IMMORTAL HUNTERS



HUNTED BY THE FAE DUKE



KRIS K. HAINES

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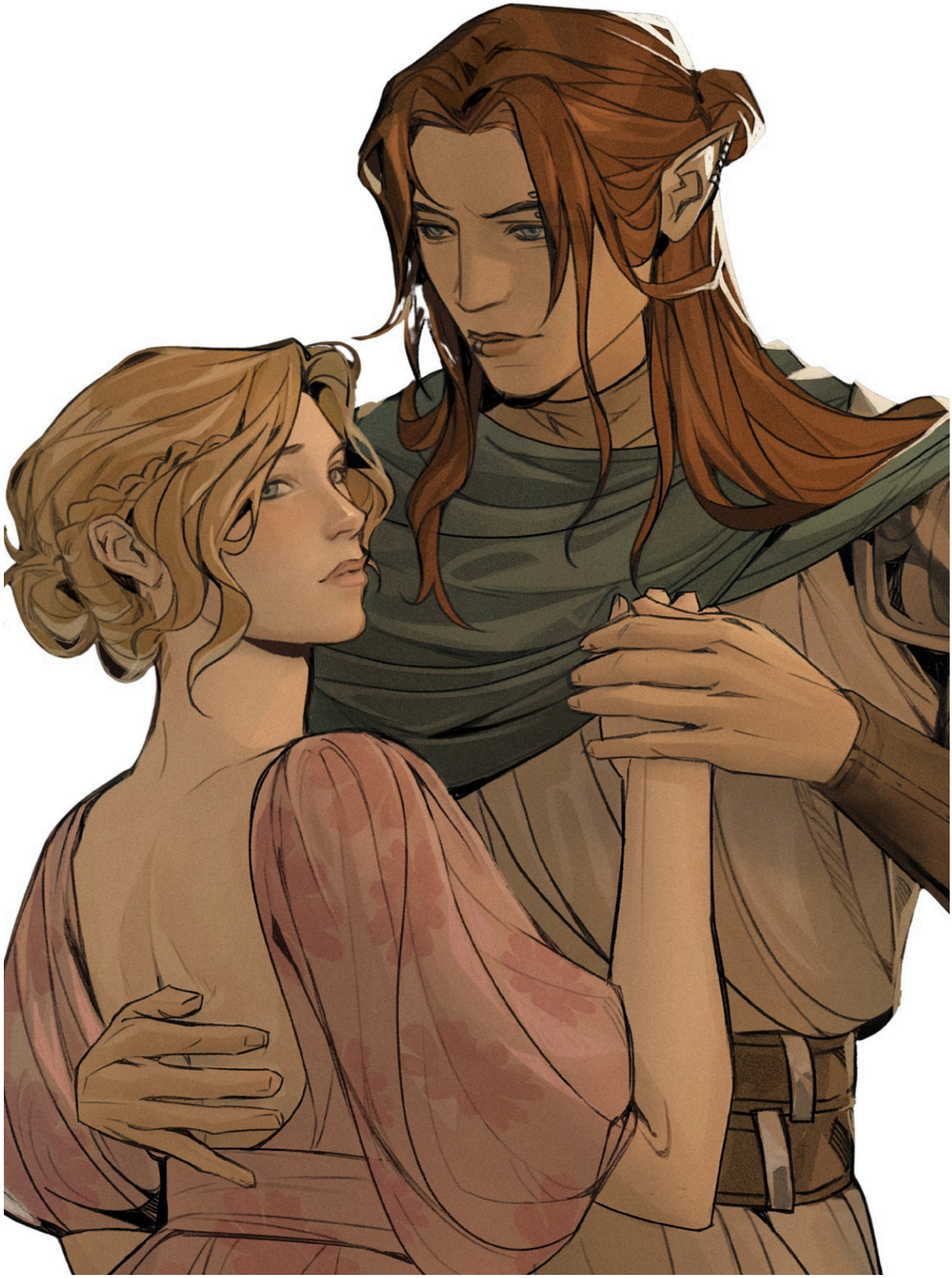
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To my curious women with voracious appetites.
Consume the world.



A Note on Content

This book is intended for adult readers and contains subject matter that might be difficult for some, including strong language, graphic sexual content including consensual BDSM and anal penetration, violence and gore, blood drinking, discussions of sex work (not shown on page), and parental abandonment. Reader discretion is advised. The mental health of my readers is of utmost importance to me. For a full list of trigger warnings, please visit my website: www.kriskhainesbooks.com.

CONTENTS

Pronunciation Guide

Breton
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5

Tír na Strelle
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13

Tír na Lune
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29

Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37

Tír na Dubh
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43

Breton
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50

The Wild Hunt
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59

Breton
Chapter 60

Epilogue
Author's Note

[Hunted by the Fae King's Shadow](#)
Shaylin Gandhi

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)

[Read the Entire Immortal Hunters Collection](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[Also by Kris K. Haines](#)
[About the Author](#)

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Characters

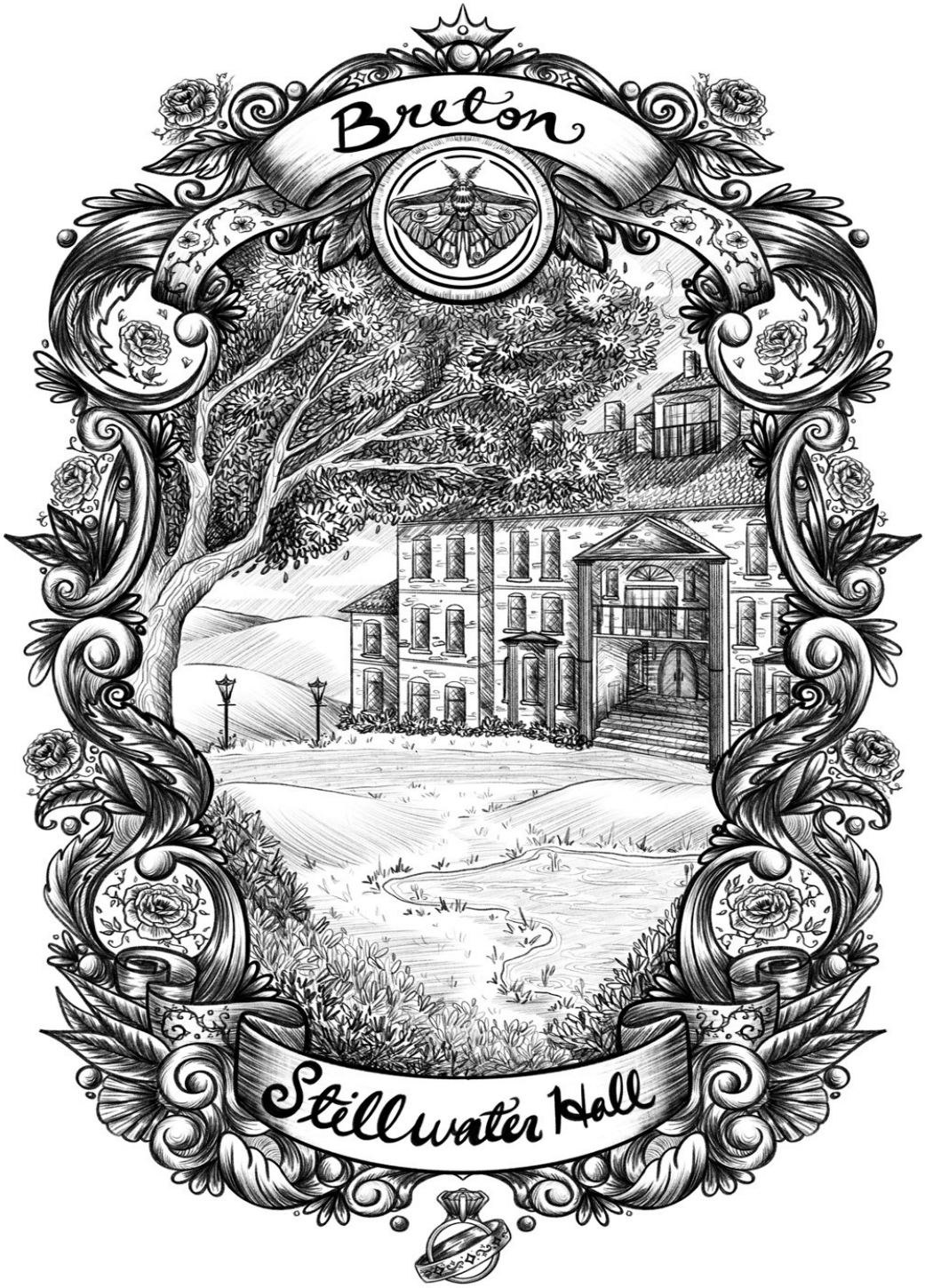
King Aengus – [king] ENG-guss
Alanthe Áine – ah-LAN-thee AWN-ya
Torvil Áine – TORE-vill AWN-ya
Queen Caer – [queen] KAIR
Lachlan Cathal – LOCK-lan KA-hal
Sabre Cernunnos – SAY-burr ker-NOO-nohs
Guy LaBeaumont – ghee lah-boh-mon
Faustine LaBeaumont – fow-STEEN lah-boh-mon
Lisande LaBeaumont – LEE-zand lah-boh-mon
Pascal LaBeaumont – pas-KAL lah-boh-mon
Lady Loargann – [lady] LORE-gehn
Aowen Macán – AY-oh-win mah-KAWN
Desmond Macán – DEHZ-muhnd mah-KAWN
Garred Smythe – GAIR-edd smith

Places

Áinesgleann – AN-esh-glan
Breton – BREH-tin
Campan's Vale – kam-pen's [vale]
Tír na Dubh – teer nah doov
Tír na Lune – teer nah loon
Tír na Strelle – teer nah strehl

Terms

Andraste – ahn-DRAHS-tay
Anguis – ANG-gwiss
Báshound – baws-hound
Cuán – koo-AWN
Danu – DAH-noo
Diamrhán – dee-AHM-rawn
The Eyrie – [the] EH-ree
Geas - gesh
Gryffalcon – gri-FALL-kan
Kelpie – KEHL-pee
Mortis – MOOR-tiss
Novillum – noh-VILL-um
Nubiium – NEW-bee-um
Púca – POO-kah
Sheilagh – SHEE-lah
Skadi – SKA-dee
Tuatha dé Danann – TOO-ah-hah DAY DON-an
Tula – TOO-lah


Breton
Stillwater Hall



CHAPTER

ONE

George Somersby is going to propose to me tonight.

So says the small box I found hidden between the pressed shirts in his valise. The navy velvet whispered that after six disappointing Seasons, I have finally made my match.

Visions of my future nuptials provide patience while George toils between my legs in a downstairs powder room. He's been at it for quite some time.

I'm starting to suspect he has no idea what he's doing.

I shift my hips to chase his tongue, and my skirts flip up to reveal mussed brown hair.

"What's the matter with you?" George rests a hand upon my thigh, swipes his mouth with the other. "Why can't you get there?"

Oh, my sweet soon-to-be husband.

What I want to say is, *I can't get there because you seem to believe my clitoris is located far closer to my navel than is anatomically possible.*

Or perhaps, *I can't get there because I've had insufficient opportunity to train you. You've done this precisely* three *times during our courtship, but who's counting?*

What I actually say is, “Keep going. I was close.”

I am nothing if not unfailingly polite. My chief virtue, according to George.

“It’s my fault, not yours.” I push down on his shoulder, subtly repositioning him. “Please don’t stop.”

He huffs an annoyed sigh, as if my orgasm is the heaviest of burdens. Exactly what I need to hear to make this happen.

But when he dips back down, his second attempt starts off much better than the first. *Yes*. Oh, please don’t move. I throw my head back as he tentatively flicks his tongue across my—

Bollocks, he’s lost it again.

I smack a hand over the sweet peas climbing the wallpaper, then scoot to the edge of the washstand. I cant my hips forward, and my hunt pays off—*oh, that’s it*—he’s finally got it. I clench my thighs around his shoulders, forcing him to stay put, and even if he’s not using quite enough pressure, if I just hold my muscles tight enough, I could almost, *yes*, I think maybe I could—

“Charlotte!”

George rears back, his head catching my dress and nearly pulling me off the washstand.

I could scream. And not the way I want to.

Was that Lizzie? My cousin is prone to dramatics, which means the threat is more likely to be a misplaced slipper than anything serious.

George frees himself from the trap of my petticoats, frowning. “What does she—”

“CHARLOTTE!”

Tension seizes my spine. That was not Lizzie. That was Aunt Theodosia.

“Sorry. Sorry! I’ve got to … ” I jump down from the washstand, rearranging my skirts, then smack a kiss onto George’s pouting lips. He accepts my apology with all the grace of a man whose raging hard-on will not be immediately dealt with. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I slip out of the powder room, cut through the sun parlor, then zigzag past salons and the grand ballroom. Inside, an army of staff are preparing for tonight’s Season opening ball.

"*CHARLOTTE EMILIE FITZROY!"*

I grimace, valiantly overcoming an urge to flee in the opposite direction before racing toward my aunt's voice, which sounds to have come from Lizzie's bedroom.

Once inside, my anxiety dissolves into near hysterics when, atop the bed, I find my cousin and her mother clutching each other with matching expressions of terror.

The source slithers out of Lizzie's ewer—Esmeralda, my late Granny Maggie's pet boomslang. And my ward for the past year and a half. Cheeky little thing must've slipped her brass cage. Again. She abhors confinement nearly as much as her previous mistress.

A pinprick of grief pierces my chest as I step to the bureau to rescue the snake. Aunt Teddy bellows for Alice, Lizzie's lady's maid. She clambers into the room, and when I pass Esmeralda to her, she pales. The snake coils around her forearm, a sign of affection that Alice has misinterpreted as an attack, if the soft wail that follows them out is any indication.

Danger abated, Aunt Teddy hauls herself from the bed, tucking straw-gold wisps into her sleeping cap. Even in her nightclothes, she is an intimidating woman. Her attention snaps to my feet. "Are you wearing those filthy boots again? I thought I asked Mathilde to dispose of them. No wonder you've yet to lure a husband, Charlotte. You have such little regard for your appearance."

George doesn't give a fig about my footwear, I think to myself, chewing my lip to mask a grin that will only encourage Aunt Teddy to expound upon my shortcomings. Her favorite subject.

"Remember what we discussed. Tonight, you must be charming and demure. Do not let your desperation show. Do not ask too many questions. And above all, do *not* talk about yourself. Figure out what the gentlemen want and be that. It's imperative to make a proper impression if you hope to make a match before you're put out to pasture."

She mutters that I'm too much like my wanton mother. Laments the loose leash her mother-in-law allowed me. Frets over my impending spinsterhood and how it will tarnish the family name.

What horror, for a woman to remain unwed after an unprecedented seventh Season.

She'll take back those words tonight. As soon as George sinks to one knee to declare his love before a room of men who've overlooked me year after year after year.

It will be a triumph. A scandal, maybe. Love overcoming every obstacle.

My smile blooms as I leave Lizzie's room, closing the door upon my aunt's grumbling.



CHAPTER
TWO

"I don't know why you took in that terrifying creature," Lizzie pouts as Alice brushes out her hair. "I would have put it out of its misery."

Lizzie has far more in common with Aunt Teddy than she realizes.

"Esmeralda is a she, not an it." My head jerks sideways as Mathilde encounters a frazzled knot. "And she was likely more frightened of you than you were of her. Especially with all your dreadful screaming."

"Once I have a husband, you can be sure I won't be sharing my household with a snake."

I want to make a crude joke, but I am not sure Lizzie would understand it. And it's not a joke a *demure* young woman should be making anyway.

Despite our seven-year age gap, Lizzie and I could be twins. We share the same pale blonde hair, golden-green eyes, and heart-shaped face. Only a few cosmetic differences separate us—the gap between my front teeth, my unruly hair that cannot decide whether it wants to be waves or curls, and my smattering of freckles from too many days sketching in the sun without a parasol.

Lizzie examines herself in the mirror. "Do you think I have a chance at Favourite?"

"You have as much a chance as anyone, I suppose."

"I wouldn't say *that*," Lizzie scoffs as Alice slides the final pin into her chignon. "I have a better chance than you, after all."

I huff out a little laugh, refusing to be stung by Lizzie's casual cruelty today. Nothing can dampen the joy fizzing through my veins. After tonight, I'll have George. Why would I care about winning the King's approval?

I smile into my bodice, dislodging a section of my updo, then yelp as Mathilde yanks my head back to begin her reconstruction.

Lizzie walks to the bed, bracing her hands on the bedpost while Alice tightens her stays. "How did you feel heading into your first Season?"

Our eyes catch in the mirror, and her bottom lip quivers. Despite her bluster, Lizzie is nervous.

Something tightens my chest, an affection she probably doesn't deserve but I cannot suppress.

I could tell her the truth. That even my first Season was horrid. That making innocuous small talk week after week, year after year, with the same group of judgmental vultures—none of whom had any real interest in me—not only bored me to tears, but stole a part of my soul. That the only thing that made last Season bearable was finding someone who wants to share forever with me.

But I know Lizzie well enough to know she doesn't want that truth.

"Well," I say, "I imagine I felt similarly to you right now."

"I very much doubt that." Lizzie burbles a laugh as Alice maneuvers her into a dusky rose evening gown. "When have you ever been more than a curiosity? You have no idea the pressure I'm bearing. If my match falls short of expectations, my reputation will never recover. If you make any match at all, Bretonnic society will deem it a miracle."

So much in common with her mother.

Behind me, Mathilde has won her battle, and a pretty pile of curls sits atop my head. She directs me toward the bedpost while she

fetches my stays.

"It will fade," I assure Lizzie, though heaven knows why I'm still indulging her. "And everyone knows you will make the best match this year. Even if you are not dubbed the Favourite."

"The title is no guarantee. Who was that woman last year?" Lizzie taps her lip. "The woman who was declared Favourite, but didn't receive a single offer. What was her name?"

"Jane. Jane—"

"Spencer!" Lizzie finishes before I can.

Yes, I remember Jane Spencer quite well. The petty comfort I'd taken in her humiliation. To be declared the King's Favourite and still end up alone? I was just as sorry for her as I was grateful; she replaced me as the butt of every between-Season joke.

"I'm not surprised." Lizzie licks her pinky, then traces the tip along her eyebrow. "She's quite plain."

"Lizzie!"

"What?" she asks, the portrait of innocence. "She is. Not even her father's money can make up for that face."

"You're terrible," I scold.

It's not true—Jane is lovely. In the right light. I will say, the peerage were shocked when she was chosen. Rumours abound to this day that Lord Spencer paid for his daughter's title.

"I'll be surprised if she shows up tonight," Lizzie prattles. "Though no one seems to want to miss this one. Mother said she'd received more requests for attendance than ever."

"Why?"

"People are whispering that George Somersby plans to open the Season with a proposal. I tried to pry the information from William, but he's been stubbornly tight-lipped."

I suppose if anyone were privy to George's plans, it would be Lizzie's brother William. Their relationship is the reason that George and I met, after all. Precisely one year ago, when we were both guests for the Season here at Stillwater Hall.

George's father, the Earl of Westershire, funds Harbridge University's biology department, of which William is the head.

George, eager to plunge into the family business, had come down for the summer to shore up the department's future curriculum.

I myself had recently arrived for my annual visit, an even more solemn affair than usual since Granny Maggie had passed that winter.

Losing my guardian, my constant companion—the woman who'd raised me—plunged me into the greatest loneliness I'd ever experienced. It had an unexpected effect, coaxing me away from the wallflower I'd been in previous Seasons. Emboldening me to try to make a connection with someone. Anyone. After all, with Granny Maggie gone, what else did I have to lose?

I started making eyes at George every time I passed him in the gardens. Lustful glances over the peony bushes. Coquettish lash-fluttering through the fountains. A half-orchestrated tumble over a wheelbarrow that resulted in George accompanying me on my daily drawing session in the woods beyond the estate.

He accompanied me every single day after that. And by the fourth or fifth session, I was doing very little drawing and much more … well … *George.*

By the end of summer, we were quite infatuated with each other. He hired me to provide the illustrations for William's scientific articles, a clever ruse to stay in each other's orbit. Even if it hasn't given us an excuse to meet more than once or twice a month.

Still, it's been so refreshing to have found a man willing to overlook the debits in my ledger. To everyone else in Breton, I am Lord Edward Fitzroy's undesirable niece—parent-less, penniless, and problematic. Six times overlooked on the marriage market due to a paltry dowry and a barbaric (Aunt Teddy's words, not mine) upbringing in the southlands. It is a role I have no desire to play again.

And based on what Lizzie's divulged, I won't have to.

There goes that joyous fizzing again. Mathilde contains it by roughly cinching my stays. Otherwise, I might blurt out the secret George and I have kept from William, from Lizzie, from *everyone* for the past twelve months. They'll all know soon enough.

Mathilde helps me into my powder-blue gown as Lizzie chatters away, listing her rivals for Favourite along with a point-by-point comparison of her strengths to their weaknesses.

I nod along, throwing in a supportive comment every now and then, but I'm not really listening. My mind races forward, tripping over itself as I plan for my new future.

I wonder where George will want to get married and could I convince him to do it here, or no, maybe in the wild woods where our love was forged, how wonderful would *that* be, and of course I'll have to ask him if I can spruce up Granny Maggie's cottage, in fact maybe he'd even do it as a wedding gift to me, it would make the perfect artist's retreat and I—

The clock on the wall chimes six o'clock. The official start of the ball. And with it, the Season.

For the first time ever, I am ready to walk into that room with my head held high.

This year, I will finally be chosen.



CHAPTER

THREE

In the grand ballroom, the peerage peacocks beneath twinkling chandeliers.

Laughter bellows and conversation sparkles as Lizzie and I make our way across the dance floor toward William and his pregnant wife, Imogene. They're gathered at the bottom of the staircase talking with another man and woman, and when I see the gentleman's short brown hair, I know it must be—

George turns, and his familiar features—the long slope of his nose, the cleft in his chin—snap into profile like a thunderclap.

William notices me, grins like the oblivious idiot he is, and beckons Lizzie and I over to join their quartet. Which includes Jane Spencer, of all people.

"Come. Let's go show her up." My cousin hooks an elbow around mine and drags me toward the staircase. She slows as we pass Temperance Houghton, her chief rival, and aims a brittle smile at the raven-haired beauty before whispering to me, "You look brutally gorgeous this evening, Charlotte."

Lizzie is rarely this nice. If I hadn't had eyes on her since our arrival scant minutes ago, I might suspect she was already drunk.

"Charlotte!" George's cheeks pink as we approach. Is he reliving our powder room tryst, too? "What a delight to see you."

Jane regards me coolly, her polite grin melting as she places a hand on George's forearm. He glances at her briefly before returning his attention to me. Mine has snagged on that familiar freckle above his upper lip. I must not think about how many times I've kissed it.

Jane doesn't bother to mask her sneer as she surveys my gown. Dotted with seed pearls and a lace belt, it's the most extravagant I've ever owned—a swan song commissioned from the modiste by Aunt Teddy. "You're looking well," Jane drawls.

I want to say, *I wish I could say the same about you.* Then tear her hand from my soon-to-be husband's arm before staking my claim by tongue-kissing him on the dance floor.

But she will know where she stands by evening's end.

The chime of a bell saves me from inventing a response to Jane's half-hearted pleasantry, and the ballroom's attention turns to a white-waistcoated footman.

"Ladies and gentleman," he announces in a pinched voice, "his royal majesty, King James VII!"

The King, a striking man in his late fifties, glides into the room donning an elaborate gold silk uniform. Beneath his snowy wig, razor-thin black brows twitch as his attention snags on several of the debuting socialites, my cousin included.

"A blessed equinox eve to you all," he begins. "I am so pleased to kick off another exciting Season. I see a number of fresh beauties vying to be dubbed Favourite tonight"—his eyes brush across me —"as well as some ripened offerings."

A small snort echoes behind me—Jane, the hypocrite—but I school myself to stillness.

A waiter delivers a coupe of champagne to His Royal Highness, and the guests raise their drinks at the same moment I realize I've yet to acquire one.

A nudge at my back reveals George, who presses a short glass of scotch whiskey into my hand. My drink of choice. He's so thoughtful.

"To the future," he murmurs beneath King James's toast, low enough that I am the only one who can hear him.

My exuberant laughter threatens to expose us. I mask it by clinking his glass, then sipping my scotch. It burns down my throat, intensifying the heat smoldering there since this morning.

The musicians strike up a lively mazurka—a perfect match for my mood. Which soars further when George requests my first dance of the evening.

He twirls me into the crowd, and I smile prettily at Jane's sour expression.



This is the best ball I've ever attended.

Four spaces on my dance card were filled. *Four.* I can scarcely believe it. And even though three were filled by George and one by William—who doesn't really count—I'm not letting those specifics tarnish my excitement.

I'm so buoyant, I don't even mind that George is taking Jane Spencer for a turn around the room. God knows the poor woman needed a win tonight. She hasn't left her table since King James's toast.

I nurse another scotch, peering at them from behind a large potted fern and debating whether to raid the food tables. Mushroom tarts and candied walnuts, sheep's milk cheese and wafer crackers are calling to me.

Unfortunately not as loudly as Aunt Teddy's voice in my head.

Control your appetites, Charlotte. Marriageable young ladies do not eat *in front of their suitors.*

Despite the evening's splendor, I will admit I'm approaching my limit. My stays are chafing and my low-heeled mules are pinching my toes. By this time most nights, I'm tucked into bed with the naughty drawings in my sketchbook.

Lizzie appears, complexion flushed, bodice askew, hazel eyes aglow. "What are you drinking?" She snatches the glass from my hand, sniffs it, then shoves it back at me. "Blech. How can you drink

this? I can barely tolerate wine and at least that has a little sweetness."

"I've acquired a taste for unpleasantness in my old age."

She snickers, then signals a waiter who brings her a glass of champagne. She gulps down half before blurting, "Oh, I've so many prospects, Charlotte. I hardly know where to start!"

I'd have trouble interpreting her jumble of names and descriptions even without my liquor-fuzzed senses.

A hush blankets the hall as King James takes his place at the top of the stairs to announce his selection for Favourite. "I hope you have enjoyed yourselves this evening."

Lizzie's fingers dig into my upper arm. She wants this. Desperately.

"This has been one of the more difficult Seasons to evaluate. So many elegant young ladies to choose from. And so many worthy of a husband."

He looks directly at me, his eyes softer than they've been all evening, and my heart bulges into my throat.

There's no way he's considering me for Favourite. Is there? No, that's quite impossible. But I wonder … Does he know of George's plans to propose? George's father is distantly related to the royal family through marriage, so I suppose there's a chance. Did he perhaps—

"This Season's Favourite is none other than Miss Elizabeth Fitzroy!"

Lizzie's squeal nearly deafens me before she rushes off, and Aunt Teddy waddles down the stairs to meet her daughter in front of the King. They both bow, spewing thanks to the man's golden slippers.

King James cups Lizzie's chin, gazing down at the beauty he's anointed for the Season, and whispers something into Lizzie's ear which has my cousin raising a gloved hand to hide a demure giggle.

I am happy for her.

I think?

Lizzie possesses everything the King looks for in a Favourite—the delicate features of a pure Bretonnic beauty, the innocent charm of youth, an absurdly rich father with the right last name.

And though Lizzie and I share that last name, she is from the correct side of the family, while I … Well, let's just say that when your mother gets pregnant by a rootless mariner and abandons you to follow him around the globe, society tends to imagine you've inherited her wanton rule-flouting. The scandal resulted in a rift wide enough that Granny Maggie, widowed by that point, was compelled to choose sides between her son and her wayward daughter. I often worried that Granny might feel she chose wrong; especially since my mother never returned. But if she had any misgivings or regrets over the years, she never shared them with me. And reassured me quite often of her gratitude for our quiet, wild life in the southlands.

If my grandmother had to anoint a Favourite, what qualities would she prioritize? An appreciation for the arts, a sharp tongue, and the inability to suffer the fools of this world, surely.

I chuckle, deciding I *am* happy for Lizzie as the hubbub over her selection dies down.

The King clears his throat. "There is one more announcement to be made before we take our leave of one another tonight." He raises his chin, searching the crowd, then finds George at the bottom of the staircase. My breath halts. "Lord Somersby, the stage is yours."

King James glides down the stairs as George bounds up, taking them two at a time like an over-eager schoolboy.

"Thank you, Your Royal Highness," he says with a subtle bow, one hand at his waist while the other fiddles in his pocket. With a small box perhaps?

My hands tremble, and my mouth dries out.

"For many of the gentlemen in this room, tonight is a beginning. The gentle emergence of love's tender sprouts after a long, cold winter. May you nurture them into sturdy oaks by summer's end."

God, I'm swooning. George has the heart of a poet. And he's always fed off an audience.

"I am, fortunately or unfortunately, not one of you. Because for me, love has already taken root. And blossomed into such an undeniable force of nature that I cannot help but be swept away. I could, of course, spend the Season pretending. Entertain fortuitous

matches. Act as if my heart were fallow ground. But it would all be a lie."

George's dark eyes ensnare mine, and I grasp the cool lip of the fern's pot to steady myself. To be proposed to in such a romantic and blatantly public manner … well, it's more than I ever dared dream.

He pulls the navy velvet box from his pocket, and the room is so silent, so enraptured, I hear the creak as he opens it.

"Darling," he says, staring down at me, "you've already made me the happiest man in the room. Let me return the favor by making you the happiest woman in Breton."

I am about to shout, *Yes*, when someone behind me nearly knocks me flat in her rush toward the stairs.

Toward my George.

"Will you marry me, Jane Spencer?"



CHAPTER

FOUR

"Charlotte."

George catches me in the darkened hallway moments after his engagement.

God. His *engagement*. I want to peel the skin from my bones just to feel something other than this hot, writhing embarrassment.

Tears sting my eyes as George's hand circles my wrist. When he swings me around, he's delighted.

"W-what do you want?" I ask as he crowds me toward the wall. My pathetic, wavering stutter holds none of the indignation I'd intended to bake into it. Which only emboldens him to cup my face.

He should not be touching me like this. Not anymore.

I should not be letting him.

His lips brush my forehead. "Do you know … toward the end of the King's speech when he looked at you, I got worried?" A gentle huff into my hair. "I thought he was going to name you Favourite. Silly."

Irritation swells, and I grasp it like a lifeline. "Why would that be silly?"

He pulls back, flashing a condescending smile. “Come on, Charlotte. You’re not meant for all this.” His fingers caress the exposed flesh above my bodice, a well-worn path, and heaven help me, I’m so destroyed I nearly let him have what I’ve given him so many times already.

Until he whispers, “You’re still my chickadee, aren’t you?”

I knock his hand from my chest. “Where is your fiancée, Lord Somersby?”

He grins, but presses in closer, wedging a leg between my thighs. As if this is all part of some game I didn’t know we were playing. “You can’t be upset about that. She’s a Favourite. Her father owns half the textile factories in Breton. And he’s paid *my* father a degrading amount of money to secure this proposal.” I push at his shoulder, but he doesn’t budge. “She’s nothing compared to you, though. A cold fish. Every time I’ve kissed her, all I can think about is how much softer your mouth is. How it feels wrapped around my—”

The slap cracks down the empty corridor.

I slump against the wall, chest heaving as George clutches his cheek and blurts, “What on earth is the matter with you?”

“I loved you.” It pours out on a pitiful wail, but I’m past caring. “I loved you, and I would have been yours forever had you only asked.”

“Charlotte.” He smiles, as patronizing as a tutor to a slow pupil. “You’re being unreasonable. My marriage need not be the end of our story. I want you just as desperately as I always have.”

The deep fissure in my chest splits open at his confession.

Because he may want to fuck me, he may want to be the only man I allow into my bed, but he will never choose me. Not for real.

I am humiliated, my face is blotchy, and my stomach is burbling from too much scotch, but I still have my self-respect.

It might be the only thing I have left after tonight.

“Goodbye, George. I wish you and Jane every happiness.”

I hold my head high, congratulating myself for keeping it together as I sashay away.

“No one else wants you, Charlotte!” he shouts. But he doesn’t chase after me. “You’ll come crawling back when you realize I’m your only option.”

I do not respond, even as his words scrape beneath my skin.

Because I have a terrible feeling he’s right.



CHAPTER
FIVE

Later that night, after the guests had been hefted away, I lay in bed, restless and cried-out.

No one has come to check on me, not even Aunt Teddy, who usually regales me with a catalog of my missteps at the end of every ball. But as soon as her daughter was declared Favourite, she was too busy lording her newfound position over the other vultures to pay me a lick of attention.

Sometimes I wonder why she's so invested in finding me a match, why she insisted Granny Maggie send me up here year after year. I suspect her motives have little to do with me and more to do with excising the stain of my mother's scandal from the family name.

Nevertheless, Lizzie's crowning as Favourite has given us a boost that Aunt Teddy will no doubt exploit next week at the Bolton's ball. As if I give a fig about this Season any longer. I thought I'd won everlasting love. Marriage would be nothing more than a consolation prize. I cannot imagine trudging through this charade, seeing George and Jane together … I am pre-emptively exhausted. And yet, I cannot sleep.

I rise, rubbing my puffy eyes, then throw a dressing gown over my chemise and grab my sketchbook from the night table. Granny Maggie was a firm believer in the therapeutic effects of creation. Perhaps a drawing session in the south gallery might relax me.

There's a particular piece I'm pulled back to again and again. *The Knight Departs*, artist unknown, is an achingly romantic oil pastel depicting a dark-haired knight in a soft embrace with a red-headed woman clad in flowing white. An eclipse of moths swirls around the couple, all with dramatic, sage-colored wings, some nearly the size of the woman's head. I've seen the moths a few times in the woods outside the estate. A few have been kind enough to pose for me.

In the painting, there's a crimson ribbon wrapped around the tip of the knight's sword, the lady's favor, and the mood captured by the artist's choices—the knight's hand upon his lady's face, the tenderness in his gaze, the fractured glint of the tear upon her cheek—always fills me with a pleasant, achy sort of nostalgia.

And after tonight's disaster, who would begrudge me a bit of wallowing? *The Knight Departs* will be the perfect tool with which to torture myself.

As I make my way downstairs, the hallways are wondrously silent. I pass the grand ballroom, noticing a table newly overflowing with envelopes, bags, and wrapped packages.

Gifts for Lizzie. Gifts for a *Favourite*.

I stalk into the shadowed room, pulling the door shut and tossing my sketchbook aside as I survey the pile. My throat itches and the tips of my ears burn as jealousy overtakes me.

Why should some invented title warrant such a barrage of excess? Why should a Favourite get all the gifts *and* any man her father can pay for? Could she not leave some scraps for the rest of us?

Righteous fury sizzles through me, and I begin ripping through the gifts. A tiny, strangled voice—my overburdened conscience—points out that these trinkets belong to my cousin and not Jane, the woman who's wronged me. Through no fault of her own, really.

I slap a gag on the far too reasonable voice and mentally shove her down the stairs as I sample every decadence—a sip of sparkling

wine, a powdered truffle, half a lemon macaron. Chewy, citrusy perfection.

Ribbons and hand-written tags pile at my feet before my conscience limps back into play to warn me that someone will find this evidence tomorrow. And that once Aunt Teddy hears of it, she's more likely to blame an innocent member of the staff than me.

At that, my frenzy slows. But not before my fingers brush against something smooth and—warm?

I pull out a silver box, no larger than the palm of my hand, and the air around me wavers. The words *For the Favourite* are carved into the lid in a beautiful script, and faint whispers leak from the seams.

The whispers grow louder as I pry the box open to reveal a thick silver ring bearing three distinct markings—a seven-pointed star, a crescent moon, and two crossed arrows forming an X. There's an engraving on the inside, written in a language I do not recognize. An old dialect from the continent, perhaps?

I set the box aside, then bring the ring to my face to—

The clock's gong has me swallowing an undignified scream.

I laugh at myself, leaning against the table and popping the other half of the macaron in my mouth. The ring holds a certain allure, despite its otherness. Or maybe *because* of it.

I did not get a ring tonight. I may never get one. So, what's the harm in trying on *this* one?

I slip the warm silver onto my finger as the clock chimes twelve, then open the ballroom door and step across the threshold.


Tir Na Strelle
Land of the Stars



CHAPTER

SIX

My ears pop, and a flash of light blots my surroundings. I shield my eyes, and when I uncover them, I am not at all where I should be: in the corridor outside the grand ballroom of Stillwater Hall.

I am in a tomb.

Two large statues stand behind me, both crowned. A man and a woman, if I'm not mistaken.

The ring sears the flesh above my palm, and I hiss out a curse as I try to pry the damned thing off. It's stuck.

In my struggle, my back slams into a wooden door and I fall ass-backwards into a forest of colossal oaks. Their twisted roots, trunks and branches are coated with luminescent moss, and a wending trail of golden light clings to the ground like sparkling fog.

I have no earthly idea where I am. Am I still *on* earth?

Clomping footsteps echo through the fog, and I lurch for a thicket. Again, I attempt to slip the ring from my finger; it has cooled somewhat since I exited the tomb. I tug and tug, growing increasingly desperate while hooves crunch toward me.

Oh god, what if it's some kind of devil or demon? This place seems far too gilded to be hell, but it's never wise to make assumptions.

I give up on the ring, then poke my head from behind the tree as a massive creature materializes from the golden mist. It's *huge*. At least twice my height and, oh hell, it's walking on all fours, and—

It's just a knight on a horse.

On second thought, is that any less odd? He's appeared out of thin air.

The knight dismounts, then runs a hand down the horse's nose, its ears flicking as it nickers softly. The beast is not small—at least eighteen hands high, if I were to guess—and the knight's shoulders are level with the saddle. He leads it to a patch of grass, then turns toward me.

Goodness.

Handsome is far too delicate a word to describe him. Striking might work. Wild. Majestic, even.

Eyes the deep blue of midnight seas peer out beneath two dark slashes of brow. His nose is long and straight, his lips broad and plush—crafted for bedrooms, not battlefields. There's a tiny silver hoop pierced through his right brow, and another nestled at the corner of his mouth. Auburn hair threaded with glistening amber falls nearly to his armpits, the upper half braided away from his face.

God, that *face.* It's at once beautiful and terrifying. And that's before I notice his ears.

Lined with more silver hoops, the tips extend far longer than a human's, ending in sharp points that poke a word into my spongy brain.

Faerie.

When I was little, Granny Maggie read to me from two very different books of faerie tales.

The first contained gentle stories of handsome knights storming castles, slaying dragons, and waking drowsy princesses with kisses of true love.

The second—the one I preferred—held stories of immortal monsters from another world tucked right beside our own but

always out of sight. Stories of teeth and claws and blood and darkness. Stories of pretty youths lured into mist-veiled woods, lost forever after. Stories of beauty so violently addictive, it drove mortals to madness.

This man—this faerie knight, I should say—belongs to the second book.

Clarity jolts me from my reverie. What's happening is so obvious, I almost laugh at myself.

When I step out from behind the tree, the knight halts.

His eyes flare, flicking down to my bare legs for an instant before returning to my face. He looks surprised. And disappointed. "*You're* the Favourite?"

His voice is deep and lush, soft and chilling. Far too alluring to be anything other than a ruse to lower my guard.

And his question was very rude. Though I suppose his incredulity is not entirely unfounded.

I hold up a hand. "You can drop the pretense. I know I'm dreaming."

The barest hint of amusement curves his mouth. "Are you?"

I nod. "You, dear figment of my overactive imagination, have been crafted from scotch whiskey, heartbreak, and faerie stories. Though I must say, I'm impressed by the vivid detail."

There's a swirling gold pattern embossed on the white armour that clings to his muscular form. His thick biceps are wrapped in pale gold chain mail, and a large sword with a seven-pointed star on the pommel crests his shoulder.

He tilts his head, moonlight glinting off his piercings, and crosses his arms. "Vivid detail?"

I step toward him, then reach up to drag my thumbs across the soft, pliable flesh of his mouth, pulling top and bottom in opposite directions. Look at that—he's got fangs. "Your lips are outrageous."

His gentle laugh tickles my fingertips.

I press onward. "You're the most stunning, fearsome man I've ever seen. I must have conjured you from the darkest depths of my subconscious. Those primal corners where fear and attraction mingle." I tap a knuckle on his breastplate. Solid. "I'm not sure why

I've dressed you as a knight. The painting in the south gallery, perhaps? Though you don't look particularly chivalrous."

Curiosity dances through his eyes, and the *V* between his brows asks the question for him.

I gesture toward … all of him. "The sharp fangs, the wild hair, the piercings. If I have a shred of virtue left—which is debatable—I'm not entirely sure it would be safe around you."

He dips his eyes to the ground and bites his lip ring. "I can assure you of two things," he says, leaving me wondering how many impressionable humans could be lured to their demise by that heady timbre. Hundreds. Thousands, perhaps. "First, you'll be entirely safe around me because you are now very much off-limits." His soft hair brushes my throat as he leans down to whisper, "And second … this isn't a dream."

I pull back, contemplating the captivating symmetry of his face. The artist in me wants to run greedy fingertips over every chiseled plane, memorize the structure so I can draw him the moment I wake up. His is not a face I want to forget. "I am quite certain that's exactly what my devious, dreaming mind would want me to believe."

He grunts out a sound that may or may not be another laugh. "If His Grace arrives at breakfast and you aren't there to join him, things could get very unpleasant. For me, not you. So, beautiful dreamer, for the sake of my head, will you please come with me?"

His Grace? Who is he talking about? I cross my arms and plant my feet, tipping my head up to meet his pleading gaze. "I will come with you."

"Praise Danu," he breathes out, swiveling toward his horse.

"If you can prove I'm not dreaming."

He groans, a deeply masculine sound, thrilling despite its frustrated undertones, and turns back to me. "How?"

I offer up my wrist. "Bite me. Please."

This time his laughter bursts forth, and it's just as rich and supple as his voice. The corners of his eyes crinkle, and a dimple pops in his left cheek.

A *dimple*.

My subconscious is trying to annihilate me.

I shake my upturned wrist at him. “Just a little nibble will do.”

His tongue pokes out to tap the tip of a fang. “My nibbles are not little.”

I swallow. “Sir, I—”

“Sir Lachlan Cathal.” He sketches a polite bow. “Upon your duty, my lady.”

I swat at the air. “Introductions are irrelevant. The moment I wake up, this entire exchange will no longer exist. I daresay *you* will no longer exist.”

Another ghost of a smile. “More’s the pity for me.”

His eyes search my face, as if trying to decide whether my request was serious. He must decide it is, because he grasps my wrist between callused fingers, his grip delicate despite his obvious strength. My heart kicks into a mad rhythm as he lifts my wrist to his mouth and bites down.

Hard.

“Ouch!” I yank my arm away, skin throbbing. “That hurt.”

He has the audacity to shrug, but does not apologize. “You said you wanted to be woken up.”

I cradle my wrist in my other hand, spying two deep red circles near my tendon where a tiny bead of blood bubbles. I rub my thumb across it to ease the sting.

Which is no longer my primary dilemma.

He bit me. And I am … still here.

Heat builds in my cheeks, and my too-shallow breathing accelerates at an alarming pace. But Sir Cathal is the picture of focused calm as he says again, very softly, “You are not dreaming.”

The tightness in my chest is real. The pain in my wrist is real.

This is *real.*

My head fuzzes and I sway on my feet. He darts forward to catch me.

As my consciousness fades, my vision narrows to sapphire eyes awash in concern. For me?

Before woolly darkness erases this strange new world, I manage to choke out a retort.

“You didn’t bite hard enough.”



CHAPTER

SEVEN

The world is swaying. Or I'm swaying? Or something is swaying beneath me.

When I crack my eyes, white armour sits inches from my nose. It takes a moment too long to realize Sir Cathal has me cradled in his arms.

It's morning now, but I have no sense of how much time has passed. Hours? Days? Beyond his broad shoulders lie vast, sun-dappled gardens. Trimmed hedges surround mounds of golden flowers that dispel a hazy aura, as if they've spent the night absorbing the moonglow. We walk past row after row of trees laden with pale yellow apples, each one ideally formed, as if painted by an artist with a painstaking attention to detail.

"Where is your horse?" I croak, my throat thick and dry and how is *that* my first question?

"In the stables. Breakfasting."

A man of few words. Just my luck.

He carries me onto the veranda of a many-spired castle that could have been plucked from the pages of a storybook. A furry, winged creature lazily circles the towers; some unnatural cross

between a lion and a bird of prey. Quite impossible. I look away before my brain breaks and I faint again.

"Ah." A male voice drifts over. "You've found her."

"Can you put me down, please?" I whisper to Sir Cathal, who obeys instantly, one large hand splayed across my lower back to steady me.

I pull at my neckline and run a palm over my frizzy waves. Heavens, I must look a fright. I plaster on a smile as I lift my gaze to—

Another absurdly handsome faerie man.

About my age, perhaps a year or two older, formally dressed in a royal blue tailcoat with gold embroidery. Blue-black hair sweeps back from a sculpted face just as devastating as Sir Cathal's. Perfect beyond any natural parameters. He's Prince Charming with pointed ears and a rogue's smile.

"This is the Favourite?" he asks, confused but intrigued.

"Oh no," Sir Cathal says wryly. "This is a woods nymph I crafted from mud and stardust when the real Favourite failed to show up." He assesses me theatrically, and my pulse spikes. Does he know? "I did a pretty good job. Wouldn't mind keeping her if she doesn't suit."

Prince Charming says nothing, merely blinks at his knight.

Sir Cathal plucks up my wrist, careful to avoid his bite marks, and taps on the ring. "Of course she's the Favourite."

The man surveys my attire—nothing but a tattered chemise stained with dirt and sweat. Where and when did I lose my dressing robe? "You might have spun her some more appropriate clothing for breakfast with a duke."

Sir Cathal shrugs, and the duke—not a prince—claps a hand onto his upper arm, tinkling the chain mail. "Grab some breakfast. It's going to be a long few days."

The knight offers me an encouraging smile as he steps away.

Clasping my hand between his own, the duke's expression is as warm as his greeting. "Welcome, darling. I trust your journey was not too disagreeable?"

"Truthfully, I don't remember much of it, Your Grace."

He grins, staring, and rubs his thumb across the heavy metal ring on my finger. “We have much to discuss.”

Sir Cathal makes his way to a wrought-iron table set for two and rummages through baskets full of scones and those perfect apples. There are cups of soft-boiled eggs, a plate of cured meats and cheeses, and a silver carafe of what I am praying to whatever deities exist in this world is coffee. I think I recognize its bitter scent, though I’m not entirely sure I can trust my senses here.

I turn back to the duke. “Forgive my ignorance, but … where precisely are we?”

“Precisely? The veranda of my castle in Tír na Strelle.” He leads me to the table and shoos his knight away.

I wrack my brain for a seed of recognition, but I have never heard of a city, town, nor even a collection of cottages called Tír na Strelle.

The duke pulls out a chair. “You should eat.” He rounds the table and picks up the carafe. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

He fills my cup, then adds a teaspoon of sugar and a generous helping of cream. It’s exquisite, rich with a bitter edge. I help myself to an egg cup, then crack the shell with a spoon. The yolk is warm and runny; just how I like it.

As I munch my divine breakfast, Sir Cathal pipes up from where he’s leaning casually against the balustrade. “Did you send the declaration to the other Houses?”

The duke’s previously pleasant expression sharpens. “Do you think me a fool?”

“Depends on the day.” Sir Cathal chomps into an apple.

“I sent it as soon as you informed me you’d retrieved her.”

“Good.” Sir Cathal nods, turning for the steps.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

The knight glances over a pauldroned shoulder. “To help with the preparations.”

The duke grins. “I think not. You can stay right here. Stand behind us and look menacing.”

Sir Cathal polishes off the apple. I never knew it was possible to eat fruit angrily, but he pulls it off. He chucks the core over the railing. "As you wish, Your Grace."

"He is rather good at that," I offer, trying to ease the tension.

"Good at what?" the duke asks.

"Looking menacing." My eyes dart to Sir Cathal. The faintest twitch lifts the corner of his mouth. Better than the scowl that was forming.

"Yes, well, at least he's good for something."

"What would he do if I leapt from this table and ran away?"

The duke scratches his temple. "And why would you do that?"

"Well, I have no idea where I am nor what your intentions are. Nor even what your name is."

He presses a palm to his chest. "Duke Desmond Macán. You can call me Des."

"Can I? Seems a bit informal. Is that what all your subjects call you?"

His eyes twinkle. "I do not have subjects. Yet."

I cock my head, confused.

Desmond adds softly, "There are many rules to this game we are about to play. You will be embroiled soon enough. For now, eat. Relax."

I try to do as he's asked, managing the eating part far better than the relaxing part. But my eyes won't stop drifting toward the hulking tower of armoured muscle standing at attention behind him. "But what *would* he do?"

Sir Cathal's deep blue eyes bolt straight toward me. "I would hunt you down. And return you."

My excitable heart lodges somewhere in my throat—entirely the *wrong* reaction for his answer—and I glance back at Desmond.

He leans across the table wearing an amused expression, then whispers loud enough for Sir Cathal to hear, "Hunting maidens used to be his favorite pastime. Perhaps you *should* run. You'd give him the most thrilling morning he's had in years."

Warmth floods my face, even though I haven't been a maiden for quite some time. When I muster the courage to look toward Sir

Cathal again, he's blushing as well. But his impenetrable stare has returned to the gardens.

"Forgive my insistence," I ask Desmond, who's slouched with an arm thrown over the back of his chair, "but what *am* I doing here?"

"What's your name, darling?"

"Charlotte. Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy."

He smiles, as if he's about to bestow a great gift upon me.

"Well, Miss Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy, you are here to marry me.

"And become queen of the celestial Otherworld."



CHAPTER

EIGHT

I emit a small, choked laugh, then look to Sir Cathal again.

This time, he's staring straight at me, pinning me to my chair like a moth in a shadow box. I suspect he has a plan for whichever way I react.

I would hunt you down. And return you.

My mind stumbles over his promise before landing on the least discombobulating piece of Desmond's information.

I am in the Otherworld, the mythical home of the Fae. Faeries. They're real. Or so the solid metal chair beneath me, the warm cup heating my fingers, and these two *very* real faerie men would have me believe.

Either that or heartbreak has driven me mad, tempting me with dreams of a title and a proposal. I realize with a jolt that this is the first I've thought about George in hours. How pleasant.

I take another bolstering sip of coffee, banishing him from my mind. "Does the Otherworld not already have a queen, Your Grace?"

"The greater Otherworld has several. But here in the celestial kingdom, we've been without one for quite some time. And it's Des, remember?" His sly wink makes my pulse skitter.

"How much time?"

"To your human perception? Nearly fifty years. Feels like a bit less on this side."

"What does that—"

"Lesson number one, Charlotte." Desmond sighs dramatically, picking at his shirt cuff. "If you want useful answers, you must ask useful questions."

I pluck a cherry scone from the basket between us, then slather it with butter, buying myself some time to think of a *useful* question.

"Why has the celestial kingdom been without a queen for…?" I trail off, hoping he might supply the rest.

Desmond leans back, contented. "This is the seventh year since Queen Caer's passing. She died in the same breath as her husband, King Aengus, to whom her human life was bound when they married."

I run a quick calculation—a year in the Otherworld is equivalent to seven years in the human realm, or thereabouts. "And why has no one succeeded them? Did they have no children?"

"Our monarchy is not built upon primogeniture. And anyway, a human and a faerie cannot produce a child together. We have a different system for selecting our rulers."

"I see," I mutter, not really seeing at all. "So I am to be queen, and you will be my king."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? Are you rescinding your proposal already, Your Grace?"

He snorts a laugh. "You're witty, darling. Keep that up. No, I say *perhaps* because I will not be your sole suitor, as much as I'd wish to be. Your king will hail from one of the three celestial territories: either myself, Duke of Tír na Strelle, Land of the Stars; Duke Áine of Tír na Lune, Land of the Moon; or Duke Cernunnos of Tír na Dubh, Land of the Void." The mood on the veranda chills at the final name. "Whichever duke wins you will also win the crown."

"Wins me? Is there to be a campaign for my heart?" I bite my lip to cage a smile, excitement zipping down my spine. Men vying for *my* affection? What a welcome turn of events.

Desmond's cruel laugh snuffs out my burgeoning enthusiasm. "No, nothing like that. You won't have a choice in the matter. We will be hunting you."

I swallow a lump of dry scone. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"That ring upon your finger belonged to Queen Caer and every mortal queen before her. When she and her husband passed, the ring returned to his house. My house. It is my responsibility to find a suitable candidate for our next queen, a task at which I've failed for the past seven years. I send the ring off into the human realm and once a woman puts it on, she accepts a proposal from the Otherworld itself. She, in this case, being you. You are now betrothed to the celestial kingdom, and a seed of novillum, light from the first star ever born in our sky, lives within you."

I glance down at my fingers, my chest, my thighs. I feel nothing but ordinary. My usual over-thinking self. Not a new twinge or tingle anywhere.

"Your task is this: find and re-assemble the pieces of the Bannrhorn, a relic of our gods that initiates the Wild Hunt. You will have nearly three months to do so, from now until dusk on Mabon, the autumnal equinox. Once the Hunt commences, *you* will be the quarry, Miss Fitzroy. The kingmaker. One duke will claim you—and the seed of novillum within you—and our monarchy will at last be restored."

"Claim me?"

"Oh, darling," he purrs. "Please don't tell me I need to explain *those* mechanics."

Right. Well. That zippy excitement dulls with each new layer of information. "This Bannrhorn. How I am supposed to … How will I know where to find the pieces?"

Desmond picks apart a flaky pastry, popping chunks in his mouth, unaware of or unbothered by my agitation. I look toward Sir Cathal again. Still staring at me. But this time, something softens the hard lines of his face. It almost looks like sympathy. Or … regret?

Desmond brushes the crumbs from his hands. "The novillum will assist you. And each duke will offer a clue that may guide you to the fragment's location within his territory."

"Come now," I croon, leaning across the table to stroke the back of his palm. "You can't just tell me?"

"Sweet thing." He smiles, then plucks up my hand and kisses my knuckles. "Trust me, I would if I could. As soon as I hid my fragment and composed the clue, a geas was placed upon me. I am forbidden from revealing the location to anyone. And if I try to use trickery—say, writing it down or providing additional clues or accompanying you on your search, well … " He slides a finger across his throat and makes a frog-like croak. "My quest for the kingship would end before it's even begun. The geas will only allow me to recite my clue to you, nothing more."

I nod, trying to wrap my head around all this … frippery. What an absurd method of choosing sovereigns.

Although, upon further reflection, is our human system much better? Is a son born of a king always the best choice to lead a people? A question to ponder another day.

"Let's hear it then," I say, ready to note the clue and reaching for the pencil behind my ear. Of course, there's not one there. And I don't have my sketchbook either. I feel more naked than when I realized I'd lost my dressing gown.

Desmond clears his throat and his ice-blue eyes go glassy. An unrecognizable monotone plods from his mouth, stripped of his playful flirtation.

"*The swan lands in a pond turned to stone."*

I blink at the short string of nonsense masquerading as a clue. "That's it?"

Desmond's eyes brighten and he rubs his forehead. "Did you get it? I'll say it again if you'd like, but give me a moment to recover. The recitations give me an awful headache."

"No, I got it, thank you. Very helpful." I force myself to smile. "When will I meet the other dukes?"

"Tomorrow," Desmond says cheerfully. "At the presentation ceremony. If they approve of you, they'll invite you to their territories where they will share their clues. I don't see any reason they won't. You have something no other candidate possessed."

"And that is?"

Desmond's brows pinch, as if the answer should be obvious. "You were named Favourite. A woman with enough grace, sophistication, and wit to charm a king in the human realm. Faerie men are not so different."

I survey both him and Sir Cathal—their wild beauty, their pointed ears, the undercurrent of power crackling through them.

A different breed entirely.

"How many candidates have there been?"

"Six."

"And how many have gained invites to the other territories?"

"Well, it's not … that is to say, we've … It's quite a bit more complicated than—"

"Tell her the truth," Sir Cathal says without looking at me.

Desmond mumbles something under his breath, then says to me, "Only the first."

Only one in six women gained the approval of the other dukes? I don't have a chance. I'll be home by nightfall tomorrow. I hide a smile behind my coffee cup.

But there's a trace of disappointment mingling with my relief. Though I'm doubtful of my abilities to decipher clues, comb enchanted lands for shattered instruments, charm powerful faerie dukes, a question lurks in the cobwebbed corners of my once hopeful heart.

Might it be worth the risk?

I am surprised to encounter the query, especially after years and years of rejection. Not to mention the very fresh, very painful one that landed me in this mess in the first place.

Still, the thought of wearing a crown, of being wed to a faerie *king*, for goodness sake … I cannot deny it is an alluring fate. A complete reinvention.

I blow out a resigned sigh. It may be alluring, but it is also quite impossible.

"Well"—I rise from my chair—"I will certainly do my best at tomorrow's ceremony, Your Grace. If, for whatever reason, the dukes see fit to deny me, please know that I will be forever grateful for your hospitality and will think of you fondly when I return home."

Sir Cathal is glaring at Desmond, who's dragging a palm over the back of his neck. "I apologize if I've given you the wrong impression, Miss Fitzroy. Your life is now tied to the Otherworld through that ring. If you do not find all three Bannrhorn fragments and initiate the Hunt before dusk on Mabon, the ring will fall off.

"And you will die."



CHAPTER
NINE

And to think I was nervous about the Season in Breton.

I crash back down into my chair, and Desmond kneels before me. "You have nothing to fear, Charlotte. You're the Favourite."

My head is swimming, and my heart waltzes against my ribs. If grace and sophistication are what's needed to win this game, then I am dead upon arrival.

Sir Cathal gently pulls me from the chair. "We need to get going. Aowen's likely plotting our dismemberment for not delivering Charlotte directly to her."

Desmond sucks on a tooth. "Bit early to subject her to my sister, no?"

"It's nearly eleven."

"Precisely my point," Desmond mutters, biting into a filled pastry. Red jam oozes out, decadent and unnerving.

"You should start preparing for the ceremony, too," Sir Cathal warns.

Desmond swipes a spot of jam from the corner of his lip and sucks it off his thumb defiantly. His knight expels a long-suffering

sigh before ushering me through a pair of tall glass doors into the palace.

He leads me through hallways lined with arched windows, outside which I spy that flying beast again. It's closer this time, close enough that I can make out a feathered head and wings attached to a body of golden fur with a long tail and clawed paws. It's so startling that I pause and Sir Cathal is forced to turn back and fetch me.

"Andraste," he says, as if the word makes any sense. "Desmond's gryffalcon." Which makes even less sense.

He explains no further as he guides me from the window and up a wide staircase, then down a high-ceilinged corridor at the end of which a woman waits with her back toward us.

She turns at our approach, and her beauty lands like a physical blow. She's a striking study in contrasts: long, night-dark hair offsets a milk-pale complexion, and large, pool-blue eyes blink above a sly, ruby smile.

If Desmond resembles a storybook prince, then his sister Aowen is both the tale's plucky princess *and* the vengeful, centuries-old queen who'd rather feast on the hero's heart.

"Wait here a moment." Sir Cathal saunters over to her as I melt back against the cool stone wall.

Their voices are pitched low enough that I cannot hear what they're saying. Sir Cathal lifts Aowen's hand and presses a gentle kiss to the back. She softens at his attention.

Is there history between them? Or is Aowen merely reacting how any woman would in the presence of the handsome, towering knight?

And why do I care about any of it when I've just learned my life is at stake?

While I pretend not to eavesdrop, Sir Cathal slips into the room behind Aowen and a periwinkle blur zooms out.

A small creature thumps to the carpet, then patters toward me. She's the size of a raven with fathomless black eyes, ears rounded like a human's, and pale lavender skin and hair. Two translucent, segmented wings—similar to a fly's—sprout from her back.

She crouches, sniffs my bare legs, then smiles through a mouth filled with concentric rows of pointed teeth. "Food?"

"Not food," Aowen calls over, her voice robust but dry. Bored. "Friend."

The tiny creature glues her nose to my ankle. "Food *and* friend."

"*No*, Vesper," Aowen commands. "Just friend."

Vesper looks up at me with baleful eyes, her too-wide mouth turning down at the corners. "Just friend." Her fluttering wings produce a clicking far too insectile to be anything *other* than petrifying. "Just friend," she whispers rebelliously before licking my calf.

She flits up to Aowen's shoulder, and her tongue darts around her lips as she stares at me. Probably wondering which of my limbs to sample first.

God, she's adorable. Reminds me a bit of Esmeralda. I might coo over her if I wasn't still in shock.

Aowen raises a hand, and I grip it as I execute a shallow curtsy. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Duchess Macán."

"Duchess." She spurts a laugh. "If only."

Embarrassment sears my cheeks, and Vesper whimpers.

"She's mostly harmless." Aowen slides her gaze toward her pet? Companion? Familiar? "Pixies have voracious appetites. They think every hot-blooded creature they encounter is food. Even their own kind. But she's more entertaining than most of the bores in this House. And a master tailor to boot. Tiny fingers make for intricate threadwork. Her creations are worth a little sacrifice of flesh every now and then."

"Whose flesh?" I ask as Vesper grins wickedly.

Sir Cathal strides back into the hallway.

"Is it up to your exacting safety standards?" Aowen asks in a teasing lilt.

"It'll do, Wen," he says, low and intimate. He bends down to press a kiss upon her cheek and some strange, hot thing coils in my chest.

Aowen turns to me. "Well, praise Danu. You are quite the beauty." She steps back, her eyes dragging down my filthy, sweat-

stiffened chemise. “We can do better than that, though. What do you think, Vesper?”

The little pixie’s wings chirrup. “Food. Pretty food.”

“She *will* be pretty food,” Aowen says, her eyes never leaving me. “Pretty bait, at least. The amount of skin you’re showing is appropriate, but it would work better if it looked a bit more purposeful.” She places a hand at her shoulder, and Vesper hops onto her fingers. “Go to my quarters and fetch some gowns in”—she pauses to study me again—“soft peach or salmon or pale blue. You’ve a spring coloring about you, I’d say. What a stir you will cause.”

Something inscrutable tightens Sir Cathal’s features as he stares at me. For perhaps a beat too long. With a barely perceptible shake of his head, he returns his attention to Aowen. “Don’t go overboard.”

“Off with you,” Aowen dismisses him then plucks up my hand. “Fret not, Sir Cathal, she will look the perfect quarry when we’re done with her. Innocent with a hint of juicy allure. Those beasts Áine and Cernunnos won’t be able to resist her tomorrow.”

She pulls me into my quarters to begin my transformation.

I want to tell her not to bother.

I am already plotting my escape.



CHAPTER

TEN

It's minutes before midnight, and I'm inside my bedchamber clutching the door handle.

I replay my arrival in the Otherworld: the clock struck twelve, I flung open the door of the grand ballroom in Stillwater and somehow stepped into the faerie realm.

Could the reverse trip possibly be as simple?

I want to go home. I might have been tempted earlier by the prospect of a handsome, magical husband. Not to mention a crown and commensurate title. But hearing that failure to procure either means death?

No. No, thank you. I am far too risk-averse for such a gamble.

I grip the handle tighter, fiddling with the sweat-stiffened collar of my chemise. Aowen and Vesper spent all afternoon outfitting me in the most excessively beautiful dresses for tomorrow's presentation ceremony, but I thought it safest to return home in my original attire.

It's going to be strange enough that I'll have been missing for a week. To show up in shimmering fabric that probably doesn't even

exist in the human realm? Well. My role in Bretonnic society would likely be downgraded from pariah to raving madwoman.

The small gilded clock on the wall chimes softly.

Here we go.

I close my eyes, counting along, and as soon as the twelfth chime sounds, I whip open the door and step across the threshold.

Into a warm, solid chest.

Sir Cathal wears a wry smile, rubbing the pectoral I slammed my forehead into. "The doors between realms don't work that way, I'm afraid."

"I'm not … I was merely … " I sputter, the tips of my ears roasting. "I needed some water."

He points over my shoulder to my nightstand. To the porcelain ewer full of water. "Is that not to your liking? I can have a word with the staff about it."

"No, that's not … "

I'm a fool. For thinking I could open a door and just waltz back to Breton. For ripping through Lizzie's gifts. For slipping on a ring that was never intended for me.

My battered conscience pipes up that if I *hadn't* put on the ring, Lizzie would be here fighting for her life. And as frustrating as she can be—due more to immaturity than malice—I would never wish such a fate upon my cousin.

I ball my hands into fists, biting my lip to stall frustrated tears. I do *not* want to cry in front of this man. But I'm not sure I can control it.

Sir Cathal pulls a pristine handkerchief from his trouser pocket. "May I come in?"

He's sporting a short, evergreen cloak over a loose white tunic. Casual, but not precisely bedclothes. Was he not sleeping? Where has he come from?

I accept the handkerchief, dabbing my eyes while I gesture him inside. I slump into a chair upholstered in navy velvet with a golden star pattern, the same seven-pointed star on the ring. This hunk of metal quite literally holding my life in place.

God, what am I going to do? I bunch the kerchief in my fist and hold it against my mouth to stop from screaming.

Sir Cathal settles into the chair opposite me with an offer from the ewer.

"I wasn't looking for water."

"I know." He thrusts the cup toward me and I take it, gulping down a long, cool swallow that makes me feel a fraction better. I'm half tempted to ask if he has anything stronger.

"How?" I set the cup on the small table between us and pick at the lace edges of his kerchief while he removes his cloak and folds it neatly over the back of his chair.

"You had a sort of panicked rabbit look on your face all through dinner tonight. Like your leg was caught in a trap and you were considering gnawing it off to free yourself."

"That's … very graphic."

At the evening meal, Desmond's celestial knights were scattered throughout the hall, and though Sir Cathal held a place of prominence, he did more listening and observing than talking. The other knights drank and laughed and celebrated my arrival along with a large contingent of what looked more like common folk than the prissy courtiers I'd been expecting. At one point, the entire hall was engaged in a rousing contest to see who could toss the most squirrels to Andraste. The atmosphere was relaxed, jovial. Reminded me of the town festivals Granny Maggie and I attended in the southlands.

I wish I could say I participated. Rather, I sat next to Desmond, eating little of whatever he put on my plate, drinking less of whatever he poured in my cup. Trying not to completely fall apart.

If I was so obviously in distress, why has Desmond not come to check on me himself?

"Are courtly dinners in Tír na Strelle always so raucous, Sir Cathal?"

"You don't have to call me Sir Cathal all the time, you know. I'd prefer you call me Lachlan." He leans forward, resting his bare forearms on his thighs. To no one's shock, least of all my own, they are stunningly formed: corded with muscle, dusted with dark hair,

and nearly as outrageous as his lips. The naked sight of them while we're alone in my bedchamber in the middle of the night feels deliciously obscene. "And yes. Meals at the castle are often lively affairs. They are not limited to Desmond's court. He prefers to dine with his people and invites a different cohort every night. Offers them access to him, an opportunity to air their grievances or share their wishes for the kingdom."

I sit up straighter, ashamed I was so focused on my own circumstances that I didn't pay attention to any of Desmond's people. Many greeted me quite warmly this evening.

"Can I ask you a question, Miss Fitzroy?"

"If you insist on Lachlan, then I'm afraid I must insist on Charlotte." I offer a wan smile.

He sends back a brighter one. "Charlotte, then. May I ask you a question?"

"You've just asked me two. The same question, in fact. But I suppose I'll give you one more chance to pull yourself together. I'm sure I'm quite intimidating with my splotchy cheeks and dirty chemise, but if I recall, it is *you* who bites."

His crooked smile broadens wide enough to pop his dimple. He looks … *charmed*. Which is quite absurd.

"Only when the request is as polite as yours was." He leans back in his chair, legs spread wide. A man so sure of himself, so comfortable in his position, he could relax anywhere.

I'd give up my artistry for that kind of self-assurance.

"Do you want to be queen?"

His question catches me off-guard. Do I? I take a deep breath and let everything fermenting in my brain since this morning come pouring out.

"I have neither the skills nor the constitution to go traipsing around your kingdom in search of magical tools, even though back home I'm actually quite fond of nature, but it just seems that perhaps the nature here would be of the variety that might eat me, and I'd rather not die before I've reached the age of thirty, not to mention that finding the relic is only half of it, and if I have to charm three faerie men with whom I have not even a species in common,

well, I promise that will not go smoothly, so you see even if I *wanted* to be queen—"

"But do you? You've offered nothing but a list of reasons why you *can't* be. If none of that were a factor, what would your answer be?"

"I … I am not sure I would be the best choice for queen."

"Who cares whether you would be the best choice? Right now, you are the only choice."

"I feel like it may be a moot point, though. You're dismissing impossibilities which, I'll remind you, not a single human woman in seven years has been able to overcome. I know what I am, Lachlan. There are things I am made for and things I am not. For example, I am not made for adventurous quests through faerie kingdoms."

He brings a hand to his face, rubbing his jaw. "What were you made for then?"

"Long drawing sessions outside in the sun. Eating an inadvisable amount of pastries in a single sitting. Spending a quiet afternoon with a raunchy book and a strong cup of tea."

"Thought you preferred coffee."

"In the morning, yes. In the afternoons I … What does this matter?"

"Do. You. Want. To be queen?"

"Well, who *wouldn't*?"

"Charlotte." His voice is stern. Scolding.

I bite back a smile. He's even more ridiculously handsome when he's angry. *That's* going to be a problem.

But I suppose if I do the mental exercise, ignore the difficulties, then, yes, I am tempted to stay here and earn a crown. What better chance to reinvent myself, unyoked by the perception of the snobs in Breton? No one here knows a thing about me. They think I'm the Favourite, for god's sake.

And Granny Maggie always said that if you weren't at least a little bit uncomfortable, you weren't truly living.

I sink back into my chair, mirroring Lachlan's pose. Maybe if I take up as much space as possible, I might feel a tenth as confident as him.

The move lifts the hem of my chemise, exposing my knees. His eyes flick there before returning to my face, and a faint blush colors his cheeks. It's so sweet, this small moment of transparency from this powerful man, that I decide to tell him the truth.

"Yes. Yes, I want to be queen."

He nods, his eyes softer. A little sad, even. "Then I'm going to help you."

"Why?"

He lifts a muscled shoulder. "If you want to be queen, I want you to be queen."

"Have you helped any of the other candidates?"

"I have not."

"Then why me?"

He sags further into his chair. "Because Desmond made me a promise this year. One final job. Help him win the kingship, and he'll release me from his service. I am … ready for my next chapter."

Silence falls between us. I have so many questions. Chief among them why he would want to leave Desmond? They seem close. I could probably ask. He'd probably tell me. Which is odd, because he seems very taciturn with everyone else.

I tap my upper lip, pretending to weigh the decision. Always wise to make a man believe you've got other options, as Granny Maggie often said. Probably where I failed with George.

The ruse hardly matters. Lachlan looks profoundly calm. If I said no, he'll likely thank me for my time and leave without another word.

Annoying. And again, I wish *I* could do that.

"Fine." I wave a hand at him. "I suppose I could do with some help. Since you're offering."

"Splendid." He arches forward, rubbing his palms together and rising from his chair to put his cloak back on. "We'll start right now. You, uh, need to get changed first."

I glance at my lap, see my chemise riding higher, then scramble to lower the hem. Now I'm the one blushing. I flee to my wardrobe, but before I can open it, he calls, "Nothing in there will suit. Here."

He aims an open palm toward a bright star outside, then twirls his wrist. A cinched sack appears in his hand in a puff of gold light.

"What did you just do?" I ask, fascinated.

"All the folk of this kingdom can use celestial light to perform small magics." As if that explains anything. But he doesn't elaborate further, merely tosses me the sack, which contains a pair of trousers, some scuffed boots, and a dark cloak similar to his own. "Put those on." He opens the door to my room. "I'll wait for you out here."

"Where are we going?"

"To fetch the first Bannrhorn fragment."

"How?" I huff out a frustrated growl. "I have no idea what Desmond's clue means. *The swan lands in a pond turned to stone*? Absurd."

He grins widely. "Hurry. If we leave now, we'll be able to fetch it and be back in time for you to get a few hours of sleep before the presentation ceremony."

"What are you—"

"There's an old faerie tale about a man who dreamed of the same woman every night for a year." He curls a large hand around the side of the door, leaning toward me. "In his dreams, she played the harp and sang to him in the loveliest voice. He fell in love, but was never able to find her in the waking world."

"Oh, I know this one!" I yelp. "He visits an enchanted lake filled with swans and has to identify his lady in order to break her curse and turn her back into a woman." I haven't thought about the story in ages, an old favorite that Granny Maggie used to read to me.

"Do you remember what the lady's name was, I wonder?" Lachlan asks portentously before closing the door and leaving me to change.

The name cracks through my mind like a bolt of lightning.

Lady Caer.

The swan lands in a pond turned to stone.

Desmond's Bannrhorn fragment is in the very first place my feet touched down in the Otherworld.

Queen Caer's tomb.



CHAPTER

ELEVEN

A crowd of several hundred fae surround the wooden dais where I await the start of the presentation ceremony.

To a one, they are beautiful—ethereal creatures crafted by primordial magic with the blood of ancient gods running through their veins. And they are broadcasting a rather wide range of emotions.

Hope. Suspicion. Skepticism. Pity.

A not insignificant number of them are frowning.

Perhaps they do not believe that the fragile human woman standing before them is up to the task of becoming their queen. I suppose I cannot blame them, given the candidates' record so far.

I press a smile into the back of my hand, knowing they are in for a shock this morning.

And I cannot decide whether to be annoyed or flattered that Desmond will be the one to waltz into the ceremony with the fragment. Feels like he's stealing my glory. When I presented the relic to him earlier this morning—or late last night, I should say—he was so overjoyed he almost kissed me.

No one else—besides Lachlan, of course—knows I've found it, not even the woman seated in the oak chair beside me. Aowen's got one elbow propped on the armrest, a fist under her dainty chin, and she's scanning the hall with the same aloof pout she's worn since I met her yesterday.

I didn't dare interrupt her process while she was dressing me earlier—a whirlwind of activity that had her manipulating my limbs, prodding my flesh, and hissing orders at Vesper. If I'm not mistaken, the final number of gowns I tried on was somewhere around four million.

I will admit that Aowen's ultimate selection is rather stunning. Peach-colored silk drapes over my shoulders, forming a deep *V* just below my navel. Layers of pleated skirts flow to my feet in a wave of peach to salmon to dusky purple, while a high slit bares my right thigh to the hip.

It is the most revealing dress I have ever worn. More revealing than any I see before me in the crowd. More revealing than Aowen's, certainly. Her midnight gown, embroidered with silver filigree, is downright modest with its high neckline and long sleeves.

I try not to fidget, especially with so many eyes upon me, but my fingers can't help pulling at the slit. Revealing the entire length of my thigh to a room of supernatural creatures growing increasingly more antsy seems unwise. When I'm not tugging on my dress, I'm caressing the crown of oak leaves nestled atop my head. Vesper brushed out my hair—I am fairly certain she pilfered a few strands—leaving a cascade of soft golden curls down my back.

I know what the people of Tír na Strelle are seeing—a ripe blossom begging to be plucked. Or another word that rhymes with it that a lady would never utter in proper company.

The hall doors boom open, and Aowen rises, muttering, "I swear, Desmond will be late to his own funeral."

Still, she plasters on a glorious smile as Desmond parades toward the dais holding a wooden box carved with seven-pointed stars. Amid the explosive cheers and shouts are several gasps and excited whispers. He looks dashing in his midnight waistcoat, maroon sash, and silver epaulets—a perfect duke of the Otherworld.

A perfect king, even.

But my disobedient gaze is drawn to the hall entrance where his knight lingers.

I have not seen Lachlan since he dropped me off at Desmond's quarters last night, told me not to tell his master that he'd helped me, offered a quick *well done*, and disappeared down the hallway.

At first, only the broad lines of Lachlan's powerful back are visible as he shuts the doors. But when he turns, his cobalt eyes spear toward me. He peruses my dress, his expression entirely unreadable until he notices my bare thigh. He swallows before looking away and blushing.

Desmond pries himself from his subjects and bounds up onto the dais. He acknowledges his sister with a half-bow and she dips into a low curtsy, her eyes wide with disbelief as she notices the box, then retakes her seat.

For a moment, I'm sure Desmond is about to do the same. Instead, he places the box at my feet, then grasps my hands and sinks to his knees.

My pulse leaps and blood pounds through my ears. I have no idea what's expected of me. Am I supposed to open the box and show off the fragment? Join him on the floor in prayer? What on earth is he doing down there?

You're doing fine.

I nearly choke on my tongue at the sound of Lachlan's voice in my head. My eyes widen, darting toward Desmond and Aowen, who show no signs of having heard him.

How in god's name is this possible?

My gift, he says in answer to a question I'm certain I did not ask out loud. *One of the reasons Desmond's been reluctant to let me leave his service.*

And here I thought it was because you are so large.

An amused chuckle rumbles between my ears. *If you're still able to crack jokes when you look as nervous as you do right now, I might rescind the bets I've placed against you.*

Oh, the bas—

Just teasing. There's a smile in his voice, but when I dare a peek, he's stone-faced in his white armour beside the dais. He's … different in here. Chattier. A little lighter. Like he was in my room last night. *Apologies, little queen. In the future, if I want to speak to you this way, I will knock first. Like this.*

Tingling heat crawls across the top of my spine, right at the base of my skull. It's a bit off-putting, like fire ants are foxtrotting through my hairline.

If you don't want me in here, all you need do is ask. Should I leave?

While his intrusion is strange, it's not entirely unwelcome.

No, I say. *Not yet.*

He huffs a gentle laugh. *I thought not*.

If you are done teasing me, do you mind enlightening me on the protocol? Aowen and Desmond have been a bit stingy with the details.

Fabric rustles and murmurs ripple; the hall is growing restless. Desmond remains kneeling before me, staring at the floor, gripping my clammy palms. Am I supposed to—

He's waiting for a gesture from you, Lachlan whispers; unnecessary since I'm the only one who can hear him.

I wrack my brain for what that could possibly be, and as the seconds slip away, I panic and pat Desmond on the shoulder. He glances up, confused and more than a little displeased, then rises with the box once again.

Lachlan rumbles back into my mind. *Not that gesture.*

What was I supposed to do? Kiss him in front of his entire court?

It's what I would have done.

The way you two bicker, I daresay he'd have enjoyed that.

Lachlan coughs into a fist, and I smile, proud that I was able to make him slip his ironclad control.

Desmond folds my hand into the crook of his elbow, and Lachlan slips from my mind like water bubbling down the shore at low tide.

"You look lovely, Charlotte," Desmond whispers. "Aowen did well."

Behind his back, his sister rolls her eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asks me.

Ready for what? I want to ask back. I've been given very few instructions for a ceremony that's ended in such catastrophic consequences at least five times already.

Before I can answer, he turns to the crowd. "Good people of Tír na Strelle, I must beg your forgiveness."

Confusion quiets the room as Desmond looks down at the box, running his hand over the lid.

When he returns to the crowd, his lower lashes gleam. "I have failed you so many times. So many candidates. So many wasted Seasons. So many years living in a fractured, king-less kingdom."

He flattens his palm against the box, then glances at me, a radiant smile parting his lips. "Our failure ends today."

He opens the box, then pulls out what looks like a long golden pipe. The mouthpiece is intact, but the other end is jagged. As if it's been broken off a larger instrument. In addition to stars, there are crescent moons and double-crossed arrows carved into it, similar to my ring.

Whispers of *the Bannrhorn* and *she found it* scuttle through the hall.

"For this year"—Desmond holds the piece aloft—"our candidate has found the Bannrhorn fragment on her very first day in the Otherworld!"

The hall fills with shouts and whistles, even louder than when Desmond arrived. Words like *queen*, *kingmaker*, and *majesty* are thrown around. I bask in their praise. Quite different than they were looking at me at the start of this ceremony.

Desmond tucks the fragment into his jacket, then squeezes my fingertips. "And not only is she clever, but she's a spectacular specimen! Don't you all agree?" He leans down to whisper in my ear, "Give them a twirl? A little show from their future queen. You really do look lovely."

I slip my hand from Desmond's arm and execute a few awkward spins, during which his indulgent smile falters. He places a hand on my shoulder to stop me, then clears his throat. "Yes, well. Shall we get the formalities out of the way?" He lowers again, this time to a single knee, and my heart slams against my ribs.

I have never been on the receiving end of a proposal, though I've dreamed of it since I was a little girl. I thought I would be in love when it happened. I also thought a human would be proposing.

I slide my gaze toward Lachlan, but his is the only attention in the hall not focused on the dais. He's staring at the entrance doors, jaw clenched.

"Miss Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy," Desmond begins, "will you betroth yourself to me so that I may compete for your hand in the Wild Hunt?"

There is only one answer I can give without forfeiting my life. Fortunately, it also happens to be the answer I *want* to give.

My acceptance is drowned in a clamouring wave of celebration. I hiss as the ring heats, burning into my flesh. When I raise it to my face, the star glows while the other two symbols remain dark.

Desmond rises, then holds our clasped hands aloft, beaming at his people. My future people. He releases my hand, then flicks his wrist and a tall mirror appears before the dais.

It's time to meet my other suitors.

A palace footman cuts through the crowd clutching a small pouch, and Desmond whispers, "Be clever and witty and you will be fine." Cold fingers pinch my chin. "You won't disappoint me, will you, darling?"

His handsome grin was made to melt hearts, but mine remains stubbornly frozen. Nerves, surely.

Desmond nods to the footman, who unties the pouch and pulls out a pile of … glittering black sand? He opens his palm and blows it toward the mirror.

The frame shines, and the glass ripples like a pebble-disturbed pond. Swirling shadows curl upon the surface before two silhouettes appear.

I cannot make out their features, their bodies mere outlines. Two tall, strapping outlines, of course. If Desmond, Lachlan and the other faerie men in this room are anything to go by, I have no doubt these two dukes are just as beautiful. Just as powerful.

"Duke Áine, Duke Cernunnos," Desmond greets his competitors, "thank you for joining us this afternoon. It's my honor to present this

Season's candidate for the Wild Hunt—Miss Charlotte Fitzroy."

The silhouette on the right, slimmer in build, dips his head in welcome. The one on the left doesn't move at all. His stillness combined with what look like ram's horns curling atop his head is making my palms sweat.

Desmond continues, "As protocol dictates, you may each ask her a single question before provisionally approving her as the quarry."

"Or rejecting her," booms the horned silhouette.

"I think you will find her quite a bit more compelling than my previous candidates." Desmond pulls the fragment from his jacket. "She has already found the first piece of the Bannrhorn!"

The reactions from the two silhouettes are quite different. The smaller one perks up, tilting his head as if examining me more closely. The horned silhouette, well … if he hadn't already spoken, I might mistake him for a statue.

Desmond turns to the shorter silhouette. "Duke Áine of Tír na Lune, you may ask the first question."

The duke steps forward, but the fog does not clear. Drat, I was hoping to see what he looked like. In a lilting tenor, he says, "Miss Fitzroy, a pleasure to make your acquaintance. How are you enjoying the Otherworld?"

"Is that your question, Your Grace?"

A tinkling chuckle. "Clever thing. Though if you'd have answered it, our interaction would be over."

"And you would have lost an opportunity to learn something about me. Which would have been a great shame." My smile is coy. "For you."

The crowd titters, and Desmond grins at me.

"Well, at the very least, I'd have learned your shape," the duke croons. "That dress is very distracting. A ploy to throw off my game?"

I smile and wag a finger at him. "Is this truly the answer you seek?"

I cannot see his face, but I sense he's enjoying our banter. Is it possible I am doing well?

Duke Áine chuckles. “Here is my official question. How did you find the fragment so quickly?”

My smile turns brittle, and my eyelid twitches. *Do* not *look at Lachlan,* I order myself. He never said it outright, but I get the feeling that he’s not supposed to be helping me. And I don’t want to seem incapable of deciphering clues on my own.

“I … ”

The base of my skull tingles. A knock.

Tell him the truth, Lachlan says as soon as I allow him in.

What, that you told me?

I didn’t tell you. I merely reminded you of a faerie tale. You identified the location on your own, if you’ll recall.

He’s … Well, he’s absolutely right. As soon as I exited my bedchamber, he asked me where we should go. *I* was the one who said Queen Caer’s tomb. And when he asked me if I remembered how to get there, I said I didn’t but his mare might. And sure enough, she led us straight to the tomb. That I entered alone. Where *I* pried up the loose tile beneath the late queen’s statue to discover the box.

I did every bit of the task myself. Minus Lachlan’s small nudge.

A relieved breath surges through my nostrils. “For a human, you’ll find I am very well versed in folklore, Your Grace. Desmond’s clue was a cakewalk.”

“I see.” Duke Áine nods and steps back, making a faint chuffing sound. Was he pleased with my answer? I cannot tell. Our short interview is over.

The other silhouette steps forward, and he’s even larger than I realized. He barely fits within the frame.

“Duke Cernnunos of Tír na Dubh,” Desmond begins, “you may ask your—”

“What do you fear most in this world?” Duke Cernnunos’s voice—a commanding bass as cold as the abyss that cradles the stars—pulls the truth from me faster than I can invent a clever response.

“To die alone.”

Duke Cernunnos cocks his head, and his horns loom even larger. “Every soul enters the Afterlands alone, lady. Your fear is foolish.

And inevitable. Try again."

I take a moment to compose myself, and a whine bursts from the mirror. Followed by three sharp barks. The duke turns his head sharply and hisses, "Skadi. Hush."

He turns back to me, waiting to see if I will change my answer. Is this allowed? No one interrupts us, so I suppose it is.

"Foolish though it may be, Your Grace, that is my answer. And what I meant was that I fear reaching the Afterlands without ever having mattered to anyone."

Oh yes, Charlotte. That was very witty. And not at all pathetic.

God, where did the woman who was parrying quips with Duke Áine disappear to?

Duke Cernunnos must take pity on me, because he says nothing further. Merely steps back in line with Duke Áine as quiet conversations buzz through the hall.

Desmond places a hand on my bare shoulder, and I look up with a pleading smile. I want to ask how I've done. If my answers were clever enough. How my performance compared to the other candidates'.

I do none of that, of course. Because his reassurance couldn't help me now, anyway. My fate will be determined by the two shadowed silhouettes in the mirror.

"Alright, Your Graces, what say you?" Desmond asks. "Will you welcome Miss Fitzroy to your territories to search for the Bannrhorn?"

Duke Cernunnos is the first to answer. It's short and simple and a spear to my heart. "No."

He disappears in a swirl of shadows, leaving only Duke Áine's silhouette in the mirror.

My pulse accelerates and my breathing shallows and I am trying to hold it together but I am certain that Duke Áine is going to reject me too, which means I'm going to die, and oh god, what's going to happen to Esmeralda if I can't get back to her, and why am I even concerned about that to begin with, because even if I survive all this and become a queen of the Otherworld, is my king really going to

allow me to go back to the human realm to retrieve a *snake,* and I should have—

Warmth prickles the base of my skull. Soothing.

You did well, Charlotte, Lachlan says. *You're a breath of fresh air, really. This is not over yet.*

A bit of that reassurance I hadn't dared ask for.

My breathing regulates as I lift my head to the final silhouette in the mirror, and Desmond clutches me to his side. "Well," he snaps, an impatient crack in his normally unflappable facade, "what is your decision, Duke Áine?"

The duke's silhouette remains motionless as the entire hall holds its breath.

This is it. I am about to die. He's going to—

"Yes."

"Yes?" Desmond repeats. "Are you… Well, that's… Yes. Yes! Wonderful!"

The hall erupts into cheers as Desmond sweeps me into his arms and presses a hard, firm kiss to my lips. Relief floods my body, an overwhelming sensation that must be the reason I feel nothing else.

"I look forward to hosting you in Tír na Lune, Miss Fitzroy." The duke's silhouette disappears in a puff of shadow.

While I'm overjoyed to be alive, I don't dare fully relax. I may have won this first battle, but I know better than anyone that a Season is a war.

And I have a feeling the Otherworld's is going to be particularly brutal.



CHAPTER

TWELVE

"I owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude, sister." Desmond settles me onto a blood-red sofa in the small parlor off the main hall to which we have retired.

"I think Charlotte herself might have upstaged that dress, actually." Aowen offers me an approving look before sinking into a velvet chair. Vesper is curled atop a throw pillow in the one opposite.

Lachlan guards the door, an unmovable wall of muscle to discourage interference with our impromptu conference.

I shift in my seat and the slit in my gown falls open, baring my leg from toe to hip.

"Get her a blanket," Lachlan grumbles at Desmond.

Does he think I'm cold? I *am* shivering. But it is not due to temperature. Now that the presentation ceremony is over, my anxious mind has decided to scale the next mountain of worries—will I be able to decipher Duke Áine's clue? Will I be able to charm the duke himself? Or will he reject me during my visit to Tír na Lune? And what will happen if Duke Cernunnos doesn't allow me to hunt for his piece of the Bannrhorn?

I sit on my hands to keep them from shaking.

Desmond shoots Lachlan an exasperated look, then drapes a blanket around my shoulders. It looks like wool, but the texture is far softer. He whispers in my ear, "Spun from sheep in the Brumalt mountains where the Wild Hunt is held. The views are even more spectacular than the fabric. You'll see them if you succeed, darling." He squeezes my shoulders, then turns to Aowen. "Fetch her some tea. Now."

"Like I have time to prepare *tea* when Vesper and I have so much work to do." Aowen sweeps a hand through a sunbeam, then twirls her fingers. A silver tea set appears on the table next to her. "Charlotte will require a complete trousseau of day dresses, evening gowns, sporting outfits, riding gear, sleepwear and Danu knows what else." She hands me a cup, and I take a deep whiff. Lavender and citrus. Divine. My first sip is the perfect temperature, not too hot, not too cold. "We need weeks to prepare something worthy of a proper quarry. And we have what? A day?"

"Make it happen." The glare Desmond aims at his sister could peel the brocade paper from the walls. "This is the greatest chance we've had in years to restore the monarchy. I do not need to remind you of the stakes, do I?"

Aowen narrows her eyes. "Of course not."

"Good." Desmond turns his attention back to me. "You did well, Charlotte, but you mustn't rest on your laurels. You may have charmed Áine enough to gain an invite to his House, but you'll need to stay on your game every second you're in Tír na Lune."

Lachlan clears his throat. "Permission to accompany her, Your Grace. If you please."

Desmond tucks his chin over his shoulder. "What? Why?"

"Cernunnos's rejection makes her vulnerable, especially to Áine's people. She'll need protection. Surely he won't question why we sent her with a bodyguard."

"Yes, but my *own* bodyguard?"

"That might help," Aowen chimes in, tracing a long fingernail along her jawline. Have she and Lachlan discussed this? "It will signal Charlotte's importance to you. And make everyone even more curious about her. Rumors will spread throughout the kingdom,

maybe even all the way to Cernunnos himself in Tír na Dubh. A little manufactured intrigue might be just the thing to make him rethink his rejection."

Desmond runs his hand over the back of his neck, addressing his knight. "Who's going to help and protect me while you're gone? You're invaluable."

Lachlan's eyes twinkle, but he doesn't budge. I suspect the man is the very definition of intractable. "Blevins and Carey are more than capable of managing your celestial knights in my absence. And I'll have Sir Dunne assigned to guard your person."

Desmond grouses, "See? You need *three* people to replace you. Aowen will accompany Charlotte as her sponsor for the Season and Tír na Strelle's official representative. I'm sure she'll be quite enough."

Aowen smirks, mumbling something that sounds like, "High praise."

"Tell me something, Your Grace." Lachlan steps into his duke. They are nearly of a height, but there's a power radiating from Lachlan that Desmond, despite his title and regal appearance, just can't match. They are both broad and leanly muscled, so that's not it. Lachlan's armed, but I don't think that's it either. It's his presence. Confident. Patient. Calm. A man who needs no more than a stern look to command a room.

He continues, "Securing Miss Fitzroy's candidacy is the single most important task that anyone in all of Tír na Strelle could be assigned right now, yes?"

"Of course," Desmond admits with a resigned sigh. As if he knows Lachlan is about to win this argument. As if he has won every previous one as well.

"And the reward for securing her candidacy will be well worth the inconvenience of losing me for several months, surely."

"Even if she finds the other pieces of the Bannrhorn, I still need to win the Hunt and claim her to become king," Desmond counters.

"And when that day comes, I will be right by your side to ensure your victory." Lachlan's eyes dart to me for a moment, then back to his master. "But we won't even have the chance if—Danu forbid—

any harm befalls her in Season. She needs the best protection this House can offer. That is me."

It's not boastful or arrogant. Just a bald fact plainly stated. It launches a fluttery sensation in my stomach.

Desmond sighs again, his shoulders dipping. Lachlan claps a hand on one, then turns to Aowen. "Take Miss Fitzroy back to her quarters and finish packing for the journey. She and I will leave for Tír na Lune tomorrow. You and Vesper should go on ahead tonight to announce our arrival."

"I'd like a moment alone with Charlotte," Desmond whines. "In private."

"Of course, Your Grace." Lachlan bows.

Aowen rises from her chair, and Vesper zips up onto her shoulder. "I'll wait for you outside, Charlotte." Her eyes dance with mischief as she whispers, "We'll bring those dukes to their knees, don't you worry. They'll be *begging* to hunt you when we're done with them."

I nod, anxious but excited.

"Food," Vesper chirps on their way out the door. "Trembling food."

Lachlan steps toward me. "No dallying." He rakes narrowed eyes over his duke. "He can be extremely long-winded once he gets going." Desmond scoffs, then shrugs in concession.

I tilt my head back to look up at Lachlan, lowering my voice. "Are you sure about this? It sounds like you have many important responsibilities here. I do not want to cause a rift between you and your duke, Sir Cathal."

"Miss Fitzroy"—he takes my hand, and every nerve ending in my body stands at attention—"you are the most important person in the Otherworld." He switches to my mind. *I promised to help you. I am a man of my word.* Then out loud, "It will be my honor to guard our future queen." He grazes his lips over my knuckles, and a riotous explosion of heat burns away that fluttering in my belly.

It's still smoldering as the door clicks shut behind him, leaving me alone with the man who hopes to be my king.

Desmond's sky-bright eyes dull with worry. "You must be careful, darling. Aowen will help you navigate the politics and personalities, and Lachlan will do everything in his power to keep you from bodily

harm. I wish I could accompany you as well, but that would be too harsh a breach of Seasonal protocol."

He moves in closer, lifting my chin with a knuckle. "I'm sorry we won't have more time together before you leave. But after the Wild Hunt, after we're married, we'll have a lifetime to get to know one another. Would you like that?"

"I—"

He doesn't wait for my answer. Instead interrupts me with our second kiss in less than an hour. It's chaste. Sweet.

Before I can figure out if I want it to turn into something more, he pulls back and whispers, "My queen."

Goosebumps pebble down my arms.

Let the grand reinvention of Miss Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy commence.



CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

The next day, I head down to the stables feeling like a duke's confident fiancée, sartorially if not mentally. Aowen and Vesper left me an elegant sapphire riding jacket, butter-soft leather breeches, and a pair of comfortable boots that lace up to my knees.

They also left me some very small undergarments which, according to Aowen, are called panties. Apparently, the women here wear them beneath all their clothing. She was a bit aghast yesterday when I told her we don't have anything like them in the human world, unnecessary with all the layers under our gowns.

"It's rather an unpleasant word, *panties*," I said to her, grimacing.

"Not when the right person says it." She winked, then bid farewell.

I enter the stables, marching past stalls filled with the most stunning horses I've ever seen. Gleaming white manes and tails offset hides of dark gold, and doleful brown eyes peer at me as I deposit myself on a bench outside a stall.

Moments later, Lachlan emerges with his mare. He's wearing a different kind of uniform today; one that resembles his white armour, but looks to be made of leather rather than metal. The horse clacks

her hoof against the floor and throws her head back, snorting, as he begins saddling her for our journey.

He murmurs as he works, then fishes a pink sugar cube from a sack hanging on the wall. Her lips snuffle over his open palm, and I catch the tail end of his praise, delivered low and soft as he pats the side of her neck.

"…my good, gentle girl."

Something deep within me perks up. I hastily shove it back down.

"Do you like kelpies?"

His question startles me—I didn't think he realized I'd arrived. "I thought she was a horse."

"Kelpies resemble horses. But they're ancient shape-shifters, really. They can travel through certain natural phenomena faster than you can blink. Water, wind, clouds, shadows. This girl here's a light kelpie."

"Well," I say, fascinated, "I suppose I do like kelpies, then. Since I like horses better than most creatures. Especially humans."

He snickers, gesturing for me to join him at his kelpie's side before placing a sugar cube in my hand.

I flatten my palm beneath her snout, and she gently takes it. Warmth radiates through my chest that I have been deemed worthy of her trust.

That, or she's easily swayed by sweets. We will get along famously.

"What's her name?" I ask as we walk out into the paddock.

He raises a dark, pierced brow, then turns to her. "Tula, light kelpie of Tír na Strelle, meet Charlotte, queen-to-be, most recently of the human realm."

Tula flares her lips, snorting at her master, while I try to recover from Lachlan wrapping his lush voice around my first name. I want him to say it again.

It is a thing I suspect I should not want.

I shake off the daze and approach Tula, who dips her head and allows me to pet her neck. "She's sweet. But who will I be riding?"

He stares down at me, confused. "We're riding Tula."

Before I have a chance to protest—which, let's be honest, I would have done rather weakly—Lachlan cups my waist, his large hands spanning my ribs to the flare of my hips, and lifts me bodily into the saddle.

"I could have done that myself. I know how to mount."

His pierced lip twitches as he shrugs, then hoists himself up behind me, wrapping thighs as hard and thick as iron posts around my own.

My face reddens at the intimacy of the position. George wasn't much for riding, and even on the outings he'd deign to take with me, I always rode my own horse.

Lachlan clicks his tongue, flicking Tula's reins, and she ambles through the paddock gate.

As soon as we exit the castle grounds, we are swarmed by fae with the same pointed ears and ethereal beauty as the man behind me. I recognize a few from the ceremony yesterday. They follow our progress down the paved marble streets, tossing cut flowers in a shade of pink so pale it almost looks white. Lachlan tells me its petals only open on clear nights when the stars are visible.

"For good luck," he rumbles at my back. "They are wishing you well."

Shouts of *my queen* and *kingmaker* ring out in our wake. It is a strange thing, adoration from complete strangers. Will they turn on me if another duke wins the Wild Hunt? Or will they respect me as their queen regardless of my husband's House?

Lachlan receives as much attention as I do. More, even. Fawning glances abound, and as we pass a dress boutique, a group of bold young women wolf-whistle. He tenses behind me.

I wonder whether he has a wife. There's no ring upon his finger. I suppose it's likely he has a lover, maybe more than one. I can't imagine a man like him—handsome, powerful, self-assured—goes without companionship for long.

The buildings stretch fewer and farther between, and the crowd thins as the paved road gives way to packed dirt. Lachlan steers Tula into a wild forest, beyond which the sky is a mauve watercolor smear of approaching twilight.

He turns Tula down a steep path leading to a dry riverbed, and I nearly tumble over her neck before he winds an arm around my waist, securing me against his chest. My focus narrows to his solid heat at my back, the brush of his soft hair against my cheek, the press of his forearm against my stomach.

"How long will it take to get to Tír na Lune?" I ask to force my focus to less treacherous territory.

"Not too long, Miss Fitzroy."

"Charlotte," I say.

"Pardon?"

"Are we back to formalities again? Now that you're my *official* bodyguard? I hope you're still allowed to use my first name."

I like the way it sounds in your mouth.

"Charlie," he says.

"Who's Charlie?"

"Could be you."

"Charlie." I test out the nickname. "It's lovely, but I'm not sure it suits me. Shall I give you a nickname as well, then? Which do you prefer—Lach or Lannie?"

"Use either, and I will pitch you from this saddle."

I laugh as the path flattens, and Lachlan removes his arm from around my waist. A pang of disappointment sparks in my chest that I do not spend any time examining. Or at least, not *much* time.

I know this feeling. This blinding, white-hot attraction that lives much lower than my head or my heart. What I mistook for love with George.

It's lust, pure and simple. Nothing more than an ill-advised crush.

Still, Lachlan and I will be spending an awful lot of time together this Season. I suppose there's little danger in getting to know the man.

"How long have you been a celestial knight?"

"For the past nine years. Since I was twenty-six."

I do a quick calculation, seven human years for every one faerie year. "You look very spry for two-hundred and forty-five."

He chuckles. "And your arithmetic is very advanced."

A small insect whizzes by my ear and I flinch. He steadies me with a pulse-quickening brush of his hand against my hip.

"Did you always want to be a knight?"

"Since I was a lad."

"But you did not become one until your mid-twenties. Is that typical?"

"No." A single, strained word. "Before Desmond hired me, I had a … different profession."

His tone has me avoiding asking exactly what his previous profession was—if he wanted me to know, he would have said, so instead I ask, "Did you enjoy it?"

"Parts of it."

"Why did you leave?"

"I was … Well, I suppose you could say I was fired."

He's being more cagey than I expected, but goodness knows I haven't been completely forthcoming with *my* details.

"Do you like working for Desmond?"

A wry smile. "Parts of it."

"Which parts?"

"You're rather nosy, aren't you?" There's no cruelty in his words, only genuine curiosity.

"I just … I like to know the truth of things. You don't have to tell me."

"It's no secret, really. There are perks to being a celestial knight, to be sure. I always have a place to sleep. I never have to worry about where my next meal is coming from. I am respected by the people of Tír na Strelle."

"But?" I peer at him over my shoulder.

He cocks his head, questioning.

"You said there were parts of it you liked." I brush a fallen leaf off my sleeve, my fingertips grazing his hand on the reins. "That implies there are parts you don't. Parts that are influencing your desire to leave, perhaps?"

His chin nudges my temple, as if he's pleased I remembered our conversation from two nights ago. "Celestial knights are not allowed

to marry. We are not allowed to own land. We are not allowed to form attachments to anything other than our duke and his people."

I frown, a little sad for him. A little sad for myself, if I'm honest. Which is useless. "So, this is the next chapter you were talking about. One full of *attachments*?"

"Something like that." I can hear the smirk in his voice.

We fall quiet again, nothing scoring our journey but birdsong and the gentle clop of Tula's hooves. I think about the perks he mentioned—constant shelter and guaranteed meals. Has he had to worry about those before? Asking directly feels impertinent. Perhaps I can get at it from another angle.

"Did you grow up in Tír na Strelle?"

"Depends on who you ask." At his odd answer, I turn again to find him grimacing. "I grew up in a region called Campan's Vale."

"And? The look on your face would suggest there's more to it than that."

"Do you really want to hear the boring politics?"

"If I'm to be queen, I should know all the politics, regardless of their entertainment value."

He snickers. "Fair enough. Campan's Vale had been a part of Tír na Strelle for centuries, but during King Aengus and Queen Caer's reign, House Áine successfully petitioned for a decree to annex the region. The family has maintained property there for years, though how that gives them the right to the region itself is beyond me. Regardless, the map was redrawn, and Tír na Lune now claims the Vale. And the duke has been using some rather harsh methods to impose rule. Crippling new tithes being the least of them. The Vale has been overrun by his forces since the king and queen passed."

"Do your parents still live there?"

"I never knew my parents."

He says it in such a matter-of-fact tone, with no trace of bitterness or hurt, that my heart lurches for him. There's a level of resilience required to navigate the world without parents. One I'm intimately familiar with.

"But the orphanage where I spent a good portion of my childhood is still there."

"I'm an orphan, too," I offer quietly.

"Really?" There's a hopeful, yet confused note in his question, and—

Shit. I'm supposed to be the Favourite.

"That is to say … I was not … I was raised by my grandmother. We were very close. She was a well-respected member of the peerage."

A well-respected member who stepped away from it when she saw how they treated my mother, but Lachlan doesn't need those details.

"*Were* very close?" he asks.

"She died. A year and a half ago." Grief, that familiar, weighty friend, lands on my chest, making my breaths come a little harder, a little slower.

Lachlan pulls me closer. "I'm sorry, Charlotte."

I blink rapidly, trying to stall my welling tears. God, how did this get-to-know-you chat become so morose? Time to switch topics.

"What happened during the ceremony? When you slipped into my mind? You mentioned it was some kind of gift."

Yes.

That warm tingle lifts the hairs at the base of my skull and a shiver runs through my body. He's still holding me so close, there's no way he doesn't notice.

"Are all fae able to … what do you call it? Mind-talk? Psychic dictation?"

His chuckle fractures, echoing both in my mind and behind my back. It's a strange, though not entirely unpleasant, sensation. "There's a name for it in our language—*diamhrán*. It means something like *'a god's song'* in the common tongue."

I swivel my chin over my shoulder, quirking an eyebrow. "Are you a god then, Sir Cathal?"

He dips his lashes, shaking his head, but I swear I hear the faint echo of an answer. Something about how he used to be called one quite frequently. He coughs into his fist, one of those adorable blushes racing across his cheekbones, and slips out of my head like bubbles of water down my spine.

"Our gods, whom humans refer to as the *Tuatha dé Danann,* all possessed the gift. They used to pass it down to fae who'd gained their favor. It was once much more prevalent. More varied, as well. I can use it to speak mind-to-mind, uncover thoughts and secrets. But there are some fae who can use it to see a person's fate, read their future. Very few are capable of the *diamhrán* now, though. I am one of the last in the celestial kingdom."

"Will it be a problem for the other dukes? Will they be hesitant to welcome you into their Houses if you can read their minds?"

"It's not that simple. The *diamhrán* requires an offering from my subject. I'm able to use it on you because of the drop of your blood I swallowed when I bit you."

I blink, idly rubbing my wrist where I swear I can still feel his fangs, though the marks have faded. "Is it some kind of magic bond, then? Are we permanently linked?"

He laughs, as if the idea is ridiculous. "No. It will fade soon. I'll need another offering to keep it alive. And if you agree, I'd like to ensure it's large enough to last through the Season."

I swallow, paling. "How large?"

"Four or five swallows should do it."

Truth be told, though his bite hurt the other night, the thought of having him on call is worth any temporary discomfort. I sit up straighter in the saddle. "Alright. Are you going to take some now?"

He tenses behind me, and Tula's ears flick. "This, ah, isn't the most conducive atmosphere for … It would be … There's only two spots where one can access that amount of blood. To attempt either while riding a horse would be very messy."

"The inner thigh," I say proudly. "Or my throat."

"Yes." I try not to take insult at his surprise. "How do you know that?"

"My brother is a professor of anatomy at Harbridge, a prestigious university back home. I used to do the illustrations for the articles he published in scientific journals."

"A mathematician, a scientist, *and* an artist," he muses, lifting my hand in front of our faces and tracing the length of my fingers with the callused tip of his thumb. I thank his gods that he's no longer in

my mind to read my thoughts. “I will take extra special care of your hands, then.”

His sweet words monopolize my thoughts until we arrive at a break in the tree line several minutes later. Tula whinnies, shaking her mane and straining a hoof forward as the sun dips below the horizon and shimmering light fills the empty river bed. It snakes through the forest, sweeping over the land so far and wide that I cannot see its beginning nor its end.

On the night I arrived, Lachlan and Tula emerged unharmed from this same strange light. The memory should calm me. Instead, my survival instincts scream that my human body will not be able to withstand whatever magic makes this possible.

Lachlan tucks his chin over my shoulder, and whispers in the same calm, low tone he used on Tula earlier, “It’s a luxbridge.”

“A what?” I can barely breathe. For a multitude of reasons.

“A way to travel via celestial light on a kelpie.” His lip ring grazes a spot beneath my ear and I nearly fly out of the saddle. “There are several throughout the kingdom, but they only appear from dusk till dawn. We’ll ride this section into Tír na Lune. There’s nothing to be afraid of, Charlotte. I have you.”

His deep reassurance is a soothing blanket for my nerves.

So I lean back and let him lead me into the light.


Tir Na Lune
Land of the Moon



CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

It's like slipping into a warm bath. And the minute the light reaches my collarbone, I squeeze my eyes shut and clamp my hands around Lachlan's muscled forearm.

Everything fades—Tula beneath me, Lachlan behind me, my head and limbs and clothes.

I am nothing.

A pocket of warmth in a cold, endless abyss.

Have I died?

No, I can still hear my heartbeat between my ears.

Whump. Whump. Whump.

But something lurks in here with me. A pinprick of light, pulsating across astral planes. An ancient thing, reaching, reaching, reaching …

For the blare of a horn, perhaps?

As soon as the thought hits, coolness spreads through my body, radiating out from behind my ribs. The yawning darkness behind my eyelids lightens, and sensations return—the flick of Tula's tail. Her shoes clomping on stone. The creak of the leather saddle.

A soft breath against the shell of my ear.

"Open your eyes, Charlotte."

I squint as the moonlit landscape blurs to life. Rolling silver hills surround an ink-blue river and just beyond, a city spreads out beneath a shining castle that looks to be made entirely of fogged glass.

"Welcome to Tír na Lune," Lachlan says as my eyes sweep over stately buildings in shades inspired by the moonglow—dove grey, pale cream, bone white. The castle itself is a collection of sharp towers in a race for the sky, the tallest of which pierces the bottom curve of the territory's namesake. Ghostly mountains lumber along the horizon, and small villages dot the hills between neat patchworks of farmland.

Serene. That's the word I'd use to describe this place. The word I might use to title a drawing, even. I want to remember this moment. Remind myself it was real. I wish I had my sketchbook.

Lachlan urges Tula into a canter, likely just as eager as I am to dismount. It has the two-pronged benefit of delivering us to the castle gate quickly *and* bouncing my ass against Lachlan's hips more times than it would be prudent to count.

It was forty-seven.

He halts Tula just outside a wrought-iron gate that bears a shield of four interlocked crescent moons. Iron lampposts topped with glowing bulbs bracket it, and I wonder what the light source is. It's too steady to be a flame. I would ask the welcoming party of fae standing just beyond the bars, but I'm guessing it's not the best question to open with. Especially given the expression on the only familiar face at the edge of the group.

I have not known Aowen long, but I can tell by her crossed arms and pinched lips that she is furious. I don't believe her anger is for us.

Lachlan dismounts, then helps me from the saddle, brushing road dust from my shoulders. "Where is Duke Áine?" he asks, scanning the group as the gate whines open.

Aowen's eyes widen in warning as she steps forward. "His Grace is indisposed tonight."

“Indisposed?” Lachlan barks, inspiring a flinch from a short, bucktoothed footman wearing a pale grey uniform. “What could possibly be more crucial than—”

“He regrets that he could not be here to greet the quarry himself, Sir Cathal.” An elegant faerie woman with long silver hair and pale green eyes steps forward, her upper lip curling around Lachlan’s title with very personal distaste.

Lachlan composes himself, then dips into a bow.

The woman turns to me, scanning my dingy traveling gear. “He is a very important man, of course. He cannot be here to welcome every woman who comes to call. Regardless of the gifts she has to offer.” She snaps at the footman. “Show Miss Fitzroy and her companion to their quarters. I am sure they must be travel-weary.”

Aowen cuts in. “I’ve spent all day preparing for Miss Fitzroy’s arrival. I can show her and Sir Cathal the way.”

“Suit yourself,” the woman says to Aowen before aiming a tight smile my way. “Welcome to Tír na Lune, miss. I do hope you enjoy yourself for as long as you’re here.” She sashays away before I have a chance to respond, the footman and other servants scurrying after her.

Aowen vents an exasperated sigh, then makes for the castle entrance, Lachlan and I falling into step behind her.

I wonder where Vesper is. I wonder what kind of rooms we’ve been given. I wonder who the woman was who greeted us and why she seemed to recognize Lachlan. I wonder why Duke Áine is not here to welcome me himself. I wonder how much of Tír na Lune will be aware of that insult by morning.

I wonder many things, chief of which is something I’d rather not wonder at all.

Whether this might be the last place in the Otherworld I ever visit.



CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

When Aowen opens the door to our quarters, at least one of my questions is answered.

Vesper zooms between the sitting area and a room to my right. She halts in mid-air when we enter, then zips into a leather valise and pulls out a dress fit for a doll. She flies toward me, hovering while she holds the tiny garment up to my cheek. It's a soft shade of green—somewhere between sage and olive.

"Food," she nods. "Fancy food."

"Don't mind her," Aowen says before shooing Vesper away. "She's spent the past twenty-four hours setting up your wardrobe. Taking a considerable amount of pride in it. Though based on that welcome, I fear her efforts may have been wasted."

I do not believe Aowen is being intentionally cruel. Careless, surely, but not malicious. If Duke Áine rescinds my invite or refuses to share his clue, the consequences for me will be far more dire than a few lost hours of closet arrangement.

But at the moment, I haven't the energy to bring it up. It's been a supremely exhausting day, and the only thing I want to do is find

out if my bed is as uncomfortable as the furniture here in the parlor—all sharp glass and stiff cushions—appears. I sincerely hope not.

The door clicks shut behind the footman, and Lachlan strides over. "Did they leave her anything to eat?"

Aowen aims a finger at the moon, then twirls her hand before sinking down onto a pale sofa. A cloched platter appears in a flash of white light on the dining table behind her. "Vesper and I ate already."

Lachlan lifts the cloche, and a billow of steam reveals a full roast chicken, seasoned potato hash, and a pile of buttered baby peas.

My stomach blurts out the loudest grumble it's ever made. I rub a hand over it, embarrassed, before Lachlan pulls out a chair. "You first."

"Nonsense. You haven't eaten all day either. There's plenty for both of us."

He shakes his head, refuses to sit. "I need to check your rooms. I'll eat whatever you don't finish. Aowen, may I speak with you alone for a moment?"

Aowen cocks a brow at me, muttering, "Am I in trouble, Sir?" before following Lachlan into another room. I dig into my meal, inventing tales of what they're talking about.

I doubt it's anything good.



Twenty minutes later, belly full yet mind still a-churn, I stand before a four-poster bed which does not seem at all conducive to sleeping. The frame resembles overlapping tree roots, and sharp branches shoot over the edges of the mattress. One unconscious flop during the night and I'll be skewered.

On the other side of the room sits a chaise lounge and matching armchair that look to be fashioned of polished metal.

The furniture is luxurious and well-formed. Sets a tone, for certain. I'm just not sure that tone is *welcome, please make yourself comfortable.*

Lachlan performs a final check in the mirrored armoire, inside which he finds a *very* dangerous collection of shrunken outfits.

There are no windows in the room, but a pair of double doors open onto a balcony above a steep drop to the walkway below.

"Well, no one will be getting in." Lachlan doesn't say the other half of the sentence which I'm sure we're both thinking—under the wrong circumstances, we may not be getting out.

He looks tired. I have an inappropriate urge to invite him to remove his leather armour and let me rub his neck. Maybe ask if he wouldn't mind spreading out on the floor and letting me sleep atop *him*? He looks far more comfortable than that bed. In fact, sleeping atop him looks like one of the most comfortable things a woman could do.

Instead I ask, "What did you need to speak with Aowen about?"

His lips flatten. "Nothing you need worry yourself over. Are the quarters to your liking?"

"If they weren't?"

He smiles softly. "I'd go downstairs, knock a few heads together, and get you something a bit less …"

"Pointy?" I burble a small laugh, then run my fingertips over my forehead. "I'll be fine. They're more than adequate."

He stares at me for a long moment. "I'll be just next door if you need anything. You can reach my room through our shared bathing chamber."

Our *shared* bathing chamber. Oh.

I bite the inside of my cheek. I will not imagine my bodyguard standing naked in a tub and soaping up his muscles, I really will n—

Too late, there it is.

I wonder if he has piercings anywhere else. I add a few to my mental image, then tuck it away to enhance as soon as I am alone in bed.

"There's one final security measure we need to attend to before I let you go for the night."

Right. The top-up. "Yes. How should we—"

I choke back a shriek as Lachlan appears in front of me faster than my human senses could track. He's extremely close and so

much larger than me, but somehow it's not menacing. He's placed his back toward the corner of the room, allowing me a clear path to both the bathing chamber and the door to the parlor. Providing me an escape route if needed. Ensuring I do not feel trapped.

"If at any moment you feel uncomfortable—during the feeding or after once the connection has been formed—all you need do is say no, and I will end it."

My brows crease. "But don't we need the connection to—"

"The only thing we *need*," he growls, "is to keep you safe. And that includes your mental well-being. If you don't want to do this, we'll find another way."

"And that would be?"

He shrugs. "I remain glued to your side at all times. You go nowhere without me, including outings with the dukes. You'd have no shred of privacy." I raise a brow. How is giving him access to my mind any less invasive? "No *physical* privacy. At least with the *diamhrán*, you can decide whether to let me in or not. You'd be able to maintain your peace but still reach me if you're in distress."

I want to tell him that I don't mind having him around. That his company is more pleasant than I anticipated.

But perhaps *he* does not want to spend his time here glued to *me*. He likely has appointments to conduct, politicking to do, arrangements to make on behalf of his duke for whatever Otherworld will emerge from the Wild Hunt.

I lift my chin. "Do it."

He tucks his fingers between my braid and my neck, then pushes the hair away from my throat and strokes his thumb across my unsteady pulse.

Languid heat spreads down my chest. To other places as well.

Charlotte, he is your *bodyguard*, not your suitor. My heart is ignoring my head's gentle reminders.

He squeezes my nape, a silent request to tilt my head and give him better access. The tip of his nose brushes my jaw and I fist my hands at my sides as I pinch my eyes shut.

"Relax." His breath is hot on my neck and I'm going to combust and he has no idea that I'm not scared of the bite but rather what

else I might beg him to do to me after he sinks his teeth in. "Quick pinch, a few swallows, and this will be over before you know it. Deep breath."

I do as he says, filling my lungs. Buried beneath the evidence of our journey—road dust, damp forest, the metallic burn of the luxbridge—is something earthy and fiery and slightly sweet. Like woodsmoke and figs. His own scent.

I swallow, try to compose myself. There's a thrumming inferno between my thighs, and my nipples are so painfully tight that I'm sure he can see them beneath my chemise and silk shirt. He must sense his effect on me.

And I cannot decide whether I'm relieved or insulted that he hasn't acknowledged it. His muscles are tense, a coiled tightness throughout his powerful body. As if he's leashing himself. Against what, I dare not ponder, lest I turn my head and lick his mouth.

God, why I am like this? Insatiable.

New Charlotte needs to get a hell of a lot better at controlling her impulses. And quickly.

He inches closer, the cool metal of his lip ring dragging against my overly sensitive skin. "Ready?"

I relax my shoulders and part my lips and I've barely said *yes* before his fangs pierce my flesh.

I gasp and arch up into him.

He threads his other arm around my waist, releasing a groan that I am fairly certain is involuntary based on how swiftly he swallows it. His tongue and lips press against my throat where he's drinking from me. It's hot and wet and dreadfully painful.

But there are other sensations as well. Tiny zaps across my nerve endings that melt into something pleasant and achy.

I sip shallow breaths, my soft chest heaving against his hard one. His fingers stroke the base of both my spine and my skull, soothing me.

That familiar tingle warms my hairline, glowing hotter as he gulps down my blood. His voice materializes in my mind, low and sultry.

That's it. Good, Charlotte. Just a little more. You taste so *fucking—*

He abruptly retracts his fangs and pulls me against his chest, his heart drumming madly as he rests his chin atop my head. I try to pull back, to look into his eyes, to read what he's thinking.

Because old Charlotte *desperately* wants to know how he was going to finish that sentence.

But he's gripping me too tightly, won't allow it. Whatever he thinks I might be able to read in his gaze, he's not willing to share it yet.

I stifle my ridiculous disappointment. What does it matter?

I am not *for* him.

After what feels like an eternity, he takes a step back, his long-fingered hands coasting up to my shoulders as his eyes search mine. "Are you alright? Did I hurt you?"

I shake my head, releasing a trail of wetness down my neck. It's almost certainly staining my white silk shirt. Vesper will be furious. I can imagine her squeaky, *Food. Bloody food.*

Come to think of it, she might prefer the shirt this way.

I chuckle, and the corner of Lachlan's mouth kicks up. "What's funny?" His silver hoop glints in the light from the leaf-shaped sconce on the wall.

My chipmunk brain latches onto my earlier curiosity about the light source, and I'm not sure if I actually care or if I'm just trying to distract myself from the relentless *want* pounding through my body when I ask, "What kind of light is in those lamps? It doesn't dance like a flame."

"Could be from any number of celestial sources," he murmurs, wiping his thumb through the blood on my neck and pulling me toward the bathing chamber. "Sometimes, it's debris from shooting star trails. Other times, sections of moonbeams or spears of sunlight. There are craftsmen throughout each territory who make them. They're called shardlights."

He explains that the energy from celestial light can be used for all sorts of magic, and I am so fascinated that until he finishes, I don't realize I am seated on a stool with a soft bandage wrapped around my throat. There's a coolness underneath, as if he's rubbed an ointment over my wound.

I pry a finger under the cloth, but he clucks his tongue and pulls my hand away while helping me off the stool. "Don't touch. It should be healed enough by morning that you can remove the bandage. There should be no scabs or bruising."

I nod. I'm not sure what else to say. Lachlan seems at a loss as well. So, we just stare at each other, me holding my arm at my side to keep from futzing with the bandage.

After several charged seconds, his voice unfurls in my mind, louder and clearer than before. *I'll be right next door. If you need anything, anything at all, just call for me.*

How?

Say my name in your mind. It might take a few tries. The diamhrán *will connect us more quickly if you're feeling a powerful emotion.*

What kind of emotions?

"Fear, distress, anger," he says out loud. "If I sense those, I'll come for you immediately."

I cock my head. "What about other powerful emotions? Those on the more joyous end of the spectrum?"

He smirks. "I'll be able to sense those as well. But I'll check with you before I come barreling in to spoil your fun. It is a courting Season, after all."

What *would* be the harm, really? To have a tryst with any willing suitors while I'm here? Desmond said a human and a faerie cannot produce children, so I know I can't get pregnant. And one of the dukes will make me his queen, after all. Desmond himself is absurdly handsome. We can probably do better than yesterday's farewell kiss. Not exactly the toe-curling encounter I'd anticipated when I first saw him.

Certainly nothing compared to the life-altering bite I just received.

"Am I limited to my suitors?"

God, where did *that* question come from? Sleep. I need to go to sleep.

But there's no judgment on Lachlan's face. If anything, he looks … intrigued.

"As future queen, it would be inadvisable to seek companionship with anyone other than your intendeds. But you're a grown woman, Charlotte." There's a small drop of my blood staining the corner of his smirk. He holds my gaze as he thumbs it across his plush lower lip, then pushes it into his mouth. "You can do whatever you want."

Whatever or whomever? All I manage in response is a soft, "Hmm."

The last time I ignored propriety and did whom I wanted, I ended up tossed out like yesterday's kitchen scraps.

Lachlan casually places a hand on the knob to his bedchamber door. "Do you require anything else of me before you retire?"

I choke on a laugh. Lachlan is the chief knight of my most ardent suitor. The suitor who Lachlan himself wants upon the throne. Which makes the ten *very* specific answers that spring to mind highly inappropriate. I'll probably sketch a few of them as soon as I—

Drat. I've got nothing to draw with. I sigh, "No, thank you."

He bows, hand on his chest, his deep blue eyes latched to mine. "Right next door. Anything at all." He angles his broad shoulders through the door and slips into his room.

I trail my fingertips along the edge of the bandage, the sting of his bite a disappointingly distant memory as I stare at the space he occupied for far longer than could be considered normal behavior.

Crossing into my own room, I search the armoire for something to sleep in and decide on a doll-sized pair of silk pajamas. I have no earthly idea how I'm expected to fit into—

They expand as soon as they catch the moonlight. Marvelous. I undress and slip on the top and pants, finding they fit better than anything I've ever worn. Aside from the traveling clothes I just shucked off.

I climb into bed, twisting around the sharp branches, and fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

When I wake the next morning, awaiting me on the vanity in the bathing chamber is a sketchbook bound in soft pink leather and a case of pencils.



CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

"Bastard left Tír na Lune yesterday to go *gambling* in Farlock's Edge."

Aowen's shout precedes her into the parlor the next morning. She slams her bedroom door behind her, Vesper clinging to her shoulder against the rush of air.

"Careful, Wen. Ears everywhere, even if you can't see them," Lachlan mutters from the seat next to me at the dining table, where he's been working on some kind of wood carving all morning.

He's abandoned his armour today, instead choosing a close-cut grey jacket that's doing the most wonderful things for his thick arms. And, to my utter delight, he's wearing a pair of reading glasses. The sight of them perched on the end of his nose is so charming that I wouldn't dare ask about them for fear of their removal.

When I emerged from my bedchamber this morning, I thanked him for the drawing supplies, and he waved me off like it was nothing before his attention snagged on the bodice of my lilac linen gown. Neither Aowen nor Vesper was around to help me dress, and I couldn't lace the stays on my own. Part of me does not miss the binding, while another part feels a bit naked. I am keenly aware of

every bounce of my breasts. So is Lachlan, it seems, as his eyes slide to me every time I shift in my seat.

And I may or may not be doing a lot of unnecessary shifting.

"Where did you go this morning?" he asks Aowen, after prying his attention off me for what feels like the hundredth time and re-focusing on his carving knife. I hope he doesn't nick himself. I smile against the back of my hand.

"This morning?" Aowen laughs, plopping down into the chair across the table. "I haven't been back here since last night."

Vesper chirps a greeting, her beetle-black eyes crawling over my frizzy hair. I haven't done a thing with it since I woke. She smiles at me, that terrifying one full of razor-sharp teeth where I can't tell if she's pleased or about to nibble my flesh. "Food. Fresh food."

Lachlan shaves a long sliver off the wood. "Bedpost notching or intelligence gathering?"

Aowen coaxes a bit of sunshine through the balcony doors, then flicks her wrist. A tray filled with fruit, coddled eggs, cold ham, and a basket of those cherry scones I love so much appears in the center of the table. She reaches for a shiny red apple and sinks her teeth into it. "Little of both." She smiles at me as she chews.

"Didn't know you had so many friends here in Tír na Lune," Lachlan murmurs.

"Almost as many as you."

Something passes between them. It looks like a challenge, but neither elaborates. She raises her brows and flicks her chin toward breakfast, encouraging me to eat. It's the only invitation I need to pull a cherry scone onto my plate and slather it with clotted cream.

"Anyway, he wasn't a friend. Just an amusing way to pass the time, with lips as loose as his regard for Duke Áine's secrets. *And* dumb as a bag of rocks. Just how I like them."

Lachlan's smile is exasperated, yet fond. He seems as close with Aowen as he is with Desmond. "What did we learn?"

"Well, for one thing, the men of Tír na Lune are surprisingly skilled with their fingers. He did this twisting mo—"

"Not what I meant," Lachlan croons without a hint of reproach. Not like there would have been in Breton, if a woman dared talk of

such things over breakfast.

"Spoilsport." She shoots me a mischievous glance. "I'll bet Charlotte wants to know. Once Duke Áine returns, she'll get well acquainted with his fingers."

A tense curiosity shoots through me. I wonder what the duke looks like. He sounded pleasant during the presentation ceremony. *Would* I like to get to know his fingers? Then again, given what Lachlan told me about the situation in Campan's Vale … I don't know enough to judge yet, but something tells me that while Duke Áine's title is noble, the man himself may be far from it.

Lachlan's grip on his knife tightens ever so slightly, but his voice is as calm as always when he asks, "And when *will* the illustrious duke be returning? Or was that not one of the secrets you learned from the gentleman who entertained you last night?"

Aowen snorts. "He was hardly a gentleman, praise Danu. But he did claim the duke will be back for dinner. I snuck down to the staff quarters before I came here, bribed one of the girls to show me this evening's place settings, and we're in luck. Charlotte will be seated right next to him."

"Good," Lachlan says, a vein in his jaw ticcing. "Hopefully he'll make up for his absence last night. And for sending Lisande LaBeaumont in his stead. What's she doing here?"

"She's the duke's current lover," Aowen bemoans. "Her father introduced them. She's been here for months, weaving herself into his life. You need to be careful, Lachlan. Desmond would call you back in a heartbeat if he knew she was here, given your history with their fam—"

"I know." His tone is sharp, and Aowen takes the hint, crunching into her apple instead of elaborating.

"Do you think she orchestrated the snub last night?" I ask, glancing toward Lachlan and studying his arresting profile. The sharp line of his jaw, the fan of his dark lashes, how his bottom lip pokes out just a bit farther than the top one.

He's a fascinating study. So much so that I nearly miss Aowen's answer to my question. Something about how it's *extremely* likely that Lisande organized the trip that the duke and his closest male

courtiers took to Farlock's Edge—a playground of a city along the border between Tír na Lune and Tír na Dubh with vices to suit any depraved taste.

Aowen rises from the table. "I'm going to take a long, hot bath. Rinse the man stink off me." Vesper squawks at her. "No, no. You help Charlotte with that rat's nest atop her head."

Vesper hisses, then zooms into my room.

I smooth a hand over my curls. Surely it's not *that* bad. "Should she be—"

"She's already stolen a few strands, right? Few more won't kill you." Aowen winks. "After, you and I are going for a little tour around the castle. I'll introduce you to some of the courtiers. Since the duke isn't here to share his clue, maybe they'll be able to give you a hint of where to start looking for the fragment."

She glides into her room, humming a bawdy folk song that I recognize—something about a maiden and a horse and a bareback ride. Granny used to sing it to me when she was feeling cheeky. Which was often.

I chuckle at the memory while rising from my own chair, then pop one more bit of scone into my mouth. "If you'll excuse me," I say to Lachlan. "Apparently, I've got an appointment with a hair-eating pixie. What's on your agenda today?"

He folds his knife and sets it upon the table next to his half-finished carving, which looks more like a shank than anything else at the moment. "I've got a check-in with Sir Quinn, the captain of Duke Áine's celestial knights. Reviewing the castle's security protocols, plans to coordinate for the Wild Hunt, that kind of thing." He switches to the *diamrhán. I'll still be available to you, though. Check in whenever you need me.*

"Actually, I *will* need you later."

"Really?" His brows rise as he removes his glasses. A tragedy. "What for?"

"I'd like to start searching the castle grounds tonight."

"Ah." He breaks my gaze, begins fiddling with the edge of a napkin. "Yes. Yes, of course. That's smart."

It's obviously not the answer he was expecting.

Oh, this will be fun.

"Why?" I drop my voice, focusing my attention on his side of the *diamhrán*, which he's left open. "What did you think I was going to ask you?"

I catch flashes of teeth across skin, fingers dimpling flesh, mouths breathing against each other, and—

He slams it closed. "Nothing."

And there goes his blush again. He really must stop doing that, or I fear I may fall in love with him. God knows I've fallen in love for less.

He coughs into his fist, still not looking at me. "Do you have an idea of where you'd like to start?"

"Well, Desmond's piece was buried in a family tomb. Perhaps Áine's is as well?"

He meets my gaze once again, composed. The celestial knight, back in control. "I'll ask Sir Quinn if we can gain access."

I nod, and the movement draws his attention to the scarf I threw on this morning to cover my bandage.

"May I?"

I nod, and his fingertips brush my collarbone as he removes the patterned silk. A nanosecond of contact that crackles flames along my skin.

"Fully healed," he declares, running the pad of his thumb across my jumping pulse.

A charged silence stretches between us, rooting me in place.

I am not some naïve ingénue. I know when men want me. When *human* men want me, at least. But Lachlan is offering the same signals—looks that linger a moment too long, unnecessary (but welcome) touches, all that adorable blushing.

Old Charlotte would have slipped into his lap this very second, unbuttoned his jacket and started searching for more piercings.

But new Charlotte is going to play by the rules. Giving in to lust, confusing it for a deeper connection, well … That ended very poorly for me in the human realm. And I fear the consequences here could be even more dire. Besides, even if I wanted to—

An irascible squawk bursts from my bedchamber.

Lachlan straightens, breaking from a daze. “You’d better go. The longer you make her wait, the more hair she’ll devour as punishment.”

I expel a breathy laugh, and his answering smile is warm sunshine in a bitter wind.

“Later then?”

His eyes trail me into my bedchamber.

“I am at your disposal, Miss Fitzroy.”



CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

"After you, ladies."

Lachlan hauls open the heavy stone door for Vesper and me, the pommel of his sword winking over his shoulder like a guiding star.

Despite my candidacy and Aowen's noble heritage, none of the courtiers she tried to introduce me to today paid us a lick of attention. Which means I have no more hint of where the next fragment may be than I did when I arrived yesterday. Which makes searching the Áine family crypt as good a place as any to start.

Lachlan hovers a hand at my lower back, ushering me through the crypt's gaping maw. Before he enters, he pulls a drop of starlight into his palm to provide illumination in the tunnels.

The door booms shut, and Vesper's trembling with so much excitement on my shoulder that her buzzing wings are knotting my curls. When she overheard me mention our destination to Aowen, she insisted on joining. Couldn't resist the temptation of being deep underground where the dead things are buried. I make a mental note to keep close watch on her, lest she steal a femur from an ancestral Áine and spark an inter-territorial incident.

"Well," Lachlan says, the light at his waist pooling shadows in the hollows beneath his sharp cheekbones, "where should we start?"

We're standing in a low-ceilinged foyer of sorts, from which branch four tunnels. Through their arched openings, I spy ghostly parts of statues, severed limbs floating in the darkness.

I shiver, tracing my thumb along the ring. It's ice cold, none of that flaring warmth it sometimes offers.

Is it giving any hint of which way to go? Lachlan asks, using the *diamrhán* because … well, I'm not sure. Maybe he doesn't want the dead to overhear us.

Nothing. I shiver again, which encourages Lachlan to stop hovering and actually place his hand on my lower back. When the heat of his palm warms my skin through my shirt, I'm shivering for a different reason.

"This way, then." He nudges me toward the tunnel in front of us. "Might as well start at the beginning."



As we pick our way through the crypt, I become certain of two things.

First, the duke's Bannrhorn fragment is not here.

And second, no family in the history of the Otherworld was as prolific as the Áines.

We're halfway down the third tunnel and have already passed at least two hundred dearly departed relatives. Their likenesses grace their final resting places, though not everyone has been granted a statue; some only have friezes on the lids of their sarcophagi. There's a distinct pattern to who gets which kind of immortal memorial.

All the men have statues. Of the women, I've seen only three. Out of two hundred.

I am annoyed, but not surprised. And I can practically hear Granny Maggie grumble something about the fragility of the male ego.

“Still nothing?” Lachlan whispers, the stardrop bobbing in his palm.

Chittering echoes from far behind us, followed by the insectile hum of wings. Vesper abandoned us about twenty tombs ago, but in her way, she’s letting me know she’s still here.

“Nothing,” I answer Lachlan, dejected. I suppose it was foolish to think that finding the other fragments would be as easy as finding Desmond’s. I twirl the cool metal around my finger. “If anything, the ring’s getting colder.”

I pause in front of the next tomb, whose statue is the only one I’ve seen depicting two people. Even rarer, they are both women.

The shorter must be a knight, in full dress armour similar to what Lachlan sometimes wears. She’s mid-snarl, terrifying, and the tip of her broadsword menaces the viewer at face-level. Like she’d run you through if you so much as looked wrong at the tall woman delicately clinging to her shoulder. And though the tall woman’s grip is light, her face is imperious. Commanding.

Quite the departure from the bland, stately representations of the men I’ve been glaring at all evening. The fierce protectiveness of the pose, not to mention the possessive curl of the tall woman’s fingers on her lady-knight’s pauldron, suggests the two women may have been in love with one another.

“Alanthe Áine and Sir Melloway, her secret lover and chief executioner.” Lachlan ambles up behind me. “Together, they were known as the Scourge of Tír na Lune.”

“That sounds like a story I need to hear.”

“It’s a thrilling one. With an appropriately tragic ending. Alanthe wanted to be the first faerie queen of the celestial Otherworld. Didn’t understand why only dukes were allowed to hunt the human quarries and win the crown. She was an only child, but since she was a woman, the Áine dukeship was going to pass to a male cousin while her father married her off to the son of one of the other Houses. She persuaded him to reconsider.”

“How?”

“By sneaking Sir Melloway and a handful of her loyal knights into the castle during the Samhain feast and slaughtering everyone in

attendance. Her father included."

I cluck my tongue. "Love an ambitious woman."

Lachlan snickers. "She declared herself Queen of Tír na Lune—a title which had never before and has never since existed—and held the castle for several months against a siege from the other territories."

I study the two fierce women, wishing to possess even a tenth the conviction and courage such a feat must have required.

"The celestial kingdom would look very different today had she succeeded," Lachlan says quietly.

"Why didn't she?"

"Sir Melloway was badly wounded during an attack, and there were no healers within the castle capable of saving her. Alanthe surrendered in order to save her lady love."

"And was she saved?"

"For a short time." The tightness in Lachlan's voice makes me dread hearing the rest. "They healed Sir Melloway. Then publicly executed both women for treason. Her cousin carried out the sentence before he took control of House Áine."

"This was how many generations back?"

"Her cousin was the current duke's father."

Anger shortens my breath, stings my eyes. "So, she was branded a traitor because she defied her family's expectations?"

"Well, she did murder an awful lot of people."

"Still," I murmur. "I think she was brave."

"Yes. And unremorseful. Probably why she was cut down so spectacularly."

"Brave women often are as soon as they refuse to do what they're told." I look up at him with fire in my eyes. "It's much the same as in my world."

There's something both thrilling and unsettling in the way he's staring at me. Especially with all this talk about loving fiercely and getting cut down for it.

I turn away, my boots scuffing the dusty floor as I move deeper into the tunnel. "Have you ever been in love like that?"

"I … " Lachlan hesitates, remaining silent for long seconds.

Have I pried too deep? Asked too personal a question? He seemed righteously angry while recounting Alanthe's story. As if he sympathized with her.

Is that why he wants to leave Desmond's service? Did he break his vow of chivalry and fall in love with a faerie woman? Someone for whom he wants to leave the knighthood?

My chest pinches at the thought. Which is highly ridiculous. Lachlan and I are merely friends. More like partners, I suppose. Why should I care who he's in love with?

"It's alright," I offer when he doesn't continue. "Another nosy question. I'm afraid I cannot help myself."

He jogs after me, then slows to hold pace. "No. I've not been in love like that yet. I'm not sure I've ever been in love at all."

"Oh." The word contains every strange emotion pinwheeling through me, of which the chief and most dangerous is relief. "Why?"

"Well, despite these outrageous lips"—he smiles down at me, putting those particular weapons on lethal display—"loving a celestial knight would not be a kind burden to put on anyone."

I have no doubt there are scores of people in this kingdom who would disagree with him. Who might even shred each other to bits for the chance to be *burdened* by a love affair with Sir Lachlan Cathal. Hell, I might even sharpen my *own* claws for the opportunity.

"What about you?" he asks. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Thousands of times."

A cocked eyebrow. "Thousands?"

"Of course. With every meal I've ever eaten, several rollicking book series, a naughty boomslang named Esmeralda, numerous pieces of art, and—"

"I thought we were speaking of romantic love."

"Oh, Sir Cathal." I bat my lashes at him. "Have you never felt the urge to run away with a toffee pudding? What a dull, flavourless life you must lead."

He huffs a little laugh, but his voice is serious when he says, "You don't have to do that with me, you know."

"What?"

"Deflect with quips. What was it you said to me? That you like to know the truth of things? Well, I want to know the truth of *you*. Even the ugly bits."

I tuck a curl behind my ear, feeling a little too seen.

And maybe it's the quiet of this dark crypt, this cold ring on my finger, the knowledge that even if I *do* survive this and complete the great reinvention of Miss Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy, I will be marrying a stranger.

It might be nice to be known by someone in the meantime. Someone who's as invested in my success as I am, but for his own selfish reasons.

I blow out a long breath as I pause before the final tomb in this tunnel. "I was in love. Once."

"Was?" Lachlan asks softly. "What happened?"

My shoulder tips up. "He wasn't."

The simple answer belies the ache lodged beneath my ribs. Though it's growing fainter with each passing day in the Otherworld.

Lachlan's lips part, but before he can get a word out, a sound like metal scraping stone cuts the silence.

Lachlan transforms before my eyes. His brows flatten and his jaw tightens, the muscles in his neck going taut. A predator with perfectly honed senses. My pulse kicks up at the sight of him. At the danger of the situation, of course. Only that.

He's every inch the celestial knight as he slips his broadsword over his shoulder in a smooth and practiced rhythm that minimizes the metallic hum of the blade against its sheath.

The noiseless action is impressive, but useless. If there is someone else down here, surely they've heard us talking and—

Vesper. When was the last time I heard the click of her wings?

"Come," Lachlan commands, barely giving me a chance to obey before he splays a palm against my back and pushes me back up the tunnel toward the statue of Alanthe and Sir Melloway. "Hide behind here."

I grab his arm before he can rush away. "Wait! What if something happens to you?"

He gently pries my fingers from his mail, then flips his hefty sword and catches it single-handedly. "It won't."

I nearly roll my eyes, though I don't doubt his prowess. He passes me the stardrop. "It will fade without proximity to my magic, but the novillum should keep it from completely going out on you. Hide it in your pocket to block the glow. If you hear anyone coming other than me—I'll warn you through the *diamhrán*—whip the drop out and blind them."

"And then what?"

"Run."

He's off, stalking down the tunnel and leaving me gaping. Not to mention with a thousand questions. How long am I supposed to wait? How does *he* not need the stardrop? Does his gift allow him the ability to see in the dark?

Despite my misgivings, I settle behind the statue, doing what I'm told and waiting for my bodyguard to deal with the trouble then come back to fetch me.

It's hard to tell how much time passes with no outside light to track; the only things to count are my breaths. I've taken about seventy when I hear the faint echo of droning wings.

Vesper.

It sounded close. From the end of this corridor, even. A frantic, stuttering buzz, like she's trying to free herself. It's followed by a pitiful whimper, and there's no way I can hide here like a coward and not try to help her.

Lachlan, I call through the *diamrhán*. *Lachlan!*

What's happened? Are you alright?

Someone's got Vesper.

Don't move. I'm coming back. I'll—

An agonized screech pierces the darkness, and before I know what I'm doing, I bolt out from behind the statue. I cannot see a thing, flailing blindly until I crack my knuckles against the wall across from the alcove.

There's a faint glow at the end of the tunnel, and as I creep toward it—one hand on the wall for guidance while the other's

wrapped around the stardrop in my pocket—I hear a small crack, followed by another wail.

The glow brightens, and I peek my head around the corner to find Vesper lying on the ground cradling her hand against her chest. There's another stardrop next to her, highlighting her in a bright aura, but she's alone.

"Oh, Vesper," I whisper as I tiptoe over, and she releases her hand as soon as she sees me. Two of her tiny lavender fingers are broken.

Who would dare hurt a creature so small? I am so distracted by the fury boiling in my veins that I barely notice her shaking her head and pointing behind me with her intact hand.

"Food!" she croaks out. "Careful food!"

A gloved hand clamps down onto my shoulder, and I'm whipped around to face a short, wiry faerie man dressed all in black beneath a hooded cloak. He raises a large knife above his head, and my reflexive will to survive kicks in as I snatch the stardrop from my pocket. I close my eyes and shove it toward his, wrenching free when he bellows. I dart away to scoop up Vesper, then hold her against my chest as I scramble toward the crypt entrance.

My assailant recovers, and his footsteps soon gain on us.

Moonlight spills beneath the door ahead, and we're close. So close. I clutch Vesper tighter, careful to avoid her injured hand, while holding the stardrop out to light our way.

I pound forward, we're nearly there, and—

Something slams into me, and I tumble forward with only a fraction of a second to toss Vesper aside before I crush her. My assailant lands on my back, and I feel the cold press of his knife against my neck. He pulls a vial from beneath his cloak, thumbing off the cork and bringing the glass to my lips.

"Drink this or I'll slit your throat," he grunts in my ear.

I press my lips closed, straining my neck away from his knife and struggling to free myself as he jams the vial against my mouth.

Then there's a hiss. And a thunk. And a shocked grunt as the man's weight instantaneously lifts off me. Something wet coats the back of my head.

I turn over to find Lachlan pinning the man to the floor with a booted foot to the chest and a broadsword to the neck. The man's wrapped a hand around Lachlan's ankle in a futile attempt to free himself. Only one hand though because…

I gag, forcing myself to look away as I realize what the back of my head is covered in.

Lachlan sliced the man's arm clean off.

I scurry for Vesper, who flies up into my arms and burrows herself against me.

"Who sent you?" Lachlan growls down at my assailant, whose laughter spurts blood down his chin.

His hood pulled back in the struggle, revealing cotton-pale hair above a gaunt face.

Lachlan bares his teeth, pressing his boot down harder. Something crunches, and the man chokes out a wheeze. "Who. Sent. You?"

"Just end me, *Sir* Cathal." The man uses what little energy he's got left to mock Lachlan's title. "You celestial knights are skillful murderers, aren't you? Crown-sponsored killers, the lot of you. And you're the best of them all."

Emotion flickers across Lachlan's face—guilt?—gone in an instant before he fists the man's cloak and slams him into the wall. The man barks a pained yelp, which turns into an anguished scream when Lachlan sinks his fangs into his throat. An attempt to form the *diamhrán* and gain access to the secrets the man refuses to share.

This bite is a far cry from the gentle pinch Lachlan offered me last night. It's messy and loud, flesh tearing and tendons crunching. I want to look away, but cannot tear my gaze from the spectacle.

Lachlan pulls back with a gasp and a final swallow, his lips and teeth coated with blood.

My assailant grins madly, pushing his tongue into the side of his mouth then biting down on something and swallowing. "She will *never* be queen."

There's a wet gurgle as the man's mouth fills with pinkish foam and his eyes roll back into his head, exposing whites as his limbs convulse.

"Fuck," Lachlan snarls as he drops the man to the floor.

"What happened?" I sway on my feet, trying not to faint. This is the goriest scene I've ever witnessed in my life; I'm proud I'm still standing.

"Poisoned himself before the connection could form." Lachlan toes the man's remaining arm. "I cannot read a dead man's secrets."

Vesper's heart races against my palm; likely from excitement, not fear. I imagine she'd like to strip the corpse for leftovers.

Lachlan cleans his sword on the assailant's cloak, then re-sheathes the blade down his back in a single movement. Seconds later, his hands are roaming over my body, close but not touching. He's killing calm, but his jaw muscles are twitching. Like my mussed hair and the small cut on my chin are crimes for which he'd like to carve up the man all over again.

I know you're not badly injured, Lachlan says. *I would have been able to feel it here. But otherwise, are you alright? I'm sorry you had to see that.*

Something is holding my shock at bay. Something that must be the reason I'm not scared of Lachlan after what he just did.

He butchered someone. For me.

On some level, I knew it was a possibility. He is my bodyguard, after all. But that knowledge alone cannot explain this low, throbbing heat spreading through me. I dare not ponder the cause while the *diamrhán* is open.

"I'm fine," I say out loud, willing him away from our connection. "But poor Vesper isn't. That bastard broke her fingers trying to lure me out. Who was he?" I flick my chin toward the vial he tried to force me to drink from. "And what is *that*?"

Lachlan picks it up, but most of its contents have spilled. "No idea," he murmurs, studying the faint sliver of acid green liquid at the bottom. "Some kind of poison, perhaps?"

"Why would he try to poison me when he already had a knife at my throat? Seems like overkill."

"Doesn't look like any kind of poison I've ever seen, anyway."

"That man … You didn't know him, but he knew you."

Lachlan shrugs, unimpressed by his own notoriety.

"That's not what I … We can use that knowledge to narrow down our list of suspects. Only a handful of people know we've arrived in Tír na Lune."

Lachlan nods thoughtfully. "Not only that.

"But how many of them knew you were in the crypt tonight?"



CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Our suspect list, as it turns out, is much longer than we anticipated.

The next morning, Sir Quinn is suitably horrified as Lachlan debriefs him on the attack. Quinn vows his knights' assistance in identifying the assailant, and offers to station extra guards outside my quarters.

I refuse because, despite the chief knight's slavering concern, he himself has not been cleared. He knew very well that we'd be exploring the crypt last night. Unfortunately, many at the castle could say the same. Due to the crypt's location in the center courtyard, anyone could have seen us enter.

The question plaguing us now is why Sir Quinn or any of Tír na Lune's power players would want me dead when the success of my venture offers their duke a chance at the crown?

We speculate all week, to little effect. Duke Áine and his entourage remain in Farlock's Edge well past the date of their supposed return. And still his remaining courtiers refuse to meet with me.

Tír na Lune's indifference combined with the complete and utter silence from Tír na Dubh—Desmond has been sending appeals to Duke Cernunnos, trying to convince His Grace to host me after Lughnasadh—have my frayed nerves on permanent alert.

My nightmare is the same every night. I'm attending the Season opening ball at Stillwater, but I do not remember anyone's name. I try to convince the strangers where I've been, that the Otherworld is real. That faeries are real. But my pleas only ever end the same way: with me tackled to the ballroom floor, which becomes the crypt floor, where I choke to death on a vial of poison.

Each time I wake, covered in slick sweat, Lachlan's right there in my mind asking if I need him. I always answer no. Because if I can't face the waning terror of a silly nightmare on my own, then I have no business being queen.

And anyway, I don't want to steal what little sleep he's getting himself; he's been far busier than me this week. Training every morning with the celestial knights, followed by hours-long—and thus far unproductive—investigations into the attack with Sir Quinn. Some nights, he doesn't return to the suite at all. Not that I stay up listening for him or anything.

It's a blessing I haven't required his guardianship often; I've barely left my room.

This afternoon, he's strolling through the castle gardens behind me and Aowen, looking more tired than I've yet seen him. Half-moons darken his under-eyes, he's stifling yawns, and it's obvious his service is taking a toll on him. That next chapter awaiting him after the Wild Hunt? I hope it's full of the rest he deserves.

It's a lovely day—blue skies, gentle breeze, puffy clouds. After a light lunch, Aowen brought me out to tour the Tranquileries, Tír na Lune's legendary gardens. Both for the scenery and to see if the fragment might be buried somewhere beneath the geometric hedges and fluffy white dahlias.

"They're even more splendid at nighttime," she declares. "Perhaps we'll come back after dinner. Every plant was selected for its bioluminescent qualities. At night, they glow like the moon itself has descended." She lowers her voice. "Sensing anything?"

"No," I murmur.

Lachlan's boots crunch through the gravel behind us, close enough to intervene at any threat to my security. Chief of which right now are the lack of warmth from the ring and how thoroughly we are being ignored.

"I have never received such a chilly reception in Tír na Lune," Aowen says, eyes glued forward as her purple skirt flicks over the path. "This is the handiwork of a single person."

"Lady LaBeaumont is going to an awful lot of trouble to prevent an outcome that is by no means guaranteed." We've trod this ground before; Lisande's was the first name added to the suspect list. But Lachlan has found no evidence tying her nor any other member of the LaBeaumont family to my attacker. "Because even if I piece together the Bannrhorn and—"

When, Lachlan rumbles into my mind, and my lips quirk up at his confidence.

"When I piece together the Bannrhorn"—I toss a smile over my shoulder, and Lachlan volleys one back, exposing the tips of his fangs; disorienting in the best way—"and Duke Áine participates in the Wild Hunt, he has only a one in three chance of becoming king. Is Lisande really so afraid of losing his love?"

"She doesn't want his love," Aowen answers, "she wants standing. She wants power. If you're his queen, she'll lose her influence."

"Yes, but won't the duke be furious with her when he realizes what she's doing? She's trying to undermine his bid for the crown."

Aowen scoffs. "A bid he and his courtiers have been *so* invested in thus far. If you want to get close enough to the duke to hear his clue, you're going to have to either win her over or work damn hard to charm him as soon as he returns. *If* he returns."

Both scenarios seem more and more impossible with every courtier who turns away from us, puppets on Lisande's network of strings. They're scattered along the grassy banks of a reflecting pool, luncheoning on blankets, gossiping beneath parasols, laughing in rowboats. Aowen aims for a spot away from the crowd beneath a weeping willow drenched in pink blossoms. As we enter the dappled

cave created by its lazy branches, Aowen caresses a pinprick of sunlight, then snaps her fingers. A blanket settles at our feet.

"Shouldn't we be mingling?" I ask. "Or maybe I should keep looking for the fragment. I was going—"

"Charlotte," Aowen chides, smoothing her skirt and folding her knees beneath her as she sits, "you've been scurrying through the castle all week. Desperate is not a good look. You need to be strategic. Project confidence. Show this court how unbothered you are by your timeline and their indifference. We're going to sit here and enjoy our afternoon in full view of everyone."

I glance over to Lachlan, who's already sprawled out against the thick trunk.

She's right, he says. *Might as well enjoy an afternoon off.*

He looks so pleased by the prospect that I dare not object.

Aowen opens a book, Lachlan dips his head back, and I pull out my sketchbook. And thus begins our peaceful respite.

Well, mostly peaceful. Every once in a while, a low laugh, scandalized gasp, or appreciative murmur floats over from Aowen. I wish I could see what book she's reading. Perhaps I'll ask her to borrow it later. I could use the distraction.

Lachlan hasn't moved from the base of the tree. I assumed he was napping, but every time voices drift into our makeshift den, his eyes pop open and bolt straight for me. As if he knows precisely where to find me, always. A thrill jolts through my veins at each glance.

I hope he cannot see what I'm drawing.

His portrait is coming along well. Despite his wild trappings—the long hair, the piercings, his brutal strength—his facial features are quite classical. Elegant, even. There are mythic heroes in Statuary Hall at Harbridge who I'm sure bear a striking resemblance. Maybe he posed for them.

I chuckle, grateful for this quiet afternoon, when a frantic male voice ruins it.

"Sir Cathal?"

Lachlan is on his feet faster than I can blink.

"Sir—"

"In here!" Lachlan calls out.

Sir Quinn—a tall, thin man with cropped silver hair and skin so pale it's nearly translucent—sweeps through the curtain of pink blossoms. His bald look of fear has me scooting closer to Aowen.

Lachlan pulls him aside. "What's happened." A command, not a question.

Sir Quinn flicks his attention toward me and Aowen, then rises onto his toes, whispering furiously. Lachlan's expression hardens—jaw tensing, eyes narrowing, lips pressing together. The same killing calm he wore in the crypt last week. My heart races and my mouth goes dry.

I want to watch him slaughter things again.

Sir Quinn wraps up his report. "You'll come then?"

Lachlan nods. "Straight away."

Sir Quinn clomps off, stirring a snowfall of petals.

"What's going on?" Aowen asks, rising and pulling me to my feet.

"Take Charlotte back to the suite." Metal clinks and leather creaks as Lachlan adjusts the straps of his sheath. "Straight back. No detours." His sword hisses down his back. "Now, Aowen."

"Yes. Yes, as you say." Even obstinate Aowen dares not disobey him when he uses that tone.

He takes a long step toward me, his face softening. Unfortunately.

I like it when he's angry.

His hand starts toward my face before detouring back to his side. "Go with Aowen. Stay in your room. You'll be fine."

"Will *you*?" I ask, breathless.

Fae are capable of faster healing than humans but, as I have recently learned, they are not immortal. The only reason they appear ageless is due to the time differential between our two realms. They can be ended. And right on cue, there go the worst-case scenarios spinning through my mind, each bloodier than the last.

He says nothing before tearing past the drooping branches. His silence haunts me through the castle and into our suite, where

Aowen locks the door. She opens it only once—to let in a hiccuping, zigzagging Vesper—and afterward, we can do nothing but wait.

And wait.

And wait.



CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Several hours later, Aowen and I are sharing a simple meal of roast beef sandwiches and salted tomatoes that she conjured from a spear of moonlight.

Vesper's curled on a sofa pillow, snore-whistling off her earlier shenanigans. After her hand healed, she went to visit family here in Tír na Lune. Aowen informed me that when pixies get together, the results are never less than absolute debauchery. She was surprised Vesper didn't return with more broken fingers.

My concerns, of course, remain focused on a much larger creature.

"Do you think he's alright?" I pick at my sandwich. There is too much roiling worry in my gut to fit much else, so I take a sip of long-cooled tea instead.

I have tried several times to reach Lachlan through the *diamrhán*, but if he can hear me calling, he's not allowing the connection to form. I finally stopped trying, worried that if he *could* hear my calls, I might be distracting him while he needs to focus.

"I'm sure he's fine," Aowen says, looking far more confident than I feel. "Lachlan is extremely skilled at whatever he puts his mind to.

And for the past nine years, that's been protecting my brother and defending Tír na Strelle."

"What was he doing before that?"

Aowen raises an eyebrow, her rosebud lips curving into an impish smile. "I'm not sure I should tell you."

My teacup clatters in its saucer as I lean across the table, ravenous for any crumb of his history. "Well, now you *must* tell me."

Aowen's large blue eyes glitter. She adores gossip, despite the harm it's doing to our cause. It takes no additional cajoling for her to spill.

"He was a courtesan," she murmurs before licking a trail of tomato juice up the side of her palm.

My breath catches in my throat. Whatever answer I expected, that was … not it.

"The most in demand in the celestial kingdom," she continues as I try to remember how to pull air into my lungs. "He's traveled extensively, most often in the company of a high-ranking lady—those who could afford his services, anyway. All one need do is look at the man to understand how many people were willing to spend their life's savings for a single night with him. He was one of the most powerful figures in any court. Even more powerful than he is now as a celestial knight. Especially given his specialty."

My body finally forces me to breathe, but I am not yet capable of speech. The salacious imagery Aowen has brought to mind with this new information makes forming even the most basic sentences impossible.

I've never seen Lachlan undressed—my gravest misfortune—but I have felt the power in his beautifully formed body. Plus, my artistic sensibilities have blessed me with a vivid imagination. So it's not hard to visualize, in striking, sensual detail, my bodyguard in a variety of sweat-soaked and extremely compromising positions.

I swallow, force myself to focus on Aowen, and barely choke out the question, "What was his specialty?"

Her responding grin is demonic, exuberant. "Domination. Pleasure control."

I nearly fall out of my chair. I may not be entirely familiar with the practice, but I can grasp its outline. Still, I need more details. Many, *many* more details. "What does that mean?"

"His lovers gave him full dominion over their bodies. How they achieved pleasure. When they achieved it. Whether they achieved it at all, depending on what had been pre-negotiated."

My face flushes as heat climbs my neck. Aunt Teddy shouts from my subconscious that this is not an appropriate conversation for proper ladies. I shove her into my mind-closet and nail the door shut.

Aowen continues, "There was one woman—a marchioness, I believe—who kept him in her employ for an entire year. Paid him such a generous salary that he took on no other clients."

"Only a year?" I snort. "Why did she let him go?"

"Her husband put a stop to it. Threatened to divorce her and strip her of her title. Her rank was more important to her than whatever was going on between her and Lachlan."

"Was it … Was she in love with him?"

Lachlan said *he'd* never been in love before, but didn't specify whether someone else might have been in love with him.

Aowen shrugs, leaning back in her chair and stretching long limbs over her head. "She certainly loved whatever he was doing to her in the bedroom."

And there go those prurient scenes in my head again. This one features Lachlan sinking his fangs into the ripe flesh of some faceless woman's ass.

I shake my head to clear the image, which has spread the sour taste of jealousy across the back of my tongue. "He told me he'd been fired from his previous job."

Aowen shifts in her seat. "There was some unpleasantness involving Lisande's brother, the son of Lord LaBeaumont, and one of Lachlan's former colleagues. Lachlan got too involved. Things escalated. He's lucky Desmond was able to protect him. I shouldn't say anymore. Probably shouldn't have even told you that much."

"How do you know this? Did you two ever—"

"No!" The noise she makes is halfway between a scream and a laugh. "He's like a baby brother to me. Treats me better than my own brother, sometimes." There's pain buried beneath her gravelly sarcasm, but before I can probe it, she presses onward. "Besides, from what I've heard, Lachlan's swung to the complete opposite side of the spectrum. He's practically celibate now."

She eyes me again with that sly smile, as if trying to gauge the level of my curiosity. Her fangs—more delicate than Lachlan's—sit pearly white against her pink lips.

We sit in silence for several moments, though it's certainly not silent in my head; my thoughts careen like harried sparrows. He said he liked parts of his previous job—but which parts? And just how good was he? I cannot imagine an impoverished orphan achieving such notoriety without a plethora of enthusiastic performance reviews. Did his gift factor into it? Did the money ever make him feel pressure to consent to things he didn't enjoy? God, I hope not.

"How are *you* faring, Charlotte?" Aowen asks, scaring off the sparrows. "I know the Season can be trying."

Sweet of her to ask, but does she want the truth? Or the answer that will placate her?

"Well, I'm fine, of course." I force a smile onto my face.

"You're doing remarkably well, you know. Despite the circumstances." She pats my hand and rises from the table. "You should try to get some sleep."

An impossibility.

Before she and Vesper retire to her room, she flicks her wrist and a platter of powdered biscuits appear before me.

I may not have told her the truth, but it seems she heard it anyway.



SEVERAL HOURS, four biscuits, and two naughty sketches later, I'm crawling into bed when a howl of pain rips through my mind.

I hiss through gritted teeth, pressing my fingers against my temples as I crash to the floor. The intrusion drowns out every other sense—I cannot see, cannot hear, cannot speak. A sharp, stabbing pain pulses down my spine, pooling in my left flank.

It fades, replaced by a volcanic spurt of anger that I swear is coming from inside the castle. Then, just as swiftly, it clears.

Lachlan has been injured. Maybe even gravely. I'm sure of it.

I call down the connection, demand he tell me where he is, but it's lifeless once again.

Blast.

I shrug off my chemise, change into my traveling clothes and riding boots, then swipe two more biscuits from the platter. For the energy, of course.

Butter and sweet lemon melt on my tongue as I exit my room, tearing across the parlor, and pound on Aowen's door.

When there's no answer, I haul it open to find her room dark. And empty.

Double blast.

The smart thing to do would be to stay put. Do what I've been told. Wait for someone more qualified to handle it.

It's what old Charlotte would have done.

But what if I'm the only person in the castle who knows Lachlan's been hurt? That he needs help?

New Charlotte slips out of the suite to rescue her bodyguard.



CHAPTER
TWENTY

The guest wing hallways are hushed, everyone barricaded in their quarters.

Behind closed doors, laughter burbles, music plays, and conversations flow. They're completely oblivious to whatever emergency has gripped the castle.

I have no idea what it is, but all I can picture is Lachlan lying on the floor of a salon, bleeding out on one of the duke's fancy carpets. Is he alone? Where are the other celestial knights? Why did no one protect him? And what sort of threat could have injured a man as skilled in combat as Lachlan?

Fueled by a regrettable amount of biscuits, my adrenaline spikes as I creep down the main staircase into the entrance hall.

As soon as my boot touches marble, a growl rumbles through the castle. A warning from some extremely large and very hungry creature. And it seems to have originated in the east wing.

I brush hair out of my eyes with shaky fingers, then straighten my shoulders and head in that direction.

I come upon a hallway lined with suits of armour that ends in a pair of tall doors. A crash booms behind them, and I race toward the

room, pausing to grab a sword from one of the statues.

God, it's bloody *heavy*. Lachlan swings them around so easily.

Still, its hefty weight makes me feel slightly less vulnerable as I open the doors into a space with an uncanny resemblance to Statuary Hall at Harbridge. A mezzanine rings a vast room filled with sculptures and free-standing walls covered in framed artwork. Clouds smother any moonlight trying to peek through the glass ceiling, resulting in plenty of shadowed corners for beasties to lurk. I see no hint of movement, and everything looks—

There. At the bottom of the opposite staircase. A large statue has been toppled, its head gently rocking several paces from where its body has fallen. An unmistakable moan of pain emanates from behind it, and my heart seizes.

Lachlan.

I adjust my grip on the sword, then scurry down the staircase to the tune of *get to him, get to him, get to him*. It's not quite loud enough to mask my simultaneous mental scolding. If he's gravely injured, how on earth am I going to get him out of here? He's easily twice my weight, if not more. And whatever made that growling noise is in here somewhere. Where the hell is Aowen? Or Vesper, for that matter? She's deadly enough to claw out an eyeball or two for me, surely.

I weave around walls covered in grand portraits of stone-faced, silver-haired faerie men. Names and dates are stamped on golden plaques beneath each frame—the years of their reign over House Áine? Odd, though, I do not see an open-ended pair that might correspond to the current duke.

I round a corner, and the next section contains a series of landscapes. There are several large pieces depicting Tír na Lune's castle and surrounding city. Smaller works fill the gaps between their frames, one barely the size of a book cover. My eyes rove over it, and the ring warms.

Of all the sodding times to get a hint.

The small painting depicts a bell-shaped hill rising above a lush, green valley. Neat, thatch-roofed buildings gather around variously

sized lakes. The metal grows faintly hotter as I step closer, searching for an inscription or a title or even the artist's—

A deep snarl burbles, far too close.

Something loosens in my gut, and as soon as I turn, I wish I hadn't.

Standing behind me is some hideous cross between a lion and a hairless dog. Its snout is thick and its face wrinkled, haloed by a pale white mane. Shiny, pupilless eyes that look like mercury swirled with ink track me; there's a puckered grey scar slashed through the left. Cuts shine on its belly, one deep enough to release blood in its wake. Is this the creature that wounded Lachlan? If so, he got a few good blows in beforehand. A long tail swings above its hind legs while another growl rumbles past the largest, sharpest teeth I've ever seen.

I take several slow, unsteady steps backward, hiding the sword behind my back and raising my palm to let the creature know I mean no harm.

The beast sniffs the air then tilts its head. Curious. Maybe it can be—

It releases a deafening roar, blowing back my hair.

I curse myself for disobeying Lachlan and hold the sword out with shaking arms.

The beast chuffs out a breath. Almost a laugh, as it stalks closer. As if it's got all the time in the Otherworld to gnaw the flesh from my bones. It's all sharp teeth and clacking claws and wrinkled, hairless skin—hideous in a rather breathtaking way. If it didn't look so intent on eating me, I might consider drawing it.

The creature shifts its pace from languid to swift, catching me off guard and swiping at my sword. Metal whines as a claw glances off the blade I barely manage to angle across my chest.

Blind instinct takes over, and I swing the sword with fiercely protesting arms. It catches the creature on the nose with a smack, but the blade does not bite.

It's decorative. Dulled.

Shit.

Still, the blow startles the creature enough to rear back, and I'm off.

I zip between walls and pedestals, shouting through the *diamrhán*, *Please tell me where you are!* I feel a flicker of surprise shoot back, but no words or full sentences.

I run and twist and look over my shoulder to see the creature weaving toward me again, and I'm hauling this ridiculously heavy sword which I probably should have dropped about four turns ago, but it was the only thing that stopped the dog-lion from chomping me even if it was mostly due to surprise, and if that was my one and only move then I've just used it up, and oh hell what was I thinking trying to rescue Lachlan because I was not made for fighting off deadly monsters or even running for that mat—

Something booms to the floor behind me, swiping dangerously close to my head. I turn, staggering backwards, to see the creature's knocked over another statue.

And as I slam into the corner of two free-standing walls, I realize what the clever thing has done.

It's a trap.

I grip the sword in both hands, breathing heavily as the creature climbs languidly over the fallen statue. It knows it's won. And dinner awaits.

I toss the heavy sword aside and scramble for the left wall. There's moulding at the top. If I can reach it, I could pull myself out. The wall isn't so tall that such a task seems impossible, only a few feet above my head.

It *is* covered in artwork, though. I jump, clinging to the moulding and glancing over my shoulder to find the creature has gotten its tail stuck within the toppled statue's rubble. It cannot reach me. Yet. It struggles forward, growling and snarling, closer to freeing itself with every pull.

I beg my muse for forgiveness as I try not to damage canvases in my struggle to pull upward, curling an elbow over the top of the wall.

Relief swoops through my stomach. I've got it. I'm going to—

The creature seizes my calf, and I barely get my other elbow in place before it's yanking me down. Something hard and sharp tears through my lower leg. Claws or teeth, I'm not sure I want to know. There's searing pain, along with a ripping sound that I pray is fabric and not flesh as I try to struggle free.

My grip on the wall loosens and I am yanked again, barely able to hook my fingers over the edge and hold on for dear life. I squeeze my eyes shut and pray for a miracle.

The faerie gods must hear me, because something thumps onto the wall, steel sings, and there he is.

Lachlan swipes his massive, and very much *not* decorative, sword down onto the beast.

The pressure on my leg releases, followed by a pained yowl. Lachlan grabs the back of my shirt and hauls me up.

"Get on my back," he commands, crouching.

I wrap my arms around his neck, but when I try to move my right leg, blinding, white-hot pain shoots through it.

"I can't," I pant. "Can't get my … "

He wraps a single large hand around both of my forearms at his neck, his sword gripped in the other. "Hold on."

It's all the warning I get before he leaps from the wall. The jolt of the landing bounces my teeth together and sends another scorching blast of pain through my leg. Then he's rushing through the gallery toward the staircase. Behind us, the creature's frustrated roar shakes the room's foundation as claws scrabble across marble.

There are so many things I want to scream at him. *Why didn't you answer me? I thought you were injured. Are you injured? Because if you are, I can't see it.*

An injured person couldn't possibly move this fast. He's not even winded, curving around walls and between statues. The staircase is *right there*, but the path is anything but straight with all this damned art in the way.

I cling to him, pressing my face past his soft, auburn hair and into the crook between his neck and shoulder. I try not to whimper against his skin, but my leg is throbbing. Am I going to lose it? Could the celestial kingdom get behind a one-legged queen? I've barely

won over a single territory with two. The thought has me choking on a morbid giggle.

I fear I might be delirious.

I must be, because for a moment, I swear I hear two howls rising. Perhaps my mind has fractured, and I—

Thump.

Lachlan skids to a halt, gripping the thigh of my uninjured leg to stop me from falling off his back.

A second beast has landed right at the base of the staircase, cutting off our escape route.

The creature behind us huffs as the pair circle us. Herding their prey.

Lachlan holds me close, whirling to keep eyes on both creatures. They swipe at us slowly, lazily. Taunting. Lachlan knocks their paws away with his sword as they inch closer, trying to tire him out. Encouraging him to drop me and deliver their meal.

He's flagging. I can feel it in his shallow breaths, in every wince as he twists to the left. He *is* injured. And in his wearied state, he can no longer ignore it.

"Put me down," I whisper in his ear.

"Never," he growls. "I'm not going to lose my—" He swallows. "Not going to let Desmond's queen be eaten by Áine's báshounds."

I have never heard of a báshound, and dearly wish I could've maintained my ignorance. They press in closer, having caught the scent of Lachlan's exhaustion and the end of their hunt.

What have I done? I've killed us both. Lachlan could have gotten away if he wasn't forced to save me from my own recklessness.

I murmur an apology onto his skin, and he rubs his cheek along the crown of my head.

"Charlotte, there's something I need to tell—"

A whistle pierces the air.

The báshounds back away, and Lachlan slumps to one knee, still holding me, trying to catch his breath. He's muttering something in another language. I cannot interpret the specific words, but the phonetics of relief are universal.

He stands, then settles me on my good leg, looping an arm around my shoulder to keep me upright.

Slow footsteps clack down the stairs, and I hear a familiar voice. "Mortis, to me. Anguis, follow."

The scarred báshound, Mortis, leads the way to their master: a tall, handsome faerie man with bright violet eyes. "I'm terribly sorry about my pets. They only follow commands from me, I'm afraid. I rushed back to Tír na Lune as soon as I heard someone had set them loose in the castle."

Lachlan's teeth are bared—in anger or pain, I cannot tell; probably both—and his armour is gouged in several places. I'm fairly certain he's hiding a gash beneath the palm pressed below his ribs. But he's still standing. Those death moans I heard in the hall, long since silenced, belonged to someone else.

Duke Áine, on the other hand, looks completely unruffled. His elegant aubergine suit is spotless, and not a single strand of pin-straight silver hair is out of place. How long could it have possibly taken for him to return from Farlock's Edge?

A wave of hot, frustrated anger sweeps through me. I cannot imagine Lachlan doesn't feel the same. But he's either too dutiful or too chained by these silly hierarchies to say anything. He holds the duke's gaze, wearing a deep frown—the most insubordination he'll chance.

I, however, have no such qualms.

"You might have come sooner, Your Grace. At least one of your own men perished, and Sir Cathal has been gravely injured. Tír na Strelle will expect a formal apology."

A tiny burst of shocked pride caresses my mind.

"*Sir* Cathal?" Duke Áine cants his head. "Is that what they're calling him these days?" He turns his attention to me. "You look a bit different than I remember from the presentation ceremony, Miss Fitzroy. Different, but not entirely unpleasant. Come, I'll send for my personal healer to meet us in your quarters. On the way, you can tell me more about my failings. I do so enjoy being scolded by a beautiful woman."

I cannot help a nervous smile. Still, I am reluctant to leave Lachlan. "But—"

Go, Lachlan says through the *diamrhán*. Which he's finally decided to use again. I could throttle him. *You've piqued his interest. Take advantage of it. Don't worry about me.*

"The other healers have set up in the first-floor parlors," the duke says to Lachlan, cruelly bored. "Might be a bit of a wait. There's quite a few nasty injuries to deal with." He strokes a hand down his báshound's mane.

Another wave of righteous anger licks through me at his complete lack of remorse or accountability. It's mirrored through the *diamrhán*, but Lachlan's face is as blank as ever when I take the duke's outstretched arm and let him guide me up the stairs.

I limp, wincing, since the duke doesn't slow his pace in the slightest to accommodate my injury. Mortis and Anguis fall into step behind us.

I catch Lachlan's gaze over my shoulder as I crest the staircase.

The ring signaled. Before Mortis ambushed me.

Where?

Over in the collection of landscapes. On a small painting of a valley below a bell-shaped hill. Do you know where that is?

He offers a barely perceptible nod. *We'll talk tomorrow. Focus on healing tonight.*

Duke Áine opens the door, but before he pulls me through, I have one more message for Lachlan. *Thank you. For saving me. Again.*

It was the least I could do. You came to save me first, after all. He grins, and it's a little incredulous.

Does no one ever think to save *him*?

I scurry after Duke Áine, two additional questions surfacing.

First, where is the land with the bell-shaped hill?

And second, what was Lachlan going to tell me when he thought we were about to die?



CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Over the next week, we grow no closer to discovering who released the báshounds nor who masterminded the crypt attack. The list of suspects, of course, is exactly the same. With a single woman at the top. A woman who remains beyond reproach, thanks to a lack of evidence *and* her relationship with the duke. We are not foolish enough to ignore that the latter may be causing the former.

Since this most recent incident, I have learned two things. First, more than one celestial knight died that night. Duke Áine is just as disturbingly unbothered by those losses as he is by his lover's murderous (allegedly) tendencies. And second, the báshounds will attend him during the Wild Hunt. They've been trained specifically to hunt human flesh.

Again, it's knowledge of which I would have rather remained ignorant.

I convalesce for several days in our quarters, during which time Lachlan answers one of my lingering questions.

The bell-shaped hill overlooks Campan's Vale, the disputed region from which Lachlan himself hails. He promises to take me there as

soon as I've healed.

And the second question? About what he was on the verge of telling me that night? It was nothing, according to the freshly taciturn Lachlan, who returned as soon as I drummed up the courage to ask. Even though I'm quite certain he's lying, I'm not going to pester him about it; if he wants to tell me, he'll tell me.

This morning, we're in the midst of a tabletop strategy game Vesper taught us involving colored seeds—she's won every round, probably cheating—when the duke arrives to collect me for our first official courting trip.

A visit to his báshound kennel.

How thoughtful of him.

The word kennel does not do the location justice. It's a several-acres-large compound with a padlocked entrance gate and covered areas for the beasts to sleep. There's also an open-air meadow for roaming. And feeding.

Of course, it's feeding time when we arrive. I force myself to watch as Mortis pounces on a terrified deer. The scar on my calf throbs in answer.

"How will you use them during the Wild Hunt?" I ask meekly, my face wan as the deer releases a pathetic bleat.

"To track you." His Grace observes the carnage with unabashed glee. "They'll be under strict orders not to harm you, though." He cuts a glance toward my leg. "They do go off script sometimes, so you'll need to keep your wits about you."

Honestly, the thought of facing his báshounds again is less anxiety-inducing than this outing. He's not asked me a single question nor offered any of his own history. Not even his first name. Is he supposed to initiate the *get-to-know-each-other* chit-chat or am I? And when is he going to share his clue? Desmond shared his immediately; I thought Duke Áine would do the same. Is the man not as desperate to become king?

I am about to ask when a valet interrupts us. "Your Grace, a reporter from the Sky Gazette is waiting in the grand salon. Lady LaBeaumont has arranged an interview for you. Your people are

clamouring to hear how you saved the castle from the báshounds last week."

The duke turns to me with a put-upon smile that rings nothing but false. "My apologies, Miss Fitzroy. I must take this meeting. All of Tír na Lune deserves to know my bravery firsthand."

All ten seconds of it, a deep voice rumbles into my mind. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

I've kept the *diamrhán* open for Lachlan this morning; the stubborn brute insisted. Though he can't see what I'm seeing, he can hear what I hear, feel what I feel.

Which at the moment is humiliation. Even more so knowing that Lachlan has witnessed me hold the duke's attention for all of twenty minutes.

"Of course, Your Grace, I understand." I dip into a shallow curtsy. "Will I see you after?"

No answer follows, and when I rise, I see that Duke Áine has already marched away.

His valet escorts me back to my quarters.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

The next day at the break of dawn, a fading luxbridge deposits Lachlan, Tula and me in a forest overlooking Campan's Vale.

The small painting in the castle gallery did not do the region justice.

A verdant hill in that unmistakable bell shape sits sentinel above the valley, protecting it from the winds howling down the Brumalts. Shielded from the harsher weather patterns, the region is a luxuriant tapestry of green flora and blue lakes. Forest and moss and olive and sage mingle with a shade of deep cobalt so reminiscent of Lachlan's eyes, it's as if he's always wearing a reminder of his homeland.

But amidst the beauty are pockets of ruin; smoldering wounds burned into the land by Duke Áine's occupation.

"Why have the other Houses done nothing to stop him?" I ask as Lachlan steers Tula down toward the town center. The ring warms as we get closer.

"Cernunnos hasn't involved himself in any of the kingdom's affairs beyond the Seasonal presentation ceremonies for the past six years. And Desmond is hamstrung. An official public move against

Duke Áine would kick off a civil war, especially since he won that ruling from Queen Caer and King Aengus. It would drag even more of the kingdom into the fighting. The best way to end this without further loss of innocent lives is for Desmond to win the monarchy. That way, he can rescind the ruling and kick Áine's forces out. But Des has still been helping in private ways. Sending supplies to the region in secret. Weapons, too. And, well, *me* when he can spare me."

"What does that mean?"

He smirks. "You'll see." Tula pauses at an overlook, and Lachlan slides his hand under mine, flicking the ring with his thumb to check the temperature. The palm-to-palm contact sends a frisson of pleasure down my spine. "Are you sensing something? Feels warmer than usual."

I survey the populated areas of the Vale, my simmering anger rising to a rolling boil. There are far too many burned-out shells of buildings. Far too many celestial knights on the streets, even at this early hour, glinting like schools of minnows in shallow water. Far too much evidence of Duke Áine claiming this idyllic region by destroying it. Does he plan to claim me the same way?

When I first arrived in the Otherworld—god, it feels like eons ago—and Desmond explained the Hunt and my suitors, it all sounded so tempting. So *thrilling*. Who would win me, I wondered? How handsome and wealthy would my pursuers be?

Such shallow considerations. They shame me now, looking upon this once-peaceful valley. Desmond and Duke Áine and even Duke Cernunnos, I have no doubt, are incredible specimens of masculine beauty and obviously live quite comfortably. But it's clear they are not all good men.

How much agency will I be afforded during the Hunt? Will I be able to influence the outcome to ensure I end up with the right man?

I press back into Lachlan, and I—

The ring singes my flesh as my gaze catches on a brick structure—some kind of small church or a temple—nestled on a property along a sparkling lakeshore.

"There. That's where we should start searching."

Lachlan slumps forward, resting his chin on my head. "Are you quite sure?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because that church is on the old Áine estate." He pushes out a ragged breath.

"The headquarters of the duke's forces here in Campan's Vale."



How many knights are outside the main house? Lachlan asks.

I peer around a large tree at the edge of the property. Lachlan sent Tula away with cryptic instructions to wait for him in their usual spot.

Four, by my count. What shall we do about them?

Lachlan's thoughtful, parting his lips as he drags the tip of his tongue down a fang. An innocuous tic. Unbearably attractive.

There's no reason why you *can't be here*, he says. *Just tell them you're searching for the fragment. You should be allowed entry wherever you need to go. Myself on the other hand …*

What?

He leans back against the tree, and scrubs his face with his palms. *I've been banished from Campan's Vale since the early days of Áine's occupation.*

You punched a bunch of people, didn't you?

He snickers, daring a peek around the tree before pulling back. *That knight on the left? The beefy blond with the long hair? I broke his jaw. And caused similar damage to ten of his friends who were terrorizing a mother and her two young daughters. Took Des weeks of careful diplomacy to ensure I hadn't exposed his other, more clandestine efforts in the Vale. My banishment was the price we paid to keep our operation going in secret. Needless to say, I cannot accompany you unless I want to spend the rest of the Season in Áine's dungeons.*

I shrug. *I'll go alone.*

You're funny. Bodyguard, remember?

You've let me go places alone before.

That was before I saw how shit you were at defending yourself against the báshounds the other night.

That sword was decorative! I whack his upper arm. *And how do you expect to accompany—*

I clap a hand over my mouth to muffle a shriek as Lachlan shrinks down in a flare of light, his skin turning a dusky purple as his pupils swell and two translucent wings sprout from his back.

He—in the form of *Vesper*—flits up to my shoulder, placing a tiny hand on my neck to steady himself. "It's a glamour," he whispers in Vesper's high-pitched voice. My body shakes with silent laughter, nearly enough to knock him off. "Another benefit of my gift. It's not unlimited, though. The energy required to hold the glamour means I cannot use the *diamrhán* in this form."

"Were you glamoured the night of the báshound attack?"

"Yes, why?"

"Hmm." My lips flatten. "As Vesper?"

"No." Lachlan peers down at his shrunken body. "This is, uh, new. Don't tell her. I'm not sure whether she'd be flattered or carve out my spleen."

I huff a laugh. "Well, I think you look and sound adorable."

He preens, fluttering his tiny wings.

"Let's hope Áine's knights agree."



"IT'S DOWN THIS WAY, MISS." The beefy knight swats at Lachlan, who's flitting around his head as he leads us around the lake toward the church on the other side of the property. "What did you say your pixie's name was?"

"I didn't. And she's not *my* pixie. Pixies belong to themselves. Her name's Vesper."

Lachlan hovers before the knight's face, blinking big, black eyes sweetly before plucking out a strand of the man's hair.

The knight swings a fist at Lachlan, which he easily dodges before stealing another strand. "*Ouch!*"

"My apologies, sir. I'm not sure what's gotten into her this morning." I shield my mouth and whisper, "I think she's flirting with you."

The knight grumbles, rubbing the crown of his head, then jogs up the church steps to open the door.

I step inside, and when he tries to follow, I halt him with a raised palm. "That's far enough, thank you."

A frown pulls down his jowls. "I'm not sure I should—"

"You want your duke to have his chance at the crown, yes?" I push the door halfway shut.

"Well, yes, of course," he splutters, red-faced.

"Then I'll request you leave me to my searching. The novillum seed gets shy when there are too many people about."

The lie pacifies him, and he sketches a shallow bow. "Right, then. Best of luck, my lady. We're all quite ready for this to be over and for Duke Áine to put these insurrectionists in Campan's Vale down once and for all."

"Quite." I smile against the bilious anger crawling up my throat, then shut him out. Through the window, I watch him clank back to the main house to join the other knights. "All clear."

I turn to find Lachlan—back in his full, mouth-watering form—gripping the back of a pew so tightly the wood is groaning. He's muttering something about how he'll show the knight an insurrection; break his jaw all over again.

"Anything?" he asks once he's recovered himself and gesturing toward the ring, which has grown so hot, my skin is near to blistering.

The nave is small, almost primitive, with white clapboard walls and a few rows of time-worn pews. Upon the altar stand four empty pedestals. Placeholders for missing faerie gods? Clearly, no one has worshiped in here for quite some time. To the right of the altar, there's an archway leading to—

The ring flares, and I hiss in a breath.

Lachlan's immediately at my side. "Where?"

I jut my chin toward the archway.

The stone staircase we find looks as if it predates this building by several centuries, and as we make our way down, the air grows damp and cool. And quiet.

At the bottom sits a large, moss-stained door with a grinning skull knocker in the center. The ring bites into my flesh again.

"It's behind here. It has to be," I say, trembling with excitement. Who needs Duke Áine and his useless clue? His weak-minded court? His bullying knights? I have found the fragment all on my own. With a bit of help from the novillum, I suppose.

Lachlan wears a skeptical scowl as he examines the skull. "What if it's a trap?"

My excitement deflates. I hadn't thought of that. I press my ear against the door, but other than a faint whistling, like wind rushing through a crack, there's nothing.

There's a phrase curving over the skull knocker, written in the fae script. Before I can open my mouth to ask what it says, Lachlan translates. "*Beyond the door lie our honored dead. May Danu offer them peace on their journey to the Afterlands.*"

"So, it's a kind of tomb as well." I study the carved phrase. "That's a good sign."

"Tomb? Or a catacomb?"

"The difference being …"

Lachlan frowns. "A few thousand bodies, I'd say."

I shudder, pulling back. "Do you think it's locked?"

The grinning skull clatters to life, and Lachlan and I rear back, nearly colliding with the stairs.

I'm clutching my chest while Lachlan clutches me, and the skull giggles eerily through chattering teeth.

"Ask me a question, ring-bearer."

"What on earth?" I mutter.

"Ask me a question, ring-bearer," it says again in response.

I glance back at Lachlan, who shrugs, then leans over me to push on the door. A circle of shimmering gold sparks fizzle out from the center, but the door does not open.

"How does one open this door?" I ask.

"Ask me a question, ring-bearer."

Worth a try.

"Who are you?"

"Ask me a question, ring-bearer."

I'm guessing the correct question will open the door, Lachlan says.

Oh, do you think so? How in the name of your gods could you have possibly deduced that?

I spew a barrage of queries at the skull—"Who can tell me the question? What kind of information are you looking for? Which gods watch over this church? How long have you been here? What's behind the door?"—but none lead to anything other than sing-song giggles and a toothy rattle.

It seems I have two options.

One, spend days upon days upon days beneath this church asking the skull every question I can possibly think of.

Or two, hear Duke Áine's clue.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Before we return to Tír na Lune, Lachlan has a stop to make. He begs my pardon, says it could take a while, but as neither the crypt attacker nor the báshound liberator have been identified, he's not keen on sending me back alone.

Honestly, I don't mind. After the scene below the church, I'm a bit disheartened. Acquiring the first fragment of the Bannrhorn was simple; I hoped the rest might be as easy. And after that pathetic first outing with Duke Áine, I am worried I will not be able to maintain the man's attention long enough to request his clue. Nor am I thrilled at the prospect of spending more time with him.

I'll take all the reprieve I can get.

Lachlan and I arrive at an old stone building that's mostly intact save for two boarded-up windows on the lower level. Beneath the portico—upon which is carved a name in the fae script—a column is in the midst of being re-plastered.

Lachlan, back in Vesper's form, hovers at my temple, then says, "Come on," in her squeaky voice. Cute, but I'd rather hear Lachlan's deep, sultry tone any day. I chuckle, imagining Lachlan's real voice coming from Vesper's tiny mouth.

The laugh dies in my throat as an enormous faerie man with acorn-brown skin and close-cropped ashen coils whips the door open and aims a sword at my chest. "State your business."

I throw my palms up, my heart racing and my brain grappling for an answer. "I … I … I … "

Lachlan zips up to the man's face, then trills, "Is that any way to speak to a lady?"

"Who the fuck are *you*?" The man swings the tip of his sword over to Lachlan, who merely steps up onto the blade and fluffs his lavender hair.

"You don't recognize me, Garred?" Lachlan drops the glamour from his voice. "I'm insulted."

I choke back a laugh; yes, just as hilarious as I thought.

The man thinks so, too, burping out a hearty bellow before surveying the street and ushering us through the door with a low, "Get your tiny purple ass in here, you idiot."

As soon as we step into the foyer, Lachlan dissolves the glamour and crushes the man into a hug full of grunting and back-slapping. Garred's slightly taller than Lachlan, all solid bulk compared to Lachlan's lean musculature.

"Sorry for the warm welcome," Garred says. "Áine's been pitting the villagers against each other. Offering tithe reductions for anyone who reports *seditious activity*. Strangers at my door have led to nothing good lately; things are extremely tense. What are you doing back here so soon? Wasn't expecting you for another few days."

Lachlan gestures toward me. "Miss Fitzroy and I had some business in the Vale. I convinced her to take a detour on our way back to Tír na Lune."

Garred's gaze bounces between us. "So … pretty boy finally got himself a woman after—"

"She's not my woman," Lachlan blurts, blushing furiously. Which removes a bit of the sting from how swiftly he objected. "She's my charge. And this Season's candidate." He holds up my hand to show Garred the ring. "Garred Smythe, meet Miss Charlotte Fitzroy."

Garred's soil-dark eyes blow wide, and he flips the tip of his sword into the floor so swiftly, I fear he may have pierced the wood.

He drops down beside the blade, head bowed. "I'm a blind old fool. And we don't get much news from the other territories anymore. Please forgive me, Your Majesty."

I encourage him to rise as Lachlan teases, "Danu spare us, don't go calling her that yet. It'll go straight to her head." He winks at me, and now *I'm* the one blushing.

Garred takes my hand and plants a kiss upon my knuckles. "A pleasure to meet you, Charlotte."

"Likewise," I respond before Lachlan's swatting him away.

"None of that, either. She's a betrothed woman."

Garred chuckles, addressing Lachlan. "You here to teach this afternoon?"

"Do you mind?" Lachlan's fists curl at his sides as a vein in his jaw jumps. Like he's got excess energy to burn after the day's frustrations. I think I've got some, too.

"Nah," Garred answers. "Lads'll be thrilled. Lasses won't get too much practice, though. They'll be too busy gawking, like usual."

Sounds about right.

"I'll go out to the barn and let them know you're coming."

"Did Tula arrive?" Lachlan asks.

"Beats me," Garred sighs, digging his fingers into his upper shoulder. "Been upstairs hunched over a desk all day trying to figure out how we can possibly house one more child *and* answer all our neighbors' pleas for protection. I'll check on my way out." He has the weary yet determined look of a man who shouldn't say yes to an additional task, but will despite himself.

"No need," Lachlan is quick to answer. "Perfectly capable of checking the stable myself."

Garred turns to me, offering a quick bow. "You are most welcome here any time, Miss Fitzroy. I hope Sir Cathal is taking good care of you."

"Better than any man in my life." I smile, something incandescent flickering through my chest when I realize it's more than a pleasantry. It's the absolute truth.

Garred wanders down the hall, and Lachlan turns to me.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"Officially? Smythe Children's House. But most of us call it the Eyrie. Sounds more badass."

"You grew up here." It's not a question; I remember him informing me he'd grown up in an orphanage during our ride to Tír na Lune.

"Since I was an eleven-year-old eaglet," Lachlan jokes.

I turn to study the space, starved to know what kind of environment could have formed such a kind, formidable man. To our left is a large living area with a wide brick fireplace; to our right, a dining room with a long wooden table and two benches. There are chips in the tabletop, several deep gouges as well, and the chairs surrounding the fireplace are worn and lumpy. Overstuffed. Probably supremely comfortable.

Both spaces are messy—tin horses and knights march across the dining room floor, and the living area is littered with open books, plaid wool blankets, and an overturned bucket of colored pencils.

It's a *home*.

Perhaps the most home-like place I've been since I arrived in the Otherworld. It reminds me of Granny Maggie's colorful, haphazardly decorated cottage. Especially with all the art on the walls. Most is the charmingly crude work of little children, but there's a large painting atop the mantel. Lachlan doesn't stop me when I walk toward it to get a better look.

The piece centers on a younger version of Garred, who has an arm around the shoulders of an older man to whom he bears a striking resemblance. They're very nearly upstaged by the brood of thirty, maybe more, pointy-eared children of various ages, ranging from ruddy-cheeked toddlers to young men and women who've just shed their adolescence.

I search the canvas for—

There. At the very edge of the front row. A lanky fae boy with long limbs, untidy auburn hair and unmistakable lake-blue eyes. He's looking out of frame, wearing an expression of such sadness and anger that I wish I could go back in time and give him a hug.

"I did not have the happiest childhood. Despite Mr. Smythe's kindnesses. Nor was I the easiest ward to corral." He circles his

thumb over the center of his callused palm. “I’m trying to make up for it now. By teaching self-defense classes to Garred’s wards and any villagers who feel safe enough to attend.”

“The carvings you work on every morning at breakfast. Those are for the children?”

“Well, I don’t arm the toddlers. But the older children deserve a chance to defend themselves. Garred has more here now than he ever has, due to the occupation. He never turns anyone away. I wish I could do more, but I’m … beholden to Desmond.”

The lump in my throat hardens, getting more difficult to swallow past the longer I stare at the sad boy in the painting. “I’m sure Garred is very grateful for whatever help you can offer.”

Lachlan sniffs, turning away from me. “Right. Well, make yourself comfortable. I’ll be teaching for a few hours, and then we can head back. There are some books in the cabinet over there, but, fair warning—I don’t think Garred has any of those raunchy ones you like.”

“Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d like to attend your class.” He looks shocked, but pleased. “I want to learn how to defend myself, too. I can’t be much worse than the children.”

“You sure about that?”

I thump his arm.

“Didn’t feel a thing.” He smirks, and my insides glow.

“Come, Your Majesty. Let’s teach you how to throw a punch.”



CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

It is a challenge not to use my newfound punching skills during my outings with Duke Áine over the next several weeks.

There is a planned tour of Tír na Lune's artisanal shardlight district; we barely exit the castle gates before a group of young women pull him away to judge an impromptu beauty contest. "The duty of a duke!" he calls out with a not-nearly-apologetic-enough grin as he leaves me on the sidewalk.

The following week, he invites me to an exclusive dinner in his quarters. It is so exclusive that I am the only one there. I eat his frangipane tart. And damn him, it's delicious.

When I return to the suite that night, I find Lachlan and Aowen discussing the various attacks on my person here in Tír na Lune.

That morning, Sir Quinn shared the news with Lachlan that the man who attacked me in the crypt had been identified. He belonged to an anti-monarchist group that's taken root within the territory. A group that also included one of the duke's courtiers—an older fae woman who was at the castle that night and likely fed my location to the assailant.

"I asked Sir Quinn," Lachlan continues, "if there was a chance the group was also responsible for the báshound escape, and his response was such a swift, emphatic *yes* that the opposite seems more likely. Have you learned anything more about Lady LaBeaumont's whereabouts that night?"

"Nothing conclusive," Aowen answers. "She has alibis, but they're from people close to her. Hard to know if anyone is telling the truth. And Sir Quinn could easily be protecting her on behalf of the duke."

"If it wasn't her, then who? Outside of the anti-monarchists, she has the most obvious motive."

"Are we certain the anti-monarchists truly exist?" Aowen tosses her blanket of raven hair over her shoulder. "I'm still not convinced the duke himself didn't orchestrate the whole thing in order to swoop in and play the hero. He's certainly been milking the story for all it's worth."

"Perhaps," Lachlan concedes. "But the duke was still in Farlock's Edge when the beasts escaped their paddock."

"He could've paid someone to let them loose."

"Maybe the entire trip to Farlock's Edge was a ruse to deflect attention from himself," I add.

Lachlan frowns. "You've spent some time with him lately. What do you think?"

I snort a laugh. "On second thought, I'm not sure he'd willingly deflect attention from himself."

An impression that is proven the next afternoon on what was to be our most promising outing yet—boating in the reflecting pool. The duke couldn't possibly escape me there. And I was right. He doesn't. He does, however, spend the entire afternoon regaling the couple in the next boat with stories about his trip to Farlock's Edge. I'm not sure he realizes I have been rowing the boat the entire time. My arms are more sore than they were after I brandished that sword against Mortis.

He is, at least, marginally remorseful afterwards. Promises to share his clue at dinner this evening.

Where we are sitting next to each other at this precise moment.

And he is most assuredly *not* clue-sharing.

He's spent the entirety of the meal recounting the same tired tale of rescuing me from the báshounds that the table has heard at least a dozen times. There are a few extra embellishments this time—a refusal by Mortis to stand down, a dramatic showdown involving a decorative sword. I suppose I should be grateful he's included an actual detail from the event. Even if it was *my* detail.

His courtiers' obsequious smiles, hearty laughter, and appropriately timed gasps egg him on. I want to beg them to stop.

I dig into my entrée—perfectly medium-rare venison drizzled with a port wine reduction, and the only thing keeping me from stabbing my fork into my hand as an excuse to leave the table. I look longingly toward the far end where Aowen and Lachlan are seated together, the former enthusiastically chatting with the group around them while the latter quietly listens.

I would have rather sat with them.

I would have rather cleaned the castle privies with my bare hands.

Instead I cling to my boredom, trying to let it drown out the other, more petrifying emotions percolating beneath my placid surface.

The duke may be boring me, but there's no doubt I am boring him as well.

And if I cannot turn the tide, I may literally be bored to death.



AN HOUR LATER, I'm in the tub, furiously scrubbing my hair. Lathery bubbles drip down my face and sting my eyes, and I'm almost grateful for the pain.

The more time I spend with Duke Áine, the less becoming his queen seems like a better option than dying.

I swallow my anger and frustration, dipping my head below the warm water before rising and using a cup to rinse my body. All I want to do right now is dry off, sink into my spiky bed, forget the past few weeks in Tír na Lune ever happened and start ov—

The door swings open and Lachlan steps in, shirtless. His lips part as he goes preternaturally still.

I shriek and drop the cup, barely managing to get a slippery arm over my breasts and a palm over my sex.

Sometimes when we're together, plotting or talking or teasing, it's easy to forget he's a supernatural being. But right now, he's every inch the strapping faerie knight.

Veins pop in his right forearm, which is flexed since he's gripping the door handle for dear life. His broad chest, muscular arms, and abdominals have surely been sculpted of golden marble, and curling around his right shoulder and down his ribs are paragraphs of dark tattoos in the fae script. The few scars he bears—a puckered slash across his left pectoral, a pink half-circle by his hipbone—speak to the dangerous ways he wields his incredible body. And glinting at his right nipple, to my utter delight, is another silver hoop.

I want to tug it between my teeth.

The *diamhrán* is not fully open at the moment, so hopefully he didn't hear that thought.

I, however, am catching snippets of his. As if the sight of my wet, naked flesh has caused his control to cease functioning.

…need to stop staring at her, you idiot, she'll…

…looks even softer than I'd…

…hear you! Close your mouth! Get your shit together! Have you forgotten how this ends? With her as your queen*, for Danu's sake…*

I break the charged silence. "Can you hand me a towel?"

"Fuck." The curse whispers past his parted lips, so soft I wonder if I made it up. He shakes his head and anchors his gaze to the floor. "Sorry, little queen. Didn't realize you were in here. I thought you'd still be with the duke." He side-steps to the shelf, then extends a towel toward me. "I promise I won't look."

Look. Please look, I nearly scream. I am battered from my failures, and Lachlan's face when he opened the door was quite the ego boost.

I grab the towel and wrap it around my figure as I step out of the tub. "All my naughty bits are hidden. You're safe."

His smile is rueful, a little sad even, when his blue eyes meet mine. "Am I?"

I should leave, allow him privacy for his own bedtime routine. But my fear that I am running out of time to hear the duke's clue emboldens me.

"Am I boring?" I blurt.

Lachlan rears back as if I just asked him the most absurd question in the world. "What?"

I finger the hem of the towel. "Duke Áine has no interest in me whatsoever. I don't … I don't think I can do this."

Lachlan cocks his head, eyes narrowing in confusion, but not anger. They're chivalrously homed in on my face, staying well above my collarbone.

I am not being even half as respectful.

But my spirits are low. And the sight of all his pierced, tattooed, muscled strength—so close I could reach out and touch him if I were feeling *really* bold—is the only thing keeping me from collapsing to the floor in a puddle of tears.

"I've already been passed over once."

"What does that mean? Passed over?"

"The man I was in love with before I came here? George? The one I told—"

"A name as insipid as the man himself, no doubt," Lachlan snarls, as if unable to stifle the comment.

"I thought he was going to propose. But he … He chose someone else. A *real* Favourite." I'm already physically naked. Might as well get a bit psychologically naked, too.

Lachlan sucks in a breath. "You're not the Favourite?"

I shake my head. "I thought I could fake it, but … I seem to have reached the limit of my acting skills."

Lachlan blinks, then clenches his jaw. *Now* he looks angry. Furious. A little devastated, even. But only momentarily. He circles the heels of his palms against his eyes. "You've enchanted Desmond, though, and he—"

"Wants to be king. He doesn't care who his queen is."

"He is very focused on that goal, but"—Lachlan grasps my damp chin, forcing me to look at him—"you have a very distorted view of yourself, Charlotte, if you believe you are without charm."

I cannot bear his intense sincerity right now. I crack beneath its weight, tearing away. "How can I trust your judgment? You barely talk to anyone."

"That's not true, I … " He scoffs, scratching the stubble shadowing his sharp jawline. "Well, I talk to you all the time."

"Often *only* me."

"You're very easy to talk to."

"For *you*." Fists on my hips, I cling to my petulance even though I'm immensely flattered. And feel the same about him. "Duke Cernunnos rejected me."

"I don't think that had very much to do with you."

"That's precisely my point!"

I toss a finger in his face, and he wraps a fist around it, looking very much like he wants to smile but is trying to stay serious in what I have clearly deemed an argument.

"His Grace will come around. Desmond is working on him."

I pull away, frustrated. "Even if he agrees, what does it matter? I'll fail with him as I have with Duke Áine. Before I came here, I thought my future was guaranteed. I had no need to beguile anyone. And now my life, the entire Otherworld's peace, and your future all depend on my doing so. I am not prepared for this. I am desperately out of practice."

My bottom lip quivers, and tears threaten to spill over my lashes. The only sound in the room is the *drip, drip, drip* of my wet hair upon the floor.

A silent stand-off stretches, me with my arms crossed over my chest, him with his large hands braced on his waist. Even those cuts of muscle that *V* into his trousers cannot lift my despair. Well, not *all* the way.

This time, he's the one to break the silence.

"Use me."

I blink, my tears dissolving, and stand up a little straighter. "What?"

He searches my face, examining every nuance. He could so easily slip into my mind, unearth my secret desires. The fact that he won't makes me trust him even more than I already do. "You said you're out of practice. My duty is to serve you. Use *me*."

"Use you … how?"

He shrugs, though there is nothing nonchalant about it. "However you'd like. You want to learn how to seduce powerful faerie men? I am a powerful faerie man—with a storied history of seduction, as I've been told you now know."

I flush. Aowen really is the most terrible gossip. "I'm sorry, I should have waited for you to—"

"I'm not ashamed of my past."

"I do not want to burden you."

Lachlan bites his lip ring, his eyes roving down my body. *Finally*. "Trust me, it would be no burden."

"Cad," I chuckle, half-heartedly swatting at him though my heart is leaping. "But wouldn't you feel like I'm taking advantage of you? Like your clients did."

His brows crinkle. "My clients didn't take advantage of me. They paid me for a service. One I was happy to provide. Besides, you're not a client. You can't afford me." I want to be affronted, but he's probably not wrong. "Consider this a gift to secure your and Desmond's future."

And there it is. Of course that's why he's offering to help me. For his duke. To ensure his own next chapter. For a second, I had thought … I curl a wet strand around my finger. "And what *about* Desmond? Would he be upset if I—"

"Started cavorting with his knight?"

"His *friend.*"

Lachlan sighs, breaking eye contact to stare at the wall. "Desmond and I … what we are to each other … It's hard to call someone a friend when they control your life choices." He turns back. "And Des is very expansive with his affections. I can assure you he's not saving himself for your marriage bed. Why should you?"

It's so tempting to agree with him. And mostly, I do. I'm just not convinced the other dukes would. God, if any of them ever found out

… I can’t put Lachlan in that kind of danger.

“Thank you. So much. You’re very kind. But … I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

He nods, resigned. Maybe a touch disappointed. But he doesn’t try to persuade me. All he does is bow slightly at the waist, the shardlights glinting off his piercings. “Sleep well, Your Majesty.”

I flee to my bedchamber without another word, cheeks hot, body aflame.

And stay up all night wondering whether I’ve just made the stupidest decision of my life.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

Yes. Yes, you have, Charlotte.

You are a complete and utter fool for rejecting your sweet and absurdly handsome bodyguard's generous offer.

It becomes more and more apparent with each subsequent outing with Duke Áine.

On Monday, I am cautiously optimistic about the tour the duke has promised through the wider territory. So far, he's not introduced me to any of the common folk in Tír na Lune. I'm not sure he himself spends much time with them.

But instead of the duke, one of his valets arrives after breakfast to inform me he's been called away for a rehearsal of—wait for it—the Vanquishing of the Báshounds, a play Lisande has commissioned based on the piece in the Sky Gazette.

Ridiculous. And that *title*. The báshounds have not been vanquished. They are still very much alive, prowling around their paddock and feasting on innocent deer.

Lachlan attempts to cheer me with a silly story about Desmond coming home from a party rip-roaring drunk and entering the wrong bedchamber. Ended up crawling into bed with one of his mother's

friends. The woman was pleased by the intrusion. Her wife, not as much.

"What were his parents like?" I ask, through a fit of laughter.

"Strict, but compassionate," Lachlan says. "And fiercely protective of all the peoples of the celestial kingdom, not just those in Tír na Strelle. He is very much like them. He will be a great king."

The reverence in Lachlan's words draws my attention to his powerful frame, his white armour, the sword resting against his chair.

"Only a great king would be worthy of such a great knight."

"See?" He smiles across the table, one of those broad ones that pops his dimple, and heat swoops through my belly. "Who said you're not charming?"

The next day, the duke has planned a luncheon in the Tranquileries. On our walk there, I ask questions about his territory, his people, their customs. But the only topic that interests Duke Áine is Duke Áine. He finds a way to steer the conversation back to himself each time. It is quite impressive, actually.

And as soon as his valet spreads out our blanket, Lady LaBeaumont slithers over. Claims the duke is the only person in all of Tír na Lune with a palette sophisticated enough to select the soup for the evening's first course.

It is the first time, to my knowledge, that I have been passed over for *soup*.

I stomp to the pink willow, fuming, until Lachlan arrives with my sketchbook. I spend the afternoon drawing unflattering portraits of the duke and Lisande which Lachlan assures me are both skillfully rendered *and* hilarious.

There is a great amount of joy to be had in indulging one's pettier instincts.

On Wednesday, I learn the meaning of the phrase *be careful what you wish for*. Duke Áine does not abandon our outing, a kelpie ride—separate kelpies, praise the faerie gods—over the Nubiium River. Not wanting to waste another second being polite and skirting the issue, I ask him to share his clue.

He side-eyes me from atop his mount. "I am not sure you are ready to hear it, Miss Fitzroy. I have not had sufficient time to judge

whether you possess the qualities I'm looking for in a queen."

My hands strangle the reins, and my eyelid starts twitching. What would be the consequences if I knocked him from his kelpie, then encouraged my own to stomp him to death? Would the ring fall off and send me to the Afterlands with him? Right now, I'm willing to chance it.

More airily than I imagined I was capable of, I ask what, precisely, he's looking for in a queen. His response begins with a list of virtues—obedience, modesty, humility—that I am certain are code for *a meek woman who will never question my decisions nor steal my spotlight*. Which gives way to an hours-long monologue on his own accomplishments and character.

By the time we return to the castle, I am on the verge of pitying my arch nemesis Lisande. How on earth can she stand to spend so much time in this man's company?

I return to my quarters—alone, since Lachlan is teaching at the Eyrie this afternoon—and vow to try harder at dinner. I have less than a month before Lughnasadh, by which time I need to have found the second fragment.

Even if I do, I still have Duke Cernunnos to contend with. We've heard no word from Tír na Dubh, nor from Desmond. If Cernunnos has been kept informed of my progress in Tír na Lune, then I am not at all surprised by his silence. Every odds-maker from here to Farlock's Edge is predicting my failure. Why would he extend an invite to a dead woman?

The whole affair is exhausting.

And every night, as I lay in the thorny bed in my coldly beautiful prison cell, Lachlan's offer blazes into my mind.

Use me.

It's always accompanied by visions of his bare torso, his ravenous expression when he walked in on me naked, those thoughts he couldn't stop me from hearing. Especially the one about how soft I looked.

Not to mention highlights of his bravery and kindness and gentle encouragement these past weeks.

He is a very good man.

It makes me want to do very bad things to him.

I get so hot that in order to fall asleep, I either have to throw off my blankets or take matters into my own hands. It only ever takes a few circles of my slick fingers as I conjure remembered sensations of his teeth on my neck, his hands on my waist, his strength at my back, and I'm coming with my *own* teeth sunk into the meat of my palm to confuse the *diamrhán*. Just in case he's eavesdropping. Despite his offer, I'm not sure I want him to know how often I touch myself while thinking about him.

My nightly diddling does nothing to ease my frustration, though. I am frustrated by this House's vain, vapid duke. Frustrated by his sycophantic courtiers. Frustrated by his meddling, murderous lover.

Mostly, though, I am frustrated with myself.

Aowen is, too; her desperation is reflected in the outfit she and Vesper have selected for me tonight.

The ethereal ice-blue gown boasts a scooped neckline, and though fitted sleeves cover my arms, my shoulders are bare and the flowing skirt is nearly translucent. There's no slit, but it's hardly needed since my legs—and panties—are plainly visible.

Vesper braided the top half of my hair, but left the bottom to cascade down my back, and she's worked some cosmetic magic on my face. Elongated lashes make my green-gold eyes look enormous, a wash of peach sweeps up my cheeks, and my rose lips look recently bitten.

"Pulling out all the stops," Lachlan grunts, either too slow or too careless to mask the want in his gaze when I exit my bedchamber.

Vesper bleats a prideful chirp, and Aowen offers me a smug smirk.

When I caught my reflection in the mirror earlier, I felt like a vixen. Interesting. Capable. Powerful. A woman who has already ensnared one duke of the Otherworld, and plans to add another to her cache.

"If the duke ignores her in this," Aowen says, admiring Vesper's handiwork, "then the man has no eyes in his head."

Vesper beams. "Food. Dazzling food."

"We're going to be late for dinner," Aowen says, lifting her skirts.

She opens the door, and Vesper chirrups a farewell before zooming through it.

I trail the blur of lavender down the hallway. "Where is she going?"

"I've learned not to ask." Aowen marches forward, but before I can follow, a warm hand around my upper arm halts me.

There's solid heat at my back, soft breath on my ear.

"You look exquisite, Charlotte."

I close my eyes, need quivering down my spine. I *really* need to stop masturbating to thoughts of my bodyguard every night.

"If the duke cannot see what a treasure you are, then he doesn't understand true value. And doesn't deserve to be your king."

I am afraid of what I might admit if I open my mouth. So I say nothing as I take Lachlan's proffered elbow, and let him lead me to the dining hall.

Where another battle in this endless war begins.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

Lisande LaBeaumont is sitting in my seat of honor next to the duke's.

My fingers tighten on Lachlan's arm, and a snarl of anger ripples through the *diamrhán* as he leads me to the table. The duke himself has not yet joined. Perhaps I can salvage this.

Would you like me to bodily remove her? Lachlan asks.

As much as it would cheer me, I don't think it would do much for my reputation.

If people see how willing I am to throw my considerable strength around for you, they might treat you with the respect you're due.

Then all anyone will say is that my power rests within you. I will handle this myself. Please.

Lachlan squeezes my fingers as he removes my hand from his arm, then makes a shallow bow. I don't think he likes how I've leashed him, but he doesn't strain against it. "As you wish, my queen."

He stalks to the other end of the table and folds into a chair next to Aowen, who's in a lively conversation with Lady Loargann. One of the duke's cousins, an elegant woman with kind eyes and a long

silver braid; she's one of the few courtiers who's been cordial to me. But that doesn't stop my stomach from twisting in knots when she flings herself across the table to greet Lachlan. He takes up her hand and plants a chivalrous kiss upon the back. Is she one of his former clients? I cannot look any longer.

Instead, I steel my spine and glide to the head of the table. The slick eyes of multiple courtiers slide toward me along with stifled whispers.

"Good evening, Lady LaBeaumont." I offer her a bright smile. Of the two of us, only I have the chance to become queen. I try to remember it as I sink into the duke's own chair.

"That's His Grace's seat," Lisande volleys.

"Yes," I say calmly. "It appears mine has been taken."

She swirls her wineglass. "His Grace was complaining about how dreadfully dull the dinner conversation has been this past month."

Several courtiers snicker, and my ears burn. I can visualize the Sky Gazette's headline tomorrow morning: *Miss Charlotte Fitzroy's Ever-Dwindling Odds Bottom Out.*

I must strike back before I lose this fight for good. "He mentioned nothing of the sort to me."

Lisande croaks out a cruel laugh. "Before or after he left you to seek out my company?"

I want to protest. I want to scream that *she's* always luring *him* away. But the only thing left to cling to is my dignity. And if I let that go, I'm surely done for. I lift my chin, do not deign to answer.

Her responding smile is razor sharp, and chairs creak as the whole table leans in, primed for the kill shot.

"You are a bore, Miss Fitzroy. I have encountered rocks with more personality. And if you think for one second that Torvil would bother sharing his clue and entering the Wild Hunt to claim you, well, you're more pathetic than you look in that gown. *Reeks* of desperation. Even the prize of the crown wouldn't be worth spending a lifetime in your company. Run along to that empty seat at the end of the table. Or better yet, spare this room your presence and dine in your—"

“Here I am!” Duke Áine—Torvil, as I’ve just learned—sings out as he strolls into the hall, completely oblivious to the carcass Lisande has just made of my candidacy.

His eyebrows rise as he looks down at me. “You’re in my seat, Miss Fitzroy.”

Lisande leaps from her chair, all ruby silk and shining white curls, then presses herself against him as she whispers into his ear. And though his periwinkle gaze may have started on me, as she continues, it drifts away and crawls down her body. I can imagine precisely what she’s saying to him.

She pulls back, fluttering her lashes, and his lips curve into a hungry smirk.

“Well?” she asks.

Torvil looks back to me, not an ounce of apology on his face. “There’s no assigned seating at court dinners. You can find another place for tonight.”

His obliviousness is a physical blow to my chest. And while some courtiers’ faces are sympathetically blank, others’ are contorted with muffled laughter.

I will not give them the benefit of my humiliation.

“Of course, Your Grace. I do hope you enjoy Miss LaBeaumont’s company this evening. I know her days with you are limited. She should appreciate her position while she can.”

A low whistle sounds: one of the celestial knights who trains with Lachlan every morning.

And the fury in Lisande’s eyes is almost worth the embarrassment of my long walk to the lone empty seat at the far end of the table.

The courtiers here do not acknowledge me once throughout dinner. Afraid the stink of the shit Lisande flung at me will rub off on them.

It stings, sinking back into this familiar status of pariah. Not even the gooey butter cake being served for dessert can make me feel better.

At the other end of the table, Lady Loargann is laughing and sighing and fawning over Lachlan. He’s barely saying a word. But his

quiet is one of still confidence. The kind that draws people closer. Makes them want to peel back his layers and discover what's underneath.

Use me.

I need to learn how to do that. Seduce with little more than a fleeting look and a coy smile. It may be my only chance to salvage this disastrous visit to Tír na Lune, get my candidacy—and my reinvention—back on track.

I polish off a slice of butter cake, my appetite somewhat returned, as dinner comes to an end.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

"I've changed my mind," I declare boldly as I whip open the door to Lachlan's bedchamber later that night. He's seated on his sofa, legs spread, polishing his sword.

Not a euphemism, much to my disappointment.

His hand stills above a small pot of wax as he glances up at me through those adorable eyeglasses. He doesn't even ask what I've changed my mind *about*. The man is that confident. It's bloody infuriating.

And more than a bit of a turn-on.

Then again, if I looked like him, I'd probably assume everyone who rejected my advances would eventually regret it and come to their senses.

"Close the door."

The low rumble of his voice trails ghostly fingers up my thighs. He folds his polishing cloth, seals the wax, then rises to place his sword in its sheath.

He's changed since dinner, now wearing a white shirt tucked into a pair of soft gray trousers. The shirt hangs open, the sleeves pushed to his elbows and exposing forearms that I have an urgent,

physical need to feel pinning me down. To what surface, I couldn't possibly care less. He plucks off his glasses, folds them into their case, then sits back down and spreads his legs wide. Taking up as much space as he pleases.

"Come over here."

It's not a request.

But he makes no move to fetch me as I hesitate, wrapping and unwrapping the sash of my dressing gown around my palm.

I was so much more sure of this decision before I opened the door, but now that I'm in his room and he's right there looking so *dreadfully* handsome and like he's been waiting for me and his loose trousers are falling in just the right way to emphasize what is clearly a very generous endowment and, oh heavens what if I mess this up or do something awkward or put my tongue in the wrong place, and he can tell that I have not done this in months and even when I did, I am not quite certain that George knew exactly what to do with my body, so—

"Charlotte." He's patient. Steady. "Do as I say."

My mind stills and my body calms. He's good at this. At knowing what a person needs. At knowing what *I* need. Crystal-clear instructions to cut through the persistent chatter.

I pad over to the sofa and sink down next to him. He's so much bigger over here. A hulking mountain of golden flesh and tousled auburn hair. And *hot*. So hot. Heat roils off him in waves, along with that heady woodsmoke and fig scent.

He's just so vividly … *present*.

And though I've been close to him before, touched him before, this feels monumentally different.

He angles his body toward me, scooting closer, and rests a hand on his broad thigh. He snakes his other arm along the back of the sofa behind my head. My hair is pinned up, so his biceps presses against the back of my neck. I lean into it. Once again, I'm cocooned, cradled, but not caged. I could get up and walk away at any moment.

I have never wanted to do anything less.

"Are you comfortable?" he asks, gesturing toward a bronze flagon and two goblets on the side table. "Need something to silence those voices in your head?"

I burble a laugh. "You're the loudest voice in my head lately."

The loudest, perhaps. A cool caress upon my overheated brain. *But unfortunately not the most persuasive*.

He lifts my chin with the callused pad of his finger. "Tell me about your experience."

"I'm not a virgin," I blurt.

"I know." Another soft smile. And the dimple. God help me. "George, was it?" He says the name with barely concealed distaste and a hint of jealousy that stokes my excitement.

"Yes," I whisper. "But there were plenty of others before him."

Lucky bastards, Lachlan purrs into my mind as he pinches a loose strand of my hair, his eyes roving over my face. Maybe he means it, or maybe he's trying to assuage my nerves. Either way, a drop of my earlier confidence returns. Enough that I place my hand upon the leg he's drawn up between us. His thighs are as solid as stone. He twitches at the contact, but moves in closer. As if my touch is a welcome surprise.

"How long were you and George together?" he asks.

"Almost a year."

Lachlan's hand on the back of the couch clenches into a fist, and the solid knot in his throat bobs. "And the sex was good?"

I send the answer into my lap. "He never … It was always … He rarely wanted to …"

"Charlotte." A large, warm hand envelopes my own upon his thigh. "We're just two friends talking. And I'm as nervous as you are."

My head shoots up. "Why would *you* be nervous?"

"I haven't done this in quite some time. I don't want to disappoint you." He gently squeezes my fingers. "Which I surely will if you don't tell me what you like. What you need."

I blow out a long breath. "He only ever brought me to orgasm a handful of times. And on those occasions, I'd done most of the work to get there myself. He always treated me like I was this fragile

thing, even when I told him that wasn't what I wanted. I asked him to be rougher. More passionate. But that wasn't what *he* wanted, so we just … It was fine. Our sexual life was fine."

Lachlan snickers. "The performance review every man seeks from his lover."

"What do your lovers say about you?"

A raised brow and a shy smirk tell me all I need to know.

I gasp as his fingers feather over the skin behind my knee, just below the hem of my chemise. He strokes lightly, so lightly I barely feel it, as his other hand curls around my nape. He holds me in place with enough gentle pressure that I cannot look away. Not that I would.

"The secret of seduction, Charlotte, is that physicality is the smallest portion of it. It's almost entirely a mental exercise."

If that is true, then I am dead in the water. I'm incapable of forming coherent thoughts while his hands are on me.

"Do you know why I was so good at it?" he asks.

Was? I nearly scoff.

I want him to move closer. He doesn't.

I want him to trail his fingers up my thigh. He doesn't.

I want him to yank me in for a rough kiss. He doesn't.

"Because of the *diamrhán*?"

He chuckles, his soft breath tickling my lips and I nearly moan, trying not to squirm. "Very few of my clients requested the service, actually. Most people aren't brave enough for that level of exposure."

There's a compliment buried in there somewhere, but the sparks flowing through my veins are making it increasingly difficult to concentrate.

"What then?" I fist my hands at my sides, grasping for control. I'm unraveling. He's unraveling me. And barely touching me.

"Because I did to them what I've been doing with you for weeks. Can you guess what it is?"

Sapphire eyes drink me in, and I know what he's seeing: a heavy-lidded stare, parted lips, flushed cheeks. He must know that all he need do is say the word, give me another command, and there is very little I wouldn't do for him right now.

His lips hover over mine. “Paying attention.”

I release the most pathetic, neediest sound I’ve ever made in my life.

“Did you just whimper?” He smiles against my mouth.

I huff. “Of course not.”

“You did.” He brushes his lip ring against the corner of my mouth and searing, liquid heat spills between my legs. “I think I’d like to hear it again.”

His fingers crawl to the soft skin of my inner thigh, inching up my chemise as he runs the tip of his nose along my throat. “What have you learned about Duke Áine since we’ve been here?” is what he says out loud. What he groans into my mind is, *You always smell incredible. Drives me fucking mad.*

I arch closer, spreading my legs in a blatant invitation for him to touch, to taste, to take, but he’s so infuriatingly restrained.

“I—”

The tips of his fingers trace the crease where my thigh meets my hip and, curse him, I *do* whimper again.

He laughs, a hot puff against my neck followed by the graze of a fang. Shivers wrack my body.

This is excruciating.

I never want him to stop.

Somewhere beneath my lust-addled daze, I remember he’s asked me a question.

“He’s vain,” I choke out as Lachlan pulls back. I know I’m not imagining the hunger in his gaze. He may be keeping me on edge, but I don’t think this is any easier for him. He’s just better at controlling himself.

“And?” He runs his fingernails up and down my thigh, coming dangerously close to my bare sex on each upstroke and pausing every time. Teasing. The brute.

“He wants to be the center of attention, always,” I continue through stuttering breaths.

“Good observation,” Lachlan murmurs onto my jaw, nipping gently. “Then why have you not won him over yet? You’ve given him plenty of attention.”

"I don't—"

Lachlan sweeps his thumb down the side of my breast, and my nipple instantly hardens. This time, the sound I make is not a whimper. It's a deep, needy moan followed by his soft growl of approval.

Lachlan, please, I beg through the *diamrhán*, dignity be damned.

But all he offers in return is another light stroke down my breast, a squeeze on my upper thigh, and a teasing grin. "Out loud, little queen."

I want to smack the smug look right off his face.

As soon as I've had a chance to ride it.

My cunt is throbbing, and I think I might be wetter than I've ever been in my life. He would know if he'd just move his fingers a little higher. I am quite certain I would fall apart instantly.

"Think about it," Lachlan says. "You've given him nothing but attention since the moment he returned. And where has that gotten you?"

"Writhing beneath a talented knight whose seduction lessons are an effective method of torture?"

The corners of his eyes crinkle, and his laughter shakes his body against me. "Charming *and* funny," he says out loud before a whisper rises in my mind, *And so gloriously aroused that it's taking all my restraint to not give you what you so desperately want. Or at least, what you* think *you want.*

"What does that mean?" I choke out. "What I *think* I want?"

He whispers against my collarbone, "You've been giving Torvil what you think he wants—your undivided attention, your eager availability—but that's not what he needs. Make him come to you. Make him worry he's not the man you want. Make him work for it. That's what a man like him needs. To believe he's bested everyone by earning the most glorious prize in the Otherworld."

"This is the lesson? The reason you're tormenting me?"

"Partly," Lachlan says with a grin, his hand cupping my nape again. "And partly because this is what *I* want. To keep you in an extended state of arousal. Have you begging me to end it." His lips

brush the shell of my ear as he whispers, "You'd do anything I asked right now if I promised to lick your cunt, wouldn't you?"

My eyes slide closed and I moan, fluttering around complete emptiness. I have never felt so hollow, a desperate awareness of all the places I need to be filled. I want him on top of me, inside me. He's absolutely right; I *would* do anything he asked if he would just put me out of my misery and—

Plush lips touch mine in a featherlight press.

Despite the tenderness of the kiss, what happens to my body can only be described as a violent explosion. I shudder, I whimper, and I'm fairly certain those are tears streaming from the corners of my eyes.

It's never been like this with anyone. Not even with George.

Another bit of advice, Lachlan whispers through the *diamrhán*, sipping me slowly, savoring my mouth. *It's bad form to think another man's name during a kiss.*

Well, maybe I wouldn't have to if said kisser would stop teasing me and—

Lachlan tucks an arm around my waist and hauls me into his lap. My thighs part, settling around his hips.

His hand spans the entire right side of my face, his thumb hooked beneath my chin. His brow is furrowed and his lips are parted and he looks *starving*. Ruined. Far more affected than he was even moments ago.

His pupils dance back and forth along my own, dipping toward my mouth, and I witness the exact second he loses whatever war he's waging with himself.

He pulls me close and kisses me for real.

His hands are everywhere, all at once, stroking down my sides, teasing up my neck, tangling through my hair. His mouth is hot and wet as he pushes his tongue past my teeth. If he was sipping before, now he's gulping, devouring. His big, powerful body surges up into me and this, *this.* Yes. It's exactly what I wanted. I smile onto his lips as I grind down on his cock, ready for the next lesson. Hell, I'm ready for the final exam. I want him to rip off my chemise, bend me over the back of the sofa, and—

He pushes me away, gasping for breath, hands wrapped around my shoulders. "That's enough."

He lifts me off his lap—as if I weigh nothing—then settles me back onto the sofa. He places my feet over the very obvious bulge in his pants. I want him to use my body to alleviate it.

But I can tell by the determined set of his jaw that he won't. Not tonight, or not ever?

I'm infuriated. And so aroused it's physically painful.

He wraps a warm hand around my ankle. "You're delicious. Dangerous. But I meant what I said about paying attention. And I don't want this"—he gestures vaguely between us—"this way. Neither do you."

He's … God, it's exasperating how well he knows me.

I slide my feet out of his lap before rising from the sofa, wobbly-legged, and heading toward our shared bathing chamber. As much as I'd like to fling myself back into his lap, beg him to change his mind, I do still possess a shred of self-worth.

"Well," I say, with all the affronted dignity I can muster with my swollen lips and wild hair, "thank you for the *lesson*." I aim a pointed look at his trousers, which are still at full mast. "Enjoy your hand tonight."

I fling the door open.

Or try to. It catches on something before I'm able.

When I turn, Lachlan towers over me, a palm splayed above my head. Once again, he's moved faster than my mortal senses could track. His shirt has fallen open, exposing the glint of his nipple piercing. It's distracting enough that I almost don't hear his low, "If we are going to do this, I want no lies between us."

My brow furrows. "What are you talking about? I haven't lied about—"

"Is a lesson really the only reason you came in here?"

"Of course!" I shout, lying liar that I am. But how does he not understand how dangerous the truth is? Or does he just not care?

He laughs, and it's a little cruel. But also a little fond. "Then I gave you exactly what you asked for. Nothing more."

"Yes, but … Well, I thought we were going to … That you were going to …"

"Come back when you're ready to be honest about what you want, Charlotte. I'll give it all to you and more."

I am beyond words. Miserably unsatisfied. Insulted. This was *his* offer, after all.

I turn and pull on the door again, nearly hitting myself in the face when he removes his palm.

"Goodnight, Sir Cathal," I spit without looking over my shoulder, then rush into my own room.

I collapse into my bed, silently screaming into my pillow.

I do not touch myself the entire night. To prove a point.

I'm just not sure to whom.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

If I thought having Lachlan following me around—ever present, ever handsome, ever off-limits—was tempting before, it is *nothing* compared to how it is now that I know how his mouth tastes, how his fingers feel caressing my body with specific intention, how his eyes dance with ravenous glee while he's winding me up.

It's all I can think about this week.

Even as his advice on how to handle Duke Áine is starting to pay off.

At dinner this evening, Lisande is in my place next to the duke again. I ignore them both, instead take a seat beside Aowen and Timothy Hopnell, son of Lord Hopnell, one of Torvil's lesser landed courtiers. Timothy is an enlightening and energetic conversationalist, knows quite a bit about the history and politics of Tír na Lune. He expounds on the anti-monarchists—not an invention after all; they've existed in the territory for years—who have grown bolder the longer the kingdom remains kingless. We discuss Campan's Vale as well, and I ask why he thinks Torvil hid the Bannrhorn fragment there. Timothy speculates that it was an attempt by the duke to strengthen his claim to the region and I cannot help but agree.

Lachlan and I haven't risked more than a trip or two over these past few weeks as the fighting between the local fae and House Áine grows more violent every day. It's an outcome that Aowen, myself and Timothy lament. Timothy perhaps a bit more carefully, given his father's position.

As dinner comes to a close, Timothy scrapes a hand through his dark hair and adjusts his glasses. "Regardless of what any of us thinks, there is only one outcome that will settle the dispute. The selection of a king." His gaze darts toward Torvil, toward Lisande, then back to me. "And we're all beginning to lose hope of that."

A month ago, I might have crumpled. Blubbered out apologies and prostrated myself at his feet, promising to do better. But I'm growing a bit tired of being underestimated. And more than exhausted by the bullies of this court. So instead, I lean back in my chair, take a long sip of my wine, and proclaim, "The Season is not over yet, Mister Hopnell."

Pride pulses through the *diamrhán* and when I tip my chin over my shoulder, Lachlan winks at me from further down the table where he's sitting with some of the other celestial knights.

The next three nights pass in a similar manner, with Lisande in my seat next to the duke and me with Aowen and his courtiers. I am learning more than I ever anticipated about the kingdom's politics. Far more than I learned on any of my outings with Tír na Lune's ostensible *leader*. The issues plaguing the kingdom since the loss of their monarchs are not so dissimilar to issues faced in the human realm. The separation of authority is leading to isolationism, which in turn foments a dangerous tribalism. There have been incidents of violence reported against fae who find themselves outside their territories. And each is blaming the others' dukes for the situation while finding their own beyond reproach.

I wish I could offer more insight, say something more clever than my oft-provided and cringe-inducing, "I'm so sorry to hear that, how terrible."

Aowen guides the conversations with far more skill. She always knows the right questions to ask. Always offers potential solutions but never false hope. She radiates a poise, confidence, and innate

authority that I have yet to encounter here in the Otherworld. Her brother has a touch of it. Lachlan does, too, in some ways. But his power is a quieter, more steadfast thing. The foundation upon which thrones are built, not occupied.

Neither Lachlan nor I have said a single word about the other night. I know he left the ball squarely in my court, but his lack of comment on what happened between us is filling me with a twisted combination of vanity and fear. I will not beg. But what if he changed his mind after he had his little sample? What if I'm not what he wants after all?

It's fine. It's *fine.* He is not for me, and I am not for him.

It's far easier to remember that when he's not opening doors, pulling out my chair, guiding me through the castle with the gentle press of his fingertips between my shoulder blades.

Plus, the cherry scones I love so much keep appearing at breakfast and never on the trays Aowen has conjured. I swear I saw a swipe of flour on Lachlan's tunic sleeve yesterday. Has he been fetching them from the kitchens for me?

I shake off my miserable confusion, trying not to stare at him across the table this morning, nearly a week after the "sofa dream." That's what I've been calling my lesson because at this point, I'm not even sure it happened.

His glasses are perched on his nose as he works on today's carving—a small ashwood dagger with a wolf's head handle. The slow, careful movements of his long fingers should not be making me think the things I'm thinking.

"I've arranged a meeting for you this afternoon," Aowen says, pulling me from my inappropriate thoughts.

"Food. Naughty food," Vesper offers through a toothy smile while braiding an underside section of Aowen's raven hair.

I ignore the pixie's taunts. "What kind of meeting?"

"Torvil's been asking about you." Aowen munches a slice of dry toast. She's been out late nearly every night this week, flitting from courtier to courtier, singing my praises. "Your obliviousness is nagging at him. He takes his lunch with every lord and lady you've sat with the night before. Wants to know exactly what you've been

talking about. The court is starting to see your company as an advantage. A way to get more face time with their duke. And the more they angle for your attention, the more intrigued Torvil becomes. Bold strategy."

She aims a sly smile at Lachlan, who flicks a wood shaving, tongues his lip ring, and shrugs a muscular shoulder. The man was crafted by his gods specifically to torment me; I'm sure of it.

"Lord Hopnell saw you drawing in the Tranquileries yesterday and asked if you do portraits," Aowen continues. "He's never sat for one and wondered if you'd be willing to draw him. I told him you'd love to."

An idea brews. "Where does he want to meet?"

"His townhouse is two blocks away, down Catena Street. I told him to expect us there after lunch."

"Would he be willing to come here instead? Tell him he needs a grander backdrop. And that I have the perfect framing in mind in the east salon."

"Across from the duke's office?" Lachlan asks with an impressed grin. *Clever little queen*.

So many grand portraits hang in the castle gallery. But guess who's not yet in the line-up? I grin back. *You told me to show Torvil what he's missing.*

"Would he agree to it, do you think?" I press Aowen.

"I don't see why not. What are you up to?"

"Food. Sneaky food." Vesper ties off the end of Aowen's braid, then flits over to start mine.

I pop a grape into my mouth.

"Ensnaring a duke. And earning his clue."



"WHERE SHOULD I SIT?" Lord Hopnell asks, twisting around in the pale afternoon sunlight streaming into the east salon.

He's a froggy-looking man with bulging eyes, a too-wide mouth, and a generous belly over stick-thin legs. His silver hair—parted

down the center and shaped into two log-like curls atop his ears—does little to dampen the effect.

"Right there in front of the fireplace, my lord." I gesture to a large chair with red silk cushions framed in white wood. A veritable throne. "I hope you'll agree this is the only seat in this room that suits you."

Lord Hopnell puffs his chest, grinning as he settles down. "I must say, Miss Fitzroy, I was a bit taken aback when you suggested the palace as the setting for my portrait, but"—he swivels his gaze around the room—"I do believe it was the right decision. It's appropriate for how close His Grace and I are."

I bite the inside of my cheek to stifle a snicker. My acquaintance with Lord Hopnell is a result of our twin banishments to the frozen wilds of the courtly dinner table. But I would never insult my pawn. "A powerful man deserves a powerful background."

Speaking of power, the air shifts as Lachlan strides into the salon. He's changed into his pristine white armour, at my request. His auburn hair is freshly braided, and his pauldrons make his shoulders look absurdly broad. I wanted another shiny object in the room to lure Duke Áine's attention. The strategy may have been a bit too effective, though; the sight of him in full dress takes my breath away.

"Sir Cathal," Lord Hopnell croaks out, displeased. Many of the Tír na Lune courtiers observe Lachlan with barely concealed distaste. I am not sure if it's because they believe him to be a trumped-up harlot who doesn't deserve his knighthood, or because his loyalty lies with a different House. "What are you doing here?"

Lachlan doesn't miss a beat. "Our future queen is under the protection of House Macán. It is my duty to ensure her safety."

Lord Hopnell huffs. "Surely you don't believe she's in any danger from me."

"Never, my lord," Lachlan says in that smooth, low voice that does funny things to my insides. I want to hear it whispering filth in my ear again. "But I thought it wise to be here for you, too. A man of your stature must have acquired a few envious enemies over the years. I offer you my protection as well."

Lord Hopnell's shoulders swell, and a wide smile splits his face. "Yes, just so. Good thought, man, good thought." He turns to me. "How should I pose?"

I guide Lord Hopnell into position as I say into Lachlan's mind, *Give him what he needs, huh?*

Men are simple creatures, Charlotte. Make us feel important and we'll do whatever you ask.

Yourself included?

Of course, he purrs, *but as I told you, you need to* ask *first. Out loud. Otherwise I might get it confused with all the begging you do in my dreams.*

I spit out a laugh, and Lord Hopnell gives me a confused look. "Relax your face, my lord," I say to him, then settle in to get started.

Despite the distraction of Lachlan's mind-flirting, once I put charcoal to paper, that familiar creative focus washes over me.

Time melts away, and I am halfway through my initial sketch when voices echo through the hallway to our left.

Lord Hopnell twists his head around. "Is that His Grace?"

I chide gently, asking him to please hold his position. I want us all to seem unbothered by the duke's presence.

"Wait for me in my office," Duke Áine says as the footsteps stop, and my spirits leap.

Lisande simpers, "But, Torvil, we're needed—"

"In my office." A sharp reprimand, followed by a low, "And do not call me that in public. I've asked you too many times, Lady LaBeaumont."

Lisande clacks away as I focus on the buttons of Lord Hopnell's waistcoat, clinging to the fabric in a desperate battle with his paunch.

Duke Áine steps up beside me. "What's going on here?"

Lord Hopnell scrambles out of his chair, bowing. "It was her idea, Your Grace. I commissioned her for a portrait, and she thought—"

"A portrait?" The duke trains his violet eyes on me, intrigued. "I wasn't aware you were an artist, Miss Fitzroy."

I execute a small curtsy. "There are many things you don't know about me, Your Grace. And it's just a hobby, really. I would never

presume to call myself an artist. This is my first official portrait."

"Nonsense," Lord Hopnell splutters. "She is a rare talent. I discovered her myself. Saw her sketching out by the reflecting pool."

Duke Áine ignores Lord Hopnell, his focus solely upon me. As if I have magically transformed into something of value. "And you felt Thaddeus was the most appropriate subject for your first *official* portrait?" A vein in his temple throbs.

My eyes dart to Lachlan, an unobtrusive statue who will not move until called upon. And though his face is a perfectly blank canvas, I know he's thinking the same thing I am.

Trap sprung.

"I thought it best to practice my skills on a lesser courtier"—Lord Hopnell huffs an affronted breath—"before even thinking to use you as a subject."

Duke Áine sniffs. "Bring examples of your work to dinner this evening. If anyone in Tír na Lune should be judging your talent, it's me. Your commission will have to wait, Thaddeus."

"I am at your service, Your Grace," I say, bowing as Duke Áine stalks away, trailed by a blubbering Lord Hopnell.

Later that evening, a sketchbook tucked under my arm, I arrive at dinner to find Lord Hopnell seated farther from the duke than he's ever been.

And right next to him is Lisande LaBeaumont.

I am far too petty to resist smirking at her as I take my place next to the duke.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

A few days later, Aowen and I are strolling through the market square in downtown Tír na Lune, enjoying a mid-morning iced cream. Because, well, why not?

"How are your painting sessions with the duke coming along?" she asks.

"Mostly well," I answer, licking the most delicious strawberry iced cream I've ever tasted off a small wooden spoon. It's as though I'm eating a freshly plucked berry that's been soaked in the coldest bowl of sweet cream. When I become queen, I will mandate this specific flavor for dessert after every meal.

"Has he shared his clue yet?"

"No. But I have not asked again. Not yet. If he senses my desperation, he's sure to deny me. I'll know when the time is right."

I do believe that, even as my deadline looms larger and deadlier every day. And my sessions with the duke *have* been going well. I've been able to maintain Torvil's undivided attention for several hours each day. Every time he rises to check my progress, he comments on how well I've captured his essence. It's less a compliment on my skills and more a testament to his vanity.

"Mostly well," Aowen echoes. "What's the trouble then?"

"I fear I am running out of questions to keep him occupied. He delights in talking about himself, but even *he* may grow bored if I don't find some new material to inquire after."

Aowen thinks for a moment, then jabs the air with her tiny spoon. "Back issues of the Sky Gazette. There are loads in the castle library. Plenty of stories he'd be delighted to embellish for you."

I snicker, though it dies quickly when Aowen continues with, "Lughnasadh is only a few weeks away. How confident are you that he'll share the clue before then?"

"Food." Vesper pokes her head out of Aowen's shoulder bag. "Dead food."

"Thanks, Vesper."

The little pixie chomps her teeth. It's almost affectionate.

I turn back to Aowen. "I'm more confident than I was when we first arrived, at least. What are the courtiers saying?"

"Lisande is in a near panic state on a daily basis." Aowen waves to a group outside a café who've been angling for her attention. She's nearly as popular with the common folk here in Tír na Lune as she is in Tír na Strelle. "She knows she's losing her influence over Torvil, and she's despondent. We'll need to keep an eye on her. She could be desperate enough to attempt another sabotage."

"It's unfair, isn't it?" I muse as we turn down a narrow side street lined with several butcher shops and a bakery. "That she and I are forced into such a silly spat over a man."

"And such a silly man at that," Aowen says, tossing her empty bowl into a bin. "One you don't even want." There's a challenge in her side-eyed glance.

"Right. Because I want Desmond."

"Where is Lachlan this afternoon?"

The subtlest of segues.

I do my best not to react. "Back at the castle answering some correspondence from your brother. Did you not know?"

"Must have forgotten," she says with a twinkle in her eye. "What news from my dear baby brother? Is he any closer to securing you an invite from Cernunnos?"

"Lachlan seems to believe it's imminent. The Gazette's been reporting on the reversal of my odds with a sort of frenzied awe. If I find the fragment and Torvil proposes, it may be the final push to change Duke Cernunnos's mind. Which would, of course, be wonderful."

A soft hum is Aowen's only response.

On our way back to the castle, we're stopped numerous times. And while several fae offer me well-wishes in my quest for the Bannrhorn, most want to speak to Aowen—requests for counsel or thanks for a kindness. A few want nothing more than to bask in her presence.

We're about to turn up the main avenue when there's a commotion behind us, and I'm nearly knocked off my feet by a man fleeing a cadre of celestial knights.

"Stop him!"

I turn at the knight's bellow. Sir Quinn.

The fugitive in question pushes through the crowd clutching a brown parcel against his tattered tunic. He begs for help as fae peel away from him, some indifferent, some sneering.

Two knights tackle him from behind, the parcel flying out of his arms as his cheek hits the ground with a meaty splat. I wince sympathetically as they drag him over to Sir Quinn.

"Please, *please*," the man begs, falling to his knees. "We're desperate."

A third knight hands the parcel to Sir Quinn, who unwraps it to reveal a marbled hunk of beef shoulder. "Stealing from a shop in Tír na Lune is equivalent to stealing from His Grace. Surely, you're aware of the penalty?"

"He claims we are his citizens, but you're killing us," the man chokes out. "You destroyed our home, so we fled. And now no one will hire me in your shining city." He spits at Sir Quinn's feet.

Sir Quinn's nose crinkles and his lip curls into a sneer. "Your failures are not His Grace's concern. The laws apply to everyone regardless of circumstance."

"My starving children are not a circumstance," the man shouts, struggling against the knights' grip.

Sir Quinn smiles cruelly. “Take him to the hold. His Grace will decide what to do with him.”

The man wails as the knights yank him upright, but before they can march him away, I step forward.

“Is this how House Áine treats its people, Sir Quinn? Have you no mercy?”

Sir Quinn rolls his eyes, and I fight an urge to kick him in the shins. I wish Lachlan were here so I could command him to attack. “This is none of your concern, Miss Fitzroy. Move aside.”

I hold my position, eyes narrowed, the breeze catching a few strands of hair. The crowd reforms, drawn by the stand-off. “I will not.”

Sir Quinn jerks his sword an inch out of its sheath. A blatant threat. “Move. Aside.”

“Or what? You’ll cut her down in the street?” Aowen steps up beside me, and though Sir Quinn has several inches on her, she’s by far the more imposing figure. “Provoke House Macán at your peril, Sir.” She turns to the prisoner. “What’s your name?”

“Stafford, my lady,” he sniffs. “My wife and boys are staying at a care home down on Front Street.”

“Leniency is a rot, Lady Macán,” Sir Quinn interjects. “There are hundreds more where this dog came from. If we feed and clothe one beggar, we must feed and clothe them all.”

Aowen and I stand down, allowing Sir Quinn and his knights to pass. But her words ripple through the crowd in their wake.

“And a leader who ignores the needs of his people will soon find he has no people left to lead.”



“Is the piece finished yet?” Duke Áine asks during our session later that afternoon. I cannot stomach his impatience.

I have not stopped thinking of Mr. Stafford and his poor family. Refugees from Campan’s Vale who’ve encountered indifference at

best and hatred at worst in the capital city of the man attempting to annex their lands.

"One cannot rush perfection," I say half-heartedly. If the duke has noticed my foul mood, he hasn't commented on it. Who am I kidding? Of course he hasn't noticed. "Lift your chin a little higher, please."

He's standing in profile before a grand marble fireplace, dressed finely in an aubergine tailcoat embroidered with silver crescent moons. Strapped across his back are a birchwood longbow and a quiver of arrows. He's worn the weapons to every previous session, but there's something particularly menacing about them today. I wonder if he intends to use them during the Wild Hunt. *If* there's a Wild Hunt.

He pouts, churlish, and I pull my hand away from the canvas before he can ruin my line. "Standing still is not my forte. What is taking so long? Are you distracted today?"

"I witnessed something rather disturbing this morning." He cocks his head, but does not make any movement to comfort me. I explain what happened with Mr. Stafford, then ask, "What will become of him?"

"You say he stole from one of the shops?"

"I did not witness it myself. But even if he did, surely you are not so cruel as to punish a poor refugee who was trying to feed his family?"

"The evidence must be reviewed, of course. We dole out justice to everyone equally."

I dig my fingernails into my palms so hard that I nearly draw blood. "Still," I say softly, demurely, "is there nothing to be done for him or his family? It would please me greatly."

"Would it? I wonder what else might please you."

The opening I've been waiting for; I leap at the opportunity.

"I … Well, I cannot help but thinking how much better things might be for everyone if there was a king again. Someone who could alleviate this fighting once and for all. If you would share your clue and allow me to …" I trail off at his frown. Drat, may have pushed too hard. I blink, raising a knuckle to my lash line to swipe at false

tears. “What I meant, of course, is that it is hard to find my artistry when my heart is so heavy, Your Grace. And your portrait deserves nothing less than my very best effort.”

His lips twitch, as if he’s amused by my request. “We are nearly there, Charlotte.”

I hide a smile behind my hand at the small victory. It’s the first time he’s said my name.

After dinner, I head down to the library and spend several hours searching through back issues of the Sky Gazette, determined to keep my momentum with Duke Áine going.

But I end up learning something much more troubling about Duke Cernunnos. A piece of essential information that has been kept from me. A betrayal.

And I know precisely who will be the target of my ire.



CHAPTER

THIRTY

Later that night, dressed for sleep, I bolt through the shared bathing chamber and bang on Lachlan's door.

My fist has barely touched wood before it flings open—was he just standing on the other side waiting for me to summon him?

"I knew you'd come to your—" The smug smirk falls from his face when he sees my stormy expression. Of course, he misreads it, starts fussing and cradling my cheeks. "What's wrong? Are you hurt? Did someone upset you? I'll fucking—"

"*You* upset me." I knock his hands away, nearly melting at his care. I shove an issue of the Gazette into his face. "No lies between us, huh? When were you going to tell me about this, then?"

He takes the paper, his eyes scanning the headline, then folds it and places it on a shelf. He has the audacity to look pained. "Desmond and I agreed it would be best if you never found out."

"Oh, you and *Desmond* decided, did you? You didn't think it pertinent to share that Duke Cernunnos *murdered* the only other woman to make it past the presentation ceremony? You are a damnable hypocrite, Lachlan Cathal! Lies by omission are still lies. And in case you've forgotten, my life is at stake!"

“Your life is my primary concern.” He rakes a hand through his hair, sighing. “I’m sorry.” When he lifts his gaze, there’s nothing but sincerity in it. “Truly, Charlotte. You deserved to know. I should have told you.”

A man admitting he was wrong? And so easily? What a novelty. I never thought to experience it.

“Then right it.” I cross my arms over my chest and step back to lean against my door. “The Sky Gazette values flavor over facts; not the most reputable of sources. Tell me everything you know.”

He pulls out a stool and sits before me, our eyes level due to our height difference. “I don’t know much. No one does. Ever since it happened, Cernunnos has been something of a recluse. He never leaves Tír na Dubh. Barely even leaves his own estate, if the reports are true. We were all so hopeful. To have the very first quarry after the king and queen’s deaths find two pieces of the Bannrhorn? The Wild Hunt was damn near assured. She’d been with Sabre—”

“Sabre?”

“Duke Cernunnos’s first name. She’d been with him for nearly two months, but she disappeared on the eve of Mabon, right before the Hunt was set to begin. She never found his fragment, and the ring returned to Desmond a day later. The only reason that would have happened was if … ”

“She had died,” I whisper.

He nods. “Sabre refused to speak about it. Didn’t decry his innocence nor proclaim his guilt. And there was little we or House Áine could do since neither has any authority in Tír na Dubh.”

An icy fear settles into my bones. Did I need to know this about my third would-be suitor? I don’t dare say it out loud, but maybe Lachlan was right not to tell me.

“The Gazette spun their own version of the story. Most of the celestial Otherworld take them at their word.”

“And what do you believe?”

“I don’t know. I want to believe that Desmond wouldn’t willingly send you to the home of a murderer, but … ” He shakes his head. “I just don’t know.”

“He doesn’t have a choice, though, does he? If he doesn’t, I’m dead anyway.”

I lean my head back, staring at Lachlan through slitted lids, restless and hungry now that anxiety over my circumstances has smothered my fury.

He’s shirtless, has a hand tucked beneath his arm, innocently popping his biceps. His muscles are a familiar weakness, one I’ve had plenty of time to inoculate myself against.

But the combination of contrition, fear, and bald craving on his face?

I am done for.

“About the other night,” I begin, “you were right, and—”

He crushes me against the bathroom door and slams his mouth down upon mine. The kiss is desperate. Voracious. Like he’s been waiting far longer than a single week for it.

He lifts me up, then wraps my thighs around his waist, trailing kisses across my collarbone as his hand traces the curve of my waist.

“I was going to make you wait,” he confesses in a needy rasp. “Was going to deny you for another week, even after you came crawling back to admit you want me as much as I want you.”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer. “I do. You stubborn idiot. You know I do.”

“I hope not. Because every minute this week that I didn’t have my hands on you or inside you was fucking torture for me.” He kisses me again, the hard heat of his cock punctuating his confession. We’ve barely even kissed. “I stopped myself that night because it terrified me, the strength of my attraction. I haven’t felt anything close to it in … a long time. Maybe not ever. And of course, I want the one woman I cannot have.” He sighs a rueful laugh against my skin, running his nose along my jaw. “But if we do this, I don’t want it to be a lesson or built on a lie. Even if it’s doomed to be nothing more than … ”

He pulls back to look at me, wild-haired and feverish with desire.

“Let me have you. For real. Just once.”

I exhale a yes.

"Do you even know what that means?"

"Probably not," I admit. Though I'm not wanting for sexual experience, I'm not sure exactly what to expect from his particular tastes.

Domination. Pleasure control.

I do know that I trust him. And that I've never been so desperate for a man in my entire life. Theoretically, I suppose I knew this type of chemistry was possible, but I'd never dared hope to experience it myself. "I'd really like to try, though."

He rumbles out a laugh, then cups my face. "Brave, beautiful woman." He plants a gentle kiss on my lips, then settles me on my feet. "Go stand in front of the mirror."

Goosebumps pebble my skin as I do as he says. I hardly recognize the wanton forest nymph staring back at me, but I think I like her.

My silk night shirt bares both a single shoulder and a slash of stomach above my loose sleep pants. Flaxen waves tumble down my back, and my lips are blotchy rose and kiss-swollen. My eyes are dark, my dilated pupils drowning out all but the thinnest ring of hazel.

Lachlan prowls up behind me, the top of my head barely cresting the bulge of one powerful shoulder. He's solid heat at my back, hands tucked under his armpits. As if he's waging an internal battle, his desire to look overriding his need to touch.

I know which side I'm backing. I think I can tip him over the edge.

I grab the hem of my shirt, and—

"No."

The command is short and sharp. When I catch his gaze in the mirror, the man staring back is different than the friend I've come to know. Harder. Rougher. Primal.

"When I want you undressed, I'll do it myself."

Callused fingertips caress my sides as he lifts the shirt over my head.

He's seen me naked before—in that split second before I covered myself in the bathing chamber. That time, he averted his eyes,

chivalrous to a fault.

This time, there's no chivalry in his ravenous attention as it roves over my exposed breasts, my softly curved stomach. Heat rises everywhere he looks, and I curl fists at my sides, a breath away from begging him to put his hands on me.

"You're a masterpiece," he rumbles before he palms my stomach and pulls me against his chest, trailing his other hand gently across my collarbone. As if I am some fragile, precious thing.

It is not what I want.

Before I can express it, he cups the weight of my breast in his hand, then pinches my nipple so hard that I arch back into him. A shudder wracks my body, and my mouth pops open, but no sound comes out. I've never been particularly loud, even in the throes of passion.

"I love the way your breathing changes when you're aroused," he whispers into my ear. "You don't make much noise. Aside from those tiny whimpers—which I love. No, I've got to pay very close attention to figure you out."

He could slip into my mind to do it. So easily. But I think he likes the challenge of reading me naturally.

He's cupping both my breasts now, tweaking my puffy nipples in a relentless wave of pinches, flicks, and pulls that has me writhing against him in exquisite agony. Better than any other time a man has touched me. And each time I jerk my hips, he grows harder against my lower back.

His lips graze my bare shoulder. "Your breasts are so sensitive. I could make you come with just a few more touches. Should I?"

I moan a low *please*, tipping the crown of my head against his rock-hard pectoral. The metal of his piercing presses into my scalp as I push my chest deeper into his hands.

There's a low grunt of approval before he pinches my right nipple, then stretches it out so far, I cry, hovering on the razor-thin edge between pleasure and pain. He's gently circling the left, gossamer light, and the contrast between the two sensations pulses heat between my thighs. My breathing goes shallow and, oh my god, he's right, I think I'm about to—

He stops. Laughs. “You think you’ve earned it yet?”

I whine pitifully, then angle my pelvis back against him, chasing any friction I can get.

“I said no.” He smacks my clit, a sharp tap that’s not nearly as hard as he’s capable of, but still stings. He’s talking to me like I’m a pet. A thing to be used. His to control. It *should* be degrading.

And I am unfathomably wet.

A splayed palm against my upper back bends me over until my forearms are propped on the vanity. Lachlan’s fingertips trail down my spine as I watch him in the mirror.

There’s a touch of reverence in his commanding expression as he caresses my ribs, my hips. He tucks his fingers into my waistband and rips my pants down—but doesn’t let me step out of them. The fabric pools around my ankles, restricting my movements.

He steps back for a moment, his deep blue eyes traveling over my ass and up my spine before meeting mine in the mirror. His stare holds me in place as he unlaces his trousers. They fall to the floor, briefly catching on his cock. Of course, it’s enormous. Beautiful. Rock-hard and curved slightly upward. I want to put my mouth on it. I want him to force me to.

He grips the base of his shaft, then runs his hand along the length, milking a glistening drop from the tip. I shudder out a whimper, and he smiles, then grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls me backward. The silky heat of him slides against my lower back, along with the brush of his knuckles as he continues to stroke himself.

“Is this what you wanted the other night?”

The noise that slips out of me couldn’t possibly be classified as words in any language. Not only is it hard to answer with my head tipped back, but the throbbing ache coursing through my body has halted all higher-level brain function. I am a being of pure need, pure want.

“You wanted me to fuck you in your tight little cunt? How many times did you make yourself come this week imagining it?”

He cups my sex from behind, coating his hand with my arousal before wrapping it around himself again, stroking faster. “I’ll bet I can guess, based on how wet you are. Was it more than five? More

than ten?" A hard, glorious smack on my ass. "Use your fucking words, Charlotte."

"*Thirteen*," I groan out. He lets go of my hair and palms my ass cheeks apart. My legs are pinned together, locked by the pants at my feet and Lachlan's knees.

"Nasty little queen," he whispers, then bites his lip ring, brows furrowed in concentration as he stares down at where he's spreading me. "No more, though. Your orgasms belong to *me* now."

The fat head of his cock notches against my slit. He's huge. Bigger than anyone I've been with. Far bigger than George.

He pushes in a little, and I gasp out a sharp breath.

"Shh, shh, shh." Our gazes snap together in the mirror again, and he nudges my tailbone down, angling my hips so he can sink in farther. Less than an inch.

It burns. It feels incredible.

"Just a little—*Fuck*, you're so tight. Does it hurt?" I nod, and he breathes out a raspy chuckle. "I'll bet it does." He doesn't let up; pushes in more. Splitting me apart. Remolding my flesh. Making a place for himself inside my body.

The burn overtakes me and I just … I can't. I squirm forward, dipping my head against the vanity.

"Almost there," he whispers, strong hands on my waist pulling me back.

"You said no lies," I choke out.

He laughs again, dark and rich. "I did say that, didn't I?" He presses my ass cheeks apart, and it helps a little, makes a tiny bit more room. "But I know what you need." He sinks deeper. Impossibly deeper. "Even when you lie to me."

I exhale long and low as his blunt head hits some final barrier inside of me at the same time as the coarse hair on his lower abdomen tickles my flesh.

He pauses for a moment, buried to the hilt, his hands bracketing my waist as his fingers gently stroke my flanks. He's pulling long, slow breaths in and shakily releasing them. Staring down at where we're joined. Like this is too much for him, too.

He finds my gaze in the mirror once more. For a moment, the dominant fae beast who has me impaled on his cock disappears and my chivalrous friend is staring at me with gratitude shining in his sapphire eyes. "Is this okay? You'll tell me if you're not okay."

Even though there's not a sliver of space between our hips and he's got me pinned to the edge of the vanity, I manage to push back against him ever so slightly. "I'm okay, Lachlan."

At the sound of his name, he closes his eyes, tips his head back in worship, and begins to move.

He's slow at first. Glacial retreats and controlled thrusts. Fingers caressing my spine and tangling in my hair. Whispered words of encouragement like *gods, look at how beautiful you are* and *angle your hips up, sweetheart* and *fuck* me*, you feel so good.*

The praise combined with his masterful strokes have me lost on a sea of bliss that's unlike anything I've ever experienced. Not to mention, I've never had sex in this position before. Respectable women do not bend over and let men fuck them like a brood mare.

But god, how incredible it feels to be undignified.

My sex pulses, tiny flutters that grow longer and more intense with each rock of Lachlan's hips. He's fisting my hair again, using it to guide my body where it feels best for him. Soon, I'm wracked by a tumultuous wave of pleasure and I'm—

"Already?" He clucks his tongue, like he's disappointed in me. "That can't have been satisfying."

But he's wrong. It was world-shattering. And I can't help it. Nor again when he hooks a hand under my knee and guides my right thigh up onto the vanity. He curves over my back, blanketing me with heated skin and soft hair and the cool pinprick of his nipple ring. When he drags out of me and thrusts back in, I can't control myself, I just can't, and I come again.

"*F-f-fuck*," he groans against my nape, his breaths pulsing in time with my orgasm. "I must be going too easy on you. Wanted to torture you a bit longer. But you're a greedy, dirty thing, aren't you? Impatient. Couldn't wait to soak my cock."

I should be horrified by the things he's saying. They're a bit derogatory. Cruel, even. But I'm a dripping mess, and my body is on

fire.

He drags his fangs along my shoulder, still moving inside me. "One more time and then it's my turn, yeah?"

He finds my clit as he bites down on the soft muscle between my shoulder and my neck, pinning me in place beneath him. His finger *tap, tap, taps* a soft, steady rhythm in time with his thrusts, and in seconds I'm coming *again*. My breath fogs the mirror until he's nothing more than a blur of gold and auburn behind me.

I am spent; used up, blissed out and fucked sore, and I think he must be able to tell that my body can't take any more because he pulls out of me—slowly, gently—then turns me around and pushes me to my knees.

"Open." His thumb hooks my chin, like he expects to have to force me, but I am so willing to please him that my mouth drops open and my tongue slides over my teeth.

"Good." His eyes are glazed and full of wonder. As if he's been waiting centuries to slip the tip of his cock into my mouth.

He cups my chin in one hand as he works himself with the other, his fist brushing against my tongue on every upstroke. He's towering above me, brows narrowed, lips parted in sheer ecstasy. I'm on my knees, but I've never felt more powerful.

His thighs quiver and his stomach tightens. He's close. I inch my tongue out, ready to take every drop.

"Fuck," he grunts. "Charlotte, I …"

If he intended to say more than that, it's lost beneath an extended groan of pleasure as I wrap my lips around him and take him deep into my mouth, swallowing everything he gives me. He cups the back of my head, holding himself steady, and this is all I want to do every night for as long as I'm able, whether the monarchy or death awaits me.

Once he's expended himself, he lifts me from the floor and settles me on the vanity, nestling between my spread legs. I hook my heels around his hard, perfect ass, pulling him into me, and then he's kissing me again. Sweetly. Thoroughly. He can surely taste himself in my mouth. And he's right, I am greedy, because I could go again this instant.

He closes his eyes, then touches his forehead to mine, unraveled. "Are you alright? I wasn't too rough? Or too mean?"

I whisper shyly, "I like it when you're mean. In this context."

He cradles my cheek, laughing. "Do you?"

I nuzzle into his hand, nodding.

Now it's his turn to be shy. A bit unbelievable after everything he just did to me. But his blush returns as he mutters, "Do you want to … I mean, we could … My bed is a little less treacherous than yours if you'd like to stay with me tonight."

There's nothing I want more right now. Which is exactly why I can't.

"Better not," I say, a gentle rejection.

He dips his chin once, sharply, then looks away. As if he's berating himself for asking. "Yes, of course." He swipes my pajamas from the bathroom floor, then helps me off the vanity and back into them before sliding his long legs into his trousers.

"This is just sex, right?" I say to him. To us both, really. "An indulgence. It can't ever be more than that."

"Worried you'll fall in love with me, little queen?" he smirks.

Yes. God, yes. But new Charlotte is going to be far more careful about who she gives her heart to.

"You needn't be," he says before I can answer. "I know very well how to keep feelings off the table."

"Right." Something pinches in my chest. Old Charlotte with her nonsense. "Well, um, thank you for the … ravishing." What? "Let's do it again sometime." *What?*

He chuckles, one hand gripping the doorframe. His unlaced trousers sit low on his hips, his auburn hair is in disarray, and curse him, he's biting that damn lip ring again. He scratches his left pectoral, staring at me, looking something much more dangerous than merely charmed.

"Whenever you'd like, Charlotte. Say the word, and I'm yours."



CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

"How are you this morning?" Duke Áine asks when he arrives at my quarters a week later to fetch me for his final portrait sitting. "Has your muse returned?"

I've "*had trouble finding my inspiration*" this week; have canceled a few of our sessions. It was a strategic move on my part, the results of which have been two-fold.

First, and exactly as I'd planned, Torvil's radiating a restless intensity as he walks us down to the grand salon. He's perfectly in step with me, gripping my hand like he's afraid I might slip away again. The perfect state from which to pluck his clue.

And second, it's given me ample opportunity to indulge myself with Lachlan.

Like on Tuesday afternoon, when he positioned me face-up at the edge of the bed, hugged my legs against his chest and sucked my toes while he fucked me. I came more times than I ever thought possible. Who knew toes were such powerful erogenous zones?

Or Thursday, when I straddled him on his sofa and made him keep his glasses on. "Really?" he asked, confused but pleased as he pulled my panties aside and guided me down onto his cock.

"You look quite distinguished in them."

I gasped as he entered me in a single upward thrust, one hand on my hip and the other cupping the base of my skull.

"Distinguished?" He licked up my throat and forced his fingers past my teeth. "I thought you liked me dirty."

I wanted to tell him that I liked him both ways. All ways, really. But couldn't find the courage for such a confession. And he kept my mouth quite busy that day, anyway.

Or yesterday at the Eyrie, up against the wall in a hidden corner of the barn after self-defense class. We were both fully clothed as he moved inside me, his warm, rough palm over my mouth to silence my screams. Apparently I *can* be loud with the right motivation.

It takes all my willpower not to glance back to where he's keeping pace with Sir Quinn.

"I do believe my muse has been restored, Your Grace," I answer. "So kind of you to inquire. I feel I've gained an entirely new perspective these past few days."

A soft chuckle tickles my mind, and for one reckless second, I imagine slipping the duke and Sir Quinn and dragging Lachlan to a cave somewhere. A private place where I can hide him away from the world, hoard him like the precious treasure he is. Maybe after a year or seven, I'd finally have my fill of him. Unlikely, but what fun I'd have trying.

We've still not spent the full night together. It's too dangerous for a number of reasons, not the least of which is possible discovery by Aowen or Vesper. The latter has taken to waking me in the morning by burrowing beneath my blankets and nipping my heels. I cannot tell if she's being playful or if she's figuring out which spices to use when she finally succumbs to her violent pixie instincts and makes a meal out of me.

The other reasons, well … I do not want to get used to something I cannot keep. There's a big difference between letting Lachlan fuck me, use my body however he pleases, and waking up in his arms.

In any case, the end of … *whatever* this is between us is inevitable. When I make Desmond king, Lachlan is leaving his

service. Desmond knows this. If I requested Lachlan stay on, that would look rather suspicious, no? I do not get the impression that Desmond would be open to sharing me.

No, it's best to appreciate this for what it is. Sex, pure and simple.

Well, maybe not entirely pure.

I dare a peek over my shoulder to find Lachlan staring at me with an amused sort of intensity.

He looks impossibly handsome today—no different than any other day, really—in his white metal armour, with his auburn hair neatly braided back and the sunlight reflecting off his piercings. I swear, I can still feel his lip ring crawling over my flesh and—

Eyes on your duke, little queen. Before he can discern where your depraved mind has strayed.

I swivel forward. *You know exactly where it's strayed. Right to thoughts of your teeth on my breast*.

Metal clanks as Lachlan's steps falter, and I bury a soft laugh into my bodice.

When we arrive at the salon, Torvil strides to the mantel while Lachlan and Sir Quinn post themselves on either side of the arched entrance.

I uncover the canvas; today I'll be working on the final highlights that will bring the piece to life. Despite my distaste for its subject, I am quite proud of the painting. It's perhaps the most skillful I've ever created. Is it because of the fine materials I've been given to work with? Or has my muse been sufficiently nourished by all the orgasms?

"So," I begin, once the duke has settled into position, "this will be our last session. I only have a few finishing touches." Over the top of the canvas, I find disappointment glazing his violet eyes. Is he going to miss this? "Do you have any idea where you might want to place it?"

He sniffs, picking at his shirt cuff. "I thought I might send it on a tour throughout Tír na Lune. My people deserve to bask in any representation of their duke. After its debut at the Harvest Ball, of course."

"Oh?" I feign delight. "I am honored by your faith in me, Your Grace. Would you like to come check my progress?"

He comes up behind me and peers over my shoulder. "Remarkable. I must say, Miss Fitzroy, I had no idea you were so talented. I don't believe any artist has ever so perfectly captured my likeness."

I bite back a snort. I've broadened his shoulders. Lengthened his legs. Filled out his chest and squared off his chin. He's still recognizably Duke Áine, but he appears much more regal than the vain prat breathing down my neck.

"Would that you could do all my portraits," he murmurs.

I turn, emboldened. "And why shouldn't I? If you claim me during the Wild Hunt, if I am fortunate enough to become your queen, I could record all your achievements. Together, we could tell the great history of King Torvil Áine through art. Every home in the celestial kingdom would demand a replica to display in your honor."

He nods, his smile swelling.

"Of course," I say, "such an outcome feels terribly out of reach."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, forgive my candor, but you have not yet shared your clue. How am I to retrieve your Bannrhorn fragment without it? I fear the Wild Hunt may not occur."

He steps closer, places a hand on my upper arm. His touch is cold, his grip limp. Worlds away from that of the knight observing us. Lachlan's almost inscrutable, but I catch his eyes darting our way every few seconds.

"Would such a thing upset you, Miss Fitzroy?" Torvil whispers.

I go in for the kill.

"You would make a great king. Your Majesty."

His gaze is glued to my mouth as he leans down. "I would, wouldn't I?"

Oh god, I faked too hard. He's going to kiss me.

I slide my lids closed, bracing for impact. As distasteful as it is, I'll bear his kiss if it means acquiring the clue.

His breath ghosts over my face, but before his lips make contact, another celestial knight clangs into the salon.

"What is it?" Torvil snaps, jerking upright.

"Apologies, Your Grace." The man bows. "You're needed in the hold."

Torvil rolls his eyes, releasing an annoyed groan. "Have Sir Quinn handle it. What good are my knights if they can't carry out justice in my name?"

The knight's eyes stray to me, then back to the duke. "It's Stafford, Your Grace. The prisoner you specifically—"

"Oh, yes." Torvil straightens. "I'll be down presently." He turns to me. "I'm afraid I must handle this, Charlotte. Perhaps we can finish the portrait tomorrow?"

"Stafford?" I ask, my spirits leaping, even as panic jostles my bones. The duke cannot leave yet; I need that damned clue. "Is he being released today?"

He sweeps a thumb down my cheek and I fight an urge to step back. "I told you I'd handle it, didn't I?"

"You are too good to me. But before you go, I wonder if you might consider—"

"The clue." He smiles. "It's taken quite some time for you to pique my interest, but I do believe you've finally earned it."

Relief sweeps away my annoyance at his phrasing.

His eyes go glassy, and his voice deepens. "*The bell tolls, though none but the reaper will utter its true name."*

I commit it to memory as he comes back to himself and releases me. "Tomorrow, then?"

"I am at your disposal, Your Grace." I curtsy.

"Please," he whispers. "Call me Torvil. And see you that retrieve the fragment."

Says the man who's waited until the last possible moment to provide his clue. Still, it's another battle won, even if I have no desire to win him in this war.

I celebrate by peppering Lachlan with kisses the moment we return to our quarters. Where I change into my traveling clothes and we head for the abandoned church.



CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

Twilight cloaks Campan's Vale when Lachlan, Tula, and I arrive in the woods outside the Áine estate. The church is dark and quiet while the grounds are abuzz with celestial knights eating and laughing, drinking and sparring in the open areas surrounding the main house.

"What do you think?" I ask Lachlan as he brackets my waist in his large hands and helps me off his kelpie. We both know I could dismount myself, but why miss an opportunity for contact? "Should I let them know I'm here again? Or—"

Raucous yelling breaks out from the back of the manor. Two knights have stripped to their trousers and are pummeling each other within a large ring formed by their colleagues. An angry, restless energy ripples off the crowd, as if the approaching harvests and the end of the balmy summer months have agitated them.

I don't want to go anywhere near them. I hope they stay on the estate tonight and do not wander out into the village.

"Never mind," I say to Lachlan, who's studying the knights with the same caution. "A covert mission it is."

He glamours into Vesper's form, then tucks into the hood of my cloak.

I keep close to the treeline, skirting the edges of the estate grounds, then slip around the back of the church and in through a side door. Once inside, I throw back my hood, and Lachlan retakes his natural form.

The ring is blazing, so hot it feels like my skin might be melting beneath it. Far hotter than the last time we were here. It must sense I have the clue. That I know exactly what question to ask the skull.

Lachlan and I make our way down the stone stairs. It's darker than the last time we visited; so dark, I can barely see. Lachlan didn't pull down any celestial light; any hint of a glow through the windows could snag unwanted attention.

My foot has barely touched the floor when the skull chatters to life. I haven't even asked a question yet.

"Ask me a question, ring-bearer," it says over and over, each utterance more excited than the one before. It's unnerving.

I suppress my fear as I say with a cheeky smile, "How are you, tonight? Reaper."

Its delivery speeds, its teeth clattering so fast I'm worried they might shatter. "Ask me a question, ask me a question, ask me a question."

It knows I have it. That the moment to fulfill its destiny has arrived, at long last.

Lachlan grabs my hand, and I'm grateful for the reassurance of his big, calloused palm enveloping my smaller, softer one.

I take a single deep breath, then ask, "What is the true name of this vale?"

Peals of laughter bounce off the stone walls, shrieking and hysterical. And loud. God, *so* loud. I hope the knights cannot hear it above their own racket.

The laughter fades as the skull's jaw creaks open.

"Áinesgleann."



“So, House Áine did rule this vale at one time?” I ask, running my hand over the crescent moons carved atop the wooden box we found behind the reaper’s door. Inside is nestled the second piece of the Bannrhorn, the thin gold section that must fall between the mouthpiece and the bell.

Lachlan and I are back up in the nave, sitting in the first pew before the barren altar.

“They built the first large settlement here,” he says, “but the vale has had hundreds of names over the centuries. Just because Torvil’s ancestor forced his family's upon it does not mean they have any more right to the region than those who live here and have nurtured the land. Once the territories united under the monarchy, the region was renamed for its most prominent feature to highlight its neutrality. The fertile farmland here was never meant to serve a single master. Its resources belong to all peoples of the celestial kingdom.”

Lachlan slams his fist against the wooden pew, and I jump. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so angry, save the night he butchered that anti-monarchist who attacked me in the crypt.

“It’s just like fucking Torvil to engineer his clue into a slap in the face for the vale’s people. Once again, trying to prove ownership of something that doesn’t belong to him.”

I don’t think he’s talking solely of Otherworld geopolitics any longer.

“He’s going to propose tomorrow.” I turn away from Lachlan’s intense gaze, though I’m not sure why. He understands the limitations of our arrangement even better than I do. “At the Harvest Ball.”

“I suspected as much. Especially now that you’ve found his piece of the horn.”

“But even when he does propose—”

“When instead of if,” Lachlan murmurs. “Confidence. Good girl.”

Goosebumps pebble my arms at his praise before I continue, “—there’s still Duke Cernunnos to consider. You got another letter from Desmond this week, right? I assume any good news would have been shared with me already.”

"He claims he's closer than ever to securing an agreement. I'm half curious and half terrified to find out what he might have offered."

I glance down at my ring, at the faintly glowing seven-pointed star. In a few days, if my confidence bears out, the crescent moon will glow as well.

It's everything I thought I wanted—the reassurance of a proposal. The certainty that someone wanted me enough to spend a lifetime at my side. The pride of being chosen. And I'm about to be chosen a second time.

So why do I feel so empty inside?

Lachlan pulls a linen-wrapped parcel from his pocket. "Cherry scone for your thoughts?"

I laugh as I place the wooden box beside me and unwrap the napkin. He brought me a snack. God, this man. "How did you know I always require pastry while hunting down ancient relics?"

He grins, tears off a chunk, then laughs as I swat him. "The noises you make when you bite into one every morning have implanted themselves in my brain." He pops the chunk into his mouth, then licks his fingers. "And I have ulterior motives."

I cock an eyebrow. "Which would be?"

My quiet friend disappears, replaced by the wild beast who's been fucking me senseless for the past week. I very much welcome his return. "Finish your scone and I'll show you."

I do as he says, liquid heat coursing through my veins. I throw in a few delighted moans, just to watch his eyes flash with desire. Once I'm done, I barely have a chance to brush the crumbs off my hands before he sweeps me up and carries me to the altar.

He removes my cloak and tosses it to the floor. Very unlike my clean, fastidious knight. I chuckle softly as he nestles between my spread thighs, clasping my face in his strong hands. Hands that could crush my skull without a second thought, yet have touched me with such tenderness.

He sucks on my lower lip, and I offer him one of those whimpers he loves so much. "I promised you something on the night of your lesson." He kisses down my neck, across my collarbone, as his

fingers unlace my shirt and slip the collar down off my shoulder, exposing a single breast. "Forgive me for not fulfilling it until now."

"What does that—"

I gasp as he squeezes my nipple, just hard enough. Right at the edge of what he knows I can take.

"You're my favorite subject, Charlotte," he breathes into my ear, circling a fingertip over where he just hurt me, easing the sting. "I could spend forever learning the shape and sounds of you."

The braying laughter of Áine's knights seeps through the church windows, along with the flickering light from their bonfires. I hope none are inspired to seek quiet refuge in this church or …

I can only imagine what the consequences of getting caught fucking my bodyguard would be. Though at this moment, with Lachlan caressing me like I am his most treasured object, I cannot honestly say I care.

He unlaces my trousers, moves his hand into my panties, and as he teases me open, I moan. Loudly. He buries my face in his neck to muffle it, chuckling. "When did you get so mouthy, little queen? If you want me to do this, you'll have to be quiet. Can you?"

No lies. We promised. So, I shake my head against his throat, savoring the salt and woodsmoke scent of his skin. If I'm moaning this loudly from such a simple touch, there's no telling what other primal sounds he might coax from me.

He pulls my head back and smirks. "Guess we'll have to improvise." He dashes off the altar to grab the linen napkin, then folds it into a triangle as he returns. He holds it up to my mouth. "Open."

I lower my jaw with no hesitation, relishing the happy spark that brightens his eyes at how well I follow his instructions. This is all I want to do. To make him look at me like that, always. To please him.

He places the napkin between my teeth, then ties it at the back of my head, tight, but not enough to hurt. "Bite down on this when you need to."

I push my tongue against the soft cloth, and liquid spills between my thighs at the restriction.

"If you want me to stop, just tap me twice on the shoulder, like this." He demonstrates, a wicked smile overtaking his handsome face as he peels off my trousers and panties, then kneels beneath me.

My heartbeat spikes. I know exactly what he's planning, cannot help the grin that pulls my lips tight around the napkin.

He glances up at me, biting his lip to hold back his laughter. "You want this that badly?"

I nod furiously, and his laugh breaks free as he skates his hands up my thighs. I quiver, placing my palms on the altar behind me. He spreads my legs apart, then pulls my hips to the edge. Right where he can reach me.

And see me.

He spends a long moment just staring, holding my thighs open. As if I am as worthy of worship as the missing idols who once guarded this holy place. He's rubbing circles into my flesh, squeezing hard. Like he can't help himself. I hope he leaves marks.

I'm whimpering into the napkin, wondering what he's waiting for. I want to beg, to plead, but I am literally gagged. He's in total control. With anyone else, I might be terrified. But Lachlan always takes care of me. Gives me only as much as I can handle and nothing more.

And he was right, of course. This is where the pleasure heightens. In the anticipation.

He covers his mouth, murmuring something in his language. Something soft and reverent.

When our gazes reconnect, I swear I feel the ground shift. "You're a wonder, Charlotte. Brave and talented and brilliant and beautiful. I hope your husband tells you that every day."

I refuse to examine why my chest aches, my eyes burn, and my throat swells closed. He probably knows, but lets the moment pass.

And then his tongue is in my cunt, and the tears wetting my cheeks are for a different reason entirely.

He snakes an arm around my thigh, holding me open while he uses his other hand to spread my lips apart. His tongue dips in and out of me in a slow, steady rhythm, and it's so bloody good—but it's

not enough. I want to roll my hips against his face, but with the way he's pinned me, it's impossible.

I've been controlled by men before, of course. Told what to say and how to say it. Told who I'm allowed to sleep with and when. Told what places I'm allowed to visit, what kinds of professions I'm allowed to have, what kind of life I'm allowed to live.

But being controlled like this? In these quiet, private moments between us? It's exactly what I've always wanted, even if I never had a name for it.

His tongue curls inside me, the tip fluttering along a spot just inside my entrance that makes me groan like a beast in heat. It's loud, even with my napkin gag.

Voices slither into the church, closer than before. Footsteps. Laughter. Cups clacking together.

Lachlan's tongue glides out of me and the emptiness is like being plunged into freezing water. "Charlotte," he commands quietly, wrapping a hand around my jaw to force me to look at him. "Hey. You have to be quiet, sweetheart. If you can't manage it, I'm going to stop."

Don't stop. Don't *stop,* I shout frantically through the *diamrhán*. *I'll do better. I can be quiet.*

I am only mildly ashamed of my desperation.

Good. A raspy whisper in my head. *Because you're so fucking delicious, I'm not sure I could stop even if Torvil walked in here.*

Lachlan's fangs glint in the moonlight, sharp and white against his swollen russet lips, and then he's on me again.

I tip my head back in ecstasy as he licks from base to apex, a long, slow glide before flicking his tongue over my clit. He does this several more times, enough that I'm a complete mess. My thighs quiver violently, rattling the old altar.

Lachlan wraps his arms around them from underneath, flattening his palms against my lower abdomen and pulling the skin taut. I am more exposed than I've ever been but somehow less vulnerable. And I feel *everything*. He works my swollen clit with just enough pressure for just long enough that I think I'm about to …

He pulls away. Starts again and, oh god, I'm right on the verge of …

He pulls away. Starts again, and … *bloody hell*, if he would just stay right there for a second longer, I know I could …

P-please, I stutter.

Please what? he asks, the picture of innocence as he tunes me up like his favorite instrument. *Please stop teasing? Please end my misery? Please make me come in your mouth?*

Whatever I manage back, even through the *diamrhán*, isn't more than gibberish because he pumps two fingers inside me as he drags his lip ring up and down my clit.

Back bowing, I come in a series of sparkling explosions that radiate out from the base of my spine. Lachlan groans against my cunt, as if my orgasm is happening to him, too. I'm probably screaming into the *diamrhán*. I'm definitely whining through my gag. He slaps a hand over my mouth.

Once my ears stop ringing, I note muted conversation outside. Did they hear anything? Do they know their future queen is spread upon an altar with her bodyguard's head between her legs?

And why does the thought of being caught like this make me even hotter?

Lachlan's hand is still covering the entire lower half of my face, his forehead pressed against my inner thigh, his shoulders heaving. As if he needs just as much time to come down from this high as I do. And he didn't even climax.

Was it like this with his clients? Was he this affected? I want to ask, but part of me doesn't want to know. Let me live in the delusion that I am special for a little while longer.

That's all we have left anyway.

He presses a soft kiss to my hip, then helps me down. He unties the napkin, and I circle my jaw, my mouth a bit sore. He kisses the corners, then holds up my panties, trousers, and cloak.

I redress as he grabs the box with the Bannrhorn fragment and leads me out of the church.

We return to Tír na Lune well past midnight. The next morning, I hand over the fragment to Duke Áine.

Just in time for the Harvest Ball, where I'll gain my second betrothal.



CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

The hill beyond the castle in Tír na Lune has been transformed into a flaming shrine to the fae sun god Lugh. His namesake holiday honors the bounty of the land, a celebration of the first harvest and a recognition of the coming scarcity, when the light will give way to darkness.

Four bonfires crackle at the corners of the party grounds, and there's an arrangement of wide, flat stones—a makeshift dance floor—ringed in thick candles. On one end, a wooden platform has been erected, and a small band of musicians deliver lively tunes on pipes, strings, and drums. At the other stands an arch woven from sunflowers and zinnias beneath which sit bushels of tomatoes, green squash, stalks of corn, and, to my utter delight, several baskets of shining maroon cherries.

When Lachlan first brought me up here, I spent a too-long moment mooning over them. But I need all the divine assistance I can get. Best not gobble up a god's offering.

Still, they've caught my eye more than once. They're more pleasant to focus on than the absolute death stare I am receiving from Lisande LaBeaumont.

I try—though not very hard—to not look smug that I am on my third dance with Torvil, all requested by him, and she has not been in his arms once.

Really, if I didn't need to keep playing this game and win his proposal, I'd let her have him. With one hand at my waist and his other clamped around my own, I feel more trapped than I did yesterday when Lachlan was pinning me to that altar.

"You look different tonight," Torvil remarks, the bonfires streaking red and orange through his silver hair. "Incandescent. Like you've been lit up from the inside."

I can tell he believes he is the cause. I am not foolish enough to disabuse him of that notion. I dip my lashes, pull my lips into a coquettish smile. "I'm just so very pleased by the time I've spent here with you and your people."

That last part is a bit of a stretch. The only time I've spent with any people outside the castle was with Aowen, not the duke himself. I wish I had more time to do so. Once I am queen, hopefully not Torvil's, the people of Tír na Lune will be my responsibility. I regret not getting to know them better, learning what they desire in a ruler.

It's hard to believe Torvil meets anyone's qualifications. The arrogant smirk on his face as he twirls me across the dance floor, drinking in the adoration of his unctuous courtiers, tells me all I need to know about his philosophies on leadership.

"Forgive my impertinence, Your Grace, but what happened the other day with Mr. Stafford?"

Torvil tears his gaze away from his admirers to look down at me. "Who?"

"The refugee from Campan's Vale. The man who allegedly stole from the butcher shop downtown. You said you were going to take care of it."

"Oh, yes. That was settled last week."

"He's back with his family, then?"

A crease appears between his brows. "No, of course not. He was executed. The evidence proved he was a thief. Not to mention a stain upon my city."

My stupidly hopeful heart plummets to my feet, and I choke back tears.

Torvil sighs dramatically. "See, this is why women are not placed in positions of power. One needs a strong stomach and an iron fist to maintain the respect of the common man."

I've known it for weeks, but still, the certainty drops into my gut like a boulder.

Not only do I not want to marry this man, I do not want him to be king at all. The people of the celestial territories deserve so much better than Torvil Áine.

The song ends and couples part, clapping for the musicians.

"Come now," Torvil says, pulling me through the crowd, "we've got happier news to impart." He whistles, then snaps toward a valet, who summons three other servants toward the wooden platform. Two carry a large, wrapped parcel while the other holds the wooden box with his Bannrhorn fragment.

Torvil leaps onto the platform, but doesn't pull me up with him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the valet shouts, "may I have your attention, please?"

At the other corner of the dance floor, Lachlan and Aowen have turned toward the stage. Vesper's perched on Lachlan's shoulder instead of Aowen's, threading her tiny hands through his soft hair. Like she can't help herself. I know the feeling.

Aowen offers an approving nod, and a sly smile.

When my gaze collides with Lachlan's, my knees nearly buckle.

I used to think the man was stoic, hard to read. But after months in his company, I notice tiny tells of emotion. Pride in the gleam of his eyes. Relief in his relaxed jaw. Tenderness in the gentle curve of his lips. And something underpinning them all that looks a lot like yearning. Which would just be silly. We said we weren't going to do that.

I tear my attention away, coward that I am, and turn back to the duke.

"Well," he begins, placing a hand atop the parcel, "as you all well know, I'm not one for long speeches."

I bite back a guffaw because I cannot tell if he's joking. Wary smiles bloom around me; his courtiers aren't sure, either.

"I will admit I was not entirely sold upon this Season's candidate when I first laid eyes upon her, but I was intrigued enough to invite her here. It hasn't been all smooth sailing, of course. There were rough seas several weeks ago, when she failed to deliver upon my initial intrigue. Not to mention it took her an absurdly long time to find my piece of the horn."

Ass. Pompous ass.

My cheeks hurt from maintaining a smile that's fighting to become a sneer. As the duke drones on, courtiers drift toward me, including Lisande.

Despite her impeccable appearance—she's never anything less than luxuriously outfitted—her face is blotchy and her eyes are red-rimmed. She gulps from a silver goblet and snarls each time the friend propping her up tries to take it. She's well on her way to rip-roaring drunk. And so obviously heartbroken that, for a moment, I cannot help feeling sorry for her. Maybe she really does love him. Maybe she doesn't want to lose him. Would it be easier to empathize with her if she tried to murder me for love instead of power?

A part of me wants to reassure her that I want nothing to do with Torvil. That I will be doing everything I can to ensure he *doesn't* win me during the Hunt. That she can have him.

But she doesn't deserve that reassurance. And it would be too dangerous to give right now, in any case.

Upon the platform, the end of the duke's speech is nowhere in sight. And when, at length, he steers the topic back toward my candidacy, he manages to make even that about himself.

"… recognized the sheer talent she possessed. Only I could have done so. And naturally, such talent must be harnessed to showcase my greatness." He snaps once more, and two servants return to the platform to unwrap the portrait.

The crowd applauds, and the base of my skull tingles.

You can come in whenever you'd like, you know, I say into the *diamrhán*. *There's no need to keep knocking. You're rather polite for a man who gagged me and denied me orgasms yesterday.*

Lachlan snickers into my mind. *I just like to give you a fair warning. You know, in case you're thinking about me and don't want me to know.*

It takes a monumental effort on my part to not surface my natural response.

Which is that I'm always thinking about him.

Did you have some reason for knocking, Sir Cathal, or did you just pop in to tell me to fix my face lest everyone read how much I despise my future betrothed?

Your face is perfect, he says with a hint of mirth that transforms into something softer. *That portrait is magnificent, Charlotte. A true work of art. It's far too good for him.*

We both know he's talking about something else. But my cowardice must be catching because he says nothing else before slipping from my mind.

"Miss Fitzroy?"

I nearly jump out of my skin. Torvil looms above me, a single hand reaching down. God, how long has he been standing there?

"Join me up here, won't you?"

I do as he asks, trying not to recoil from his touch as he pulls me onto the platform to face the sea of courtiers—his privileged few. The only fae who've been invited to partake in these festivities, which are meant to be a communal celebration of abundance. There is too much food, too much wine, too much, too much, too much for the paltry sum upon these grounds.

This could have fed Mr. Stafford and his family, Garred and the children at the Eyrie, for months.

Bile rises up my throat, and I remind myself that my presence here is a necessary evil. That to have any chance to fix things means accepting this abominable man's proposal, means preening for his horrid courtiers, means genuflecting to his bootlicking knights, and—

Okay, now *you need to fix your face*, Lachlan murmurs. *Your smile is so wide, I can see your molars. Looks very natural.*

I swallow a laugh, then soften my features.

Better.

“What is the purpose of a queen?” Torvil muses. “It’s to uplift her husband. To solidify his power. To amplify his legacy. With Charlotte by my side, the celestial kingdom will be gifted evidence of each one of my future great deeds as king.” He gets down on one knee, twirling the ring around my finger. “Miss Charlotte Fitzroy, you may betroth yourself to me. And I will claim you during the Wild Hunt.”

Heat sears my flesh as the ring flares, lighting up the crescent moon between the glowing seven-pointed star and dark crossed arrows.

Lisande’s wailing sob is drowned out by erupting cheers, Lachlan’s and Aowen’s included. I know they are cheering for my triumph and not the duke.

“Food! Royal food!” Vesper’s squeaky chant adds a spot of warmth to my otherwise cold chest.

I may have won the privilege of another sunrise, but at what risk to the good people of this world?

“A toast!” the valet shouts. “A toast to the happy couple!”

Another palace servant joins us on the platform, balancing a tray with two silver goblets, as more servants flow through the crowd, distributing glasses of wine.

Torvil plucks the goblets from the tray, hands me one, then wraps an arm around my shoulder. He raises his glass, about to deliver another blowhard speech, when shocked gasps and rustling whispers interrupt him.

Lisande swaggers up the steps, clapping theatrically. She misses several times. “To the happy couple! The happiest of cou”—a wet hiccup—“couples.”

She pushes between me and Torvil, and god help me, my first instinct is to thank her. She stinks of wine and too much powdery perfume.

Lachlan races for the platform, but I still him with a slice of my chin. I do not believe Lisande means me any harm. She has no visible weapons. And more than anything, she looks broken.

“Lisande,” Torvil snarls, clutching her upper arm. “You’re ruining this.”

Her laugh is a bitter cackle. "It's already ruined." She snatches my wine, draining it in a long swallow. Ruby liquid trails down her chin, into her pale hair. She tosses the goblet aside. "*She* ruined it. She ruined my—" She hiccups again, but this time it ends in a groan. "Ruined my—" A wet gurgle. Her eyes bulge wide.

She drops to her knees, clawing at her throat, her face purpling. Torvil jumps back and tucks me behind him before tossing his own goblet into the grass.

"Help her!" I shout to the celestial knights gathered at the crowd's edges. Several rush the stage, but instead of assisting Lisande, they circle their master. Who's in no danger whatsoever.

Watery blood leaks from Lisande's nose, veins throb in her neck, and she collapses onto her back, choking down wet, wheezing gasps. Her hand flops on the planks, seeking something, anything, to cling to.

I grab it, offering what comfort I can in her final, painful moments. Torvil's staring down at us, ringed by his knights, and the look on his face is so full of hatred, I block Lisande's view of him. Were I in her position, I'd want to go to my grave believing the man I loved still held an ounce of affection for me.

Her hand slackens, and her struggle ends.

Courtiers rush the platform, jostling one another to gape at her. To see her death up close. They are horrid.

Just as horrid as their duke, who turns to his knights. "Get rid of the body. Immediately."

My head swims as I stand, nearly knocked off the platform by the knights clamoring to do their duke's bidding. One hauls Lisande's corpse over his shoulder and the others fall into formation around him as they make their way toward the eastern side of the castle grounds.

Toward the báshound paddock.

I shudder, then search for Lachlan. He's interrogating the duke's valet, demanding to know who had access to the goblets before the toast.

It hits me like a blast of winter wind. The wine in the goblet was poisoned. *My* goblet.

Someone has tried to kill me again. And it certainly was not Lisande LaBeaumont.

All I want to do is run to Lachlan, have him sweep me into his strong arms and make me forget everything about this wretched night.

Cold fingers upon my elbow startle me.

"Atrocious," Torvil says. "A perfectly wonderful engagement party sullied by a murder attempt and a hysterical woman. Those damn anti-monarchists again, no doubt."

I clench my jaw. I want to use some of those moves Lachlan's been teaching me in the Eyrie to punch Torvil's teeth out. Has he no trace of sympathy for his former lover?

"Well, at least we have tomorrow night," he says.

"What's tomorrow night?"

"Your farewell dinner." He lifts my hand, rubbing his thumb over the crescent moon in my ring. "It will be difficult to say goodbye, but hopefully we will see each other again on Mabon."

Hopefully. In all the chaos of this evening, I had almost forgotten there's still one fragment to find. One last duke to win over.

"I am sure your delicate feminine sensibilities have been quite trod upon by all this excitement." He places my hand in the crook of his elbow. I didn't realize it was possible to feel such volcanic levels of anger. I congratulate myself for not stomping his foot and running away screaming. "I will walk you back to your quarters to rest."

I don't even have the strength to protest.

But my rage quells slightly when Lachlan falls into step behind us. He doesn't say a word; he's just quietly there.

Like always.



CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

"Are we sure the goblet was intended for you?" Aowen asks the following afternoon as we're strolling the quays of the Nubiium.

The city is grey and drizzly, mirroring my mood. Not very conducive for walking. But Vesper threw a tantrum earlier when we attempted to help her pack up my wardrobe; she banished us from the suite.

Lachlan's out assisting Sir Quinn, questioning courtiers and gathering evidence. He's been gone all day.

Well, since this morning, at least. I summoned him to my bedchamber in the ghostly hours before dawn. I didn't sleep at all last night, haunted by the terrible desperation on Lisande's face as she choked on her own blood and the horrific, hateful look the duke sent her to the Afterlands with. I needed Lachlan's mouth and hands on my body to remember I was still alive, still in this.

He was the perfect distraction, of course. Thrumming with power and vibrant life, moving atop me, inside me, my wrists bound above my head in one strong hand as he clung to me with the other. He

spent so much time warming me up with his tongue and fingers that as soon as he pushed into me, I had a tiny, fluttering orgasm.

"Come on, Charlotte," he puffed against my lips, his auburn hair falling around my face. "I know you can do better than that."

And I did do better. Three times better, in fact. The most intense of which when he clamped his teeth on my nipple as he grunted out his own pleasure, squeezing me so close I feared my ribs might snap.

Perhaps he'd been frightened last night, too. Perhaps he needed the reassurance of my body just as much as I needed his.

He slipped out of me, then out of my room before the sun rose.

Sometimes, I wish—

"Did you hear me?" Aowen asks, pulling me from thoughts of the man who occupies far too many of them.

"Are you sure that goblet was intended for you?" Aowen angles the parasol, ensuring we're both covered as the patter intensifies. "How would the poisoner have known which goblet Duke Áine intended to hand to you? Perhaps the duke himself was the intended target."

"It's possible." I shrug. "Hard to know since he tossed his cup aside as soon as he saw what was happening to Lisande. Perhaps both were poisoned."

"He's certainly got plenty of enemies outside the castle," Aowen whispers, and my first thought is of the anti-monarchists. But really, it could have been anyone from Campan's Vale as well. My heart clenches for poor Mr. Stafford; Aowen had his widow and children quietly relocated to a small town in Tír na Strelle, somewhere they would be safe and well cared for. "Or …." She trails off, eying me with concern.

"Speak your mind. I've survived three assassination attempts, found two-thirds of the Bannrhorn, gained the favour of a notoriously difficult court, and won the betrothal of the most self-centered man in the Otherworld. I can handle whatever terrifying theory you're about to launch."

She nudges my shoulder, murmuring, "Sounding a lot like a queen lately, Your Majesty," then pulls me closer, cocooning us

beneath the parasol. "What I was going to say is, what if the duke himself poisoned that cup?"

"Why would he do such a thing? He needs me to become king. Not to mention if he wanted me dead, there were plenty of other opportunities to do so. He himself stopped his báshounds from devouring me, remember?"

Aowen sighs. "You're probably right. Still, I'm very glad we'll be returning to Tír na Strelle tomorrow. I'm looking forward to sleeping in my own bed. And visiting a few friends." She taps her lips with two fingers, staring off into the middle distance. Her definition of "friends" must be very similar to mine and Lachlan's.

I am glad to be leaving Tír na Lune, too. But I cannot help but worry about the mechanics of this ring. How long will it allow me to remain alive if Duke Cernunnos does not come around?

As soon as we enter the dining hall that evening, I learn I had nothing to worry about.



DESMOND IS SEATED in the place of honor next to Torvil.

I halt so swiftly that Lachlan slams into my back.

Careful, little queen. He steadies me while eying his master. Shock pops down the *diamrhán*. He had no idea Desmond would be joining us either.

Neither did Aowen, based on her furrowed brow and suspicious eyes.

"Charlotte, my darling!" Desmond calls as he rises, reaching me in a few long strides. He tears me away from Lachlan, whose touch lingers on my bare shoulders.

"Come, I've saved you a seat next to me," Desmond burbles, delighted. It's a strange reunion after months apart. Especially since I barely had any time to get to know him. But he's acting as if we've been acquainted for years.

Torvil looks completely put out by our familiarity.

Naturally, I'm delighted to play along.

Desmond pulls out my chair and before I sit, I press a kiss to his cheek. "How have you been, Des? I missed you terribly."

My effusiveness doesn't throw him in the slightest. He flattens my hand against his face as he sits. "I missed you, too, of course." He kisses the center of my palm, and though he is by far the less objectionable of my two potential husbands, I cannot help a small shiver of revulsion.

This is … not ideal.

My gaze strays to Lachlan, who's on the opposite side of the table next to Aowen and a brunette knight whose name I can never remember. The knight leans over Aowen, sharing a joke with Lachlan, who tips his head back, laughing loudly. It's a forced bray. Very unlike him.

Perhaps I am not the only one faking.

I turn back to Desmond. "Why have you come? We would have seen each other tomorrow in Tír na Strelle."

"We wouldn't, actually." His smile is enigmatic as he taps a knife against his glass. The chatter fades to a whispering hush. Desmond addresses Torvil before proceeding. "May I have the floor, Your Grace?"

Torvil demurs with an upturned palm. "What's mine is yours, old friend." His eyes flick to me.

I want to scream. Leap from this table and declare that I belong to no one but myself. That I've changed my mind. That if this is what it means to be a queen, then I want none of it in any world.

I don't, of course. I swallow my anger, bury it in my chest with the embers of those other repressed emotions threatening to set me ablaze.

Desmond's chair creaks as he rises. The courtiers wear mixed expressions of wariness and respect. Desmond is, after all, a duke of the celestial kingdom. Who knows who their master will be in half a year's time?

Desmond clears his throat, lifting his glass. "I have wonderful news. For all of us. Duke Cernunnos has agreed to host Miss Fitzoy!"

Excited gasps ripple down the table.

Torvil stands, clapping, "How in the name of Danu did you manage it?" he asks through a broad, tight grin. Furious that this feather landed in Desmond's cap instead of his.

Desmond's gaze glances off his sister. "Everyone has a price, Torvil. Surely you know that better than anyone."

Aowen pales, but Desmond does not elaborate. A knot cinches my gut.

It doesn't loosen for the rest of dinner, and I am only half-listening as Desmond and Torvil chat through reports from their territories. Desmond is far better informed of the goings-on in Tír na Strelle than Torvil is about Tír na Lune. Several times, I catch Torvil referencing "recent" incidents that happened months ago. And I am quite certain a few of his contributions are word-for-word recitations from editorials in the Sky Gazette.

Both men are ignoring me. They haven't asked my opinion on a single topic, and when I do try to contribute, one or the other talks over me.

Those embers burn hotter with each course.

After an interminable amount of time, dessert is served. I devour my chocolate ganache, licking the spoon clean while silently hexing arrogant men.

When Torvil places his own spoon down, signaling that the table may take their leave, Aowen launches out of her seat and through the door.

Lachlan's head whips around to follow her progress.

What happened? I ask.

Truthfully, I have no idea.

Go check on her. Please.

But you're—

I'm fine. Bored to tears and more than ready to flee both my suitors, but I doubt I'm in any real danger while Desmond is here.

Lachlan's torso is angled toward the door despite his white-knuckled grip on the back of his chair.

We still do not know who attempted to poison you last night. *I am not comfortable leaving you.*

Please, Lachlan.

He sighs. *Two pleases in the span of ten seconds? My defenses are sufficiently crumbled.* His tone sharpens. *Stay with Desmond.*

He doesn't wait for me to confirm before striding through the door. He knows I'll obey when he uses that voice.

I address Desmond, loud enough for Torvil to overhear, "Well, since we are destined to be parted, yet again, perhaps you'll accompany me to my quarters? I'd like to turn in early before the journey to Tír na Dubh tomorrow."

"Yes, of course, darling," Desmond purrs, taking my hand as I rise from my chair.

"A word before you leave?" Torvil takes my other hand.

For long seconds, neither lets go. Months ago, this might have been my dream scenario: a rakish, dark-haired duke and a sleek, silver-haired duke fighting over me.

But the reality is much different than I imagined.

I am not their choice. I am a prize. And I do not want to be won by either.

Desmond releases me, but lingers by the door.

Torvil slides a hand around my waist and cups my cheek. "It will be difficult to let you leave, Charlotte." His voice is full of longing. Is it for Desmond's benefit? The only thing I truly believe he'll miss is me painting pictures of him.

Still, I know my role. "It will be difficult for me *to* leave, Your Grace."

"I've had something made for you. Something to remember me by." He snaps and a valet trots over with an oblong velvet box. "For the moon in my sky."

He opens the box, and I give a watery little gasp. Dewy tears dot my lashes. I am getting quite good at this.

The bracelet is beautiful, an alternating pattern of round and crescent diamonds strung together on a thin gold chain. Torvil removes it from the box, then clasps it onto my wrist. "Promise you'll wear it every day until we are reunited. During the Hunt, too. And think of me each time you look upon it."

I hold up my wrist, admiring the way the shardlights bounce off the facets. The clarity is stunning, though there's one gem that's a

little cloudier than the rest.

"It's beautiful, Your Grace," I whisper. "I will cherish it."

He leans down, lids sliding closed and lips parting, and *shit*, I am not *that* good of an actress. I turn my face at the last moment, and his cool kiss lands against my chin, against which he huffs an awkward laugh.

"Shall we try again?" He leans down a second time, but I press my fingertips against his lips.

"I find the anticipation is more than half the fun, don't you?" I say in my sultriest imitation of Lachlan before rising on my toes and whispering in Torvil's pointed ear, "Kiss me when you claim me, my king."

When I pull back, his violet gaze has deepened to a stormy indigo. "Give my regards to Cernunnos. I'll see you again soon, Charlotte."

There's both a promise and a threat in his farewell.

I return to Desmond, who cups my elbow and walks me back to my quarters.



CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

As soon as Desmond opens the door, a small porcelain bowl smashes into the wall beside us.

"How *could* you?"

Across the parlor, Aowen snatches a candlestick and raises it above her head. "I trusted you! I've done everything in my power to support your bid for the monarchy, and this is how you repay me? Your own flesh and blood!"

She hurls the candlestick, and in an impressive display of his supernatural senses, Desmond curls a forearm around my waist, tucks me behind his back, and catches the candlestick in mid-air, all in less than half a second.

"Wen," he chides in an unruffled tone, "you're being hysterical."

Now *I* want to lob a candlestick at his head.

The noise that bursts from his sister is a harpy's war cry. Furious. Ear-drum shattering. Enough to crack a square of glass in the balcony doors.

Aowen launches over the sofa, scrambling toward her brother, who aims an affronted gape at Lachlan that shouts, *you're my knight; do something?*

Lachlan snakes his arms around Aowen seconds before she reaches Desmond. She kicks and wails in Lachlan's grip as he uses those same low tones I've heard him soothe Tula with. Unfortunately, it isn't working nearly as well as it's worked on Tula. Or me, for that matter.

Aowen's still screeching when Desmond gains another enemy in the form of a tiny, enraged pixie. Vesper burrows in Desmond's hair, biting the pointed tips of his ears.

Desmond's shouting and Aowen's wailing and Vesper's squeaking and I'm trying to—

"*ENOUGH!"* Lachlan's booming bellow silences the room. "Are we beasts or are we family?" He settles Aowen onto the sofa. "Why are you so upset?"

"Everyone has their price," she seethes to Desmond, raking her nails through her dark hair. "You sold me off to Cernunnos, didn't you?"

Lachlan rears back. "He wouldn't." He turns to his duke. "You didn't."

"It was the only way to secure his participation," Desmond whispers. "He insists he's not a murderer."

"And you just took him at his word?" Aowen sniffs back tears, as if she doesn't want us to see or hear them, and my chest squeezes. I sit beside her, but she pulls away, stifling a sob into the back of her hand.

Desmond slumps into an armchair and rubs his forehead. "He was going to officially reject Charlotte. She'd be dead right now if I hadn't done it."

My heart hiccups, waves of heat and frost searing my veins. I stare at the ring, this scrap of metal that suddenly feels as fragile as my own mortality.

Aowen sits up a little straighter. Ashamed she'd forgotten the consequences of Duke Cernunnos's rejection. And though I do not have that luxury, I cannot find it in myself to be upset with her.

"Tell us," Lachlan commands. "What was the exact agreement you brokered?"

Desmond, the craven, can't even look at Aowen. "If Cernunnos loses the Wild Hunt, Aowen will be his consolation prize. His bride."

"You are a complete piece of shit, you know that?" Aowen hisses.

Vesper flits over to spit in Desmond's face. I suppress a cheer.

It is, apparently, the last straw in his indefatigable well of good humor.

"I am your *duke*, Aowen Macán," he roars. "You will do as I say to protect the interests of our House and the kingdom. And if the cost of a better world is you marrying a monster, then consider it a small price to pay. Stop being so fucking selfish."

Lachlan scrapes a hand over his jaw, muttering what sounds like a reprimand.

Aowen pulls herself to her full height, swatting a tear off her cheek. "As you command, Your Grace."

I'm impressed by the amount of hatred she bakes into her deep curtsy. She turns on her heel and glides into her bedchamber, followed by Vesper, who shakes a small fist at Desmond. The door slams shut behind them.

"How could you do it, Des?" Lachlan asks. "Your own *sister*?"

"That wasn't the only stipulation for his participation." Desmond's anger melts into a weary kind of regret.

Lachlan goes stiff-backed, pulling his shoulders square and folding his hands behind him. A knight at attention to his master.

"You are not allowed to accompany Charlotte. Lord LaBeaumont insisted."

"No."

Both men turn at my outburst, affection stealing across Lachlan's face as curiosity with the slightest edge of suspicion twists Desmond's.

"Th-that is to say," I sputter, "I need him."

God, that was worse.

"I'm afraid that will be quite impossible, darling," Desmond says softly.

"Why?" Lachlan asks, jaw tight, looking like someone just ripped his heart out.

"The LaBeaumont family estate falls within Tír na Dubh's borders, even if the social-climbing bastards never spend any time there. Pascal rushed to Cernunnos as soon as word reached him of his daughter's death. He's convinced you had something to do with it. Doesn't want you anywhere near his territory. He's still furious that I took on your debt and stayed your punishment for what happened with his son."

"Charlotte needs protection. There have been three attempts on her life here in Tír na Lune alone. And not one of us knows what to expect in Tír na Dubh."

Though they have a casual relationship on the surface, Lachlan *never* disobeys his duke's orders. And the fact that he's doing so on my behalf makes my heart swell with something very, very dangerous.

"Everyone seems to have forgotten who I am tonight." Desmond's expression is thunderous as he steps up to his knight, and Lachlan flinches. A rarity. "Sir Dunne is already on his way to accompany Aowen and Charlotte to Cernunnos's manor. And you will return to Tír na Strelle with me tomorrow or I swear by Danu, I will extend your service by a further fifty years."

Lachlan's gaze anchors to the wall above Desmond's head, his face pale and his nostrils flaring. "Yes, Your Grace."

Desmond pulls me from the sofa and crushes a harsh, demanding kiss onto my mouth. "I will win you, Charlotte. And when I am king, I will fix all of this. Do not doubt it. Even though your companions are determined to do so."

I'm breathless as he stalks out of the suite, and Lachlan and I are left alone.

Lachlan releases a long, wavering breath, then calmly walks to his bedchamber door.

And slams his fist into it.



CHAPTER

THIRTY-SIX

The wood cracks, but the door doesn't fully break; there's no way Lachlan put his full force behind the blow.

I have seen him fight off báshounds. I have watched him train future warriors. I have benefited—greatly and often—from his single-minded focus in the bedroom.

But I have never seen him lose his composure like this.

It probably shouldn't be making me so hot.

I slide a wary glance toward Aowen's bedchamber. There's not a scrap of light beneath her door. Hopefully she's asleep already.

Lachlan hasn't moved, is still holding his fist against the wood, breathing heavily through clenched teeth.

I know he would never hurt me. That he'd rather choke down broken glass than cause me any pain. At least, not more than I've agreed to.

So it is not fear that slows my steps as I approach him. Or, more accurately, not fear *of* him. It's fear *for* him. That he might be upset or ashamed of me seeing him this way. Furious. Riotous. Straining at the tight threads of control he's woven around his world.

I want to touch him, but I'm afraid I might spook him. So instead, I press my cheek against the doorframe, trying to catch his eye. His gaze bores into the depression, as if he could fix it by concentrating hard enough on the damage.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I whisper.

"Certainly not."

The anger serrating his voice is likely for Desmond, not me. Maybe even a bit for Lachlan himself.

"Do you want to talk about something else?"

He turns, his sapphire eyes sparkling with unshed tears. They run down my body, then back up again. Stop on my mouth.

"I don't want to talk at all."

"That's fine, we can—"

His hands are in my hair and he's pushing me against the wall.

Every emotion that was missing from Desmond's kiss, from Torvil's almost-kiss, can be found here in the slide of Lachlan's lips across mine. In the clash of our teeth. In the soft heat of his tongue. I shudder out his favorite whimper, and his hand slides down to my ass, his fingers digging in so hard he nearly rips my gown.

I yelp, and he stiffens. He tears his mouth from mine and tries to pull away, but I don't let him.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs into my hair. "I can't … We shouldn't do this right now. I'm too … I don't want to hurt you."

I bring my hand to his cheek. "You would never."

He looks wretched, fear and desire fighting for dominance. "You have no idea what I'm capable of. The things my anger might urge me to do to your body. I cannot be gentle right now."

"Who says I want you to be? I can handle you, Lachlan. I'm not afraid."

"Charlotte," he groans. "You don't understand. I—"

"You're doing an awful lot of talking for someone who said he didn't want to talk." I wrap my hand around the back of his neck. It's coated with sweat, evidence of how hard he's fighting his urges. I whisper into his ear the same offer he made. "Use me."

He presses his forehead against mine, heated skin to heated skin, behind which thrums the *diamrhán*, our connection.

I trust you, I say through it.

More than anyone. More than is wise.

I do not need to voice that part. He knows.

Which is probably why he throws me over his shoulder, pushes the cracked door open, and tosses me onto his bed.

He wastes no time climbing on top of me, his mouth fused to mine. My entire jaw is corralled by one of his massive hands as the other deftly pulls up my skirt and strokes the fabric between my legs.

"Your panties are very wet," he whispers against my mouth, and I can tell by the curve of his lips that this discovery has pleased him. And *I* am pleased to discover that Aowen was right about that word. "You like me angry and out of control? You want me to be rough with you? To be mean?"

His hand dips beneath the waistband, followed by a light graze along my slit and a small pinch to my clit. I am putty.

"*Please*," I beg. It's all I can manage.

He coasts down my body, pulling down my sleeves and biting the swells of my breasts above my bodice. It hurts, but also feels so incredible that I let slip a loud moan.

He tsks. "Quiet. You don't want Aowen to hear you. Burst through that door to see her brother's future queen being fucked raw by his knight."

He pushes off me, and I almost cry out in protest. I can be quiet. Or at least try. He didn't have to stop. He—

He slides me to the edge of the bed and rips my panties off. "Open your mouth."

I instantly obey, liquid heat pulsing between my thighs as he stuffs them into my mouth. I taste my own arousal. This is filthy. And so degrading.

I'm in ecstasy.

"Scream into those all you like. If you don't, I'm not doing my job properly." He grazes his lips across my temple, my kind friend checking in. "You remember our signal, yes? If at any moment you want me to stop, just tap me twice with your heels or leg."

I nod furiously, wondering why he didn't tell me to use my hands.

I find out a moment later when he stands me up, turns me around, and tears my gown straight down the back. He undoes my stays with practiced hands, then strips off my shift and ties my wrists together with the laces.

I raise a brow, breasts pushed together and on display for him. I am fully naked aside from my thigh-high silk stockings and lace garters.

"Stay like that for a moment," he breathes, reverent. "I want to look at you."

He doesn't say what we're both thinking. Which is that this could be the very last time he's able to look at me like this. We'll part tomorrow—him to Tír na Strelle with Desmond and me to Tír na Dubh to win my final suitor—and will not see each other again until Mabon for the Wild Hunt.

And that's the best-case scenario.

But maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe none of it ever mattered. Because tonight, we are not Lachlan and Charlotte, the silly fools who can't keep their hands off each other.

Tonight, we are master and plaything.

"Such a soft, beautiful little pet." He steps closer, runs his knuckles down the side of my breast, across my ribs, over the curve of my waist. "Trussed up for me to use however I please."

Anticipation fizzes through my veins. I want him to stop looking and start touching. I am so slick, he could enter me right now and encounter no resistance.

But of course, he doesn't. He likes to draw things out. Likes to torture me, in the best way. We both know the longer he makes me wait, the more spectacular the grand finale will be.

He spins me around again, then lifts my hands toward the bedpost, curling my fingers around it. He pulls my waist back, forcing me to bend forward. "Don't let go, no matter what happens back here."

My nipples tighten as I nod, angling my cheek into the crook of my elbow so I can watch what he does to me. At first, it's nothing

more than spreading my legs a little wider. Cool air flows over my exposed sex, and I do feel like a pet. One who would like to be stroked.

He slowly unbuttons his jacket, then strips it off his broad shoulders and folds it over the back of a chair. Neat, as always. He grasps the back of his shirt collar and hauls it over his head, placing it atop his jacket. He removes his boots, then unlaces his trousers, but does not pull them down completely. They sit low on his hips, exposing dark hair and those two delicious slices of muscle.

He is so goddamn beautiful. A work of art. The intricate script of his tattoos, the shiny piercing through his nipple, the ears, the fangs, the strength and power in his supernatural body. And he's about to use it all on me. I choke back a hysterical laugh because when was the last time I felt such pure, incandescent joy?

Not once has he looked away during his display. He likes to watch my eyes glaze with hunger, likes the way my skin flushes at the sight of him.

He approaches from behind, the soft fabric of his trousers kissing my ass cheeks. "I'm going to hurt you. Then I'm going to fuck you. Okay?"

I don't even have the time to nod before his hand smacks across my ass. The noise that escapes me is half scream, half whimper, muffled by the wet fabric in my mouth.

He fists my hair, pulling my head back, and growls in my ear, "I don't fucking care if you're okay with it. Do you know why?" His nose buries in the soft curls at my nape. "Because your body is *mine* tonight." He curls an arm beneath my waist, feather-light circles on my clit, and the gentle touch combined with the lingering sting of his blow has me shuddering, clinging to the post to stay upright. "And I take care of what's mine."

He removes his hand from between my legs and I whine, not at all placated by the gentle kisses he trails down my spine. I sway my ass against him, begging for more touch, begging him to make me come. Even though I know that if he obeyed, the climax would be bright and sharp and over far too quickly. Unsatisfying.

So, of course, he doesn't.

Instead, he spanks me again. Hard enough that my elbows bend and I have to brace my hands against the post to keep from slamming the crown of my head into it.

"I told you to hold onto that," he snarls before flattening his palm across my other ass cheek. My flesh ripples beneath the blow, and god, I should not enjoy how cruel he's being. How demanding and possessive. It's such a dramatic contrast to how he is with me everywhere else—soft, attentive, deferent. I am growing too fond of both sides. It's a problem.

But one for another day.

I let my mind drift away as he continues his thrashing. Blow after blow after blow. My flesh is scalding; I cannot imagine how pink it must be.

Tears gather in the corners of my eyes, and saliva pools around the panties in my mouth. Every time he glances from my ass to my face, sees the mess he's making of me, the bulge in his trousers grows. I cannot wait to feel him inside me. I wonder where he'll put it fir—

Smack.

It's the hardest blow yet. A scream sinks into my gag, and drool cascades down my chin. The pain is nearly unbearable, but combined with the anticipation of the pleasure he'll give me, how he might use me next, blots out everything. Every worry about what awaits me in Tír na Dubh. Every anxiety of not having him there by my side. Every concern over Aowen's terrible arrangement. It all fades beneath the role I'm playing—Lachlan's pet. All I need do is take what he's offering, do what I'm told, and he'll give me what I need.

There's only one anxiety it cannot fully dispel. A splinter lodged deep in my chest.

How am I supposed to give him up?

"Three more," he rasps, as frayed as I am. "Just three, and then I'll make the pain go away."

The physical pain, maybe. Though I doubt even that's possible. Part of me hopes it isn't. I want him imprinted on my flesh, my bones.

He never lies to me. Three more blows, just like he said, but they're not as hard this time. As if he's losing steam. As if he cannot wait for the next part either.

On the final one, his hand lingers, squeezing my cheeks and pulling them apart. His fingertips graze the bottom of my slit, the faintest of touches, but it's enough to make me moan, nearly choke on my panties.

He bites my flank, a playful nip, and his breath warms my skin. "You did so well, Charlotte. So good for me. And you know what good girls get?"

More orgasms than they can handle? I whisper excitedly through the *diamrhán.*

He laughs as he kneels behind me, shoves his face between my ass cheeks, and spears his tongue into my cunt from behind.

The invasion is so sudden, so forceful, that I scream into my gag. I'm clinging to the post, barely able to stay upright as he fucks me with his tongue while gently fingering my clit with the perfect amount of pressure. But of course, he knows that; pulls away at the last second every time. Winding me up, then releasing me. Winding me up, then releasing me. My thighs quiver violently, chasing the orgasms he's denying me. I'd be on the floor if he wasn't holding me up.

On the fourth go-round, he circles his finger around my asshole, and I immediately tense.

"Have you ever been taken here?" he asks quietly.

"No," I mumble around the panties. The truth, of course. Though I can't say I haven't been curious. It's an odd sensation, a bit uncomfortable, but the longer he applies such gentle pressure, the better it feels. Like the nerve endings there are somehow attached to my clitoris.

He presses a kiss to the underside of my ass, right where it meets the back of my thigh, then whispers against my skin, "Will you let me?"

The need underpinning his question cleaves my heart in two. I know the real question he's asking. He wants a part of me that's his

and his alone. All that primal, territorial, male bullshit. The reason I'm not supposed to be doing this with him in the first place.

But when Lachlan asks, it sounds more like freedom than restriction. Because it's my choice.

He is my choice.

You can do whatever you want to me, I answer.

He shudders out a breath, then spends a few more minutes torturing me, sucking my clit and licking my flesh, all while circling, circling, circling my asshole. "Relax," he whispers, stroking gently, but not pushing inside. "We're not quite there yet. Need to warm you up properly first."

I'm panting, whimpering, pushing my ass into his face. I'm about to start begging when he finally takes pity on me, flicking his tongue swiftly across my clit at the same time as he slips just the pad of his index finger into my ass.

The orgasm tears me apart, buckling my legs, but he catches me before I fall.

He sinks his teeth into my ass, the backs of my thighs, as I come down from what I can only imagine is the first of the multi-course feast he's preparing to make of me this evening. He pulls the panties from my mouth, then kisses me and scoops me into his arms. I'm euphoric and jelly-limbed and I do nothing to help him, but I don't think he wants me to.

He unbinds my wrists and lays me spread-eagled on the bed. He takes my hands and rebinds one to each bedpost.

What if I want to touch you? I am no longer gagged, but something about asking the question out loud feels too vulnerable.

His eyes flick to mine, then back to the knot he's tying at my wrist. "Not tonight," is all he says. It's not cruel, but it's not kind either. I try not to let it sting, try not to think back on how rarely he's let me explore him all the times we've fucked.

I'm derailed only momentarily, and before I know it, he's kissing and biting down my body again before stuffing a pillow under my ass and kneeling between my thighs. He's staring at my sex, rubbing his thumb down through my lips.

He adjusts his trousers just enough to free his cock. It's so hard it looks almost painful. How on earth does he think that's going to fit in my ass?

But he has other plans for me first.

He shifts in closer, running his hot length through my wetness, coating himself. I roll my hips up to meet him, but he barks out a harsh "No", then flattens a palm against my inner thigh, holding me still and open for him. His head breaches my entrance, where he hovers, letting me adjust. This part is always a bit painful, deliciously so, and I suck in a sharp breath through gritted teeth as I attempt to move onto him.

"Slowly now," he grunts, feeding me inch by inch. "We're going to take our time, and—*Fuck.*" He quivers, squeezes my thigh. He's not even halfway in and I'm already stretched to my limit. His eyes meet mine, tender and terrified. "I don't understand it, Charlotte. Every time with you feels like the first time. Even though I think about this, about you, all the fucking time. The feeling of your body wrapping around my cock? I have to force myself not to come. Every"—he pushes in a bit—"single"—a bit more—"fucking"—and more—"time."

He stops. Takes a breath. Works himself deeper in increments, pushing and retreating. It's a glorious sight, the muscles rippling down his arms as he presses my thighs open, the tiny beads of sweat slicking his abdomen, the way his trousers rest around his hips and only his cock is exposed as it sinks into me.

Once he's all the way in, he pauses, though I want to come apart. Beg him to split me open, remake my bones, my sinew. Let me always be this for him. Not a woman. Not a wife. Not a queen.

Just *his*.

"Hold onto your bonds." He flicks his chin toward the laces around my wrists, then pulls out and slams back in so hard that the only thing keeping me from crashing into the headboard is my swift obedience.

He sets a punishing rhythm, caging my waist between his large hands as he plunges into me. I bite down on my lip so hard I taste blood. He bends down to lick it off my mouth.

He’s everywhere, all at once. Above me, around me, his hands roving over my breasts, my belly, mapping every curve and swell and dip. Saving the sensations of me for later. For when he cannot have this.

My second orgasm hits with the tip of his cock rubbing against that sensitive spot inside while his thumb circles my clit. My third when he bottoms out within me, biting the side of my breast at the same time. My fourth comes out of nowhere, just from the drag of his cock in my cunt and how sensitive and swollen he’s made me.

I know I told him he could do whatever he wanted with me, but he’s relentless.

“More?” he asks, as I’m coasting through the almost painful shudders of my last climax.

“I don’t think—”

“You’ll take more.”

He pulls out of me, and I nearly scream in protest. It dies in my throat when his cock presses against my asshole. Instinctively, I close my legs, but he pushes down on my thighs, forcing me open again.

“You’re okay,” he whispers, soothing. “It will burn a little at first, but I promise, if you just breathe and relax and try not to fight it, it will be the hardest orgasm you’ve ever had in your life.”

This from the man who’s broken that record countless times.

He strokes a hand between my legs, slicking his cock with my arousal. He nestles between my cheeks again, notching his blunt head against what, to me, feels an unbreachable entrance.

There is no way this is going to work.

He rocks against me, not pushing in, just a steady pressure against my hole. Several times, I’m sure he’s about to slip in and I tense up, push him away. He never gets frustrated, no matter how many times it happens. Just keeps telling me how well I’m doing, how beautiful I am, how he’s the luckiest man in both realms to have me this way. All the while, he’s stroking my clit and everything starts to feel looser and looser.

Once I’m relaxed and pliant enough, he nudges the head of his cock in and—

Oh, holy *fuck*.

Pleasure jolts through my clit, not enough to make me come but nearly. He's still stroking it lightly, pushing a bit further into my ass, and the look on his face is nothing less than transcendent.

He's right, it does burn. But at the edges, I catch a hint of the pleasure he's talking about. The longer he moves, shallowly in and out of me, the easier it is to hold on to. And soon enough, I don't have words to describe how good this feels. He's filling me in a completely new way, my cunt fluttering around emptiness.

I grip my bindings, holding my torso upright so I can watch him work himself into me.

His deep blue eyes find mine across our bodies. "Is this alright?"

I nod, an unfamiliar type of moan building in my chest. It's not from my lungs, but somewhere lower. Far deeper.

His brows furrow, incredulous. I'm sure I'm wearing a similar expression. We're giddy. Overcome. How is this so good? Every boundary we break fuses us together more tightly.

My breath hitches, and it's about to happen. He senses it, starts thrusting slightly faster, slightly harder.

Scream my name through the diamrhán*,* he commands. *I want your voice in my veins when you come.*

Palm up, he pumps his middle and ring fingers into me, stroking my clit with his thumb, and with one final thrust of his cock into my ass, I explode.

My body convulses, and I moan, *Lachlan,* into our minds while burying a bestial roar into my shoulder. The orgasm has been multiplied ten-fold, radiates deep through my pelvis, fires up my tailbone.

Lachlan's own pleasure follows shortly after and I don't think he meant for this to end yet, but he's no more in control than I am right now.

I am fairly certain my soul leaves my body.

That must be why my ears are ringing, as if I've ascended to some great height too quickly to adjust to the altitude.

I become aware of myself again, of Lachlan untying my restraints, of him flopping down next to me and pulling me on top of

him, just as fucked out as I am. He kisses the sweat from my temples, nuzzles into my curls, and whispers against my cheek, "Please stay with me tonight."

God, I shouldn't. Tonight of all nights. I am cracked open, raw and exposed, and if I let him in any further, I fear I shall never extricate him. At least not without severe damage.

But despite my hesitations, I find myself nodding.

Once. Maybe just this once, I'll allow myself to pretend we belong to each other.

I smile at the beautiful lie, then drift away on a smoky-fig-scented cloud.



CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN

"Is it morning?" I mumble as I come to, heated skin against my back. A deeply sated chuckle in my ear. Plush lips down my neck. A watery splash.

"Not quite."

I open my eyes to discover I'm in the copper tub in our bathing chamber, cradled between Lachlan's tree-trunk thighs as he cleans me with a cotton cloth.

I am pleasantly sore everywhere and evidence is beginning to form: fingertip-shaped ovals on my flanks, a purplish welt on my inner thigh, bite marks on the sides of my breasts.

He shifts behind me, angling his head over my shoulder.

"Sorry about those," he murmurs.

"No lies."

His laugh rumbles through my chest. "Alright. I'm not sorry at all. I like the look of my marks on you."

I nuzzle back against him. "I would wear them proudly."

He continues to wash me in silence, caring for the body he used so aggressively. And just as I think I might drift off again, he

whispers, “How are you feeling? Are you okay with everything that happened between us tonight?”

I smile sleepily, pressing the corner of my mouth into his shoulder. “You were right.”

“I often am.”

I bite his nipple ring.

“Ouch! Wicked beastie,” he chuckles. “Which specific thing was I right about this time?”

“When you put your …. in my … ” A blush climbs my cheeks—heaven only knows why after all the filthy things I’ve let him do to me. “I have never come so hard in my entire life.”

He places his muscular arms atop my own, then wraps both pairs around us, pulling me close. “Can I ask something of you?” he whispers against my temple.

Anything. Everything.

“What?”

“Will you … I would like it if …” He shakes his head. “Never mind. It’s not a fair request.”

I spin around in his arms, then sit cross-legged between his spread legs. “Lachlan. Ask it. I will not lie if it’s something I don’t want to do.”

“Will you keep it between us?” The question is so soft I barely hear him despite our proximity. “Not let another man have that part of you? Even after you marry?”

It’s the most vulnerable I’ve ever seen him, and it fractures my chest. He has no idea how much of me he already owns. No idea that the thought of letting another man touch me anywhere, let alone the part he’s just asked to claim, fills me with such dread I want to scream.

But I do not have the luxury of choosing him. My life, his freedom, and the fate of the kingdom depend on it.

I can, however, fulfill his request. It’s the easiest yes I’ve ever given. “I promise.”

He smiles, relieved, then ties his damp, auburn waves back from his face. “I won’t either. Take another woman there, I mean. I feel like a possessive asshole for even asking such a thing of you. Am I

being selfish to deny you something that gives you so much pleasure?”

I snort, then lean against the tub, draping my ankles over his shins. “Based on prior experience, I believe this promise will be more disappointing for future you than future me.”

Something clouds his expression. “I don’t know about the other two, but I have heard that Desmond is a very skilled lover. I doubt you’ll have anything to complain about.”

I have little comfort to offer. Especially since we both know very well that Desmond’s first act as king will be to claim my body. So, I look away as I ask Lachlan, “How did you come to be in his service? What happened with Lord LaBeaumont?”

“I killed his son.”

Water splashes as I whip back to face him. Such an unexpected answer, and delivered so plainly. Lachlan is a celestial knight, capable of all manner of violence. But this happened before that, back when he was a courtesan.

I scroll my mind for an appropriate response, but all I produce is a weak, “Why?”

His gaze catches the shadowed corner of the room, a vein in his temple pulsing.

“You don’t have to tell me, I—”

“No, it’s alright.” He turns back with a soft smile. “I’m just trying to find the best place to start.”

“Take your time,” I concede, dipping lower in the water to ward off the sudden chill. He pulls my ankles outside his thighs and rubs my calves as he unspools his story.

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, even during your brief sojourn in the celestial kingdom, there are Houses within each territory that fancy themselves a cut above the rest. Houses who, throughout history, have gathered power through wealth or ties to the monarchy.”

“It is similar in the human realm, as I’m sure you know,” I say, savoring his strong fingers on my flesh and the rich cadence of his voice. I could listen to him speak for hours.

“Then I’ll spare you the boring history lesson and tell you that House LaBeaumont is nearly as bad as House Áine. They both

represent a kind of ruthlessness that certain families believe is necessary to maintain power. There are rumors that Faustine LaBeaumont, Lisande's mother, killed Queen Caer in her sleep. She was mistress of the robes at the time. The act ended the king's life as well, of course, and opened the monarchy to the other ruling Houses. No one's ever successfully proved her involvement, though." He sneers and flicks the surface of the water. "If it were up to me, I'd have wiped House LaBeaumont from existence centuries ago."

Something deeply personal simmers beneath his hatred.

"Despite my distaste for the family, I will not deny they are extremely shrewd. After all, what's the best way to maintain a connection to the powerful? Control their vices. House LaBeaumont knows this better than anyone. They basically own Farlock's Edge and are the chief investors in every pleasure establishment from Tír na Strelle to Tír na Dubh."

Ah. "Including the one you used to work at?"

He nods. "As the crown jewel in their offering, I was immune to their cruelest policies. My clients were some of the most influential women in the kingdom, after all." His lips flatten. "My colleagues were not so lucky."

He spreads an arm across the lip of the tub, knuckles whitening as he squeezes the rim. "Some of the things I saw in those places … They were little better than charnel houses, Charlotte. But as long as a client was paying, no taste was too depraved to service. And if any of the sex workers refused, they would—"

"Lose their job?" I interrupt.

"Never." Lachlan's smile is pure, bitter cynicism. "Even the resulting poverty would have been a mercy compared to the lashings they'd receive for disappointing a client. There were punishments for ending services too early, for getting sick and needing to take time off, for not meeting the weekly quotas—which were nearly impossible for new workers to achieve, given the low rates they started at."

I shudder. "It sounds horrific."

"It was. Though there's nothing inherently wrong with sex work when done in a healthy manner with consent and proper

compensation. But the places run by the LaBeaumonts offered little of that."

A question's been percolating. I am half afraid to ask. "How did you come to work at one?"

"I was"—he rubs his thumbnail along his lower lip—"a very angry young man. Had lots of questions for which the world did not have satisfactory answers. Who were my parents? Why had they abandoned me? Why had the gods gifted me the *diamrhán*? They must have had grand intentions for me. Much grander than any opportunity I was being offered at the Eyrie. Garred's father was always urging me not to use it. I thought"—he laughs at himself—"thought he was jealous of me. Didn't learn until it was too late that he was trying to protect me."

"What happened?"

"It's a story told so many times, I'm almost embarrassed by its banality. Arrogant young man falls in with the wrong crowd. Begins using his gift to help unscrupulous people access inaccessible secrets. Gets showered with dirty money and false praise. Rich, beautiful women start throwing themselves at him, and he's far too hot-blooded and full of himself to refuse."

I blink. The Lachlan I know is none of those things. At least, not outside the bedroom. But perhaps that's why he clings so fiercely to his control everywhere else. Because he knows the consequences of a slip-up, how easily that cyclone of vice could swirl him up again.

"I'm not going to lie; for a few years, it was good. Very good, even. I was wanted by *everyone*. For an orphan who grew up wanted by no one, fame and fortune were heady drugs. Not to mention I had the ear of the most powerful players in the kingdom. But the more mired I became in that world, the more the treatment of my colleagues grated on me. The only difference between us was the *diamrhán*. Should a divine gift, one I did nothing to earn, mean that I should feast while they suffered famine? I started pressing the subject with a few of my more progressive clients, and though they were sympathetic, none were brave enough to speak out against a system from which they themselves benefited."

I want to wrap my arms around him, want to comfort him so badly, but I also don't want to break the spell. He so rarely allows me these peeks behind his curtain.

"I grew so disillusioned that I was ready to give up. My grandiose lifestyle was not nearly as glamorous as I'd imagined, and my desire for reform had been thwarted at every turn. I was ready to crawl back to the Eyrie with my proverbial tail between my legs. But then, something happened that dramatically altered the course of my life."

He swallows, dread contorting his features, and despite my thirst for this knowledge, I almost ask him to stop.

"I began mentoring a young woman named Phaelyn, whom I'd met at one of LaBeaumont's swankier establishments in Farlock's Edge. She'd asked me for advice on how to snare more powerful, better-paying clients. She had no gift, but she was ambitious. Beautiful. And very cunning."

A pang of jealousy flares behind my ribs. It's not only useless, given Lachlan's history—if I were jealous of all his former lovers, I'd never have the capacity for a single other emotion—but it's also unfair, given I'm betrothed to two other men. I shove the feeling aside as he continues.

"Phaelyn was a quick study. She soon became the favored companion of Guy LaBeaumont, Lisande's brother. He treated her well enough at first. She'd gush to me about all the gifts he'd given her, the promises he'd made. I warned her to be wary, but she wouldn't listen. She thought I was purposefully holding her back. Like I was worried she'd outshine me." He shook his head.

"She started to look worse every time I met with her. New bruises and cuts, a nervous, jumpy energy, a dullness in her eyes. Her light had been snuffed out. She always insisted Guy had nothing to do with it. Whatever sway he held over her, she was too afraid to speak against him. But I knew if I didn't do something, he was going to break her.

"Guy had arranged a trip to Tír na Strelle for the winter solstice that year, and I manipulated my way into joining him, Phaelyn, and his friends. I awoke one night to screaming from Guy's hotel room. I rushed in to find her"—he swallows, paling, and I pre-emptively fold

a hand over my mouth—"she was lying naked on the floor, battered beyond belief. Guy was hunched over her, drenched in blood.

"As soon as I opened the door, he tried to scramble away, but I caught him. Bit into his neck to establish the *diamrhán* and sunk into his mind to learn why he'd … " His voice breaks. "That she'd told him she was … "

"Pregnant," I whisper, my throat constricting.

Lachlan's hand on the lip of the tub curls into a fist. "She was good enough to fuck, but not good enough to bear his child. And I just … I snapped. I left him in pieces.

"Since it happened in Tír na Strelle, Desmond presided over my case. Pascal LaBeaumont wanted me executed. A trumped up orphan, a *whore,* had dared sever a vein in his bloodline? Unacceptable. But Desmond spared me. Sentenced me to a monetary debt to the LaBeaumonts and then paid it himself, offering to make me a knight of his House to pay him back.

"I had never met Desmond before that day—I'd heard of him, of course. The youngest duke to ever preside over House Macán. He gave me hope for the first time in years. Hope that maybe the celestial kingdom could be better, if only someone like him could lead it."

He remains silent for so long afterward that I realize he's finally come to the end of his sad, horrible story. So much about him makes more sense. Why he's eschewed the excesses of his former lifestyle. Why he's so committed to Desmond's cause. Even the casual nature of their relationship makes sense—they are brothers-in-arms, attempting a revolution from the top down.

And the only way to ensure their success is for me to marry Desmond.

Lachlan stares at me from across the tub, so full of yearning and cautious hope. For his would-be king. For the common people of the kingdom. Maybe even for me.

I rise, water sluicing down my naked body, and hold out my hand. "Let's go to bed."

He takes it, allows me to pull him from the tub and towel him off. We put on our nightclothes, then tumble into his warm featherbed.

But before we succumb to sleep, I have a request.

"Would you let me draw you?"

I've already drawn him so many times. In so many real and imagined poses, some innocent, most naughty. But this is our last night together. I want something enduring to remember him by.

He smiles, flattered. "Of course."

I patter through the bathing chamber and into my room to grab my sketchbook and a pencil, and when I return, Lachlan's sprawled along the mattress with an arm behind his head.

"Get my good side, little queen."

I snicker, then climb on top of him, straddling his waist. "They're all good sides." I run my fingers down the intricate script of his tattoos, shocked to recognize one. I stop on it. "Does this say—"

"Smythe Children's House, yes. The entire tattoo is a letter that Garred's father wrote to me toward the end of my days as a courtesan. When I was struggling the hardest to find my place in this world. He provided many words of wisdom worth being permanently inked on one's flesh."

"I should hope so," I mumble and he laughs, guiding my fingers toward the line across his heart.

"This is the one I try to live by. Some days it's easier than others."

I trace my fingertips along the sloping letters, and Lachlan makes a low, grumbly sound like the purr of a jungle cat. "What does it say?"

"*Noble deeds need not a noble birth.*"

"That's beautiful."

"Yes." When our eyes reconnect, I find him already staring at me. "It is."

The illustration takes little time. I've memorized every line, every plane of him; I hardly need him as a live model. But I would regret not capturing his specific expression tonight—contentment and vulnerability and such deep longing that I know it will be painful to look upon this piece afterward.

Once finished, I lay down next to him. "Thank you."

"For what?" His voice is thick, languid.

"For everything. I would not have made it this far without you. Thank you for helping me. For protecting me."

He doesn't respond, pulls me into him and tucks me against his chest. We hold each other until the sky outside turns the color of bruised plums.

The next morning, after I wake in my own bed with no memory of how I got there, I notice the door to the bathing chamber is open.

So is the one that leads into Lachlan's room. Which is empty.

He's gone.

All that's left of him are the marks on my body and a note next to his drawing in my sketchbook.

You helped me, too, Charlotte. More than you know. With my deepest affection, Lachlan.


Tír na Dubh
Land of the Void



CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT

The journey to Tír na Dubh is quiet, uneventful. Aowen doesn't say a single word during the ride to the luxbridge, as if some essential part of her has been carved away by her brother's arrangement with Duke Cernunnos.

I feel as though I'm missing an essential part as well.

Lachlan was the first face I saw when I arrived in the Otherworld, and since then, I have barely spent a day outside his company. He left Tula for me, and while his kelpie is sweet and swift, she is a poor replacement.

Vesper flits from Aowen to me, nuzzling her small head into my neck. "Food. Brave food."

Sweet of her to try to soothe me. And I would never be so rude as to say so out loud, but … She is also a poor replacement for Lachlan.

Aowen's kelpie, Cuán, strolls into the luxbridge just before dawn breaks, and I close my eyes when Tula does the same. Vesper grips a few strands of my hair to hold herself in place.

When we come out the other side, all the color has been leached from the world. I blink a few times, fearing the luxbridge damaged

my vision.

After several tries, I accept that it's not me—it's the land itself. The forest of skeletal trees is foggy and lifeless. Aowen waits by a grizzled black oak whose roots weave like tentacles through the loam, her scarlet cloak a fresh wound against the grey.

Cuán bobs his snout, pulling at the reins. Impatient to get moving again. I could not agree more.

Tír na Dubh has all the charm of a graveyard.

The atmosphere grows no livelier as the woods thin to reveal the outskirts of villages. Cottages, pubs, and factories belch out austere fae dressed in drab blues and browns. Wary glances and warier sneers slide our way, but mostly we inspire indifference. Unexpected, given the four celestial knights of House Macán riding at our backs. Led by Sir Dunne, they glisten in their white armour, so reminiscent of Lachlan that it is physically painful to look at them.

I wonder what he's doing at this exact moment. Have he and Desmond made it back to Tír na Strelle by now? I try opening the *diamrhán* but either he's too far away or he's purposefully keeping it closed. I should have asked more about the logistics of our connection while we were together. Can he not contact me? Or is he choosing not to? The uncertainty is nearly as torturous as this endless ride.

I flick Tula's reins, trotting up beside Aowen and Cuán. "How much longer? This luxbridge seems much farther away from civilization than Tír na Lune's."

"Tír na Dubh has never been an easy place to access. I don't think Sabre intends to change that any time soon." Aowen's hand trembles as she strokes Cuán's neck.

"Have you been here before?"

"Never." She surveys the spindly trees, the lack of greenery which I'm starting to suspect is not a seasonal issue.

"Is the entire territory like this?"

"Each territory feeds off the energy of its ruling family. Tír na Strelle is sparkling and abundant because that is how Desmond comports himself. Tír na Lune is cold and extravagant, like Torvil."

Given this new piece of information, I'm not sure I want to meet Tír na Dubh's duke. The man to whom either myself or Aowen will be married. Fear shivers down my spine.

"What will the territories be like once the monarchy has been restored?"

"They'll maintain some of each House's essence, but it will be tempered by whichever wins the crown."

Wins me, she means.

When I become queen, will the kingdom mirror *my* energy? How would it manifest? A little silly, a little frivolous, a lot anxious, sweets for every meal.

I look around the village—a few shabby cottages, a dilapidated inn, a crumbling produce stand selling nothing but small, wrinkled potatoes—and I wonder whether an injection of Miss Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy into these depressed lands might not be such a bad thing.



House Macán in Tír na Strelle is a shimmering storybook castle overflowing with starlit gardens. House Áine in Tír na Lune is a sharp-spired fortress of smoked glass bathed in frosty moonlight.

Both grand. Both imposing, in their way.

House Cernunnos is imposing, there's no doubt of that.

But it has none of the grandeur of the other two.

The three-story black brick manor is a collection of lopsided chimneys and shoddy gables scattered across mist-shrouded moors. As we approach, a woolly layer of clouds banishes the sunlight and a howling wind kicks up. There is nothing around for miles save cold and damp and gloom. Were it not for the manor's size, one would never imagine it to be the home of a territory's ruling House.

The cobblestone courtyard features a large, moss-covered statue of a formidable faerie man with ram's horns curling back from his forehead.

"His great-grandfather." Aowen answers my unasked question. "Daget Cernunnos."

"Do all the Cernunnos family have horns like that?"

"Only the male heirs destined to become head of House."

The howling intensifies and I realize it's not the wind when a shadow takes form at the edge of the property. As it jaunts closer to our small party, Tula begins dancing beneath me, swishing her tail and clacking a hoof against the ground.

I try to soothe her, mimicking Lachlan's low tones, but, as it turns out, I am also a poor substitute for everyone's favorite honey-voiced knight.

As the shadow moves closer, I'm not sure even Lachlan could have soothed us.

A colossal, undead wolf prowls around the side of the house.

Half her skull is exposed, giving her a permanent grin full of sharp fangs from which a long, mottled gray tongue lolls. Her black fur is wet and matted in some places, worn completely away in others to reveal sinew and bone. Her eyes are bright yellow rings around glowing green pupils.

Her head jerks up when she notices us, and she releases another shrieking howl before breaking into a sprint.

Straight for us.

Tula and Cuán rear up, wild-eyed with terror, and it's all Aowen and I can do to keep them from bolting across the moors. Sir Dunne shouts commands and there's a steel-sharp symphony of swords unsheathing.

The undead wolf pounds closer and closer, her skull's grin making her look absurdly friendly despite her petrifying appearance.

She's rounding the statue when a deep, familiar voice booms across the courtyard.

"Skadi! Heel!"

The wolf skids to a halt, her skeletal paws scrabbling on the stones before she turns and lopes toward a small door beneath the staircase of the manor's entrance.

A single figure emerges, ducking down beneath the jamb, then stretching to his full height. He may be the tallest biped I have ever

seen in person, even without the horns. As soon as I catch sight of him, the ring warms a little.

He approaches slowly but with purpose, and aside from his zombified wolf, not a single valet, courtier, nor knight have joined to welcome us.

"Stand down, sirs," he warns the celestial knights. "There's nothing Skadi loves more than cracking open suits of armour to pluck out the juicy bits." There is no humour in his tone. "Trained her myself."

Sir Dunne pales, especially when Skadi lowers her head and burbles out a growl. Every sword is immediately resheathed.

Sabre turns to Aowen and me. "Lady Macán, Miss Fitzroy, welcome to Tír na Dubh. Come, dinner is ready in the salon."

And with that perfunctory greeting, he turns back toward the manor, pulls something from his pocket that looks suspiciously like a femur, and hurls it across the moors. Skadi bounds after it.

Aowen and I share a disquieted glance before dismounting. She hands the kelpies to Sir Dunne, who asks, "Would you like us to accompany you inside, my lady?"

"We'll be fine."

The knight blows out a relieved breath, and Aowen tracks Sabre as he enters the manor, not bothering to wait for us.



CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE

The salon Sabre leads us to is all ebony-paneled walls surrounding a black brick fireplace. A few dim shardlights barely hold back the shadows and as my eyes adjust, I see a table set for three. Much more intimate than I was expecting, given the courtly dinners in Tír na Lune. Those were spectacles, a jockeying for power, a stage upon which the sycophants performed for Duke Áine.

House Cernunnos is far from that. No more than a single valet and a handful of housemaids appeared on our walk to the salon. And we certainly didn't spy any courtiers nor even anyone who looked like a family member.

His words from the presentation ceremony tiptoe through my brain: *Every soul enters the Afterlands alone, lady.*

Does the duke live here by himself? Less witnesses, perhaps, for when he slits our throats.

As we take our seats, Sabre siphons a beam from the shardlight, then jerks his wrist and meals appear on our plates. Unidentifiable beige meat and a medley of bland root vegetables smothered in creamy gravy. I dip my fork into the sauce, then poke my tongue at

it. The duke shoots me an affronted scowl that shouts, *it's not poisoned.*

I take a tentative bite and not only do I not choke, but the food is surprisingly flavorful for all its lack of appearance. So is the wine.

Or perhaps my taste buds are desperate; I haven't fed them anything since an apple and oat bar before we entered the luxbridge in Tír na Lune.

I dig into the meal, ravenous, but the silence in the room is deafening. Every chew and swallow is amplified. Not to mention Vesper's satisfied growls as she digs into the plate of raw meat Sabre conjured for her. He's generous for a murderer; I'll give him that.

While we eat, I study him. He's more severe than handsome, but not entirely unattractive. Thick, dark brows frame a pronounced nose that sits above pleasantly full lips. His eyes appear black, but every so often a flicker of shardlight catches spots of amber or chestnut. His hair is a pile of black waves that can't decide which way to lay, and two enormous white horns sweep back from his forehead to curl beneath his ears.

For a man who looks so bestial, he is a neat eater. He cuts dainty bites, never switching his utensils—a skill I've yet to master—chewing slowly and methodically. After he's polished off his dinner, he wipes his face, places his refolded napkin onto his plate, and patiently waits for the rest of the table to catch up.

Officially, he's courting me—or plotting my death, hard to tell—but his attention keeps snagging on Aowen. He glances away each time she shifts, as if he doesn't want to get caught staring.

Once we've finished dinner, he refills our wine glasses, then sits back and rubs his jaw with elegantly-sculpted fingers. He still says nothing, and I cannot tell if it's because he has nothing to say or if he's trying to lure us into a false sense of safety before feeding us to his undead pet.

I might be wary, but Aowen is not. "Why did you make that bargain with my brother?"

Sabre shows no evidence that her question has thrown him. "I did not request you, Lady Macán, if that's what you're implying. Your

brother offered. I accepted. Always good to have a back-up plan."

"A back-up wife, you mean." Her bitter laugh sounds more like a bark. "You haven't welcomed a candidate in Tír na Dubh since the one you killed."

I search his face for a reaction—clenched teeth, a wince, an eyelid flutter. There's nothing. He's carved from the same marble as his great-grandfather outside. If the man truly is a killer, he's showing no sign of guilt.

"Why now?" Aowen demands. "Desmond would have made you this bargain at any time had you hinted it's what you wanted."

"As I already explained, I did not request you. And in any case, the Wild Hunt was not possible before now." He assesses me, and unease knots my stomach. "It may yet be impossible still."

Aowen frowns. "Why?"

Sabre swirls his wine glass. I doubt he expected an interrogation on night one of our two-month courtship. But clearly, Aowen is not what he expected either. He doesn't look entirely displeased. "What I am about to tell you needs to be kept in the utmost confidence."

Aowen side-eyes him as she asks, "And why should we promise that, Your Grace?"

He takes a slow sip, peering at her over the rim. "Because I've asked you to. I am not trying to trick you or do you harm—"

"No, just trying to marry me against my will."

"Fate has determined no course for us yet. It could be Miss Fitzroy I marry."

I imagine myself living in this gloomy, drafty house. Married to this man. Sharing a bed with him. It does not paint a tempting picture.

Sabre leans forward, fully engaged—perhaps Desmond knew exactly what he was doing offering up his sister—and continues, "But there's a rather important obstacle that must be cleared before any marriage can take place." He settles into his chair, his features hardening once more. "I do not know the location of my piece of the Bannrhorn."

Aowen's fingers tighten ever so slightly on the stem of her wine glass. "Right. Because Charlotte has to find it. Give her your clue

and we'll start searching."

Color rises above Sabre's stubble, from anger or shame, I cannot tell. "That is not what I meant. House Cernunnos's Bannrhorn fragment is no longer in Tír na Dubh. It's not in the Otherworld at all."

"Well, where is it?"

"The human realm."

Sabre's confession shocks her into silence for a few long moments before he flicks a lock of dark hair off his forehead. "At least, I believe that's where it is."

Aowen leans back in her chair and crosses her arms, her crimson nails *tap tap tapping* against her muslin riding dress. "Explain."

Sabre swipes up his wine and drains the glass. "You are rather demanding for a woman without a noble title."

"Oh, Sabre," Aowen snorts, "you have no idea." I could be imagining things, but I swear the hairs on the back of his neck lift when she says his name. "You'd better hope this gets resolved and you win Charlotte during the Hunt. Reuniting the kingdom would be a far easier task than serving as my husband."

Sabre covers his mouth with a large hand, but not before I see the small smile forming there. He composes himself before he continues, "Despite the rumors you've heard in Tír na Lune and Tír na Strelle, I did not murder the first candidate. She … I never would have … We were in love. The months she spent here were the happiest of my life."

Aowen's hands tighten on her arms, her face a mix of surprise and skepticism. As for me, I am wondering why Sabre is being so forthcoming. And so soon into our stay.

He continues on, as if reading from a script he's spent weeks preparing. "Despite our affection for each other, I could not give her the one thing she wanted more than anything in the world: children. And I loved her too much to demand such a sacrifice." The flames dance in his shining eyes. "So I let her go."

Aowen's face softens, but does not completely lose its edge. "Let her go? Where? And how? Once the ring binds itself to the quarry,

the only way to remove it is a claiming or a rejection. One offers life and the other, certain death."

"That's not entirely accurate," Sabre whispers. "If the rejection occurs while the quarry is in the Otherworld, then yes. Without the protection of the ring and the novillum seed it implants, her human body cannot withstand the time differential. But if the quarry returns to the human realm and the ring falls off there, the only consequence is a complete loss of the memories she made while wearing it."

Cold heat prickles my limbs. There's been a way out all this time? Aowen looks gobsmacked. She didn't know either.

"How could you possibly know that?"

Sadness creeps over Sabre's face. "I spent a small fortune to consult a seer in Farlock's Edge. The woman gave my love a reading of her future which confirmed it was possible. At the stroke of midnight on Mabon that year, when the doors between our two worlds connect, she stepped through. It only happens on the equinoxes, when light and dark are fully balanced in at least one realm. And the only way through them is that ring." He gestures to my hand.

"She had a little trick up her sleeve, though. One I did not foresee. We'd been storing the fragment in the reliquary since she'd found it during her third week here. We never told anyone because, well, we wanted all the time together we could get. But the day before she left, it was there. And the day after, it was not."

"Why didn't you invite any of the other quarries to visit you in Season then?" I ask. "You could have sent them back to the human realm to search for the fragment."

Sabre circles his fingertips on his forehead. "When she walked through that door, any interest I had in the future died. I was angry. Heartbroken and lovesick. I didn't want anything to do with anyone. I let my territory suffer for my moods. The last thing I wanted to do was court another human woman. And Torvil kept rejecting them at the presentation ceremonies, so I just …"

He clears his throat. "My apologies, Miss Fitzroy. I do not want to give you the impression that I think so little of human life. Each

rejection took a piece of my soul. But even if I had accepted them, sent them across the realms, how would they have found my love? And even if they had, why would she give them the fragment? If she even remembered she'd stolen it in the first place."

"So what's the difference this time?" Aowen asks.

He nods toward me. "She is. She's made it farther than any quarry since the first. And she's the only one who may actually have a chance to find it."

"Why?" Aowen's frustration spills over. "Why would Charlotte have a better chance than any of the other quarries?"

"Because the woman I loved, the one I let go, the one who took my Bannrhorn fragment? Her name was Margaret Bowles."

My ears begin ringing, and my chest tightens.

"And as I have recently learned, she married a man named Edward Fitzroy and had two lovely children."

Tears stain my lashes, and my throat constricts to the point I can barely breathe.

"She passed away last year, left her cottage and a small inheritance to her granddaughter.

"Charlotte."



CHAPTER

FORTY

The door to the human realm will not open for me until midnight on Mabon, which means I have roughly seven weeks to learn everything I can about Granny Maggie's time here in Tír na Dubh.

According to Sabre, her quarters have not been touched since she left. But there is no dust on any of the surfaces, and the air does not have the stale quality of a boarded-up room.

It's almost as if someone spends a little time in here regularly.

But if Sabre had been visiting Granny's abandoned rooms, my presence is the perfect deterrent. Any pretense of courting me was discarded the moment he made his confession. Perhaps even earlier than that.

Still, in order to figure out why my grandmother stole the fragment and what she planned to do with it in the human realm, I needed to understand her mindset while she was here. And the greatest source of *that* information is Sabre himself. He seems to be the only thing in this manor to which the ring reacts.

But he's a hard man to pin down. Since our arrival, he's taken no more meals with us. And from what I can tell, most of his hours are

spent locked in his study. I crept past the other day to find he'd left the door cracked. He was bent over his desk, hair mussed and fingers ink-stained, making notes on what looked like blueprints or architectural drawings. Before I could ask him about it—or sneak a closer peek—he got up and slammed the door in my face.

I'm starting to question Granny Maggie's taste in men.

And wondering if I might have inherited it from her.

George was obviously a bad choice, though the further I get from that affair, the more I realize he took advantage of my open nature. I'm not excusing my own role; I am a fully functioning adult capable of making my own decisions. But it *was* naïve to assume a man like that would have proposed to me. Not because there's anything wrong with me, but because of those unsavory qualities of his that I was all too eager to overlook: an obsession with status, a need to be adored, a compunction to be seen as the "good guy" in any scenario. Regardless, I am done reprimanding myself. George and I were never meant to be.

Lachlan, on the other hand … I am not sure how to classify an entanglement that was doomed from the start. Yet another example of my appetites getting me into trouble?

Aunt Teddy was always scolding me for them, be they gastronomical or on the more prurient end of the spectrum. Said if I didn't learn to regulate them, that no man would ever take me seriously as a wife. I often wondered if she'd guessed what George and I were up to.

My appetites never seemed to bother Lachlan. Though I suppose becoming his wife was never a possibility anyway. Perhaps that's why I was not afraid to indulge?

I will leave it there because to examine my motives any deeper might mean unearthing world-shifting revelations about my feelings for him. Bury, bury, bury. If Bretonnic society taught me nothing else, it at least taught me that.

Tonight, I've decided to go for a walk around the property at dusk in an effort to clear my head, shake off some of those buried feelings, and pout over my inability to find anything that might inform my search for the Bannrhorn. I have only just stepped

outside when I hear paws pounding toward me and the unmistakable huffs of a pursuing animal.

I turn, then freeze as Skadi races toward me, Sabre jogging after her. It looks as if they've come from the wider walking path that rings the outskirts of the property.

She bounds closer and closer, her tongue bouncing, like a gigantic, half-dead puppy.

"Skadi!" Sabre shouts, and my ring heats at his voice. "You blasted fool. Halt!"

Skadi may be excitable, but she will not disobey her master, thank their gods. She stops, then sits back on her haunches in front of me. She's enormous. Larger than Torvil's báshounds. Nearly the size of the elephants in the zoological gardens at Harbridge.

Her hot breath fans my face and I pinch my nose, expecting to smell rotting carcass, but am treated to a scent that's more like peppermint leaves steeped in snowmelt.

She barks at me, a short, sharp yip, then tip-taps her front paws. Granny and I never had a dog, but our closest neighbors lived on a farm with all kinds of animals. Including the sweetest wolfhound named Sheilagh who used to perform this same bark and tap routine. I know what it means. Pets. That's what Skadi wants.

I raise my palm and Skadi bends down to nudge her wet nose against it. I try to keep my hand to the intact half and not the half that's mostly exposed nasal cavity.

"My apologies, Miss Fitzroy," Sabre pants as he scuffs through the gravel toward us.

We're at the back of the house, several paces from the veranda and overlooked by the guest rooms. Most are dark, mine included, but there's a shardlight glowing in Aowen's. And I swear the curtain just billowed.

"Skadi is usually far more obedient"—Sabre side-eyes his … well, I'm not sure exactly *what* Skadi is—"but where you are concerned, she seems to forget her manners."

"It's alright," I say, continuing to pet Skadi's nose. Her glowing green eyes slip shut; she's in pure ecstasy. A small giggle escapes my lips. "She's adorable."

Sabre grunts out a laugh. “I have never heard anyone other than your grandmother say that about a necrowolf.”

“A necrowolf.” I roll the word across my tongue. “What is that?”

“I could give you a proper explanation, but I’m afraid it might take all night. Have you heard the saying ‘a cat has nine lives’?”

“Yes?”

“Well, a simplified version might be something like Skadi’s on her seventh.”

Before I can craft a quip about Skadi seeming more canine than feline, Sabre turns away. And I’m about to lose the only chance I’ve had in weeks to probe him.

“Wait!” I blurt. “I … Have you … Can you spare me a moment, Your Grace? I’d love to talk to you about my grandmother.”

He swivels back, his eyes squeezed shut as he pulls a deep breath through flared nostrils. Like this is precisely why he’s been avoiding me.

“I don’t doubt the subject is quite painful for you, but my searching has borne no fruit. And if I cannot find your piece of the Bannrhorn, well …” There are so many consequences I could name. I don’t know Sabre well enough to discern which one will move him, so I go with the most broad. “Your kingdom will remain fractured.”

It’s hard to tell if Sabre even cares about that. If he desires the crown at all. Or why, outside of my heritage, he’s decided after seven years to participate in the Season.

Resignation softens his features, and his shoulders dip. He gestures toward a stone bench just off the path, consumed by a cloud of overgrown black elderberry bushes.

I sweep aside a branch of dark, spidery leaves, stirring a rich, sweet scent like honey and cooked berries, then take a seat. Sabre sits down at the other end. As far away from me as possible.

I might be insulted, were I at all invested in his courtship.

Silence reigns for several charged moments, broken only by the winds whistling across the moors and over the stone wall surrounding the property. Skadi releases a few long-suffering, canine sighs from her position at her master’s feet. Insulted that we do not seem occupied and yet no one is playing with her.

“What was she like?” I ask, diving in headfirst. “While she was here?”

“She was … ” Sabre starts, then stops. Struggling to find words. “Well, she was radiant. The most beautiful woman I’d ever seen at the time.” His eyes flick toward the glowing window. “But it wasn’t just her appearance that made her beautiful. It was her craving for life. Her curiosity. She wanted to know everything about me, about Tír na Dubh. And she had a way of looking upon the world without judgment. Accepting all its graceless sinners as they were, not as they should be.”

I pinch the skin between my thumb and forefinger to forestall tears. It’s as if he’s plucked the description of my grandmother from my own head.

“Well,” Sabre sniffs, “you can imagine how attractive someone like that was to a man who’d never thought very highly of himself to begin with. And who’d recently been thrust into a bid for the monarchy.”

“What did she do while she was here?”

Sabre raises a brow, and my face flames.

“I mean, besides the … well, surely, you know what I …” I recover myself. “Were there places she visited frequently? Anywhere that might have given her a reason to steal your fragment?”

“I have no idea why she did it. Perhaps she thought taking it would mean no other human woman would be forced into the Wild Hunt against her will? Or perhaps there was something sinister in that reading she received in Farlock’s Edge; something she was too afraid to tell me.”

“Does that seer still work there? Perhaps we can pay them a—”

“She died. Shortly after Margaret and I had gone to visit her. It was the first place I went for answers.”

So strange to hear someone use Granny’s full name. She was Maggie to all our friends and neighbors. There’s reverence in Sabre’s pronunciation. And long-tended sorrow.

“Did she not want you to fall in love with someone else? Maybe she took the fragment out of jealousy.”

"Gods, no." Sabre laughs, the boisterous thumps of a booming timpani. They reconfigure the harsh planes of his face into something truly breathtaking. I can start to see why Granny Maggie fell for him. She loved to study people's laughs, tried to encourage them as often as possible. "If she saw me now, she'd tear my head off for spending all this time mourning the loss of her when I could have been …" He tilts his gaze toward the clasped hands resting in his lap. "She'd be terribly disappointed in me."

He composes himself, sitting up straighter, and the elderberry bush leaves tickle over us like searching fingers. "She spent much of her time here drawing. I assume you've found the sketchbooks in her rooms?"

I nod. "I've reviewed less than a quarter of them. She was very prolific while she was here. Had an endless well of inspiration to draw from, it seems." I slide my eyes toward him, suppressing an instinct to nudge his shoulder or take his hand. He looks … Well, he looks touch-starved.

"What was her life like in Breton?" he asks softly. "With Edward." There's no jealousy in his question. A bit of envy, perhaps. But it's clear he never begrudged her happiness.

"I'm afraid I do not know." I pick at the stiff leaves. "He passed before I was born." I'm embarrassed to tell Sabre everything my grandmother sacrificed to raise me. Her position within society, her grandiose estate, a life that would have been far more comfortable—certainly more convenient—than the wild one we lived in the southlands.

"Was she happy?"

"She was." That I *do* know to be true. "But she was always a little restless. That curiosity you mentioned? It stayed with her throughout the years; she was always searching for something. I used to think it was novelty—a new village to visit, new players coming to town, a new painting to work on. She dragged me all over the southlands, anywhere she could afford to chase her muse. But now I think … perhaps a part of her remained in the Otherworld. And it wasn't novelty she was searching for, but rather something she didn't even remember she'd lost."

Sabre rattles out a breath, angling away from me.

I allow him his privacy, and when I can feel the moment has passed, I ask, "How did you know who I was? During the presentation ceremony? I never thought Granny and I looked very much alike."

"No, you really don't." Sabre turns back wearing the ghost of a smile. "But you have her spirit. As soon as Skadi saw you through the mirror, she wouldn't stop barking. I wasn't certain, but I had my suspicions. Information about the human realm can be bought in Farlock's Edge—if you know who to ask and can afford their exorbitant prices. I knew who you were by the time Desmond showed up last month, begging me to take part in the Hunt with his intriguing offer."

His eyes slide up the manor to that glowing window again. Mine follow. There's the barest hint of a shadow at the edge of the curtain.

"She will never accept you, or forgive you, if you force her to marry you."

"I know it," he sighs, idly rubbing a hand along the bottom of his horn. He stares up at the guest room with a longing far too intense to be solely inspired by the dark-haired spitfire he won in a marriage bargain.

"But I'm tired of being lonely."



CHAPTER

FORTY-ONE

Aowen and I are breakfasting in the sun parlor a few weeks later when the banging starts.

"What is that?" I mutter, shoving half of my blackberry-jam-slathered crumpet into my mouth before following her out of the room.

In the near-empty halls, we pass only the barest hint of staff—who, we've been assured by the staff themselves, are all grossly overpaid and here out of a devotion to their solitary duke.

As we take the west stairs up to the second floor, the pounding grows louder and more frequent. Wood splinters and something crashes before we rush into a guest room where all the furniture has been pushed to one side and draped with drop-cloths.

Sabre turns at our entrance, stirring the dust floating through spears of sunlight and settling on his horns. He's holding a sledgehammer, its head buried in a half-demolished wall. His chest is heaving and his shirt is sweat-soaked, the sleeves pushed up his forearms. A triangle of hard muscle covered in dark hair is plainly visible beneath his open collar, and dangling suspenders bracket a very well-formed backside.

Aowen's hand is at her throat. She's been struck speechless, breathing nearly as heavily as Sabre himself while they stare at each other.

Sabre breaks the spell first. "Yes? What do you want?"

Rude question for a man in the midst of destroying his own house.

Aowen squares her shoulders, readjusting her regal mask. "The terrible racket you're making interrupted our breakfast."

Sabre pulls the sledgehammer from the wall, then props it on his shoulder, his muscles bunching beneath translucent linen. Aowen swallows as he prowls toward us. "This is my home, Lady Macán. And if I want to do some light renovation, I'll make as much racket as I damn well please. I had no idea you had such delicate sensibilities."

"Delicate?" Aowen scoffs. "You'll find I'm made of stronger stuff than most, Your Grace. If you're lucky."

Sabre's lip twitches upward before he forces it into deep scowl.

"And what do you mean by 'renovation'?" she asks.

Sabre swings the sledgehammer down, placing the head between his feet, then brushes his hands together. The resulting cloud of dust sends both Aowen and me into mild coughing fits.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I intend to turn Cernunnos Manor into transitional housing for those fleeing Campan's Vale. This place is far too large and empty. Might as well use it to offer a safe haven for the displaced. I've wanted to do it ever since Torvil sent his forces to the Vale but lacked the conviction to start." He looks to me. "Until now."

Our talk about Granny Maggie last week must have been more powerful—or therapeutic—than I thought.

Aowen's hand has risen to her throat again, where a splotchy red flush steals across her skin. Her mouth is moving, but nothing is coming out. And the way she's looking at Sabre … I don't think that physical wall is the only thing he's just knocked down.

I come to her rescue. "Do you intend to do this work by yourself, Your Grace? Could your staff not help you?"

Sabre grunts, "They've enough to focus on with their regular responsibilities. They do not need the burden of additional tasks."

Aowen snaps back to attention. "The Thompson boys over on Ackerley lane would be delighted to help. As would Mr. Shelbourne. He built his own house, you know. He's got a fine eye for construction."

Sabre's expression darkens. "Making friends in my territory already, are you? How often have you visited the Thompson boys, then?"

I wince. Poor Sabre has no idea to whom he just revealed his hand.

Aowen's smile is smooth, practiced. She's regained at least some of the power she forfeited while drooling over his workman's attire. "I have spent my days visiting as many of your people as I can. There's a very real possibility that one day they will be my people, too." Her voice softens a little. "You should know they speak quite fondly of you, even though you have not deigned to meet with them for—"

"Do *not* tell me how to run my territory, woman," Sabre snarls, stepping closer.

"I wouldn't have to if you'd made any effort to do so yourself," Aowen parries, not backing down an inch.

Their fangs are bared, their eyes narrow slits, and I honestly cannot tell if they are about to kill or kiss each other.

I anchor my gaze to the floor to hide a delighted grin.

But before a brawl—or a heavy petting session—can begin, hooves clomp up the dirt road leading to the estate, followed by shouting and scuffling from the front yard.

Sabre hurries to the window, then barks out a "Stay inside" to Aowen before he dashes from the room.

Aowen shakes her head. "He really hasn't the faintest idea who he's dealing with, does he?"

"None whatsoever," I chuckle as she and I head downstairs and out the front door.

On the lawn, a young couple, each clutching a wailing child, exit a kelpie-drawn cart being driven by Garred Smythe of all people. He

jumps down from the driver's bench, then brandishes the broadsword I've seen him train with at the Eyrie.

Three celestial knights are halfway up the entrance road when Sabre barrels around the manor mounted on Skadi and holding two curved daggers that resemble scythes. Or his horns.

He herds Garred and the family behind him, then notices Aowen and I have come out to help.

"Thought I told you to stay inside," he grumbles.

Aowen's only response is to laugh at him.

I'm about to ask Garred what's happened when the celestial knights square off against Sabre and Skadi. I recognize the beefy blond who led me to the church in Campan's Vale.

"Step aside, Your Grace," the knight says. "These people are dangerous criminals. Missed the past four tithes and have illegally journeyed through a luxbridge to escape justice."

The father, a scholarly-looking man with curly brown hair and glasses, holds his wailing daughter tighter, ready to defend himself before Sabre answers for him.

"I don't care if they murdered the duke himself. Neither you nor Torvil have any authority in Tír na Dubh. Get the fuck off my property before I feed your entrails to Skadi."

The knights' kelpies pull at their bridles, rearing up as Skadi nips at their legs.

Sabre leaps from her back, then swipes his daggers together in a whisper of steel. "Now."

The blond knight sneers. "His Grace will not forget this insult, Cernunnos."

"After he loses the Wild Hunt, he can take it up with the new king."

Skadi lunges, swiping a bony paw at the knight on the left, who screams in a terribly undignified manner before racing away. The two others follow, Sabre's booming laugh mingling with their clanking retreat.

Aowen must have forgotten herself again, because the fire in her eyes as she stares at him could ignite the damp moors.

I turn to the family, reaching my arms out to the mother—a tall blond woman crying tears of relief—who passes me her young son. He cannot be a day over two. A dangerous criminal, indeed. I soothe and bounce her child to the tune of her thanks.

"You're safe now," Aowen proclaims. "Please, come inside and make yourselves comfortable. I'll ask Cook to put some food out."

Sabre nods his agreement, not a single breath of protest at Aowen welcoming the family into *his* household.

The father turns to Sabre, his daughter refusing to release him. "We didn't know where else to go. They were demanding over half our annual harvest. When we refused, they burned our fields, commandeered our farmhouse. Garred said we could come here, but that we might be early, and—"

"You need not explain yourself to me, sir," Sabre interrupts. "You and your family are welcome to stay as long as you need."

The little girl pulls back from her father's neck, sniffing away tears as she blinks at Sabre's horns. Her father puts her down to shake Sabre's hand. "Thank you, Your Grace. You've saved us."

"You saved yourselves. I had little to do with it," Sabre answers gruffly, pulling his hand from the man's grip and gesturing toward the house. The rest of the family walks away, but the little girl stays, goggling up at Sabre while he peers down at her. The silhouette is quite comical; her head barely crests his knees.

"Yes? What is it?" he growls, supremely uncomfortable. I wonder how many children he's met in his life?

The little girl throws her arms around his legs, squeezing so tightly he nearly falls off balance. She doesn't utter a word. Nor does he. He merely hovers a hand over her head, like he doesn't trust himself with something so fragile.

He gently pats her hair, once, twice. She unlocks his legs, beams up at him through a holey smile, then dashes away toward her family.

That fiery look in Aowen's eyes melts into something almost wistful. As soon as Sabre catches it, she huffs and stomps up to the house.

Garred approaches, reaching out a hand which Sabre takes with a grimace. Too much touching for one day, I imagine. "My apologies, Your Grace. The Eyrie's bursting at the seams and I didn't know where else to take them. I know you're not operational yet, but Mr. and Mrs. Harroway are both extremely skilled carpenters. They'd be happy to help."

"We've got more than enough; we'll make it work." Sabre hooks his daggers under his belt. "Speaking of, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to mine. I'll send one of the stableboys to fetch your kelpies. He'll feed and water them before you head back to the Vale." He whistles for Skadi, who lopes down the road from where she was supervising the knights' exit and follows him back around the house.

Garred swivels toward me, and I offer him a warm smile.

"Miss Fitzroy." He takes my hand and plants a cordial kiss on the back. "It's been a while. Are you well?"

I shrug. "As well as can be expected."

"Duke's a bristly one, isn't he? Was shocked as hell to receive his letter last week, telling me about his plans for this place."

"Oh, no, that's not what … He's been very generous with us."

"How is your search for the third piece of the Bannrhorn coming along?" He removes the harness from his kelpies, then settles the shaft on the grass.

"Well, yes. Very well indeed. I'll have it any day now, I'm certain of it." It's not that I don't trust Garred, but Sabre's secret is not mine to expose. Plus, there's a more important question I'd like to ask, one that's been burning a hole in my chest since Garred arrived.

"How fares Sir Cathal?"

Garred tilts his head. "He's not here?"

I burble a laugh. "You think Lachlan would've passed up a chance to intimidate Torvil's knights?"

"Point fairly made." Sabre's stableboy jogs up to us, and Garred hands over his kelpies' reins. "I assumed he was with you; I haven't seen him in the Vale for weeks."

I blink. "Does that happen often? Extended amounts of time between his visits?"

"Only when he's done something to upset Desmond, who then shortens his leash. Desmond always wins." I wouldn't have expected to see the sneer on Garred's face, especially not about the duke who, by all accounts, saved Lachlan's life. "When he thinks Lahclan has strayed too far outside his influence, he likes to remind him of that."

"Oh." I fear I'm incapable of a more coherent response.

"May I offer you a piece of advice, Miss Fitzroy?"

"I'd be glad of one."

He takes my hand, pats the back. "Go easy on him."

I attempt to pull my hand away, but he doesn't let go. "I'm not sure what you're—"

"Lachlan is a giver. He gives and gives and gives and gives and expects nothing in return. Sometimes I wish he'd be a bit more selfish. Demand *more* from the world. Even if what he wants most will cut the deepest."

What can I say back to *that*?

Garred pats my hand again, then releases me, and I watch as his ash-colored coils disappear around the side of the house.

I stand in the front yard for a long while, contemplating his send-off.

The things we want most cut the deepest, indeed.



CHAPTER

FORTY-TWO

It's been three weeks since the Harroways arrived at House Cernunnos.

And three weeks since Aowen abandoned our information gathering to assist Sabre with his renovations instead.

I have not teased her yet, but I have grand plans.

I don't really need her help anyway. I've been through every nook and cranny of Granny Maggie's rooms. Her numerous sketchbooks are mostly filled with portraits of Sabre. Given that only seven years have passed here in the Otherworld while nearly fifty have passed in the human world, he doesn't look much different in the sketches except his hair is a bit shorter, his eyes a bit livelier. In addition to the portraits, there are a few drawings of flora—purple heather, bright green bracken, pink willowherb. All far more colorful than the skeletal black and gray that coats most of the land now. Though I did see a tiny green leaf poking its head aboveground last week and I swear the black elder bushes are starting to show berries.

Perhaps Sabre is enjoying his new company more than he anticipated.

Outside of the sketchbooks, Granny doesn't seem to have put her stamp on anything else within the manor. I was hoping to find some journals, maybe even a letter or two. I should have known better. She always expressed herself best through imagery. But I cannot figure out what story, if any, she was trying to tell within these drawings. The ring has not warmed at *anything.* I'm not even sure what I'm looking for anymore.

And now, two days before Mabon, I am running out of time to find any hint at all of where to start in the human realm.

Tonight, I've decided to let my thoughts wander. Sometimes I can pick up unforeseen patterns or snatch a piece of missing knowledge from my idle mind. I'm curled in an overstuffed armchair before the fireplace in Granny Maggie's bedchamber. I've taken to sleeping here instead of the sparse but comfortable quarters Sabre prepared for me. My sketchbook is open in my lap and I'm working on my own piece instead of poring over my grandmothers' for the thousandth time.

I don't dare turn back the pages. I know what I will find. Portraits of Lachlan in various stages of undress. Half-rendered illustrations of couplings that still have the power to make me blush. That drawing from our final night together and the note he left me.

You helped me, too, Charlotte. More than you know. With my deepest affection, Lachlan.

I cannot decide who I miss more lately, him or Granny Maggie. It's hard not to view her secrets as betrayal, even if she lost her memories the moment that ring fell from her finger.

The piece I'm working on is a portrait of her at my age. I'm taking the woman I remember—the wild mane of gray hair, the pale blue eyes, the wicked grin—and trying to imagine how she must have looked when Sabre met her. She had deep copper hair when she was younger—a point of great pride. She loved how the color made her stand out in a crowd. My mother had strawberry blond hair, a mix of Granny's and Grandpa Edward's. And then there's me with my pale blond waves. As if the color dulled with each new generation. As if I am a washed-out imitation of the bold, adventurous women that came before me.

There's a vise around my ribs, a deep ache that is less due to Granny Maggie's failure to hint her faerie stories were real—did she even know?—and more due to her passing. I will never get a chance to share *my* faerie story with her.

The door behind me cracks open. "You're still awake. Want some company?"

"Not really," I say to Aowen, pulling pencil across paper without looking up.

"I thought you might say that. Which is why I brought reinforcements."

I glance over my shoulder, and she wiggles a basket of caramel tarts.

Damn her.

"Come on, then," I sigh, gesturing to the other armchair. She sweeps in and sets the basket onto the small table between us. "Where's Vesper?"

"Mending garments for the Vale refugees. Three more groups arrived today. Including another family with small children. The upper floors of the east wing are very lively."

"How does His Grace feel about that?"

"Do you know I caught him *smiling* this morning? Revolutionary."

I smirk, folding up my sketchbook and tucking it beside me. Better there than on the table where Aowen might be tempted to pick it up and peruse its scandalous contents. "And where is the House's illustrious master? You seem very reluctant to leave his side lately."

Aowen shrugs, pursing her lips. "He's walking the grounds with Skadi."

Of course, I know this. Sabre and his necrowolf run the same route every night. But I'll never pass up a chance to needle Aowen about him.

"How is your information gathering going?" she asks.

I groan, grabbing a warm tart from the basket and sinking my teeth into gooey, buttery deliciousness. "Not well. There's barely anything in Granny's sketchbooks save drawings of your maybe-future-husband. There are no journals, no secret notes in any of the

other books, nothing. I am beginning to wonder if she took the fragment on impulse. Or …"

"Or what?"

"Are we entirely sure Sabre is telling the truth of how it disappeared?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if he asked her to take it away?"

Aowen scrunches her nose, defensive. It takes everything in my power to not croon *you like him*. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"You heard what he said when we arrived. That he was so heartsick, he never wanted to be king. What better way to kill that opportunity than sending your human lover home with the magical relic needed to make it happen?"

Aowen props her chin in her hand and stares into the fire. "I cannot explain it, Charlotte, but I … I trust him. I believe he has his people's interests—the whole kingdom's interests, really—at heart." I sigh, because despite my playing devil's advocate, I agree with her. "He wants the fighting to end. And for the first time in a long time, he believes it may be possible."

"I suppose you're right," I say, polishing off my tart. I want to reach for another, but I stop myself. I'm already restless; the sugar will make it worse.

Frustration drills my skull. I am not going to find any clues here among Granny Maggie's abandoned treasures. And Death continues to stalk me, patient yet ever present. If I fail to find the fragment, I suppose I could stay in the human realm, let the ring fall off and forget everything that's happened to me here. But then what would become of Aowen? Of Vesper? Of Garred? Of the people of the Vale?

Of Lachlan?

Bugger it. I'm eating another tart.

"Have you heard any news from Desmond?" I ask, nonchalant, digging back into the basket.

"What kind of news?"

"Oh, you know. How fare the people of Tír na Strelle? How are preparations coming along for the Wild Hunt? What does he have Lachlan working on?"

She must have caught the hitch in my voice because now she's the one smirking. But it falls from her face when she answers, "I am not speaking to my brother."

I cock an eyebrow. "Is that wise? With the Hunt so close and how high the stakes are?"

"He betrayed me," she spits. "We had an agreement. I would help him become king and in return, he would leave me to a life of my choosing. Instead, he used me as a pawn to achieve his own ends. I … I am not sure I'll ever be able to forgive him for that."

"Well, I do hope that won't make family dinners awkward once we're sisters."

She huffs a laugh, but deep hurt darkens her eyes. "I was nine years old when he was born, have I ever told you?"

I shake my head.

She stares into the dying fire, shivering. "He was such a beautiful baby. Everyone said so. Mother and Father were over the moon. House Macán, at last secured by a male heir. There were no celebrations when I was born, only tense whispers and hand-wringing. But I loved him so much, the jealousy was easier to bear. I was the eldest, but what did that matter?"

Her expression shutters, frozen once more by her imperviousness.

"A woman as the head of House? What could possibly be more absurd?"

Aowen would make a wonderful queen. She's confident, open-minded, and she cares for every living creature in the Otherworld. She's brave, she's not afraid to make difficult decisions, and she steps aside when needed to let others shine.

Yes, she would make an excellent queen.

A far better queen than me.

I wrap my hand around hers, squeezing gently in a silent moment of solidarity.

Because if I don't find Sabre's lost Bannrhorn fragment, there will be no queen at all.



CHAPTER

FORTY-THREE

On the eve of Mabon, at ten minutes to midnight, Aowen, Sabre and I are standing in front of the door to Granny Maggie's quarters.

Aowen's gripping my hands, Vesper perched on her shoulder, Sabre a towering presence behind her. "You remember how time works between the two realms?"

I nod, my stomach queasy. I went overboard at dinner this evening, preparing myself for the loss of the delectable food here in the Otherworld. Or perhaps it's because Aowen has just reminded me that once the clock strikes midnight, I will have nine Otherworld hours—sixty-three human realm hours, roughly two-and-a-half days—to find the Bannrhorn fragment before we need to leave to join the other Houses for the Wild Hunt.

Less than three days to find my way to Granny Maggie's cottage and figure out where she's hidden the damned relic. At least travel times won't be an issue—Sabre has given me an obscura compass. It permits its user to journey through shadows, reach any far flung destination in the blink of the eye beneath its cloudy glass surface. It will also be a timer, of sorts. Once the eye fully opens, the magic

within it will have leached out, and Sabre will officially propose. Which will cause the ring to deliver me straight back to him in the Otherworld.

I turn to him now, with one final, desperate question. "Did she say anything out of the ordinary on those last days with you? Anything at all?"

Sabre shakes his head. "Nothing. Though she did make one request before she walked through the door—she asked me to not formally reject her, said she couldn't bear it. That she'd rather let the ring fall off at dusk on Mabon, her deadline for assembling the fragments. She wanted a few more days in the human realm with her memories of me."

I nod. That would have given her nearly a week to do … something. Though heaven only knows what.

Aowen squeezes my hands. "Are you sure you're okay to do this alone? I can go with you." Her gaze flicks back over her shoulder toward Sabre. I don't think she likes the idea of leaving him.

He frowns.

I don't think he likes it either.

I squeeze back. "I'll be fine. It would be a bit difficult to explain … well, *you* to my relatives. If I run into any of them."

"I could glamour myself."

"Impossible. You'd never pass for something as plain as a human, even with a glamour up," I tease to distract myself from my nerves.

"Vesper could accompany you."

"Food. Lonely food," Vesper trills.

She doesn't want to come with me, either. Not that I blame her.

What if I get stuck there? What if I can never return?

What if I've lost my chance to tell Lachlan how much he meant to me?

"I—"

A door slams and crashing footsteps echo through the foyer.

"What in the name of Danu?" Sabre murmurs, turning toward the end of the hall.

A tingle warms the base of my skull and Lachlan's voice doubles; *Charlotte* is breathed reverently into my mind at the same time as "Miss Fitzroy?" is called out downstairs.

We're on the second floor, I say through the *diamrhán*. *Up the stairs, then turn left down the third hallway.*

Anticipation thrums a heavy beat in my veins as his footsteps come closer. And closer. And closer still.

And then, there he is.

Profound relief flickers through our connection. And it's not only coming from my side.

The warm tingle at the base of my skull flares into a liquid inferno, soft, malleable flames that start in my chest and spread through my limbs.

I want to run to him, leap into his arms, bury my face in his neck, but I don't dare under the watchful eyes of Aowen, Sabre, and Vesper.

Bursts of joy pop through the *diamrhán*, though Lachlan's expression remains serious. His fist clenches and unclenches at his side, the only physical tell that he's struggling as much as I am to not touch.

"Sir Cathal?" Sabre booms. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to resume my duties as Miss Fitzroy's bodyguard," Lachlan says, a bit breathless. "Desmond sent me."

"Did he?" Sabre looks to Aowen, baffled.

"Yes," Lachlan says, perfectly matter-of-fact. Then, in too incredulous of a tone for someone who could have waited until morning to "resume his duties," asks, "Why are you all standing in the hallway in the middle of the night?"

As soon as he says it, the large clock in the foyer tolls.

One, two, three gongs.

"It's a longer story than we have time to tell." Aowen folds Lachlan's and my hands together.

Four, five, six gongs.

If we don't open the door soon, we'll miss our window.

"Go with her," Aowen says.

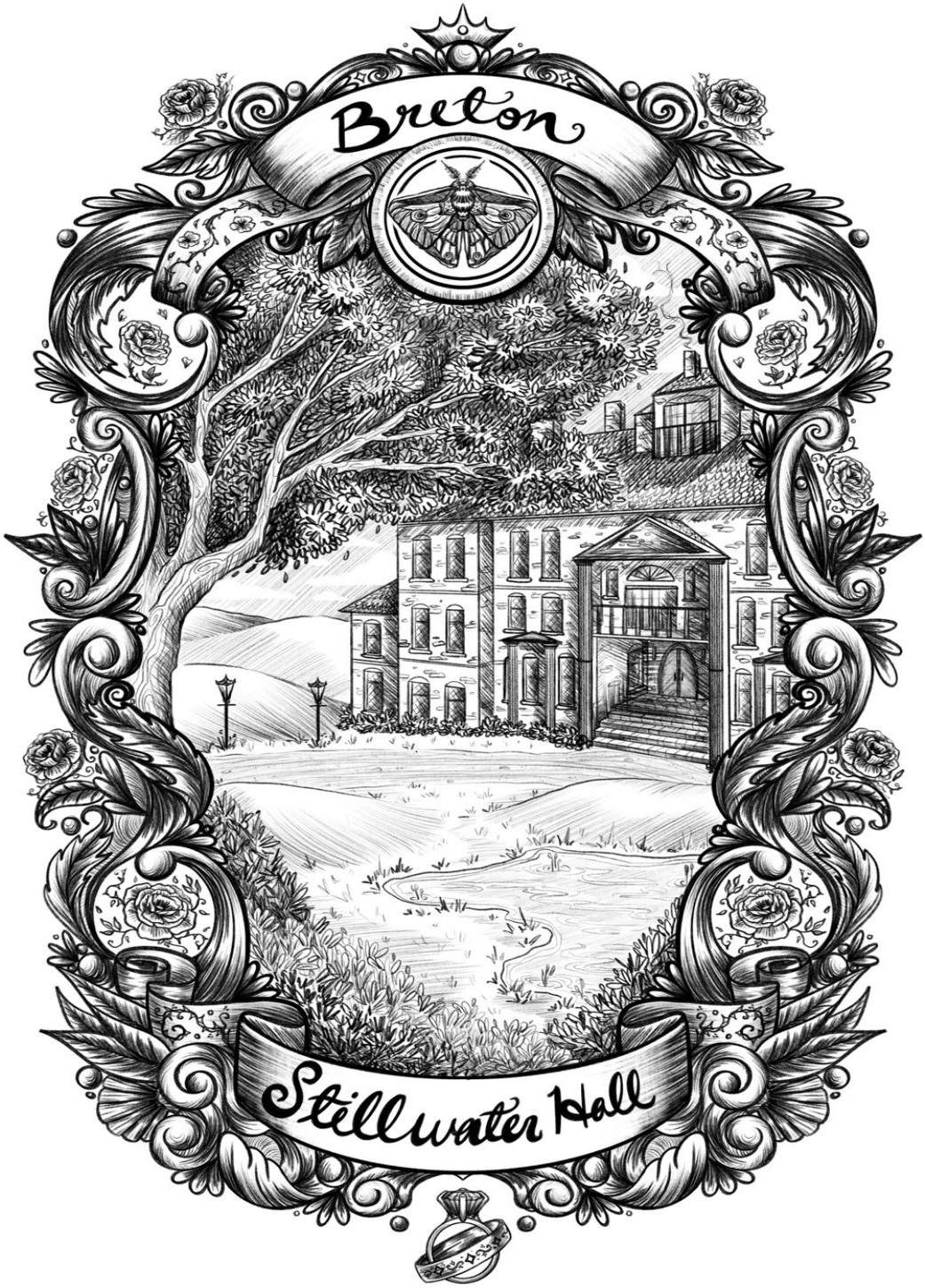
Seven, eight, nine gongs.

Lachlan merely nods and grips my hand tighter. He doesn't ask where we're going or why or what we're doing.

On the tenth gong, I open the door.

On the eleventh, Sabre says, "May luck be on your side, Miss Fitzroy."

On the twelfth, Lachlan and I step through the door.


Breton
Stillwater Hall



CHAPTER

FORTY-FOUR

We step out into a mausoleum.

Moonlight falling through stained glass paints the dusty floor in shades of ruby and emerald. On either side of us, sarcophagi are stacked three high within the cracked walls.

I know this place. It's the Fitzroy family tomb. For the men, at least. Granny Maggie's grave is in the cemetery outside. I wonder why the door opened here? Is it because I was thinking of her when I walked through? Did the ring deliver me to her final resting place?

I turn to Lachlan, who's still clutching my hand. We stare at each other as dried leaves scuttle across the floor.

We're both a little shy, I suppose. It's been weeks since we were last together, naked and spent in a warm embrace. He's quieter than I'm used to. The kind of quiet he reserves for strangers. Is that all I am to him now?

"So," he asks, "perhaps you should explain what I've gotten myself into?"

I laugh, breaking the tension, and before I can get a word out, he's kissing me. A hand spears into my hair while the other splays

across my back to pull me close. He smells of wind and rain and the acrid, metal scent of Otherworld magic.

I lose myself in his kiss, his touch, if only for a moment. One we probably cannot spare.

"I missed you," I attempt in between strokes of his tongue into my mouth.

"Charlotte, you have no idea."

"Why didn't you contact me through the *diamrhán*?"

"It doesn't work that far away."

"And you didn't feel it pertinent to inform me of that before you left?" I'm half-ashamed of my neediness, but so thankful to be in his arms again that I hardly care.

"I'm sorry, I thought it would be easier on both of us that way, but I was—" He groans when I bite his lip ring, a punishment. He runs a hand down my body. "We should stop. I know we've done some wild things together, but fucking you on the floor in front of the dead feels a bit sacrilegious, even for me. Also, and I probably should have asked this before I stepped through that door, but … are we in the human realm?"

I pull back—absolute torture—and press a hand against his chest. Even through his leather breastplate, his heart pounds against my palm.

And as much as I want to test his restraint, let him have me right here in this mausoleum, I am keenly aware of our timeline.

"I will explain, I promise." I guide him out into the cemetery of the North Umberton Cathedral, less than five miles from Stillwater Hall.

We trek down a gravel path, then turn into a row of headstones, stopping at a grand one that's nearly as tall as Lachlan himself. There's a sculpture on top, a wandering angel. A nod to Granny's adventurous side that I convinced Uncle Edward to add. I hadn't seen it until now—the sculptor was still working when I was pulled into the Otherworld. Now, it's dirt-smudged and moss-stained, reminding me that though I feel I've only been gone four months, two years have passed on this side.

I kneel in the wet grass, croak out a wet and wobbly, “Hello again, you old bat.”

God, I miss the way we used to tease each other. Granny Maggie was my everything. Mother and father, guardian and enforcer, tutor and chief instigator. She understood my need to create, my yearning for adventure. I think that’s why she taught me to draw, so I could visit other worlds in my imagination whenever I wished.

“You’ve got some explaining to do,” I whisper, running my fingers along her name, the stone cool and damp. It was early spring when I left the human realm, but now there’s an autumnal chill in the air. Not the biting, relentless cold of winter, but enough to make me shiver beneath my wool jacket and leather pants.

“Come,” Lachlan whispers, pulling me from the ground. “We need to find shelter for the night. And I need to weave a glamour before anyone sees me.”

I rise, swiping wet leaves from my knees before kissing my fingers and touching the angel. Saying a silent prayer to Lachlan’s gods that Granny Maggie has found peace in the Afterlands. I have a suspicion she’d rather be there than in Breton’s heaven. Who knows? Maybe they’re one and the same.

“I know a place.” I pull the obscura compass from my pocket. “But don’t weave that glamour just yet.

“I have plans for you.”



CHAPTER

FORTY-FIVE

We do two things as soon as we arrive at Granny Maggie's thatch-roofed, two-story cottage in the southlands.

First, and after some very mild begging (the barest suggestion and a soft please), Lachlan fucks me standing up right inside the door. It's fast and frenzied and despite our efforts to draw it out, it's been too long and we're far too desperate for each other to make it last more than a few minutes.

Second, Lachlan steps back outside to use the moonlight to weave himself a glamour. It's not as powerful as it would have been in the Otherworld, so he's only capable of a few minor adjustments. Outwardly, he looks human; he's rounded his ears and dulled his eyes, shortened his fangs and covered his piercings. He left the tattoos, since most of them are hidden by his clothes anyway. Even with the tweaks, he cuts a striking figure.

After the wall-fucking and the glamouring and a quick nap in my old bed—I never realized how small it was until it needed to hold a tall, strapping faerie knight—we woke before dawn and began our search.

Fortunately, the cottage is in excellent shape. The furniture is covered, and there's a layer of dust upon every surface, but not as much as one might expect after two years. All the hinges have been well oiled, and the windows look clean. Someone has been coming to check on the place. Perhaps Uncle Edward is trying to sell it?

Lachlan and I decide to divide and conquer, so he begins downstairs in the small library while I start upstairs in Granny Maggie's studio.

Of course, we don't find the fragment anywhere. I am not surprised, really. If it were here, the ring would have heated the moment I laid eyes on the cottage.

Instead, we spend the morning gathering anything that might provide a clue—the faerie tale books she used to read me, documents pertaining to her life after the Otherworld (marriage certificates, birth announcements, family obituaries, and the like), plus a king's ransom of sketchbooks. Then in the afternoon, we sit at the kitchen table reviewing everything over a sad lunch of boiled eggs (pilfered from the neighbor's chickens), apple slices (pilfered from the neighbor's orchard), and bland tea (pilfered from the old tin I found in the cupboard).

"Anything?" He grimaces as he sips from his cup, then shakes it off as if he doesn't want to insult my tea-making skills.

"Ring's not warming at anything, yet." I leaf through a sketchbook, crunching into an apple slice. "Although this book is nothing but drawings of me as a child—"

"Let me see." He swipes it up despite my feeble protest, and his smile grows as he flies through the pages. "You were quite the little scamp, weren't you?"

I know what he's seeing—me, covered in mud, holding up a frog; me, screaming my head off outside a toy shop when Granny wouldn't buy me the stuffed bear in the window; me, leaping over the creek out back, barefoot in a ripped pinafore.

I remember the painting in the Eyrie, of Lachlan as a sad, angry boy, and a throat-stinging rush of love for my grandmother overtakes me. I could have easily lost my spirit due to my mother's

abandonment. But Granny Maggie never made me feel anything less than supremely wanted.

"I was a great deal of trouble," I say proudly, clearing my throat.

"Was?"

I gasp, mock-insulted. "If I am too much for you, Sir Cathal, I'll happily take my trouble elsewhere."

"I am a celestial knight, Miss Fitzroy." He cocks his head and bites his lip ring. "I can handle you."

I almost ask if he'd like to start right now.

"Speaking of trouble," I say instead, "have there been any developments in the search for the Harvest Ball poisoner?"

He blows out a weary sigh. "They caught the man who did it."

"Who?"

"Timothy Hopnell. One of Torvil's valets found traces of the poison in his guestroom at the castle."

I press a hand to my chest. "Why would he have done such a thing?"

"He claims he didn't. But his father testified that he'd fallen in with the anti-monarchists."

I cock a brow. "Really?"

"Must have. It was the same poison the crypt attacker tried to use on you."

"Dreadful. And what will happen to him?" Concern wavers the question, and Lachlan levels me with a sharp stare.

"He tried to kill you, Charlotte. He's being held at a prison in Tír na Lune for now. His sentence is to participate in the Hunt, where one of your suitors will have the honor of killing him on your behalf."

I shudder, my overly active imagination picturing the sarcastic, intelligent, bespectacled man I remember from courtly dinners getting torn apart by Skadi or Torvil's báshounds or Desmond's gryffalcon.

I do not ponder it long, returning my attention to our task. Because if I can't figure out where Granny Maggie hid this blasted horn fragment, none of it will matter anyway.

Lachlan and I spend the rest of the day, the gentle yet terrifying closure of the first of my two-and-a-half days in the human realm,

quietly reviewing our materials.

The ring gently warms as I'm searching through a sketchbook I found tucked away in Granny's nightstand. A small clue, *finally*. Inside, there are numerous etchings of two figures posed together. Like she was practicing something.

Revelation nudges the back of my mind, but escapes before I can catch it.

I move on to a new sketchbook, the ring cooling once more, and pause to accept another cup of weak tea from Lachlan. Along with my third boiled egg of the day and a handful of walnuts from the tree out back.

The next time I glance up, the sun has set, Lachlan's lit a few candles and a fire, and I realize we've been sitting together in silence for several hours. It's been nice, actually. To exist in the same space as him.

For a moment, I let myself dream …

What would happen if I let the time expire? If I stayed here in the human realm? Would he want to stay with me? And when I lost my memories, would he be able to convince me of what we are to each other?

I doubt he could stomach abandoning his people—Garred, the children at the Eyrie, and all the fae of Campan's Vale. I am the best chance they've had in years to regain peace and normalcy, a chance to rebuild. Am I selfish enough to take that away from them?

I look toward Lachlan, his auburn hair gilded by the candleglow, his glasses perched on the end of his nose, and I wish I *were* that selfish.

I do not want to give him up.

It is the first time I have allowed myself to think such a thing. The first time I've formed the words, if only in my mind.

It's unlikely I'm going to find anything in these books. At least not right now. My brain is feeling rather mushy from hours and hours of searching for clues. I need a break.

And I can think of exactly how I want to spend it.

Lachlan comes very willingly when I take his hand and guide him upstairs.

~

LACHLAN IS SO deep inside me that I cannot tell where he ends and I begin.

I'm on top but certainly not in charge. My palms are flat against his chest and he's got one hand wrapped around my wrists while the other grips my hip, rocking me back and forth onto his cock.

It's as good as it always is. Better even. If for no other reason than every time with him feels better than the last.

His sapphire eyes—bright and sparkling once again—rove from the place where our bodies are joined and up over my stomach, my breasts, my face while he whispers soft praise like *exquisite* and *so fucking tight* and *could stay inside you forever* and *you'll come for me again, won't you?*

I will. And I do.

As soon as I led him up here, I insisted he remove the glamour. I love his wild parts, the attributes that remind me that it's an entirely different species of man who's splitting me apart and making me scream. When he first entered me tonight, inch by inch in a way that no matter how wet I am is never not painful, I looked to his pointed ears, ran a fingertip over his fang, and I came instantly.

He laughed, tweaking my nipple to extend the aftershocks, and crooned, "Insatiable."

It doesn't bruise when he says it. Not like when men have said it to me before. Or when I've thought it about myself. Lachlan makes me feel as though my appetites for food, for sex, for *life*, are perfectly normal. That I should have whatever I want, whenever I want. Like I could drink the world, and he'd be right beside me to refill my cup.

An enveloping, radiant heat sweeps through me that has nothing to do with the pleasure the beautiful knight moving beneath me has wrought and has more to do with—

"*The Knight Departs!*" I scream.

"What was that?" Lachlan, buried to the hilt, stills my hips, chuckling softly. "Did I break you? Is there too much pleasure

flooding your brain?"

"No, no!" I smack my palm against his rock-hard pectoral, a different kind of excitement coursing through me. "The painting! In the south gallery at Stillwater. I can't believe I never … Always knew there was a reason I was … Maybe there's some kind of …"

Lachlan sits up, heavy-lidded and grinning, but does not yet pull out. "Charlotte." It's soft, fond, maybe a touch exasperated. He brushes my hair back from my face and cups my cheeks. "What are you babbling about, little queen?"

I take a deep breath, inadvertently tightening my core, and Lachlan sinks a groan of pleasure against my collarbone. "You're killing me, sweetheart."

"The old sketchbook I was looking through earlier. The ring reacted to it. And there were iterations of the same pose over and over again. I knew they looked familiar, but I couldn't figure out what they were until just now. They're from a painting called *The Knight Departs*. I think … I think my Granny Maggie was the artist. And I think it might be an ode to her time in the Otherworld with Sabre. Maybe there's a clue about where she hid the fragment. We need to go there. Right now."

"Right now?" His smile is incredulous. "May I finish first?"

I glance down between us, marveling at the way we fit together. Like it's the most natural thing in the world for a human woman and a faerie man to be fused, one being, one body.

I lean in and bite his jaw. "Allow me, Sir Cathal."

He wraps his arms around me, fingers splayed on my ribs, and lets me control the pace. I curl my hands around his nape, fisting his hair as leverage while I drag myself up and down his cock. Our faces are so close I can see every muscle twitch, feel every hitched breath upon my lips.

It's a blissful eternity and yet no time at all before he's the one throwing his head back and screaming *my* name—"Charlotte. *Charlotte. CHARLOTTE!"*—into the cozy silence of the cottage.

We clean ourselves up, get dressed, then use the obscura compass to return to Stillwater Hall.

Where this entire topsy-turvy Season started.



CHAPTER

FORTY-SIX

Lachlan and I argue the moment our feet touch the silvered grass in the woods behind my aunt and uncle's estate.

I want to break into the manor immediately, search the painting for clues, give us as much time as possible to find the Bannrhorn fragment.

Lachlan believes it would be more prudent to wait until morning, when we can approach the household as visitors, not burglars. What if someone calls the constable?

But, I counter, if this was Lachlan's plan the whole time, why had we not just stayed up at the cottage? I can think of a hundred more creative ways to test the durability of my old bed.

He whisper-shouts that I am like a dog with a bone and he didn't think he was going to be able to talk me out of it. He looks angry, but also, dare I say, a little smitten. Like maybe he, too, is questioning how quickly we need to return to a world where our fates are destined to diverge.

Something flutters behind my ribs, and I relent.

Anyway, he isn't entirely wrong. If one of the staff were to come upon us in the gallery, I shudder to think what Lachlan might be

forced to do to keep them quiet.

Plus, I need some time to think up a story. In the excitement over my epiphany, I'd quite forgotten that as far as the Fitzroys are concerned, I've been gone for two years. To break into the main house raving about horned faeries and ancient relics and wild hunts with a strange, tall man by my side might get me thrown into an asylum. And that would have a very adverse effect upon our timeline.

Instead, we stay at an inn in North Umberton. I had no idea how tired I truly was, because as soon as my adrenaline wears off, I nearly fall asleep at the counter while Lachlan pays for a room with the false coin Sabre provided us.

The next morning, we walk through the market stalls in search of breakfast before we make our way to Stillwater. Lachlan purchases me a bag of late-season cherries and a minced meat hand pie.

"Was there leftover coin?" I ask, sucking in a breath to cool my inadvisedly large and volcanically hot bite.

"Nope." He pops a cherry into his mouth. "Nicked it from the till after I carried you upstairs."

"Criminal," I tease, stroking my tongue over the burned roof of my mouth. "Did you ev—"

"Charlotte?!"

I lift my head to see my cousin Lizzie hurtling a pram over the packed dirt. She skids to a halt, pram abandoned, and throws herself upon me in a crushing hug.

When she pulls back, her eyes are shining. "My god, Charlotte. They thought you were dead." I'm baffled she would have been so upset by my absence. Also a little touched. "I visited Granny's cottage, but there was no sign of you. I've been going back every few months to see if … Where have you been?"

I unravel the tale I've spent the morning inventing. That I couldn't stomach another Season. That I used my inheritance to fund that continental trip Granny Maggie and I had been dreaming of but had never taken. I introduce her to my "husband"—Lachlan was both delighted to contribute to the ruse and annoyed that I

thought I had to ask permission—and she's just as enamored by him as the other women in town.

"And who is this little angel?" I ask, peeking into the pram upon the most adorable, chubby-cheeked baby girl, soundly asleep despite her mother's careless driving.

"I married a *duke* at the end of that Season," Lizzie says, immediately turning the conversation back onto herself. I suppose she wouldn't be Lizzie if she didn't. It doesn't bother me as much as it used to. "Charles Cranford, son of the Duke of Mewsbury. Temperance Houghton was livid. She still hasn't made a match."

Lizzie cackles, victorious and cruel. Well on her way to the life of a vulture in Seasons to come. I stroke a fingertip across the baby's tiny palm, say a prayer that she'll find happiness regardless of her mother's schemes.

"The title of Favourite paid off," Lizzie finishes.

Lachlan's hand at my lower back tenses. We cannot form the *diamrhán* in the human realm, but I am dying to know where his thoughts have strayed. He knew I wasn't the Favourite, but I hope he's not thinking things could have been easier for him if Lizzie had been the one he found that night.

"What are your plans for the evening?" she asks. "Mother's hosting a dinner party. Oh, you *must* come. Everyone will want to meet your dashing new husband, and—"

"We've been married for two years, actually." Lachlan grabs my hand and runs his thumb over the silver ring. "The minute I spoke to her, I said to myself, *here is a woman I want in my life always*. So, not precisely a *new* husband."

I stare at him, this human ghost in the shape of my faerie knight, and am hit with such an overwhelming wave of gratitude and longing that I hardly know what to do with it.

"New husband, old husband, no matter." Lizzie waves her hand, and a coo rises from the pram. "You'll come then? Both of you?"

Once my brain catches up with reality—rather than whirring around the possibility of a truth buried in Lachlan's role-playing—I respond with, "Of course. Actually, do you think Aunt Teddy would mind if we popped over now? I want to show Lachlan the art

collection. And there are a few things I'd like to retrieve before we return to the continent."

Lizzie hefts her baby into her arms—heavens, I must be just as self-centered as she is; I didn't even ask the child's name—and she blinks rapidly. "Oh, your sketchbook, do you mean? I've kept it for you. I've been certain someday you'd return. You're, um, very talented, Charlotte. I'm sorry if I never told you. Let me get Mary settled again, then I need to finish my shopping and we can walk to Stillwater together, yes?"

"That sounds lovely," I say, though Lizzie has already turned her attention to baby Mary, bobbing her gently as she pushes the pram away.

"What was in that sketchbook, I wonder?" Lachlan's whisper at my ear sends shivers down my spine.

"Nothing you haven't done to me at least twice," I murmur.

"Hmm." He slides a hand around my waist to pull me closer. "Why don't you show me, and we'll replicate a few before we 'return to the continent', *wife*?" He bites my neck and I giggle.

"Oh, Charlotte!" Lizzie shouts from halfway down the market lane. "I forgot to mention. You'll never guess who's coming to dinner tonight.

"George and Jane Somersby."



CHAPTER

FORTY-SEVEN

Stillwater Hall is as sprawling and stately as ever, her red-brick chimneys cresting the alders as Lizzie guides us up the path. If the Fitzroys do not notice I remained unchanged after two years away, perhaps it is because their ancestral home is similarly ageless.

And though I may look the same on the outside, inside I feel eons away from the woman I was when I last walked the manor's hallowed halls. Then, I was heartbroken, mourning the death of a relationship that had never even existed.

Now, the heartbreak is still there, but it's reformed around different primary materials. A grief I haven't even experienced yet.

I slide my gaze toward Lachlan, who's assessing the doors, the windows, the roofline with the eye of a knight who's always thinking three steps ahead. He's holding my hand, idly stroking his thumb along my palm.

God, we're going to destroy each other. What the hell were we thinking?

Lizzie leads us up the entry stairs, and inside, the reunions go smoother than I would have anticipated.

Aunt Teddy—gobsmacked to see me but perhaps not quite as relieved as her daughter—gives Lachlan an approving look.

Uncle Edward barely removes his pipe as we pause at his study, but does manage a quick, "You're well, then, Charlotte?" before turning back to his ledgers.

Lastly, and to my delighted shock, is Esmeralda, for whom Lizzie has been caring in my absence.

"Charles is something of a naturalist," she says, pursing her lips at the boomslang. "He adores the vile thing."

Lizzie returns to her quarters to put Mary down for a nap—it is lovely to see my cousin as a mother, if unusual that she cares for something more than herself—and Lachlan and I make our way to the south gallery.

Breaking through beams of sunlight, we walk to the back wall where *The Knight Departs* holds a place of prominence.

Now that I understand the inspiration, the piece is even more devastating. I study the familiar paint strokes, overcome.

My sob has barely burst forth before Lachlan is pressing me to his chest, stroking my hair. "What's wrong?"

"There was this whole part of her life I knew nothing about. And now she's gone, and I can't ask her about it." I pull back and wipe my eyes. "Not that she would remember. I'm being silly."

He swipes my cheek with his thumb. "It's never silly to long for those we've lost."

I turn to study the painting, leaning back against Lachlan's solid warmth. I thought something would jump out at me the moment I saw it again. A hidden clue that my time in the Otherworld would reveal. But upon first pass, and other than the ring heating on my finger, there's … nothing.

"Why do you think she did it?" Lachlan murmurs.

I blow out a watery sigh. "I wish I knew. The woman I knew was fearless. Fiercely independent. She did everything she could to protect me from the nastier gossip about my mother. I'm not sure I would go so far as to say that she hated the peerage or the monarchy, but she was damn close. Perhaps that attitude was sown during her time in the Otherworld with Sabre? Maybe she thought

she was being revolutionary, stealing the Bannrhorn and ensuring the death of a system she loathed, in one world if not the other?"

Lachlan's lips kick up. "She sounds like a formidable woman."

I smile. "She was."

"She'd have to be to raise such a formidable granddaughter."

I scoff. I may not be as meek as I was four months ago, but formidable seems a bit of a stretch. "Hardly."

"Charlotte." He bites out my name like he's angry that I'm being so hard on myself. "You are days away from achieving what no woman has been able to achieve in *years* in the Otherworld." He turns me around, then presses my palm against his heart, that low, steady thump that always calms me. "If that's not formidable, then I fear I don't know the meaning of the word." He kisses me, soft and gentle. My blood heats anyway.

I turn back to the familiar painting, and I do see a few things I hadn't noticed before. It's obvious the red-haired woman is an avatar for Granny Maggie herself. And there's the barest hint of horns atop the knight's head—a few strokes of curling shadow that now seem so deliberate.

I step back, frustrated and mildly panicked that I have just over twenty-four hours left to find the fragment and my most promising lead is about to shrivel into dust. "Do you see anything of interest?"

"I do, actually."

I toss a glance over my shoulder. "What?"

"Those moths," he says, stepping closer to examine the insects with the large sage-green wings swirling around the knight and his lady. "Have you seen them before?"

"Yes," I say, wary. "But only here around Stillwater. Out in the woods, mostly. I used to draw them."

Lachlan nods, an odd emotion that almost looks like resignation shadowing his features. "That's because they are not of the human world. Well, not only. They're called vanguard moths. And they live on a very particular species of tree."

My hand comes up to my throat. "Do you think there's one here?"

Lachlan sighs, his face inscrutable. "I know there is.

“And I know where it is, too.”



CHAPTER

FORTY-EIGHT

As soon as Lachlan dropped his revelation, one of the new lady's maids came to fetch me to dress for dinner.

Given our timeline, I almost bowed out of the whole thing, but Lachlan informed me that his mysterious tree wouldn't reveal itself until dawn anyway. Which meant both more time with him and a final meal with my human family.

Maybe a goodbye seems a worthless thing—Aunt Teddy has always been a bit cruel, and my Uncle Edward indifferent. But I have at least a few good memories of Lizzie and William and his wife, Imogene.

And besides, we do need to eat.

Lachlan and I approach the dining room together, lilting conversation, tinkling glassware, and a child's screeching laughter bouncing off the walls. I halt outside the arched entranceway.

I think of everything I used to worry about before entering a room like this. What if no one acknowledges me? What if they judge my hair or my dress? What if I call someone by the wrong name or, heaven forbid, the right name, but then cannot think of how to start a conversation?

But I've fought for my confidence over the past months in the Otherworld. And given the stakes, worrying about what anyone in there thinks of me just feels so … trivial.

Lachlan sweeps his palm down the bare skin of my back, exposed by the modern dress Lizzie lent me for dinner, then whispers against my temple, "Formidable."

I square my shoulders, take his arm, and stride into the room.

"Charlotte!" William bounds over with all the energy of a curly-coated retriever and sweeps me into a hug. "Christ, we were all so worried about you." He pulls back, frowning. "Why didn't you write?"

Imogene, an elegant contrast to her energetic husband, saunters up holding a sweet little boy with dark hair and a runny nose. "Leave the poor woman alone, Will." Her eyes sweep approvingly up Lachlan, who towers absurdly over the group. "She was otherwise occupied." She leans in closer to me. "Well *done*, Charlotte."

She introduces me to their son, another Edward, but discourages me from hugging the child due to his cold. She hands him off to his nursemaid as the adults take their seats for dinner.

Aunt Teddy has changed up the seating arrangements and instead of a single long table, there are several round ones scattered throughout the room.

At our table of eight are Lizzie and her husband Charles, a rugged man with a deep tan, a broad white smile, and a mop of sun-kissed hair. He looks as if he'd rather be hunting game in the North Umberton hills instead of trussed up in a tailcoat, but he's so attentive to Lizzie and so obviously infatuated—holding her hand, playing with her hair, buttering her bread—that it's hard to find him anything but charming.

William and Imogene are here as well, and shortly after we take our seats, the first course is served: pumpkin soup topped with spiced seeds and a swirl of cream. It's divine, even compared to the Otherworld's wonderful dishes; Lachlan eats every drop, murmuring his incredulity.

After the soup course, the two seats between Imogene and me remain unoccupied, and I am wondering how long they—

"Hello, chickadee."

My stomach drops as my gaze lifts to … God, George looks terrible.

His nose is blotchy, his eyes bloodshot, and his hair limp and greasy. He darts for the chair next to me before Jane—wearing a tight-lipped expression no one would ever mistake for a smile—can get to it first. There is a very awkward moment where they whisper-fight over who should take the seat.

George wins, and I am stuck sitting between my first love and my current …

It feels disingenuous to call Lachlan anything other than my love. But we've never talked about any of it. Not how we're feeling, not what comes after.

Because there is no after for us, I suppose.

The next course—fillet of turbot in a herbed béchamel sauce—is served, and as the group digs in, George leans around me to address Lachlan. "I don't think we've been properly introduced. Who are you?"

An aggressive introduction for someone with George's bland Bretonnic manners.

Lachlan, bless him, appears supremely unbothered. He offers George a warm, polite smile. At least, I'm sure that's how it looks to the rest of the table. I know what lurks beneath his glamour; those fangs are bared. "Lachlan Cathal." He extends a hand over my plate, shaking George's much harder than necessary. George winces, and I inwardly cheer. "Charlotte's husband. And you are?"

George sputters a laugh. "Charlotte's never mentioned me? We were quite close, you know."

William lobs a "Get a hold of yourself, man," which George ignores before slugging back half a glass of gin. Jane grabs his forearm, hissing something too low for the rest of us to hear. He tears his arm away, and his face is so cruel that I feel sorry for her.

This is the man I thought I wanted?

"What do you do?" George slurs, sloshing his drink on the table. Jane hurries to blot it with her napkin.

"I work in personal security for a duke on the continent," Lachlan says calmly, slicing into his fish.

"Which duke?" George asks, leaning over me and pushing his arm against my breast. He's trying to make it look unintentional, but I know him better than that. I shrink away, scooting closer to Lachlan. "I have loads of connections on the continent. Perhaps I know your employer."

"I very much doubt that." Lachlan bakes enough disdain into his answer to redden George's already ruddy cheeks.

"Did she tell you I'm an earl? From one of the richest families in Breton. You seem a bit of a downgrade."

Imogene stares daggers at George while Jane slumps into her chair and tosses down her fork.

"George," I start, testing out some of the authority I've earned in the Otherworld, "you are being incredibly—"

He barrels over me, increasing his volume to drown me out, "How did you two meet?" Beneath the table, his fingers dig into my thigh, and I yelp. "How long after you met did she spread her legs for you? Bet it wasn't long, the little tramp. She's a great lay, though, isn't she? Best I ever had."

Scandalized gasps overtake the table, and poor Jane chokes out a miserable sob. But the vocal commotion is buried beneath a jangle of glassware and cutlery as Lachlan pushes back from the table and slams George into the wall. At a normal human pace, thank goodness, though I know he could have done it far faster.

Lachlan holds George by the throat, expending no effort whatsoever as George scrabbles at his arm, feet kicking uselessly.

Several of the household staff rush over to intervene, but William stops them. Lizzie's eyes sparkle with mad glee, and I have the most intense urge to hug both my cousins.

Lachlan calmly picks his teeth with a pinky, dislodging a speck of parsley and examining it instead of George's purpling face. "Disrespect my wife again and I will rip out your intestines, then use them to fashion you a new cravat."

He flicks the parsley away, then bolts his eyes to George, whose entire face slackens as a stain spreads down his trousers. "Is that clear?"

George nods furiously, and Lachlan drops him to the floor. One of my uncle's valets whisks George from the room, Jane scurrying away behind him. I feel terrible for her. I cannot believe I ever envied her.

The thunderclouds lift, and the rest of the meal passes in easy conversation. No one remarks on George's behavior—nor the things he just revealed about us—and I am, for once, grateful for the Bretonnic tendency to sweep unpleasantness under the rug.

William and Imogene share hilarious stories of little Edward's misadventures, and it is obvious the entire family unit adore one another.

Over dessert—a raspberry meringue so airy it melts at first contact with my tongue—Charles describes the architectural plans for his and Lizzie's new home, spending a particularly long time detailing the four wardrobes he designed specially for her, one for each season. She beams at him, and he seizes her hand, pressing a long kiss to the back of her palm.

Even Aunt Teddy comes over to grill Lachlan about his financial status and land holdings and plans for the future. She's being just as overbearing as she's always been, and maybe it's the food or the drink or the company, but I see it differently now. Less an act of control and more a means to ensure my safety in a world that can be dangerously cruel for women.

Throughout, Lachlan drapes his arm over the back of my chair, twirling my hair through his fingers or stroking my neck. The casual intimacies of two people who belong to each other. I can hardly bear it. Because I never want him to stop.

The evening ends, we say our goodbyes, and the lie tastes bittersweet when I promise we'll visit again soon.

Still, I am glad we had time for this. I feel settled in a way I never expected.

That night at the inn, I am so exhausted from the past two days and the altercation with George and the impending sadness of never seeing my family again that all I manage is to let Lachlan strip off my dress, carry me to bed, and fold me up in his arms.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck and am asleep in seconds.



CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE

The area of the woods that Lachlan leads me to the next morning is not far from where I used to take my daily drawing walks.

We woke early—too early, in my humble opinion—to ensure we're in place as soon as dawn arrives and this special tree (about which Lachlan is being very secretive, if I'm honest) reveals itself.

We turn down a dark, overgrown path, and I can barely see a foot in front of me. I'm yawning, as wobbly-legged as a fawn, so I don't protest much when, after I trip over a root, Lachlan scoops me into his arms.

"Probably should have let me work on my hiking skills," I murmur, resting my head on his bulging shoulder. "I'll face greater dangers than exposed tree roots during the Wild Hunt."

He tenses, but doesn't respond.

Is he facing the end of our affair with the same persistent dread as I am?

He never specified what his next chapter would be, after the Wild Hunt when he leaves Desmond's service. I suspect, but he's never

confirmed, that he'll return to Campan's Vale. Help Garred run the Eyrie.

Find himself a wife.

Something roars in the hidden spaces of my heart, those shadowed corners I don't dare peek into.

I nuzzle into him. He's still mine for a little while.

As a precaution, he's kept up his glamour. Fortunately it's done nothing to mask his scent—clean skin and woodsmoke and wild magic. God, I could eat him alive right this second. I am regretting not doing so last night.

Grey light creeps through the forest, illuminating bark patterns and the shapes of leaves.

"We're not far now." His voice rumbles down my limbs.

"How do you know what we're looking for?"

Yet again, he doesn't answer. He's so quiet this morning, tense and withdrawn. Not the normal flavor of his confident silence.

We crest a small rise, and then—there. At the other side of the shallow valley is a large, flat rock above a hole so deep and dark it looks as if a primordial god stabbed a finger through the world.

And framing the black is a border of fluttering sage green.

Hundreds, even thousands of vanguard moths surround the cave entrance.

"What on earth?" I say, marveling as the ring warms on my finger.

"They're waiting for the door to open."

He settles me on my feet and I dart down to the rock, peering into the darkness. "What door?"

He pulls down a wisp of fading moonlight, but the resulting spark in his palm is much fainter on this side. He takes my hand in the other and guides me into the cave. "You'll see."

His answer ricochets off the damp walls, and it's much warmer in here than it is outside. As if there's a heat source up ahead. It's unnerving; like we're sliding down the gullet of the earth itself.

Vanguard moths dance in and out of his light, and time both slows and speeds, a different beat with each step. It's certainly not following any kind of natural flow, so it's hard to tell how long we

walk. I measure our journey by steady footsteps and eerie plops of water. Fifty. One-hundred. Two-hundred.

Lachlan's moonspark glows brighter and—

That's not the moonspark.

My smile widens, and Lachlan flicks his chin toward the light, urging me to run ahead and explore. He's good at that. Encouraging my excitement, no matter where it leads. And I'm not afraid to do it as long as he's at my back.

The tunnel spills into a vast cavern, so high it fades up into blackness.

The floor is a jumble of large, round stones cut through with winding paths of dense grass, every inch of flora coated with luminescent gold. More vanguard moths slice dizzying lines through the humid air, and in the very center is an impossibly large oak. A colossus. The largest living thing I have ever seen. Its gnarled branches twist up into the dark, and its roots form a tangled tapestry that radiates out toward the edges of the cavern. Vanguard moths blanket the broad trunk like living bark.

"What is this place?" I ask, awe softening my voice.

"This is a beacon oak," Lachlan answers, reverently. "One of the first beings born in your world. Grown from an acorn planted by Danu herself. They allow any creature of the Otherworld to return, should they find themselves trapped in the human realm. If we get stuck here long enough, we're overcome by the time compression and we begin aging unnaturally fast." I shoot him a panicked look, but he just chuckles. "Three days isn't long enough to kill me, little queen. Don't worry. Three weeks might do the trick, though."

"Do Aowen and Sabre know about it? Why didn't we use this pathway into the human world? Why did we wait until the equinox to open that door?"

Lachlan glances up at the tree. "Only Otherworld creatures can enter from this side and only humans can enter from the other." He taps the silver band on my finger. "Because of the ring, the tree recognizes you as an Otherworld creature. You wouldn't have been let through on that side." He opens a palm into the air and a vanguard moth lands, tiptoeing across his fingers. "These are the

only beings who can enter through both sides; they've adapted over centuries to the time differential."

I cock an eyebrow. "How do you know so much about them? And how did you know where to find this place?"

He shrugs, inscrutable once more, and something shifts beneath us, a great rumbling groan. The ground trembles and the large stones clack together.

"What's happening?" I ask.

"Dawn," is all he says before a large section of root closest to the tree pushes upward, forming an archway. The void beneath it is just that, black and fathomless.

Until.

A pinprick of golden light appears in the center, then expands outward until the entire archway looks like a sparkling waterfall.

An eardrum-splitting *whoosh* overtakes the cavern as thousands of pairs of wings beat as one. The entire eclipse of moths launches off roots, branches, the cavern walls, and Lachlan's finger. They spear through the opening like a jet of shaggy water.

Minutes later, the archway has sunk back into the dirt and the cavern is empty. Save for me and Lachlan and a few stragglers who aren't in any rush to join their fellows in the Otherworld. Maybe they'll wend their way back into the woods and someone else will draw them this morning.

"How has no one ever discovered this cavern?" I ask.

"It's enchanted against human interference."

"Then how—"

He taps my ring again. "Creature of the Otherworld right now, remember?"

I nod. "And Granny Maggie would have been wearing it as well. Sabre told me she asked him not to reject her. To let the ring fall off naturally. That would've given her nearly a week to hide the Bannrhorn fragment and create *The Knight Departs*. But how would she have known that beacon oaks existed?"

Lachlan blows out a long, weary breath. "Perhaps Sabre told her. Maybe he hoped she'd change her mind and come back to him."

My eyes sting. "That's an incredibly sad thought."

"It is," is all he says, morose.

Is it because we have so little time left to find the fragment? It's probably more than that. But I cannot bear to hear him confirm it.

"Well," I say, refocusing on the daunting task at hand, "I suppose we'd better start looking."



In the end, it's another clue from Granny Maggie and *The Knight Departs* that leads us to the Bannrhorn fragment. Tied around a thin root toward the moss-covered side of the tree is a crimson ribbon. Just like the one wrapped around the knight's sword in the painting.

As soon as I find it, the ring sears another blister onto my poor finger. I swipe a dirty hand across my sweat-soaked brow and shout for Lachlan. The cavern seems to be growing hotter. I stripped off my jacket and shirt as soon as we began searching, and am now wearing nothing more than a thin chemise tucked into my trousers.

Lachlan strides over, similarly disrobed, and I take an indulgent moment to study his glistening torso. He smirks, knows exactly what I'm up to, and I decide right then and there that if this ribbon reveals what I believe it will, then he will be my reward in the time we have left. He drinks in my half-dressed body as if he's perfectly on board with that plan.

Will this bottomless well of want between us ever cease? I hope it does—for both our sakes.

"Look," I say, pointing to the ribbon.

He tugs a few of the weaker roots aside, making space to dig into the soft ground beneath. I'm cursing us for not having brought any tools—not even a shovel—but as it turns out, we don't need one.

His fingers bump against something hard, buried only a few feet down. He pulls out a rusted metal box, the crossed arrows of Tír na Dubh scratched into the lid. He stands, wiping off the dirt, and hands the box to me. "You're the quarry." His voice hitches slightly. "You do the honors."

The box is heavier than it looks, though it's not much larger than a cake tin. A faint hum rises when my fingers touch the surface, similar to those ghostly whispers I heard when I found the ring box among Lizzie's gifts what feels like years ago. I suppose it *was* years ago, in some sense.

Lachlan holds his breath as I open the box, revealing the bell of the Bannrhorn. The markings glow when I touch it, and the ring flares again.

I suck in a wince. "Why is it—"

"It knows you've found its siblings. And that it's almost time to crown a new king."

Now I am the one frowning. "How much time do we have left?"

He shuts the lid, placing his hand over mine atop the box, then pulls the obscura compass from his pocket. The eye is almost fully open, though there's a thin expanse of lid visible on the top and bottom. "Less than an hour."

I place the box on the ground, wipe the dirt from my hands, then cup Lachlan's precious face in one hand as I run the fingers of my other over his pointed ear. He shudders, his eyes sliding closed. "If I've only got an hour left, let me spend it with you."

I rise onto my tiptoes to kiss him, but he places his hands on my shoulders to stop me.

"Wait. There's something I … I need to tell you something." He swallows, glancing away from me. "Desmond did not send me back to resume my duties. I snuck off on my own. He has no idea I'm with you."

My breath stalls. There he goes, breaking rules for me yet again.

"Is he … Will he be angry? Why would you do such a thing?"

I am not upset that Lachlan defied his duke; more afraid of what Desmond might do in retaliation.

"Because I had to see you again before the Hunt. I wanted you to know about my next chapter."

His next chapter? What does that even matter now? What an odd thing to—

"You," he says, and my heart seizes.

"You were supposed to be my next chapter, Charlotte."



CHAPTER

FIFTY

I blink up at him, confused.

"What are you talking about? Since when? Surely not the night I arrived in the Otherworld."

"No." He shakes his head, his lips softly curving. "No, little queen, I've known you a bit longer than that. Well, known you might be a bit of a stretch. I knew what I wanted you to be."

He nudges me backward, encouraging me to sit on a shimmering rock before kneeling at my feet and taking my hand.

"It's all Desmond's fault, really. Why I fell …" He swallows. Restarts. "After last year's Hunting Season in the Otherworld, when his candidate failed, yet again, to survive the presentation ceremony, he was furious. Said we needed to try something different with the ring this year. He remembered something your grandmother mentioned when she was the candidate, something about your king selecting a Favourite each Season. Desmond asked me to find out if it was true. I couldn't come over in my true form, as you know. But there was a clever solution in the shape of a tiny creature who can easily walk between worlds."

A vanguard moth flutters over his head.

"I used the *diamrhán* to make connections with them. Penetrating their simple minds is far easier than forming the connection with a human or another faerie. No blood is required, and I'm able to influence them, guide them where to fly. The first time I visited the woods behind Stillwater Hall in the mind of a moth was about a year ago. Seven for you. I still remember the first time I saw you, as clear as if it were yesterday."

He closes his eyes. "You were leaned against a log, sketchbook propped on your knees, drawing yellow irises growing along a stream bed. You looked carefree. Content. And so devastatingly beautiful that I thought I must have been dreaming."

I know which day that was. It was shortly after Granny had sent me down to Stillwater for my first Season to placate Aunt Teddy. I was nervous, but excited. Of course, I didn't make Favourite that year—not that I expected to—but I was hopeful about making a match someday. I remember feeling so *light* about my future, about everything.

Lachlan reopens his eyes and continues, "Up until that moment, I hadn't wanted anything for myself in a long time. I'd been in Desmond's service for nearly eight years, content in my ascetic existence as I helped him build his life. But the moment I laid eyes upon you, I started to wonder—what would it be like to build my *own* life? To be in control of my choices again? Maybe I'd decide to spend an afternoon watching a lovely young woman—*my* woman—sketch in the woods. A simple peace where neither of us had another soul to answer to except each other."

I nearly snort. He has no idea how mired I was in the restrictive rules of Bretonnic society at the time. How much worse they were going to get for me. But I do not want to sully his lovely dream with an ugly dose of reality.

"To me, you represented freedom. A treasure I'd once possessed but had carelessly tossed aside for power and prestige. After that day, I … Well, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Every time I returned via a new vanguard moth, I'd wait for you in the woods before I went on my intelligence gathering expeditions for Desmond.

You didn't show up every time, but when you did, I'd watch you from the branches. Pretty sure you drew me a few times."

He chuckles, and I return a watery little laugh. He's right, of course.

"After a few months on my end, several years on yours, I came to the woods one morning and you were … you were with a man. You looked radiantly happy, and I was so jealous I could barely breathe. It was for the best though, I thought at the time. You'd reminded me how much joy there could be in simply *wanting* something. Even something you'll never possess. I mean, what exactly had I been planning to do? Lure you to the Otherworld? Seek a way into the human realm in my real form so I could lightly stalk you until either your man or the time compression killed me?"

He laughs at himself, hanging his head and placing a warm hand on my thigh, his touch grounding. I need it now more than ever. "When you showed up in the royal tomb in Tír na Strelle claiming to be the Favourite … You know this part of the story already. I told myself you were never meant to be mine anyway. That I'd already given you up once, and I could do it again. I promised myself I would help you, befriend you, but wouldn't cross any lines. I broke all my own rules, of course. And once we became lovers, I thought perhaps the gods had given me another gift after all. Even if it was only for a short period of time. I was infatuated with the woman I'd seen drawing in the woods, but the reality of you … Gods, Charlotte, it's been excruciating. I've lied to myself so many times over these past months. Swore that I wasn't falling for you, that my heart was safe. That I'd be able to let you go when the time came, and now—"

"The time has come." I can barely choke out the words, my voice breaking on every syllable.

He offers me a rueful smile. "I wasn't going to tell you. It was a burden I thought to bear alone. But I want … No, I *need* you to know that no matter what happens during the Wild Hunt, that there's at least one man in the Otherworld who chose you for you. Before any of this. One who has no chance at power or a crown by claiming you."

He cups my face, strokes his thumb along my cheekbone. "I love you. Deeply. Irrevocably. Pitifully. I swear I tried to stop."

They're the words I've longed to hear my entire life. From the only man I've ever truly wanted to hear them.

And it's the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

Tears drip from my chin, and I place my hand over his heart. It drums madly beneath his warm skin as I whisper, "I love you, too. What the hell are we going to do?"

He sputters out a ragged laugh, then looks away. "You will be queen, and I will … deal with it."

When his gaze returns, it's so raw and desperate that all I want to do is fling myself into his lap, kiss him a thousand times, and tell him I'd choose him always. Forever. In either world.

"What do *you* want, Charlotte?"

I sit up straighter. It's a question no one save Granny Maggie has ever asked me.

What *do* I want?

I have no good options, not a single one where no one gets hurt. Let's say Lachlan and I stay here in the human realm. I let the ring fall off and forget all about him and my time in the Otherworld. How long would it take him to convince me what we are to each other? There is a very real risk that he would literally die trying. Not to mention, where does that leave the celestial kingdom?

"I … I want to do the right thing. I will make Desmond king."

"And after?" He squeezes my hand, clinging. "I could stay in his service. He'd be ecstatic. We wouldn't … We don't have to end. It could be our secret."

I bite my lip, sending my cloudy vision skyward. It's *so* tempting.

But I remember what Garred said. About Lachlan giving too much and never asking for anything in return.

"I cannot"—my chest is fracturing, my heart spilling through the cracks; I swallow—"cannot do that to you. I won't."

"I don't want anyone else." He pushes in closer, kneeling between my spread legs, gripping my hand and clutching my face like he'll die if he lets go. "You think you'd be doing me a favor by setting me loose, but I tell you, it will kill me. I'd rather suffer seeing

you in his arms in public, knowing you were mine behind closed doors, than lose you completely."

It's the same arrangement George offered me. Which is why I know, deep in Lachlan's and my mirrored souls, that it would chip away at him until nothing but misery and emptiness remained.

"You are the best man I've ever known." I curl my fingers around his palm, lower his hand from my face. "You deserve to be loved out loud, Lachlan."

He tilts his head, lips parting to expose the tips of his fangs, and more than anything he looks confused. Like he's taking me apart in his mind. Reconfiguring me. He knows I'm right. But it is unbearable to watch him dismantle his dream of us in real time.

He rubs a palm over his mouth, then stands and holds it out to me. "I understand."

"As soon as we return—" My voice splinters. I just need to get through this request without breaking. "As soon as we return, I'd like you to dissolve the *diamrhán.* Please."

He bows stiffly. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Chivalrous to the end. Chivalrous to a fault.

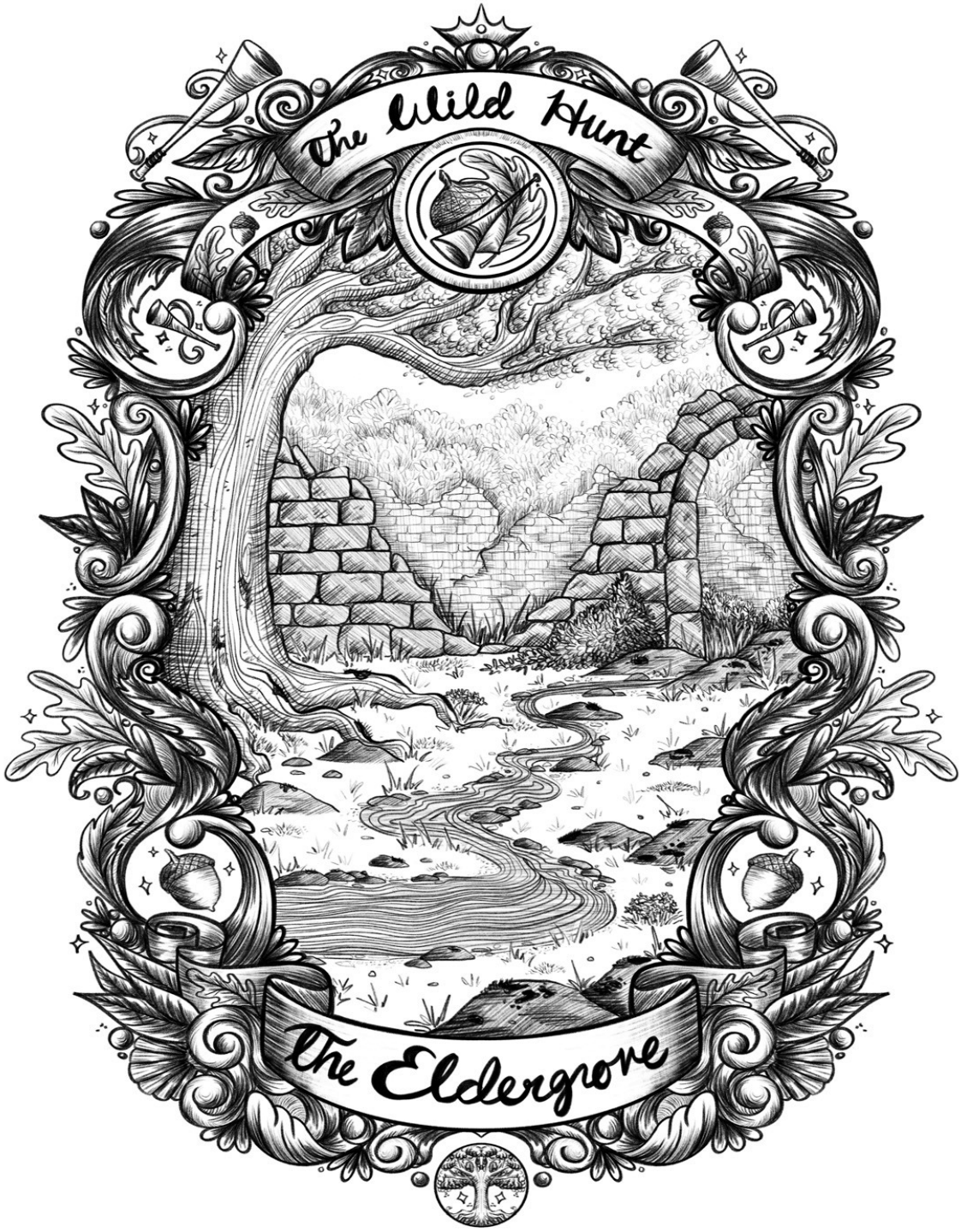
I want to crumble into a million pieces. Let the moths scatter me across the soil.

The ring burns my flesh, the crossed arrows glowing bright. Sabre's proposal.

Our time is officially over.

I grasp the hand of my friend, my knight, the love of my life in a kinder version of this faerie tale, and we're whisked back to the Otherworld.

So that I may crown a king.


The Wild Hunt
The Eldergrove



CHAPTER

FIFTY-ONE

The Sanctuary of the Eternal Mother is carved into a peak of the Brumalt mountains and overlooks the Eldergrove, the sacred forest where the Wild Hunt will take place.

The sanctuary, the mountains, and the forest abound with ancient magic, like the source of all power in the celestial Otherworld flows within the stone and roots and soil.

The trees outside my bridal chamber—where I was deposited this morning by a priestess—glow golden in the sinking sun. I am supposed to be using my time before the opening sacrament to meditate, pray to Danu, the Eternal Mother, make peace with my mortality before giving myself to my husband.

There are many things I should make peace with, but that is not one of them.

As soon as Sabre proposed and the ring summoned us back to Tír na Dubh, Lachlan handed me over to Aowen with a soft, "Take care of her," before bowing and taking his leave. I didn't even say goodbye, could barely watch as he and Tula charged away from the estate. As I turned from the window, a sharp pain stabbed the base

of my skull, like I'd been skewered with a knitting needle. It throbbed for a moment, and then…

Nothing.

Lachlan had dissolved the *diamrhán*. As I'd requested.

I wanted to scream. Wanted to rend my garments. Wanted to beg the gods from every world to deliver me a miracle to fix this, one that would make Desmond king without me.

I've been in that raw, exposed nerve state ever since. While I was led to this chamber. While I was stripped of my traveling clothes. While I was bathed, scrubbed, and perfumed in oils meant to enhance my natural pheromones, provide the dukes and their beasts a scent to track.

The priestesses are now arranging my hair into a braided crown, studding it with white camellia flowers. A symbol of my innocence and purity. I nearly laugh in their faces, despite my mental state. They wrap me in white silk—more a length of fabric than a proper gown; easier for my king to tear away—then pin it closed at my shoulders and hip before sliding gold slippers onto my feet.

They ask me if I'd like to look in the mirror, to assess their handiwork, but I don't need to. I know what costume I'm wearing—a virgin ripe for the claiming. A vessel from which my husband will drink his power.

Another priestess opens the chamber door. "It is time, Your Majesty."

The title—which they've used since I arrived—fills me with nothing but dread as we spiral down stone stairs into the nave. A small crowd has gathered. Timothy Hopnell, his hands tied in his lap, is seated in the back row next to a celestial knight, and I recognize a few courtiers from House Macán and House Áine.

Two acolytes run their fingers along the rims of bronze bowls, beginning my processional—a series of deep, low notes that pulse like the heartbeat of the Otherworld itself.

The crowd quiets, every head turning to me as I pad behind a priestess scattering camellia petals.

The head priestess, covered head-to-toe in robes so dark green they appear black and wearing a smooth gold face mask, waits on

the altar surrounded by my three suitors and their seconds.

Torvil is on the far left, his silver hair gleaming against his charcoal and purple hunting gear. He glances down to my wrist, then smiles when he sees I'm wearing the bracelet he gave me. Standing beside him is a celestial knight whom I don't recognize, decked out in silver armour. He's heavily armed with a birchwood bow strapped to his back.

Why do they have weapons? They're supposed to find me and claim me, not kill me, so—

Fear cramps my belly. They're for each other. Weapons to kill the other dukes.

I shift my gaze to Sabre, a gathering storm in all black with those two curved daggers at his hips. He's not looking at me or his second, a bulky knight in a necrowolf helmet. His attention is anchored to a woman seated in the front row whose night-dark hair I'd recognize even if Sabre weren't staring at her.

Aowen.

Seeing her in the flesh gives me the courage to study the final pair on the altar.

Desmond is elegant in maroon and midnight blue. Strapped to his back is a broadsword with a seven-pointed star on the pommel, familiar. He looks regal; the idealized notion of a benevolent faerie king.

I force myself to meet Lachlan's gaze—which I felt upon me the moment I entered the nave—and his sad, soft smile hurts more than if I'd found anger or jealousy there.

He's resplendent. In his gleaming white armour, every falling sunbeam in the sanctuary is inexorably drawn toward him. Or maybe that's just my perception.

I bite my tongue so hard to stop tears that I draw blood. I swallow the coppery tang as my interminable procession ends. The priestess has overturned the basket of camellia petals, a makeshift rug for me to kneel upon at the feet of my suitors.

"Gathered hunters," the head priestess intones, her voice clear as a bell beneath her mask, "we wish you luck on the cusp of your pursuit. May Danu guide you to victory." She sings something in the

fae language, and my ring heats. All three symbols throb faintly as she turns to me. "Majesty, as your hunters are allowed seconds, you may choose a companion to assist you during the campaign."

"I choose Lady Aowen Macán, Your Benevolence."

"Impossible," Torvil spits. "She's the sister of one of the hunters! She'll put the rest of us at a disadvantage."

The priestess cants her head. "Are you sure, child? It is an unorthodox choice. Queen Caer's companion had no tie to any of the great Houses."

I lift my chin. "I am sure."

She turns to the dukes. "Your Graces? Do you approve?"

"Of course not!" Torvil grinds his teeth.

Desmond offers an easy yes, while Sabre remains silent, concern and a question in his dark eyes as he stares at Aowen. I don't think he wants her in any kind of danger. And I don't need to see her face to imagine her expression right now. Brave. Determined. A hint of *Sabre, if you don't agree to this, I'll tear your balls off.*

He smirks—I must be imagining correctly—and barks out, "Approved."

Torvil blows a sharp breath through his nose, fists clenched at his sides, but, having been outvoted, poses no further objections.

"Wonderful." The head priestess summons Aowen. "Lady Macán, please take your place by your queen's side."

Aowen rustles up to kneel beside me, a long braid draped down her back over a thick, crimson cloak. She grabs my hand, interlacing our fingers and pressing our palms together. As if she can will strength and power into me with the force of her affection alone. I clutch her hand tighter to let her know it's working.

"It is time for the assembly of the Bannrhorn," the head priestess says. "Acolytes, if you please?"

Three young fae women in fawn-colored robes rise from the pews, each carrying a box.

I did that. I found all three fragments. Pride buoys my head momentarily above water, even as facing the consequences of my success drowns me once more.

The acolytes bow before each duke, then open the boxes to offer each his piece of the horn. The head priestess floats over to a stone font carved with the celestial symbols; a faint shimmer rises above the rim.

"Duke Torvil Áine of Tír na Lune," she intones, "do you agree to hunt this quarry and bear the responsibility of kingship should you claim her?"

"I do." Torvil smirks before settling his fragment into the font.

The head priestess nods, then turns to Sabre. "Duke Sabre Cernunnos of Tír na Dubh, do you agree to hunt this quarry and bear the responsibility of kingship should you claim her?"

"I do," Sabre growls as he tosses his fragment in.

"Duke Desmond Macán of Tír na Strelle, do you agree to hunt this quarry and bear the responsibility of kingship should you claim her?"

"I will." Desmond's vow echoes through the nave as he settles the final fragment with the others.

There's a harsh flare of light, so bright I'm forced to shield my eyes. The priestess bends over the rim and pulls out the restored Bannrhorn. Given the size of the fragments, it's much larger than I anticipated; the bell falls well below her knees.

She steps to the front of the altar. "Then by the grace of Danu, our Eternal Mother, let the Wild Hunt commence."

The sun outside winks out, and she blows the horn. Three long, resonant blasts that shake the foundation of the sanctuary.

With each note, the seed of novillum within me stirs. It pulses outward from the base of my throat, a balmy, flourishing warmth that soaks into my skin, my muscles, my veins, my bones. I am still human, but there's new strength in my body. New power. I can feel it.

As the final horn blast fades, Aowen grips my hand tighter, and we disappear in a burst of shimmering, golden light.



CHAPTER

FIFTY-TWO

When the world reforms, Aowen and I find ourselves in the hollow of a gigantic oak, likely one of the behemoths I spied from my bridal chamber earlier.

The ground is spongy but dry, covered in fallen leaves and branches, and there are a few narrow holes carved into the trunk that lead out into the forest.

"What just happened?" I ask, the end of my white silk wrap snagging on a splintered root. I rip off a good chunk in an effort to free myself.

Aowen frowns. "We'll have all been scattered to different sections of the Eldergrove." She flings off her red cloak to reveal a quilted leather jacket, two blunt daggers with serrated edges in her belt loops, and an awful, ammoniac scent.

I cover my nose. "God, what the *hell* is that smell?"

"Púca piss" is all she says. As if that explains why I'm somehow smelling the dried urine of several different types of animals. What is a púca? Where did she get its piss? *How* did she get it? The only clear answer is why—to mask our own scents from Torvil's báshounds.

When she unzips the jacket, poor Vesper flies out coughing and gagging.

"Food!" she squeaks as soon as she's recovered. She bumps her small head against my cheek. "Favorite food."

I laugh. "I missed you, too, Vesper."

"Go scout for us," Aowen commands, slipping off her jacket and revealing a second, identical one underneath. Smells just as god-awful. "See if you can figure out our location."

Vesper zooms toward an open knothole, nearly sliding out of the hollow before I can cry, "Wait!"

I unclasp Torvil's bracelet. "Take this with you. Throw it as far away from us as you can get."

Aowen raises a brow. "What is it?"

"Torvil gave it to me on the night he proposed. Insisted I wear it during the hunt. Fool thought I wouldn't guess it's enchanted to track me." I point at the cloudy diamond. "See? Hopefully Vesper can buy us some time by getting rid of it."

Aowen nods, impressed.

"Food," Vesper chirps as she takes the bracelet. "Smart food." She slips it over her head, wearing it like a necklace, then zips off.

Aowen removes her boots, then strips off her pants, again revealing another pair underneath. She hands them and a jacket to me. Thank goodness, I'm starting to become immune to the stench. "Here, put these on. Sorry I couldn't bring an extra pair of boots as well." She grimaces at my slippers. "How they expect you to give chase in those things …"

"I think they expect me to wait here for slaughter like a good little lamb. Or at least, wait here while they slaughter each other." Fear prickles down my spine. For Desmond and Sabre. For Lachlan, of course.

I shrug on the jacket, then the pants, which are a bit snug in the waist and too long. I have to roll up the legs, but I'm far more protected than I was in my bridal attire.

"You take the boots," Aowen insists, shoving them in my face.

"No, I—"

"Charlotte," she snarls, baring her fangs. God, she's petrifying when she wants to be. "Stop with your self-sacrificing bullshit and take the fucking boots."

I nearly confess just how much I've leaned into my "self-sacrificing bullshit," then give her my slippers.

"I wish I had more time to teach you how to use this." She hands me one of the weapons. "It's called a thorn dagger. And it's better than nothing." The blade is barely larger than my hand, and a portion of exposed tang nestles between my fingers when she wraps them around the t-shaped hilt. "When you punch with it, aim for the soft bits."

I nod, grateful to at least know how to do *that* thanks to Lachlan's lessons at the Eyrie. I tuck the thorn through a belt loop.

She takes me by the shoulders. "Every quarry before you was—what did you call it? A good little lamb. Quivering in place until a husband came to claim her. That is *not* what you're going to do."

She pulls a tendril of moonlight through a knothole, then twirls her wrist. Berries, pears, and several types of tree nuts pile at our feet. I help myself to the makeshift dinner as she continues.

"Sabre and I did some plotting while you and Lachlan were searching for the Bannrhorn fragment. Sabre's focus will be protecting Desmond. Meanwhile, you and I will determine our location within the Eldergrove so we can send it to them. And if Torvil or his minions find us first"—she slashes out with her thorn—"they will die before he claims you."

My stomach sinks with each of her declarations. "How are we going to send Desmond our location?"

Her brows twist. "You'll tell Lachlan through the *diamrhán.* Obviously."

Blood rushes from my face; I'm going to faint. "It doesn't exist anymore. I … We … I asked him to dissolve it."

Aowen takes several long, deep breaths. Like she's trying not to snarl at me again. "Why, Charlotte?" she asks, more calmly than I deserve. "Why would you do that?"

It's now or never. No one knows the depths of my feelings for Lachlan, how fiercely I ache for him. But the secret is poison. I need

to excise it if I want to keep my wits about me. A necessity, now that I've plucked the lynchpin from Aowen's strategy.

"Because I love him," I whisper. "And it's tearing me apart."

Despite the fear and devastation on her face, her tone is kind. "It's alright. It's alright, we'll just …" She examines the hollow, the ceiling. "I suppose we'll need to venture outside." Her lips twitch. I think a part of her is secretly pleased.

"To do the claiming ourselves."



CHAPTER

FIFTY-THREE

We wait for Vesper to return, then leave the protection of the tree hollow to venture out into the Eldergrove.

Between breaks in the canopy, stars wink within a black velvet sky. There's only the slimmest crescent of a waning moon tonight, and the golden shimmer that coats so much of the Otherworld plant life is much fainter. I can barely see twenty paces ahead of me. Treacherous, but it means we will be harder to see as well.

Vesper saw smoke a quarter of the way up one of the Brumalts during her scouting trip. It's a multiple-hour walk from our oak, and though we're not certain who it is, we have a two-thirds chance of finding an ally. No better or worse than any other direction we could be walking, really.

The Eldergrove is eerily silent; no call of night birds nor scampering of nocturnal creatures. It's as if the Eternal Mother decided to bless the dukes and their hunting beasts with as little distraction as possible.

The only sound is the gentle rush of water—likely mountain runoff in the form of a creek or small river—toward which we're

walking.

Aowen doesn't say a word as she clomps ahead of me through the underbrush, around thick oaks and skinny birches. Old Charlotte might have spent this entire long walk worrying that her reticence meant she was still upset with me over the *diamrhán*—and yes, I realize now what a stupid, *stupid* decision that was. Why did Lachlan not talk me out of it? It would be incredibly useful to be able to communicate. But maybe he wasn't thinking any more clearly than I was at the time. Maybe the thought of keeping the connection was just as unbearable for him.

Anyway, new Charlotte has decided to take Aowen at her word. She said it was alright. And if she was lying about that? Well, it's not my responsibility to read her mind, is it?

Still, I cannot help but wish she'd talk to me, if only to stave off the boredom. We've been walking for hours. Vesper hangs back with me, but she's not much of a conversationalist. And she keeps flying off to get a pixie's-eye view of our route.

I am actually grateful to be a little bored, it's better than—

Something crashes through the woods to our left, and Aowen breathes out a soft curse before pulling me behind a fallen log half covered in tiny mushroom ladders.

"Friend or foe?" I search the dark sky for Vesper, who disappeared again a few minutes ago. Maybe she can see who—or what—it is.

A second crash sounds to our right. There is only one duke who has more than one hunting animal by his side.

"Foe," Aowen whispers simultaneously with my, "Torvil."

We peek around the log to find a small party gathered in a clearing about a hundred paces away. In the forefront, two large, white-maned heads lap from a puddle—Mortis and Anguis. I stutter out a breath, grateful for Aowen's foresight with the púca piss. We're downwind right now, so hopefully they can't smell *anything*.

Standing behind the báshounds are two figures. One is unmistakably Torvil, his pale locks a flare in the dark night. If the other figure is his second, then the man should be plainly visible in

his silver armour. But he seems to have put on a dark, hooded cloak?

A third figure joins them. Wearing shiny, silver armour. Torvil's *actual* second.

Torvil's cheating; he's brought in a third player.

"What should we do?" I move my lips as little as possible, barely letting the words come out. Those báshounds were bred to do one thing: hunt. I'm sure their hearing is incredibly keen.

"I'll distract them," Aowen whispers back. "And you run."

"Are you mad?" It's an effort to keep my voice low. "They'll rip you to pieces."

She slowly pulls the thorn from her belt loop. "Not if I rip them up first."

"Aowen, no. If something happens to you, I am … I cannot survive this alone."

She strokes a hand down my face. "Vesper will help you. And it would be an honor to die defending my queen."

These stubborn fucking faeries. Since when did I ask anyone to die for me? "I forbid it." Bone-deep panic forestalls my tears. "If I am your queen, then you must obey me."

She pats my cheek, then kisses my temple. "Cute." She picks up an acorn and, before I can make further protest, lobs it over the log. It lands in a pile of leaves, the soft crash apocalyptically loud. "Now, *run*."

I sprint away from the log as she steps over it. "Oi! Over here, assholes."

I hear Torvil snarl, "Find Charlotte," followed by the thump of báshound paws. Fortunately, they've decided to divide and conquer. Unfortunately, one is headed straight for me.

I run as fast as I can, but I don't want to get too far away from Aowen. What if she's overconfident? What if they hurt her and she needs my help?

My best option would be to get to higher ground, where the báshounds cannot reach me and I can gain a vantage point toward the clearing.

The beast behind me—I have no idea which one—is gaining. I'm not exactly being careful not to leave a trail. Branches snap around me, and my footprints sink into the dirt. But if I have to sacrifice something during this getaway, it won't be speed.

The báshound pounds closer and up ahead, I spy a tall fir with dense branches that looks scalable.

I look over my shoulder to see how close he is, and … He's right there.

It's Anguis, not Mortis. No scar. He roars, probably to signal his brother.

I leap for the lowest branch, cutting my hands on the rough bark and tearing out needles as I pull myself up. My palms grow sticky with blood and sap, and the medicinal pine scent is cloying, but I keep going.

The tree shudders as Anguis slams into the trunk, and I nearly lose my footing. He attempts my upward route, but the branch snaps off beneath his paw. He snarls, then begins pacing and whining and howling beneath me.

I hug the trunk, clinging for dear life. How embarrassing would it be to *fall* to my death after all this? The novillum has certainly given me an advantage over my normal human body—I am not nearly as winded as I should be from that sprint, and the cuts on my hands are already healing—but my balance is still pure Charlotte.

I glance out toward the clearing. There's no one there.

I find out why moments later when Torvil and his knight clank over to my tree with Mortis and a cursing, hissing Aowen. The knight is hauling her by her braid. It's hard to see in the dark, but she seems mostly unharmed outside a small cut on her cheekbone. I cannot say the same about the knight, whose ear is a pulpy mess draining blood down his neck. Good for her.

"Charlotte, my queen!" Torvil calls up. "My apologies, dear one. We did not mean to frighten you. Come down and let me claim you, and this can all be over."

Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

If I do not come down, he'll know I have no desire to be his queen. But if I *do* come down, that's the most probable outcome. I

cannot fight off him and his second *and* his báshounds. Probably not even with Aowen's help. And that's not me being meek or weak-minded; it's just a fact. A few sparring lessons with Lachlan in the Eyrie do not a warrior make.

"Is that you, Your Grace? Oh, I'm so relieved!" Think, Charlotte, *think*. I pick my way down the branches, my mind whirring.

"Are you?" Torvil asks. "It took us longer to find you than it should have. We found your bracelet buried in the mud miles from here. What happened?"

I reach the lowest branch above the one torn away by Anguis. There is a good fifteen-foot drop to the ground.

Torvil sees my hesitation, then walks over and holds out his arms.

"Jump." His violet eyes flash up at me. "I'll catch you."

Here goes nothing.

I sit down on the branch, then gently shove off, falling down into Torvil's arms. My mind and body scream to get away, scratch his face, *run run run*, but I have a careful game to play right now if I'm going to get both Aowen and myself safely out of this.

Speaking of Aowen, she's kneeling on the ground by the knight's feet, gripping her braid to alleviate the pressure. Her face is a mask of desperation—an act. I see the glint in her pool-blue eyes that says, *You can do this, Charlotte. Be clever.*

Torvil settles me on my feet. "Well?"

There's really only one angle to play.

I point a shaking finger at Aowen. "She took it. She and Desmond, they …" I blink back false tears. "They enchanted me before the Hunt. Forced me to choose her as my second. The enchantment wore off as soon as the Bannrhorn was blown, and I've been fighting her since we arrived in the Eldergrove. She … she's trying to take me to her brother!"

Aowen wears a defiant scowl, but I can tell how pleased she is with her cunning little liar queen. I'm a bit proud of myself, too, if I'm honest. Though I haven't thought through how I'm going to use my lies to save her.

"I see." Torvil stares down at Aowen, then flicks his chin toward his knight. "End her."

"No!" I shout, and Torvil swivels back to me, sneering. "No, wait, I … We should make an example of her. After the Hunt. A public execution, like the one Alanthe Áine received. We must show what happens to women who break the rules."

Torvil's brows rise, and I'm not sure whether he's shocked at my viciousness or my knowledge of the Scourge of Tír na Lune. Aowen's gnawing on the inside of her cheek, probably trying not to smile.

"As Her Majesty wishes, of course," Torvil croons, snapping his finger at his knight, who pulls Aowen to her feet. Torvil raises his fingers to his mouth, and—

A blur of purple screams down from the pine and sinks rows of razor-sharp teeth into the knight's sole intact ear. He shrieks, and, in his scrabble for Vesper, releases Aowen, who tears her thorn from his belt and sinks it into Torvil's side.

Everything happens so quickly, I can barely keep up.

Torvil falls to his knees, a hand pressed to the wound, and hollers for his báshounds.

"Foolish girl!" Aowen growls loudly. "Vesper! To me!"

I let Aowen drag me away, assisting as much as I can without spoiling our show.

Torvil issues a watery shout to his second, "Help me, you fool!" Aowen cut him deep, but I doubt we're lucky enough that he'll die from it. "Mortis! Anguis! *Follow them.*"

The trees grow closer and closer together, much easier for Aowen, Vesper, and me to slip through than the báshounds. They're caught up, ramming massive shoulders into immovable trunks, and soon, we've gained a several-minute advantage.

That gentle rush of water swells into a tidal bellow as we come upon a waterfall. And I was hesitant about a fifteen-foot jump from a tree? This leap looks to be at least ten times that.

"Come on, Charlotte." Aowen pulls at my sleeve, glancing over her shoulder as trees splinter and the báshounds crash toward us. "Fucking *jump!*"

I take her hand and a deep breath.

Then we plummet down through the mist into churning, freezing water.



CHAPTER

FIFTY-FOUR

I'm crouched on all fours, coughing up my lungs on the bank of a shallow river. I have no idea how far down the water carried us, but I hear no báshounds crashing through the forest. We are safe. For now.

Aowen thumps my back a few times, then slumps down against a wet rock. The cut on her cheek looks nearly healed already. So are the cuts on my hands. I could get used to this quick, magical healing.

I hack a gob of spit into the dirt—so ladylike—then crawl over to Aowen and sit beside her. We're both wheezing, thinking through our next move. To the east, the horizon pinkens, dawn less than an hour away.

Vesper nuzzles into my lap and begins peeling the remaining sap from my hands, anything the river didn't wash away. It's soothing, her tiny fingers picking across my palms.

"How the *fuck* did that bastard find us first?" Aowen snarls.

"Maybe the smoke Vesper saw was from his group after all?"

Vesper tilts her face up, devastated and apologetic, and Aowen softens. "Not your fault. We all made the decision to head in that

direction."

"Did you see where that cloaked figure went? Torvil snuck in a third player," I grumble.

Aowen nods down to Vesper. "Asshole stole my strategy."

We settle back against the rock, and Aowen uses a spot of moonlight to conjure us some more nuts and berries. The river burbles in the background, and the night is warm. It's peaceful here, in a way.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?" I ask Aowen. "Where I come from, duchesses are raised on more parlor-appropriate skills. Like needlepoint and passive-aggressive compliments."

Aowen laughs. "Not a duchess, remember? I insisted my parents allow me to receive fight training alongside Desmond. There are women knights among the celestial ranks, of course. Not many. When I finally accepted that I would never be a leader like Des, I thought maybe I might like to be a knight. My parents were reluctant at first, but I persuaded them."

"How?"

"I refused to bathe until they relented. By the end of the third week, even I was disgusted with myself." Aowen snickers.

It's nice to have a quiet moment, even in the midst of all this, to focus on something other than despair and destruction.

"How do you think the others are faring?" I ask quietly.

"Well, if I know Des at all, he's probably losing his mind at Lachlan for allowing you two to dissolve the *diamrhán*. But the plan was always to get to highest ground, somewhere where he'd have the best view of the valley and could send Andraste out to hunt for you while Sabre and his knight kept watch."

"Yes, you'd mentioned that. That you and Sabre had made *plans* together." I say it as suggestively as I possibly can. Because I intend to milk this brief respite for all its worth. And I have not teased her about him nearly enough.

"He's …" she starts before shaking her head. "The more time I spend with him, the less I think marrying him is a terrible idea." She exhales, long and loud. "In fact, I'm starting to think it's maybe the best idea Desmond's ever had."

She turns her face up to the sky, and I suddenly understand the meaning of the phrase *stars in her eyes.* "Sabre is so different than I expected. He's gruff, of course. A bit rough around the edges. But his compassion is boundless. He doesn't believe it, but he would be a wonderful king. Though if you try to claim him, I *will* break your legs."

I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter. "I wouldn't dream of it. Have you two …"

She pops a berry into her mouth. "Haven't even kissed." A shy smile. "We're, um, waiting until we're married. *If* we're married, of course."

I fold an arm around her shoulder in a half hug. "I'm very happy for you, Wen."

"Pah," she huffs, though she doesn't pull away nor look at me funny for using Lachlan's nickname for her. "None of that sentimental crap."

"You're the most powerful woman I know. I'll forgive if love has made you a little squishy."

"Not sure it's love yet, am I?" She drags her fingers through the fallen leaves at her side. "Last week he took off his shirt while we were painting in the west wing, and I swear I lost all motor function. Spent the entire afternoon cataloging the freckles on his shoulders. His *freckles*, Charlotte. What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"Not a damn thing." I sigh, leaning my head against hers. My eyelids are heavy, and my body is melting into the mud.

A short nap couldn't hurt, could it? We'll need to restore our energy for whatever comes next.

I'm asleep before I can even ask Aowen whether it's a good idea.



I'm awoken by something rustling through the trees across the river.

The sun blazes down on us. It's mid-afternoon. How long did Aowen let me sleep?

The hangdog look on her face as she pulls me up and behind a birch tells me she may have met a similar fate. I scan the site for Vesper, but she's nowhere to be found. Perhaps *she* was keeping watch at least?

I peer around the birch, trying to get a look at who's found us. My hands tremble against the rough bark, my frantic pulse throbbing between my ears.

"Who is it?" I whisper, shaking off the fog of sleep. "Did they see us?"

"I mean you no harm, Majesty!" a male voice calls out, and when I peer around the birch, Timothy Hopnell is awkwardly splashing through the shallow water, hands still tied. "I wanted to—"

"Are you daft?" Aowen hisses, stalking toward him. "Or are you trying to draw out every hunter in the Eldergrove?"

She pulls out her thorn, but there's no need. Timothy crashes to his knees before her, bound hands raised.

"I have information for Miss Fitzroy," he begs. "It's extremely important. Please lower your weapon."

"No, I don't think I will, thanks." She digs the tip of the thorn into the soft space beneath his jaw. "You have two minutes. Speak."

"Right." Timothy's pupils are wide and his hair disheveled. His glasses are gone; it's a wonder he found us at all. "I was framed. I didn't … I am not your attempted assassin."

"Why should I believe you?" I bite out.

"Would I be here prostrating myself before you if I was lying?"

Aowen pushes the thorn in harder, nearly breaking skin.

"It's a possibility," I say. "Perhaps you've made a deal with one of the dukes. To find me so they'll spare your life? Sounds like something Torvil would—"

"It was him," Timothy blubbers.

"Him, what?"

"Torvil. He was the one who tried to poison you during the Harvest Ball.

"Duke Áine himself."



CHAPTER

FIFTY-FIVE

"How do you know that?" Aowen snarls, pushing the thorn in harder.

Timothy sucks a pained breath through clenched teeth, lifting his bound hands higher. "I overheard a conversation between him and my father the night they made their plans to frame me."

"It was Torvil," I rasp out. "All three times?"

"Three times?" Timothy shakes his head, a thin line of blood crawling down his grimy neck. "I only know about—" He angles back, hissing. "Can you take this dagger away from my throat. She needs to hear this. Please."

Aowen slowly backs away, then sits on a nearby branch, her elbow propped on her knee and her thorn leveled at Timothy's head. "I've got a wicked throwing arm. And killer aim. Please, test me."

Vesper flits down from the trees and perches on Aowen's shoulder, narrowing her beady eyes. "Food. Dismembered food."

Timothy recoils, and I smile as I stare down at him. "If your information is useful, the pixie won't eat you. Probably. Now, explain why Torvil wants me dead. He needs me to become king."

"He doesn't, actually," Timothy says. "He only needs the seed of novillum inside you. That's what the poison would have done—extract the seed from your body. Killing you would have been a mere side effect."

"Oh, a *mere* side effect?" I scoff. This doesn't make any sense. "I was in Tír na Lune for weeks. He had ample opportunity. Why did he wait until Lughnasadh?"

"It took him until then to replicate it. He learned of the poison after that anti-monarchist attacked you in the crypt. He wasn't trying to kill you, either. Or, well, he wasn't *only* trying to kill you. After all, your death would have only meant the delay of the Wild Hunt for another Season. But destroying the novillum itself? Without it, no king can claim power."

"Is that what Torvil wants? To destroy the novillum and end the monarchy?"

Timothy frowns. "He didn't share the intricacies of his plans with my father. But he did say—"

A deep growl shakes the forest, far enough away that it's hard to tell whether it was a báshound or a necrowolf.

Aowen swivels toward it. "Go see."

Vesper's off the second Aowen finishes her request.

Timothy's stunned into silence, quivering, searching the shadowed crevices beneath the thick canopy surrounding us.

"Timothy," I snap.

"Right." He brushes hair from his face, and something glints on the rope around his wrists.

A cloudy diamond. Like the one on the bracelet Torvil gave me.

Aowen notices it the same moment I do, then leaps to her feet. "You fucking idiot!" She pulls Timothy up, then slices through his bonds and throws them as far downstream as she can. But the water isn't moving fast enough to pull it away quickly. "You've brought them right to us!" She grabs him by the shirt and hauls him down to her face. "I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"I didn't know," Timothy babbles. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Please," I say calmly over Aowen's shoulder. "Finish what you were telling me."

Something very large crashes through the underbrush, snapping branches and crunching leaves. A harrowing roar trembles my bones. It's closing in. And swiftly.

"We need to get out of here. Now." Aowen clears the site, tossing the remains of our snack into the creek, shifting piles of leaves around.

"He said he would rule," Timothy says to me, "but that there would be no queen. That even if you made it to the Wild Hunt, he would ensure it."

"What does that even mean? And how do I know you're telling the truth?"

Timothy laughs, a bitter puff. "I'm dead either way. What would I gain by lying to you?"

"Let's go!" Aowen tugs me away from Timothy.

"Come with us!" I scream as she drags me through the shallow water. "We'll protect you from him!"

Timothy shakes his head. "Every predator in the Eldergrove is looking for you. I think I'll take my chances with—"

His refusal transforms into a blood-curdling scream as a báshound bursts through the trees and snaps its jaws around his leg, knocking him to the ground. It rakes a clawed paw across his stomach, then dips its head down, eating him as he bats uselessly against its snout.

I clap a hand over my mouth, and Aowen pulls us up behind the trees on the other bank. I squint, noticing something on the opposite side.

"Wait," I whisper-shout. "*Wait!*"

She snarls, but stops pulling.

"Look." I point toward the underbrush where a pair of glowing green eyes watches the báshound devour poor Timothy Hopnell. A meal is a meal, apparently. Even in the midst of a hunt for a different quarry.

I take a step backward and—

Snap.

The báshound's head whips over its shoulder. It's Anguis again—no scar. His hairless muzzle is coated with blood, and viscera dangles

between his enormous teeth.

I choke back an urge to vomit as Anguis burbles a warning growl, scanning for us. His mist-and-ink eyes land on me with the force of a physical blow. The bellowing roar he unleashes shakes the trees, the stones, the very ground beneath my feet.

Aowen grapples at my shoulders, stuttering *run run run* over and over, like her brain is caught in a petrified loop.

The báshound crouches backward, poised to spring for us, and my stupor breaks.

His massive paws crash down on our side of the bank as I turn Aowen around and shove her in the back.

We barrel around thin white trunks, leap over fallen branches and slip on wet leaves, but even in the harsh daylight, the woods are full of unseen obstacles and we fall at least four times and the báshound snarls behind us and his hammering footfalls are growing so close that I swear I can feel the heat of his breath on my—

An enormous shadow bursts through the trees. I scream and pull Aowen to the ground.

Skadi soars over us, then slams into Anguis's side, throwing him across a clearing into a stiff birch.

A figure leaps down from Skadi's back, and my heart catches in my throat.

Lachlan.

He's the brightest object beneath the dappled green canopy, his white armour gleaming as he prowls toward the báshound and arcs the tip of his sword through the air.

Skadi stalks behind him, her tongue lolling out of her panting, skeletal mouth. Rotted flesh flakes from her chest, and the bared, sinewy muscles of her right flank bunch and flex as she walks.

Anguis pushes himself up, shaking off leaves and twigs, then snarls at his advancing enemies.

I can barely watch, hands flat on my face, peeking through spread fingers as a vicious battle breaks out. Blood and fur flies, jaws snap, and metal thunks into flesh.

I train my gaze on the blur of white, Lachlan dancing through the fray, stabbing and slicing with such precision it's like he's

choreographed the entire fight. Aowen is as transfixed as I am.

Soon, Anguis is a swaying, snapping mess of dark red wounds against wrinkled grey skin. He releases a pitiful wail, collapsing to the forest floor as his misty eyes slip closed.

Lachlan plunges the tip of his sword into the dirt, then leans down on the pommel, sucking in heaving breaths. Skadi comes over, bumping him with her two-toned snout as he scratches behind her good ear. There's a slash on his neck, blood seeping beneath his chest plate. Another crimson bloom seeps through the mail at his ribs.

I want to comfort him. Hold him and clean him and bandage his wounds.

But my wants stopped mattering the second the last blast of the Bannrhorn faded. Maybe even sooner than that.

Aowen does not share my hesitations; she runs over to Lachlan and wraps him in a deep hug that spikes my envy so high, my eyes sting.

Next to them, Skadi rolls onto her back, her bony paws flicking through the air. Aowen laughs, then crouches down to pet her belly.

My eyes collide with Lachlan's and the rest of the world falls away.

Mud cakes my face, my jacket is torn, I smell of púca piss, and my braided crown is half-dismantled. I'm sweaty and blotchy and dirt-splattered and bloodied. I have likely never looked worse.

Lachlan stares at me as if I am the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

"How did you find me without the *diamrhán*?" I croak.

He gifts me a weary smile. "I don't need magic to find the other half of my soul."

Before I can respond—god, what would I even *say* to that?—a piercing hawk's cry arrows through the forest.

Andraste, Desmond's gryffalcon, swoops down into the clearing with Vesper clinging to her neck feathers. The lavender pixie is waving and chirping, proud of her excellent deed.

Lachlan's gaze shutters, the moment between us passed. "Come, Your Majesty," he says as he guides me toward the majestic winged

beast.

"Your king is waiting for you."



CHAPTER

FIFTY-SIX

Viewed from the sky, the Eldergrove sprawls even farther than I imagined, stretching from the Brumalts at our backs out past the horizon ahead.

How a hunter could find anything within it is beyond me, though Andraste seems to know precisely where she's going. She circles down to a milky turquoise lake ringed by ancestral pines, then lands gracefully, bending her neck to allow us to dismount.

Desmond rushes over, ignoring his knight and his sister as he sweeps me into crushing arms. "Praise Danu," he says, cupping the back of my head. "I was getting worried they'd never find you."

I want to ask why he wasn't out searching, but I bite back the question. What does it matter now? He will claim me, he will become king, Lachlan will be free, and the Otherworld will know peace once more.

"Where's Sabre?" Aowen barks, interrupting our reunion.

Desmond nods over his shoulder. "Scouting the perimeter with his knight. Ensuring we don't gain any unwanted company."

Aowen nods, already staring between the pines. As if she could send him strength and luck with the sheer force of her attention. But

on the shore of these placid waters, protected by this brave group of beasts and warriors, it's hard to imagine we're not safe.

Desmond leaves my side to confer with Lachlan, and Aowen takes his place.

"Thank you." She offers a wan smile. She knows the choice I'm making—duty over love. She leans her head on my shoulder. "Sister."

I am too overcome for conversation. I press my cheek against the crown of her head and wait.

I catch snippets of Desmond's discussion with Lachlan at the edge of the water. Desmond asking Lachlan if he's sure he wants to leave the knighthood? If there's anything Desmond can do to change his mind? Lachlan only shakes his head and extends a hand toward his duke, who clasps it, then pulls him into a hug. Will Desmond miss him, I wonder?

Does he have any idea why Lachlan refuses to stay?

Desmond saunters over and holds out a hand to me.

My heart batters my ribs as he guides me away from the shore. Vesper flits down to Aowen's shoulder, her black eyes crawling over my dirt-stained jacket and torn pants. Like it's a personal insult that I am so poorly attired on what is ostensibly my wedding day. But then her tiny face transforms. There's affection. A little sadness, too. I think Vesper's able to read us all more deeply than we give her credit for.

Desmond leads us to a small alcove created by the drooping, tangled branches of two pines leaning against each other. A private, makeshift altar.

He's gripping my hand so tightly, I fear my fingers might break. Is he nervous, too?

Despite my soul screaming *wrong wrong wrong*, I know Desmond is a good man. That he will be a good king. Why should my insignificant heart matter when ignoring it will fix so many things for so many people?

Desmond turns away to remove his cloak, and I use his inattention to search the shore one final time as an unmarried woman.

To find *him*.

Lachlan's gazing out over the water, his back toward me. He's a sculpture in the wind, his auburn hair whipping around the seven-pointed star crowning his sword. The brave knight at final respite, his campaign at a close.

He turns and our eyes meet. Even this far away, all I feel from him is profound love and acceptance. He places a hand on his chest, mouths the words *my queen*, and bows into the wind.

I swivel back before I ruin everything. Before I run from this good man who would be king to the great man who owns my heart.

Desmond steps beneath the boughs in a simple white tunic and leather breeches, his arms spread wide. "Are you ready, darling?"

I know how this ritual ends, with us both saying our vows, then Desmond laying me down upon the soft needles and taking my body as his. Claiming the seed of novillum within me. Our lives will synchronize, and we will rule.

The moment seems too banal for so grand an outcome. But maybe that's what makes it easier to accept when Desmond places his hands on my waist, presses his forehead to mine, and whispers the vow I must repeat back to him.

Despite everything, my voice is steady. "By the life in my veins, by the will in my heart, by the persistence of my soul, I choose you as king, Desmond Macán. I am yours to command."

His chest thumps as I say the vow. I am not foolish enough to think it thumps for me. But perhaps over time we could learn to love one another. He pulls back, cups my cheeks, and smiles. A stunner. Broad and dazzling and full of joy and wonder. It's regal. Beautiful, really.

He's about to start his own vow when there's a *twang.*

And a *thump*.

He jerks forward, grunting, and his smile turns red before it falls away. His brows furrow as he glances down at the arrow pierced through his chest.

Oh, no. Oh, *god*.

He falls forward, and I try to catch him, but he's far larger and heavier than me, so we tumble to the ground instead. Iron-rich

warmth splashes my face, my hair, smears my jacket and hands and pants. There's so much. Too much.

I maneuver his head into my lap, screaming for help before I stop myself.

What if it was Torvil? What if he's about to kill me, too? Can he extract the novillum from a dead woman? I'm not keen to find out.

I scan the pines for the archer, but Lachlan reaches us first, bursting around a tree then skidding through the needles, chest heaving and eyes blown wide.

"Help," I croak, pressing my hands against Desmond's chest, trying to keep his blood, his *life*, in. It's not working. He's too still. Growing too cold.

Lachlan crouches beside me, panicked. "Is any of that yours?" he barks, his usual cool calm completely abandoned as his hands rove over my skull, my back. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine." My hands are slippery and this is not working and there's still a killer out there and I can't … "Help him," I scream at Lachlan. "*Help him!*"

More rustling surrounds us as Aowen and Sabre come crashing through the trees. Aowen wears the most placid expression I've ever seen on her face. Which means below her surface churn eruptive levels of fury.

Sabre's dragging someone behind her in a headlock, and when the man lifts his silver-haired head—

Sir Quinn.

The cloaked third by the river with Torvil. So obvious I want to scream.

Sabre knocks Sir Quinn to his knees, then fists his hair and pulls his head back, giving Aowen full access to the throat of the man who, based on the quiver of arrows over his shoulder, killed her brother.

The birchwood bow bounces against Aowen's back as she stomps over and hooks her thorn under Sir Quinn's throat. Sabre pushes him into it, and a thin red line trickles into his collar.

"Look at him." Aowen's voice is glacial, but Quinn—the stupid bastard—snaps his eyes shut. "Fucking *look at him!*" she roars,

digging the thorn in further.

Sabre pries Quinn's lids open, forces his head toward me and Desmond, and Quinn's lips curve into a lunatic smile. His voice is a laborious wheeze. "And thus concludes House Macán's bid for the crown. How pitiful an ending."

Aowen's beautiful face transforms into a gleeful, terrifying mask. "Less pitiful than yours is about to be."

She whips back her arm, then slams the thorn into the corner of his neck, right beneath his left ear. She drags it slowly, deeply toward the other side.

I may be more immune to violence and gore than I was several months ago, but this is too gruesome to witness. I look away and cover my ears, but it's not enough to mute the squelching gurgle of Aowen sawing through Sir Quinn's throat.

A hand lands on my shoulder with gentle, comforting pressure. I'll recognize that touch until my bones have crumbled to dust. I press my cheek to Lachlan's fingers, tense until he whispers, "It's done."

When I open my eyes, they're inexorably drawn to the corpse. Quinn's head, a contorted mosaic of wild-eyed pain, is barely attached to his body, and there's a gaping, ragged valley beneath his chin. A blood-red second smile.

Good.

Aowen's hunched over, staring at what's left of Quinn while Sabre stares at her, awestruck. Worshipful. Like he'd kick the corpse aside, kneel in the blood of her fallen enemy, and propose right here and now.

Aowen rises, then staggers toward me, her anger pouring out in a long, keening wail as she pulls Desmond from my lap.

She rocks him against her torso, burying her sobs into his neck, muttering *baby brother* and *Des* over and over again. They hadn't spoken since the night he showed up in Tír na Lune to tell us he'd bargained her to Sabre. I cannot fathom her grief.

Lachlan stands beside her, resting a hand atop Desmond's head. "Sleep well, my king. Until we meet again in the Afterlands."

I stand and brush myself off, wondering what in god's name our next steps are. Desmond was the answer to everything—my survival beyond the end of the Wild Hunt, Lachlan's freedom, the Otherworld's peace—and now … How much time do we even have left to fix this? Mere hours?

It's not long enough.

I turn to Lachlan, and he opens his arms, about to—

The ground beneath us shudders, branches crashing, and before I even have a chance to breathe, I see Mortis pounding toward us.

And with a powerful bolt of clarity, as if from Danu herself, I know what I must do.

Mortis stops before us, snarling. Aowen wipes off her thorn, Lachlan's sword hisses out, and Sabre flips his scythe-daggers. Skadi's glowing green eyes flash deep within the pines; she must have been stalking Mortis. I try to catch her gaze, let her know not to come any closer.

"Wait," I say, too faintly for anyone to hear me. They've corralled me behind them, thinking I'll be no help, but they forget I am the only advantage we have left.

"Wait!" I shout. Lachlan is the first to turn. "I'm going with him."

"What?" He rears back. "Absolutely fucking not."

Mortis creeps closer, advancing and retreating, toying with us like he did in Tír na Lune.

I grab Lachlan's elbow. "Mortis will not kill me. I can end this. Please."

I see the moment my plea reaches him. His hand comes to my face, fingers tightening on my cheek, his sapphire eyes asking a question I don't have an answer for yet.

What happens after?

I cannot think that far ahead. I strip off my jacket, my boots, my pants, until I'm wearing nothing but the chemise from beneath my bridal attire. I un-plait my hair, then put the boots back on and tuck the thorn into the left with just the edge of the handle peeking out.

Aowen does a double-take at my attire. "What is she doing?"

Lachlan presses a kiss to my temple, audience be damned. "Saving us."

I step toward the báshound with the ugly, jagged scar through his left eye.

"Mortis," I say.

"Take me to your master."



CHAPTER

FIFTY-SEVEN

Mortis weaves through the forest, bending around trees, leaping over streams, bounding up rocks. My fingers tangle through his grizzled mane, holding on for dear life. He howls, a signal to his master that he's captured their prey.

The sun dips ever closer to the horizon, panic a swift drumbeat in my chest. I hope Lachlan, Aowen, Vesper, and Sabre are not following us. It's a fool's hope; of course they are. But I pray they do not interfere with my plan.

Mortis slows as a break in the trees appears. Beyond, on a bald white rock jutting over the vast expanse of the Eldergrove, a figure stands in silhouette against the setting sun. Five spikes shoot from his head. I see he's taken the liberty of crowning himself already.

Torvil smiles as Mortis slinks over to deposit me at his feet.

I crash down upon the rock, sniveling. Playing my part. He doesn't know that I know of his plans to steal the novillum seed. At least, I'm praying he doesn't. It's my only edge, and one I'll need to cling to fiercely.

"Very good," he croons to Mortis, who snaps out a sharp bark, then sits back on his haunches, awaiting further instructions. "Make

sure you've not been followed."

Mortis barks again, once, twice, then darts back into the forest.

Torvil helps me up, and the tears in my eyes, while very real, are born from hatred, not gratitude. I doubt he can tell the difference.

"Oh, my dear Charlotte." He brushes my hair off my face, pulls up the collar of my chemise. "What have those brutes done to you? I was so worried when the Macán bitch stole you away yesterday."

"She b-brought me to Desmond, but he … Sir Quinn was there. He killed the duke just as he was about to …" I trail off, squeeze my eyes shut to spill tears down my cheek. "Oh, Torvil, I was so scared Desmond was going to claim me before I could get to you."

Frightened and helpless, I paw at him. Seeking weapons.

Or a vial.

Timothy said Torvil intended to be a king without a queen. And the only way he could achieve *that* is if he brought another vial of that poison to the Eldergrove.

He grabs my wrists roughly, nearly snapping bone and interrupting my search, then presses my hands against his chest. "I promised I would win you, Charlotte. By any means necessary. There's nothing to fear now. We will end this together."

He bends down to kiss me, my hands trapped against him, and there's nothing I can do to stop it this time. His tongue invades my mouth and every cell in my body revolts as he begins subtly moving toward the edge of the rock.

I try to hold firm, push back, but he's far stronger than me. My boots slip, and stones skitter down the cliff. I force my panic down, test his grip, but it's vise-tight. Not only can I not pull away, but I can barely breathe around his mouth. I don't want this, don't want him, and I am not doing a very good job of masking my struggle. There is no way he cannot sense my hesitation.

Obviously, he does not care.

He takes a huge step forward, and a gust blows up my chemise.

A howl tumbles through the trees, long and loud, followed by the unmistakable sounds of a struggle—barks and growls and swords crashing and armour clanking.

Torvil tears his lips from mine and in the split second of his distraction, I glance at my feet. A necessity to grab the thorn that unfortunately shows me how terrifyingly close I am to certain death. Half of my boot heel hangs off the edge, and an overwhelming wave of vertigo overtakes me. My head spins and my vision blurs. Bending over, even to grab my weapon, seems an impossibility.

Torvil shakes me, icy with rage. "You led them to me."

Truthfully, I did not. If anything, it was Mortis. "Never, my king. I would never betr—"

His hands are at my throat, choking off my words. "You traitorous little bitch," he snarls, which is quite rich coming from a man who likely intends to poison me then throw me off a cliff.

He bends me backward, enough that I can reach the top of my boot to slip out the thorn.

I slice it across his wrist, and he jumps back, shocked. As if I have transformed before him once again. Not a lamb, but a viper. One who's not afraid to strike.

"This game is *over*." I level the thorn at him. "Give me the poison. I know you have it on you."

He snickers, shaking the blood off his wrist before pulling a familiar vial of acid green liquid from his pocket. "This poison?" He slips his hand into his other pocket, retrieving another vial, this one filled with a bubbly liquid that resembles pink champagne. "Thought you might be more interested in the antidote, honestly."

The thorn wavers as my hand shakes. "Antidote?"

He takes a long step forward, pressing his chest into the thorn. Confident that I won't use it. Not yet. Not until I hear his villain monologue. How very *Torvil* of him. If this situation weren't so dire, I might burst into hysterical laughter.

"I have an offer for you, Miss Fitzroy." He holds up the green vial. "When you take this, the novillum seed will be expelled from your body and rebind itself to the ring."

When I take it. I am half-terrified to hear why he is so sure I will.

"After which, the ring will fall off, exposing your mortal body to the glacial march of time here in the Otherworld. Your heart will slow

to the point your brain will be convinced it's stopped beating. And you will die.

"Unless"—he shakes the pink vial—"you drink this immediately after. It will halt the time expansion. Heal you. Alter the very fabric of your being. You could stay in the Otherworld forever. Marry that poor, lowly knight who was always mooning over you. Have his hideous, ginger-haired babies for all I care. The antidote would make you compatible in that way as well."

Torvil claimed my heart would slow, but right now, it's beating faster than a hummingbird's wings.

He's offering me everything I want. Minus the babies, of course. But I'm not surprised Torvil would assume that just because I am a woman, I must want to be a mother.

He creeps closer, the tip of the thorn piercing his charcoal hunting jacket. "I'll give you land, a title, the reassurance that you and Lachlan will be safe. As long as you agree not to get in the way of my new world order. And give me the novillum seed so I can end this *farce* of a monarchy."

His spittle-coated lips pull into a mad grin. "Alanthe Áine was right about one thing, you know. Why should a mortal woman be queen of our kind? And why should every House have an equal chance to rule, when it is so clear that the Áines are the only House capable of it?"

I am fairly certain he's *completely* misinterpreted Alanthe Áine's story, but what would be the point in correcting him now?

"Once I have the seed, I will forge it into this crown, destroy the ring, and the Wild Hunt will be over, once and for all. The Áine dynasty will rule the celestial kingdom forevermore, as our gods intended.

"So, Miss Fitzroy," he shakes both vials in his outstretched arms, "what do you say? Do we have a deal? You get your blissful ending, I get a permanent crown, and we all live happily ever after."

I wish I were a better woman. That Torvil's offer wasn't so, *so* tempting. It's the reinvention I've been chasing this whole time, in a more literal sense than I ever thought possible.

And the thought of spending a lifetime with Lachlan? I want that more than I've ever wanted anything in either realm.

I close my eyes, a single tear spilling down my cheek.

Because regardless of who I am at this moment, old or new Charlotte, there is only one right answer. The same answer Lachlan would give, were he in my place.

"No."

"No?" Torvil tilts his head, brows knit as he slips the vials back into his pockets. "You did understand what I just said, didn't you? Do you need me to explain it all again?"

God, he really is the fucking *worst*.

I lurch forward and bury the thorn between his ribs. He grunts, but recovers quickly, grabbing my other arm and pulling me forward. I lose my footing, and he slams us to the ground, crushing me beneath him. His crown topples off, but my thorn stays wedged in his side.

He makes no move to remove it, focused instead on wrapping strong, cold hands around my throat and pushing down on my windpipe. I have never felt so fragile, thin-boned and eminently breakable.

My lungs burn as I suck down air that doesn't move past his grip, and shale bites into my arm each time I strain for the thorn. I can't get more than a finger on it before he pushes down harder.

His violet eyes sparkle, exuberant. "Was this your plan all along? To kill me? Did you hate me from the very start?" He leans in, his chest compressing my own, his lips grazing the corner of my mouth. "I thought you were quite a little treat when I first saw you at that presentation ceremony. Too bad you turned out to be such a lying whore."

Tears coat my face, and I can't breathe.

He lets up a fraction, enough for the barest sip of air, and oh thank god, I—

He chokes down again, sneering and sitting back on my hips. "If you won't drink the poison on your own, I'll pour it down your throat. Now, be a lamb, and just"—he slams my head into the

ground—"fucking"—*slam*—"pass out"—*slam*—"already." And once more for good measure.

My head throbs and spots bloom behind my eyelids. I am no longer a person, just a fog of pain. Whatever power the novillum gifted me is likely the only reason I'm still alive. Torvil's blows would have surely cracked my skull otherwise.

My world narrows to the pound of my heart and the rush of blood in my ears.

Torvil's hovering face holds no emotion whatsoever. No anger, no gleeful violence, not even disgust. It's dispassionate and sterile. Like he's crushing a bug.

Is it because I am human?

Or because I am a woman?

I have been underestimated so many times—by George, by Desmond, by Sir Quinn, by Torvil's courtiers, by Torvil himself.

And I am not the only one. I think of Jane, forced to stay in an unhappy marriage. Of Lisande, desperate for the love of a man who did not flinch at her death. Of Aowen, living in the shadow of a brother not nearly as qualified to lead. Of Alanthe and Granny Maggie and my mother and every woman who's ever sacrificed her joy to meet a man's expectations.

It is for them and all the women who came before and will come after that my ember of frustration flames into adrenaline-fueled rage. I let it consume me as I surge upward and wrap my fingers around the thorn's handle. Torvil roars as I rip it from his side. It's drenched in blood, wet and slippery, but I hold tight.

"There will be no king."

I jam it into his neck, once, twice, three times.

He grunts out a watery cough, then slaps a palm against the wound as he staggers up off me.

I push to my feet, dizzy, nauseous, as his frantic eyes search for a weapon. They land on the discarded crown, but he hesitates just long enough that I'm able to kick it over the edge. It tumbles to the rocks below with a tinkling crash.

I lunge for him again, using the thorn to punch him in the stomach, the thigh, the shoulder, rending flesh with every blow.

Torvil manages to block some, but not all. I catch his palms, his forearms. I can't get close enough to stab his face, but god, do I want to try.

Blood splatters my chemise, my skin, warm and wet, and he's covered in it, too—crimson streaks through his white hair and a thick, sticky layer on his palms.

He's weakening, I can feel it. And I'm too slippery to get a firm grip on. He did not expect this. Did not expect *me.* He brings shaking fingers to his mouth and whistles, two sharp, gurgling blasts.

Calling Mortis.

My chin hooks over my shoulder as the beast breaks through the tree line, followed by Aowen. She's carrying Sir Quinn's bow and quiver.

Torvil grins like he's won, wincing as he pulls the vials from his pocket.

"Last chance!" he gurgles. "Accept my offer, and all will be forgiven. Otherwise, I fear my hound is about to end you. No bother. I'll do this all again next year with another candidate."

Mortis rushes toward us, head down and snarling furiously as Aowen plants herself and notches an arrow.

"Come on, *come on*," I mutter.

Time slows as Mortis pounds forward.

Twenty feet.

Fifteen feet.

His raw meat smell fills my bruised, burning lungs as—

Twang.

Thwap.

An arrow explodes through Mortis's good eye, and I leap sideways, grabbing the green vial from Torvil's outstretched hand and rolling away.

His beast slams into him, and they tumble off the cliff.



CHAPTER

FIFTY-EIGHT

My lungs are a fiery bellows and every inch of my body is aching and bloodied—some of it mine, most of it Torvil's—as I clutch the poison vial and stare down at the valley below. There's a slash in the greenery at the bottom of the cliff, the trees bent and broken, and I can vividly picture the red pulp and smashed bones that were once Torvil and Mortis.

And the antidote.

Despite it's loss, a smile curves my cracked lips before I am whisked off my feet and pulled into a crushing embrace by Aowen. I wince, and she pulls back, her hands hovering over my injuries.

"Sorry, sorry," she murmurs. "Fuck me, Charlotte, that was spectacular."

She leans over the edge, and I know the moment she finds the smashed trees. Her mouth presses into a thin white line, and her eyes narrow. She makes some kind of slashing gesture over her heart, as if she's cursing Torvil's corpse.

Leaves crunch behind us, and Skadi lopes out of the forest, followed by Lachlan and Sabre. Lachlan is mostly unharmed, save a few scratches and dents in his armour and a weeping slice down his

cheek that only serves to make him look more dashing. Sabre leans heavily against him, limping and cradling an arm far lower than it should be. Dislocated shoulder, I suspect.

Aowen sprints toward them, trading places with Lachlan, who's standing before me faster than I can blink.

He doesn't say a word, doesn't ask if I'm okay—he knows I'm not, for so many reasons—just pulls me into his arms and holds me against his chest.

Neither of us looks at the sun, hovering over the horizon. There's an hour, maybe two, before the Wild Hunt ends and the ring falls off. And I have something very important to do before that happens.

Aowen and Sabre stagger over. "I'll do it," Sabre booms. "I'll claim you."

Aowen bites the corner of her lip, trying not to cry. She'd do it. For me. Would give him up if it meant I could live.

I shake my head, Lachlan's large hand cradling the back of my skull.

Sabre grimaces. "I am the only duke left. If I don't claim you before the sun sets, you will die and there will be no king."

My voice is a weak croak, my throat bruised and raw. "There *will* be no king."

I snare Aowen's gaze as I hold up the green vial.

"But there could be a queen."

Aowen looks taken aback, her bright blue eyes widening before she pulls her shoulders square, adjusting the bow across her back. "I don't think—"

"If I take this, the seed of novillum will be extracted. And will be yours to do with as you wish."

"But you will die," Aowen says, her voice breaking.

"Not if we time it correctly," Lachlan whispers, glancing toward the horizon and the rapidly setting sun before sliding his gaze to Sabre. "Is there a beacon oak here?"

"Pinpoint in the center of the Eldergrove. Andraste knows the way." He turns to me. "As soon as the archway opens, drink the vial and the seed will rebind to the ring before it falls off. After, you'll

have seconds to slip through to the other side. Do it before your heart stops."

Aowen still looks confused, but Sabre smiles, the first I've seen, his dour features lifted on buoyant curves. Aowen was right; it's revolutionary. "The title of royal consort sounds a lot more appealing than king."

Aowen curls a hand around his left horn and yanks him down for a magnificent kiss. There's a great deal of tongue.

I cannot look away as my grin pulls wider and wider. There's a rumbling against my cheek; Lachlan watching and laughing. Behind them, Skadi pants, then howls.

Sabre breaks away, grunting in pain. "Mind the bruises, back-up wife."

Aowen plants another gentle kiss upon his lips, whispering, "That'll be Your Majesty from here on out."

Sabre runs a hand down her back. "As it should be."

The haze of glory wears off, and Aowen pulls me from Lachlan, then throws her arms around me, a sob catching in her throat.

"I'll never forget you."

I hiccup a wet laugh. "I wish I could say the same."

She steps back, her sincerity undeterred by my gallows humor, and holds me by the shoulders. "Thank you, Charlotte. For everything. For all of it."

Vesper flies out of the woods, gnawing on a grisly bone that's either a human ulna or a báshound knuckle—I'd rather not speculate—then tosses it aside when she sees our somber faces.

"Food?" she asks Aowen.

"Charlotte is going home. She's leaving. She's"—Aowen's voice breaks—"made me queen of the celestial kingdom."

Vesper offers a sawtooth smile as she zips over to hug my neck, her fly wings tickling my jaw. She cups my face in her little hands, kisses me on the nose—respectfully; no tasting—and whispers, "Friend. Cherished friend."

I choke back my tears. This is a happy moment. One we've all achieved together.

Lachlan whistles, and a piercing cry answers. Andraste swoops up the cliff, lands on the rock, then rears back when Lachlan tries to place me on her back. Like she doesn't want all this blood staining her feathers. I don't blame her.

Lachlan coos something at her and she relents, then he mounts up behind me. His muscles tense, like he's about to encourage her to take flight, when Aowen cries, "Wait!"

She digs into Sabre's jacket, pulling out a pink leather book. "I saved this for you." She hands it up to me. "You might not remember us, but at least we'll still be with you. In a way."

Embarrassment briefly flushes my cheeks—did she look through it? Did *Sabre*?—but honestly, what does it matter anymore? Aowen knows what Lachlan and I are to each other. Sabre might as well know, too.

I hand the book to Lachlan for safekeeping; I don't want to bloody it. "Thank you," I say to Aowen. "Your Majesty."

She squeezes my hand, gore be damned, and holds it tight. Barely lets go in time for Lachlan to give Andraste a gentle kick.

No one questions our need for privacy, our wish to have this final goodbye to ourselves. They know Lachlan will bring the novillum safely back to its new owner.

Andraste launches into the air, and we're on our way to the beacon tree.

And my final hour in the Otherworld.



CHAPTER
FIFTY-NINE

We reach the center of the Eldergrove quickly, as if Andraste knows the dire circumstances, is pushing herself to her limit for me. Given the size of the beacon oak in the human realm, I expect to see branches bursting above the greenery. Instead, they're nestled within the lush carpet of yews and alders, birches and pines.

I realize why moments later, when Andraste sinks below the canopy, following the oak's trunk into a deep, wide depression in the forest floor.

On the bottom, we land on terrain similar to that in the cave near Stillwater. A few vanguard moths mill about, alighting on moss-covered stones and thick branches. There's a welcome addition on this side, though—milky, bubbling hot springs tucked between the tangled roots.

Lachlan helps me off Andraste's back, and she swivels her head around, squawking indignantly at the blood matting her feathers and fur. She launches into the air, twisting through the branches. Maybe she's trying to give us privacy. More likely, she's off to get clean.

We watch her go, and then …

It’s just us.

“Come,” he says softly, taking my hand and leading me over to a steaming pool.

The gorge darkens, the sun so low in the sky above that its beams cannot reach us. The shimmering golden moss coating the stones, branches, and roots glows faintly, offering us just enough light to see by.

Lachlan stands me at the edge of the pool and removes my boots. He leaves me in my chemise, the heat of the water warming my limbs while he undresses. He unstraps the armour at his shins and forearms, then his breast and back plates. Mail tinkles as he lifts it above his head, and soon, he’s in nothing more than a thin cotton tunic and loose leather trousers.

He leans down to strip off my chemise, then takes my hand and helps me into the water. It stings against my cuts, but the pain is outweighed by the relief of my muscles loosening.

There’s a flat stone on one side, where he encourages me to sit as he kneels on the edge behind me. He washes the blood from my hair and body, cleaning the deeper cuts that will take longer to heal. He tears strips from his shirt to bandage them.

His silence has always had so many shades; right now, it’s sacramental. As if this is a purification.

I do not deserve it.

I close my eyes and dip my head back as his fingers circle my scalp. “Why are you being so kind to me?”

He snickers softly. “I am a kind person.”

I grip his wet forearm and open my eyes to look at him.

God, *look* at him.

I tug gently, the barest request before he’s stripped down to golden, tattooed flesh. He sinks into the pool beside me.

I do not speak as I clean his wounds, a far shorter task. I run my thumb down the slash on his cheek, try again. “How do you not hate me? I rejected you. Broke your heart.”

His eyes brim with sad affection as he breathes out, “Charlotte.” He flattens his palm against my chest, over the swell of my left

breast. “I knew you were going to break my heart the moment you arrived in the Otherworld.”

He takes my hand, places it upon his own heart. “I’d let you break it a thousand times more for the privilege of knowing you.”

My fingers curl against his chest, my throat thickening, so painful beneath the bruises. “Lachlan, I—”

He shushes me, those low soothing tones, my very favorite in his vocal repertoire. “I know. It’s alright.”

My vision blurs as drops plink into the bubbling water. “I wish we had more time. It wasn’t enough.”

He smiles, and there’s no sadness in it this time. Only the purest, most profound joy. “I’m grateful for every minute.”

“Even the minutes I was teasing you?”

He laughs, cupping my face. “Especially those.”

“I cannot live without you.”

“You have before.” He kisses my forehead. “You will again. As soon as you walk through the archway, you’ll forget all about me.”

I shake my head. I don’t want that. Not at all.

I would rather carry this grief until the end of my days than forget a single breath I took beside him.

I surge forward, and he meets my fervor. I kiss him, burrow into him, tangling my arms around his waist. I want to take him with me.

How cruel the gods, both his and mine, to offer me a man who’d choose me and not allow me to choose him in return.

He pulls me into his lap, parting my thighs around his waist, and I brush his hair back from his face. Chest to chest, I hold his gaze as he pushes into me.

We flow together, whispering devotion onto each other’s flesh. It’s precious and fleeting and all the more painful for it. We try to make it last because it’s the final—

No, I will not say it. Will not think it. I’d rather die here in his arms as he moves inside me, savoring the taste of him.

“Lachlan,” I pray against his lips, and he squeezes me closer, burying his face in my neck, as close as I am to letting go. “I love you. I will love you always. Even when I have no name to give my sorrow.”

I don’t let him say it back. Penance for my rejection. Instead, I claim his mouth as he shudders up into me and we tip over the edge together.

As we’re drying off and I’m slipping on my chemise, there’s a crunching pop behind us. A thick root by the base of the trunk bends and stretches upward. Here in the Otherworld, it fills in the opposite manner—the sparkling golden glow blotted out by a spot of darkness that expands until the entire archway is limitless black.

An ice-cold burn sears my finger, and I hiss as the ring starts slipping off. Lachlan takes my hand and offers me the vial. I swallow the liquid; it’s cool and flavorless.

My lungs seize, and I clutch my chest as agony rips through me—the novillum seed tearing the magic from my veins as the supernatural pressure of the Otherworld bears down. I stagger into Lachlan, who guides me toward the archway.

The ring nestles between our clasped palms, as if he’s fighting to hold it there, to keep me alive until we reach the door, and I can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe.

I want to tell him again. That I love him. I want to tell him so many times that he saves each utterance, buries them beneath his skin so he can cut one out whenever he needs to hear it.

But the words won’t form, my voice is gone, and the archway is about to close.

He pushes me backward and I know the moment my back crosses between our worlds. Soft relief spreads through me, easing all my pain. Even the pain of leaving him. Once again, I am a formless spirit floating through an endless pocket of warmth and peace.

It closes around my body, crawling up my outstretched arm as I cling to his hand.

He gently unwraps my fingers.

“By the life in my veins, by the will in my heart, by the persistence of my soul, I choose you, Charlotte Emilie Fitzroy. I am yours, forevermore.”

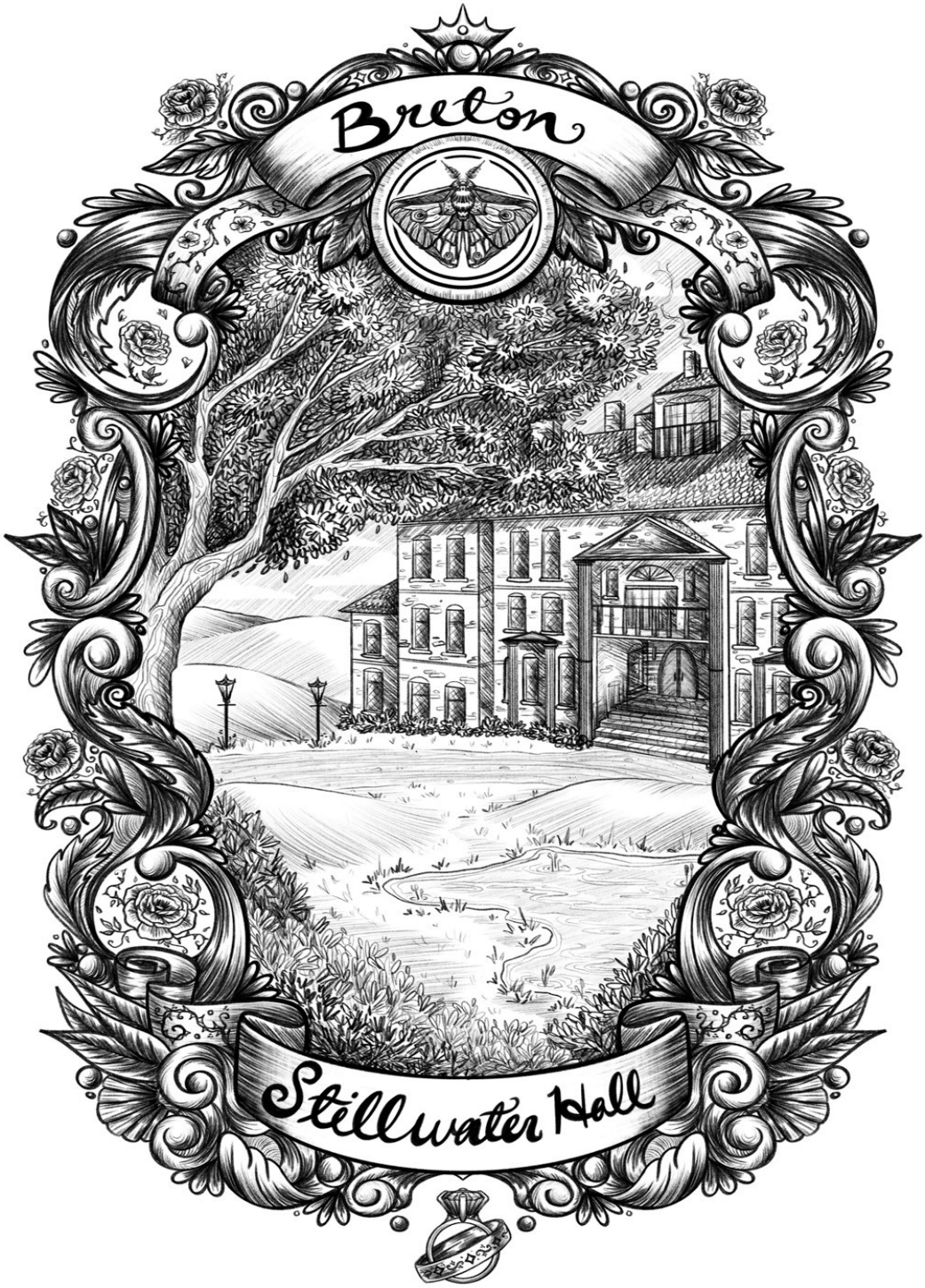
He kisses my hand, then pulls the ring off. Swirling in the center of it is the tiniest speck of light, like a crumb from a shattered

diamond.

He hands me my sketchbook as I fall back through the archway.

Back to the human realm.

Where I forget that he ever existed.


Breton
Stillwater Hall



CHAPTER

SIXTY

THREE AND A HALF YEARS LATER

"Sit still, my cherub."

Mary squirms in Lizzie's lap beneath the wisteria in Granny Maggie's cottage garden. My garden.

"You've been so good," I continue. "I'm almost finished."

Lizzie lifts a thigh from the stone bench. "Thank goodness."

"You too, Mummy," I scold, and Mary giggles, repeating the admonishment back to her mother. Who responds by tickling her.

I laugh, wait for them to still so I can finish their portrait—a lovely piece of mother and daughter surrounded by a waterfall of soft purple. It's been unseasonably warm in the southlands, and even now at the end of March, the flowers have opened.

I feel a bit like those flowers myself, overeager to spread my petals after a cold, harsh winter.

Three years ago, something terrible happened to me. To this day, I have no memory of what it was.

Lizzie's husband Charles found me in the woods behind Stillwater, babbling and confused, dressed only in a damp chemise and asking

if I had missed the ball at Bolton manor. An event which had occurred more than two years prior.

I was carrying a pink sketchbook, covered in bruises, my wounds bandaged. Which was odd because I was completely alone.

I spent months convalescing at Stillwater, subjected to a rotating cast of William's colleagues from Harbridge. None could discern what caused me to lose two year's worth of memories.

And a marriage, apparently.

When Lizzie told me I had visited Stillwater with my husband the week before my strange arrival in those woods, you could have knocked me over with a feather. She blushed as she scrolled through the pages of my sketchbook.

"His name was Lachlan Cathal." She held up a drawing of a very handsome man with unbound auburn hair, a literal knight in shining armour, sleeping against the trunk of a weeping willow. Unmistakably drawn by my hand. "You were quite enamored with each other. Do you really not remember him at all? Nor what might have happened to him?"

I cried myself to sleep that night, crippled by a grief so tectonic, my hollow mind could barely comprehend it.

Uncle Edward solicited King James to launch a nationwide manhunt. He even contacted a few of the dukes on the continent, trying to find the one for whom Lachlan had claimed to work. But no trace of Mr. Cathal was ever found. If Lizzie and Charles and William and Imogene hadn't been so adamant and consistent in their memories of him, I might wonder if I hadn't just made him up.

I'd pore over the sketchbook sometimes; it held the most prurient, wonderful illustrations. It was hard to believe the woman in them was me. Though on long, chilled nights that winter, I wanted nothing more fervently than to remember even a snippet of one.

On many of the pages, and depending on the angle, Lachlan appeared to have elongated ears and very sharp incisors. I wondered what would have inspired me toward such an artistic choice.

I did get better. There was nothing wrong with my body; the bruises faded short weeks after my misadventure, as Lizzie and I

had taken to calling it. And when I began yearning for those specific reassurances of life that come from contact with one's fellow humans, I knew my spirits had caught up.

I attended a few Seasonal balls the next spring, but found I had absolutely no desire to marry. Or re-marry, I suppose. I still don't—not even at my far-past-marriageable age of thirty-two. I had a few sweet, simple affairs with sweet, simple men. None lasted more than a month or two. It's as if there's some barrier around my heart, a fortress protecting a secret so fragile I dare not even share it with myself.

I spent three full turns of the Season at Stillwater, leaving only to visit Cranford Manor, the lodge a few towns over that Charles built for Lizzie and their family. They've only Mary, but are eager for more little ones. Charles is a nurturer at heart; he cried a little when I mused over taking back custody of Esmeralda. In the end, it felt too cruel to force him to part with her.

It was a pleasant time in my life, marred only by a simmering, ever-present panic; like I had forgotten something gravely important. Something I never wanted to forget.

This spring, I decided I was ready to leave Stillwater, reclaim my inheritance, and make a life for myself in Granny's cottage in the southlands. I've spent the past three years perfecting my craft; my portrait skills in particular have vastly improved. I created one for Charles; it's displayed proudly at Cranford and has earned me several large commissions. Enough to sustain myself for a little while, at least.

It will be a small life. But it will be *my* life. I am quite looking forward to it.

Lizzie and Mary accompanied me on the trip down and have been here for the past two weeks helping me get settled. Lizzie is anxious to return home, especially since the Season opens this evening. She's going to miss the ball—she's told me no less than twenty-four times. The same number of times I've expressed my gratitude.

This portrait is my thanks.

I only make them suffer the stillness for another ten minutes or so. I can add the final touches once they've gone. And it will be nice

to have an excuse to visit when the piece is finished.

Wheels and hooves thump down the dirt road leading to the cottage, and the time has come to say goodbye. Though I'm reluctant to lose their company, I am looking forward to some time alone.

Over the past three years, I have been poked and prodded and coddled and encouraged and interviewed and accompanied and feted and monitored and, god help me, *included* in everything. It was wonderful. I am quite over it.

I am ready to familiarize myself with that particular cadence of solitude. Ready to let my mind wander. Perhaps within the idleness, I might find a few of my lost memories.

The carriage stops before the cottage, and Mary waves at the driver.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" Lizzie asks, pressing her hand to her bonnet to keep the wind from stealing it. "We can stay a few more days, if you'd like. Midnight is the equinox; what if a beast emerges from the woods to snatch you?"

The curl of her lips tells me she's joking, while her furrowed brow reveals she's only offering out of politeness. She's desperate to return north before she misses more than the opening ball.

"I'll be fine." I grab her hands. "Having you and Mary with me has been wonderful, but I'm sure Charles misses you both terribly. Esmeralda is not the most engaging company. It's time for me to give you back."

She wraps me in a hug, relief softening her features. "Come visit us at Cranford whenever you'd like. You've an open invitation; I mean it." She turns over her shoulder. "Mary! Come say goodbye to Auntie Charlotte!"

I am not her aunt, but Lizzie insisted on the title. It's sweet, really.

Mary toddles over on carefree limbs and I squat down as she leaps into my arms. "Oof!" She wraps tiny hands around the back of my neck, her sweet breath stirring my curls. "Be a good cherub for your Mummy, yes?" I say loudly, then whisper, "But promise me you'll be a wicked one sometimes, too."

She giggles before pressing a wet kiss to my cheek, then scurries over to terrorize the horses.

Lizzie's conferring with the driver, who rounds the carriage struggling with a large, wrapped parcel. She smiles impishly as he lugs it into the cottage.

"What is that?" I ask.

"Mother bought a hideous neoclassical battle scene from some Gaulish artist that will span the entire back wall of the south gallery. She's re-arranging everything at Stillwater, but I convinced her this one belongs here with you. You were quite fond of it, weren't you?"

I hug them both once more, then send them off in a swirling cloud of dirt.

When I re-enter the cottage, the silence knocks me sideways. It's what I wanted, but the lack of laughter and chatter will take some getting used to.

The wrapped painting leans against the wall, and I stare at it for longer than perhaps could be considered normal. I'm not afraid to unwrap it, per se, it's just … I don't have a name for the churning emptiness I'm feeling. Is it hunger, perhaps?

I make some tea and arrange a platter of cold chicken, crusty bread, and the last of the pickles Lizzie brought from Cranford. I eat, staring at the painting even longer, trying to ascertain where this odd, uncanny ache in my chest is coming from.

Lazy afternoon sun crawls up the table legs when, at last, I gain the courage to unwrap it. I cut the twine, then carefully slice through the paper.

The Knight Departs has the same powerful effect on me as always. I am overcome by the poignant tenderness between the knight and his lady. But there's a note of bitter, bone-deep melancholy that I swear I've never felt before. My fingers shake as I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

I pull *The Knight Departs* away from the wall, intending to examine the hardware on the back, and find a letter nestled in the bottom corner of the frame.

It's less a letter and more a booklet, thick and brown with age. On the cover, in Granny Maggie's familiar, forward-slanting scrawl, is

written:

To Margaret, From Margaret

I frown at the strange manner of her address, then walk back to my tea and begin reading.



It is nearly midnight when I finish my third re-read of the letter. Which is more like a short novel.

Granny Maggie's—Margaret Bowles's—original faerie story.

An epic adventure of magic rings and celestial courts and handsome dukes with pointed ears and horns. I have the strangest sense of déja vu as I'm reading.

Has she told me this story before? And why can I hear certain passages, smell and taste others, as if I've lived them myself?

Several times within the text, she makes mention of friends she made there, though she never names them. As if to do so would be too painful.

There's a sarcastic, devastating woman with night-dark hair and pool-blue eyes. There's a tall, gruff duke with ram's horns whose exterior is as hard as his interior is soft; it's very obvious that Granny Maggie was in love with him. And there's a handsome knight with hair the color of autumn leaves who offered her protection in one of the courts. His description cramps my chest so fiercely that I have to pause to catch my breath.

The ending is the strangest part of all. No matter how many times I read the words, I cannot make sense of them.

I stole it for you, though I haven't even met you yet. The seer showed me how terribly the Otherworld's story would end if I hadn't. How terribly your *story might end. Oh my dear Charlotte, you are in for an* adventure.

I fall back, blowing out a long, slow breath.

A branch scrapes the window and I nearly fly out of my chair. The candles are nothing but sad, lumpen faces of wax and the room

has grown terribly cold. I've been so engrossed, I haven't even lit a fire.

I rise to correct the oversight, and something taps on the door. Another branch, surely. I pull a blanket around my shoulders, ignoring it.

But it sounds again. So faint, I could almost convince myself I'm hearing things.

Almost.

I gather my courage, then fling open the door before I can second-guess myself.

Sitting on the stoop, glinting in the moonlight, is a small, silver box.

There's not a soul to be found in the dark night, no movement save a few leaves dancing across the dirt lane.

I bend down to pick up the box, which is unnaturally warm given the chill in the air. I close the door, turning the box over to find an etching on the bottom; one of those strange, beautiful moths from *The Knight Departs*.

Hushed whispers overtake my mind, a susurrous of voices. Some are so close they prickle the hairs on my neck, while others seem to shout from miles away.

Inside the box is a simple, silver band, also heated. I pull it out; there's an engraving on the inside.

One of the voices crystallizes in my mind. A low, lush voice that sounds like the answer to every question I've ever asked, the blessing of every prayer I've ever sent to an indifferent god.

The voice says my name as the clock strikes midnight, and I read the engraving.

For My Favourite.

I slip the ring onto my finger and open the door.



EPILOGUE

LACHLAN

The moon was high and the stars were bright on the night you came back to the Otherworld.

As if the gods were offering a celestial backdrop as celebratory as my mood.

Well, celebratory the instant you pushed open the door of the Macán family tomb, anyway. Before that, I'd been a wreck of shattered nerves and nauseous panic.

What if it hadn't worked? What if all my traveling back and forth to Farlock's Edge had all been for naught? Queen Aowen had sent me there almost immediately after her coronation with enough coin to found my own small nation. Or to pay the excessive fees charged by the sorcerers who toil in our most ancient magics.

I felt a bit guilty about the expense, but when Wen assured me that the money had come from the LaBeaumont coffers—part of the wealth redistribution program she and Sabre had undertaken to right that family's many, *many* wrongs—well, after hearing that, I didn't feel so bad.

Besides, there is no amount I wouldn't have paid, nothing I would not have given, to bring you back to me.

Fortunately, we still had the ring. And the novillum seed. Thanks to you.

A masterful sorcerer, an older woman whose knobby fingers moved faster and with more precision than I'd ever seen, was able to extract a small wisp of the novillum's power—enough to offer you

its benefits without delegitimizing Aowen's crown—and forge it back into the ring. She also gave it a new engraving. I'm sure it didn't mean much to you when you read it, but I hoped someday you might appreciate the nod to our origins.

Even with the sorcerer's skill, it took months of careful spellwork to complete. Months I spent so anxious and desperate that even wearing myself out every day assisting the reconstruction in Campan's Vale couldn't help me sleep at night. Garred was worried about me. As were my new people.

Have I forgotten to mention my new title? Aowen has dubbed me Duke of House Smythe, the new sovereign House of the Vale. Co-duke, actually. Garred is much more enamored of our rank than I am.

I argued with Wen and Sabre about it for weeks. Then Garred, the sneaky bastard, arranged a surprise gathering in town where nearly every citizen came to give thanks for our training and service during the occupation. And assured me they wanted no other men to lead them.

As you well know—or I suppose, you used to know—I am not a man of many words. Especially in front of large crowds. I found myself similarly speechless that day.

But I was so, so grateful. To my new queen. To the resilient people of Campan's Vale.

And to you, for allowing us this peace in the first place.

I had only a few weeks to acclimate myself to my new position—even now, when someone calls me *Your Grace*, half the time I turn back expecting to find Desmond—and before I knew it, the ring was ready and the spring equinox in the human realm was approaching.

The night before, Aowen and I had dinner together, just the two of us. Well, three if you count the pixie on the wall. We drank, we laughed, we reminisced about the previous Season. After many shared memories and too many bottles of wine, I placed the ring box in her hand as she grabbed mine.

"Get our quarry back, Your Grace," she said. "Please." Vesper confirmed with a small hiccup, then refilled her tiny glass.

Words failed me again, but I nodded as Aowen closed her eyes and clasped the small box to her chest, asking Danu to guide the ring to the human realm. To you.

I lived years between the day you left and that night, even though only six months had passed in the Otherworld. It was as if my heart had kept pace with yours the entire time.

And then the tomb opened. And you stepped through the door.

And my heart stopped beating altogether.

You were just as confused, just as beautiful, as you were that night you first arrived. Though this time, a small flare of recognition widened your eyes as they fell upon me.

"Hello." The sound of your voice nearly brought me to my knees. "I, um … Well, I seem to have lost my way." You laughed nervously. Another wallop. "Am I in the Otherworld?"

Shock forced a breath from my lungs. Had you retained your memories after all? "Yes. How do you know that?"

"I've just read the most incredible letter. My grandmother has been here before, and … "

You recounted the entire tale, and I hope you'll forgive that I was only half-listening; I was too busy studying you. You were slightly thinner than the ghost who'd haunted me these past months, and I desperately hoped it was not due to heartbreak or illness.

But there was that cheeky sparkle in your eyes. That effervescent curiosity. That need to consume every bit of the world around you.

I thought I understood grief, the shape and taste of it. But in that moment, I knew it was far more bittersweet than I'd anticipated.

Because as ecstatic as I was to have you back, there still existed a version of you that would be forever lost to me.

My little queen.

At some point, you must have realized you'd been rambling for ten minutes and you stopped abruptly, nervous and hesitant once again.

I knew the answer before the question left my mouth, but couldn't help asking it.

"Do you know me?"

"No." Your curls danced in the moonglow. "But I do know your name. Lachlan Cathal, right?" A smile parted your rosebud lips, and my hands began trembling. I had not prepared myself very well for the emotional and physical turmoil of your return. "This may sound ridiculous, but … are you my husband?"

Not yet, I thought to myself even as I shook my head. "A ruse from another lifetime, I'm afraid."

"Oh." You looked even more confused. "Well, then I … do you know *me*?"

"I used to. Very well."

You scrutinized my face, as if you could excavate your memories if you only stared hard enough. As if you'd never wanted anything more.

I stepped toward you and took your hand, your skin soft against my palm. Like coming home after a brutal, centuries-long odyssey.

"I made a promise to you once. That if you ran away, I would hunt you down and return you." I swallowed as I stared down at you. My Charlotte. My love. "Will you return to me?"

You ran your thumb along the ring, then smiled at me again. "Yes. Yes, I think I'd like that."

My nerves dissolved and relief pulsed down to my bones. "Good."

"To where are we returning?"

"A castle not too far from here. There are a few more people waiting to greet you." I folded your hand into the crook of my elbow and turned us toward the luxbridge where I'd left Tula.

"Along the way, let me tell you a faerie story."



Read on for a note from the author plus a preview of ***Hunted by the Fae King's Shadow*** *by Shaylin Gandhi, the next book in the* ***Immortal Hunters*** *collection!*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so very much for taking the time to read Hunted by the Fae Duke - I sincerely hope you enjoyed it! DMs are always open if you have questions, wanna squeal with me over Lachlan, or need to yell at me for all the emotional damage.
If you are willing, I would be eternally grateful if you would write a review on either Goodreads, Amazon, or ideally both. Every review helps my book get seen! And please feel free to tag me on socials in positive 4- and 5-star reviews.

REVIEW LINKS:
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If you'd like to check out my other books or purchase signed copies, please visit my website at kriskhainesbooks.com. You can also sign-up for my newsletter to get updates about book releases, signing events, bonus content, giveaways, ARC sign-ups, and so much more!

Hunted by the Fae King's Shadow

IMMORTAL HUNTERS

SHAYLIN GANDHI

CHAPTER

ONE

When the fae king comes to court, I'm supposed to disappear. Not spy on him from inside the armoire in the receiving hall and wonder if I'll have to marry him.

But the moment I peer out through the armoire's slatted door and glimpse our immortal visitor, that's what I do. What if, when my sisters and I are presented to him tonight, he chooses me? What if he steals me away to his castle beyond the Wildwood? What if he forces me to spend my life there, cut off from my people, on the far side of a forest no human can cross?

My breath shortens as I mash my eye against the slats. Beyond the door, the fae king strides through our airy receiving hall like he owns the marble he's walking on.

One glance is all it takes to have dread pooling low in my stomach. Because Ishanna's blood, he's like nothing I've ever seen—an imposing tower of muscle and sinew, with long white hair that spills to his waist. His face is both harsh and unfeeling, his cheekbones as sharp as the elongated tips of his ears. That, coupled with his yellow eyes and the brutal slash of his brows, makes him look like someone's downfall come to life. Like sin and corruption and ruin, if sin wore leather armor and had golden, sunbaked skin.

My lungs suck at the armoire's stale air, but the attempt to steady myself does nothing. This man, this…*fae*…is everything people whisper about: wicked, immoral, cruel. I can tell by the careless roll

of his steps, the scornful set of his lips. That twist to his mouth looks permanent—a message etched in stone, warning all who come near that Amriel of the Fae does what he likes, to whoever he likes, whenever he chooses.

Morals—and consequences—be damned.

I blink furiously, but my cramped hiding place shrinks as the armoire presses in around me. Maybe it's a fresh wave of fear, or maybe everyone feels this way when they first lay eyes on the fae king. Or any fae at all.

I wouldn't know, because the last time the fae delegation visited, I was only three. I wasn't even allowed downstairs—only royal women who'd come of age in the past quarter-century were. As the stories go, the fae king perused each one, then turned away and made the same pronouncement he always does.

"Not this time. Maybe in another twenty-five years."

Now, as I crouch in the darkness, I grab hold of that truth and press it close. The fae king might visit every quarter-century, and we might let him, because we have no choice—the treaty we signed at the end of the war grants him the right to claim a human bride as a sort of living, breathing peace offering. But in the two hundred years since that agreement, the fae king hasn't actually chosen. He comes to court once in every generation, then sneers at his options and leaves again.

I have no reason to believe that will change tonight.

I'm still bolstering myself with the thought when Amriel's approach slows, his casual stride giving way to…well, I don't know, exactly. Something that raises the hair on my neck. The air around him seems to thicken, while at his side, his hands curl into fists.

He draws abreast of my hiding place and stops. So do the half-dozen delegates who flank him. The fae contingent glances around, searching for the source of the delay.

All except for their king, who raises his nose and sniffs. His head swivels, his golden eyes scanning for whatever has caught his attention. And…oh, goddess. He's looking at the armoire. At *me*.

Lightning touches down beneath my skin. *He can't actually see me*, my mind insists, but the way my heart rattles against my

ribcage tells me I don't believe it. The cabinet might conceal me, but Amriel's gaze burrows through the slats, drilling beneath my skin, probing toward my core.

An involuntary whimper leaves my lips. I try to muffle it with a trembling hand, but too late—the king's eyes narrow to slits. He tests the air again, then takes a step toward my hiding place.

My heart slams against the back of my throat. Oh, no. No, no, no. Why did I think this was a good idea? Why didn't I just stay upstairs, like I was supposed to?

I scramble backward, my spine melding with the wood as I inch as far from him as I can get. I grope blindly for the crescent-moon pendant at my throat. *Help me, Ishanna*. *Protect me from this brute.*

But my fevered prayers have no effect. Amriel's boots clack across the marble, each footfall louder than the last. *Clack. Clack. Clack.*

I curl into myself, bracing for the door to swing wide, to expose me to his ruthless yellow gaze, but at the last moment, my prayers are answered.

"Amriel." My father's voice booms through the hall. "You've made it."

That familiar tenor wraps me in relief. It also halts the fae king's steps. Cocooned as I am in shadows, I can't see him anymore, but I assume that's *him* clearing his throat, mere inches away.

"Edmond," he says. "Still alive, I see. And looking far more grown-up than last time."

A shiver coasts along my skin. The fae king's voice is deep, resonant in a way the hall's acoustics can't claim responsibility for. A chilly thread of boredom runs throughout, as if this conversation, this entire endeavor, amounts to nothing more than an inconvenience for him. Just a fleeting annoyance amid the endlessness of his existence.

A new set of footsteps approaches—my father's, this time. "Welcome," he says. "It's good to see you again."

Despite my predicament, my mouth twists at the lie. My father hates the fae. It doesn't matter that we only see them once every twenty-five years during the Claiming, or that in the interim, they

keep to their kingdom beyond the Wildwood, where no human dares to go.

My father detests our immortal neighbors. Most humans do, and with good reason—during the war, we suffered at their hands, for a crime no greater than setting foot on their land. It's hard to believe something *that* insignificant prompted such bloodshed, but the history books are clear: two hundred years ago, my great-great-however-many-times grandmother, frustrated by the eternal gulf between humans and fae, took it upon herself to find a way through the Wildwood. She arrived at Amriel's castle with her advisors in tow, intent on establishing diplomatic relations.

But the fae king answered her overture with violence. With a war that then raged for a decade.

Needless to say, we humans don't go into the Wildwood, anymore.

"Come," my father says, with the weighty intonation of one king speaking to another. "Food and refreshments are this way. And I imagine you'll want some rest before tonight's…presentation."

That last word hitches in his throat. He masks the wobble well, enough that Amriel won't catch it, but I know the tell: deep rage festers at the thought of this fae brute legally kidnapping one of Aethrolia's royal daughters.

"Refreshments?" the fae king says. "Very well. Truth be told, I never turn down an offer of wine."

The offhand remark pulls a gasp up my throat. Did he just insult us on purpose? Or by accident? Because we don't drink wine in Aethrolia. No follower of Ishanna does.

A heavy silence falls in the hall, which Amriel breaks with a chuckle. "Oh, but that's right—you don't partake in that particular pleasure, do you, Edmond? Or any pleasure at all, really."

Air floods my lungs, a fiery torrent. On purpose. Definitely on purpose.

"I don't partake in wickedness," my father grits out. "Which means I can offer you tea. Or juice. Or any number of things that don't separate a man from his good sense."

Another chuckle from the fae king, and Ishanna help me, the sound is so arrogant I can practically feel its bite, like frozen metal pressed against my skin. “Good sense?” he says. “And what would I do with a thing like that?”

The casual doubling-down on his blasphemy sends me reeling. Here in Aethrolia, we strive to always remain in control of ourselves. Ishanna teaches us to retain our faculties at all times.

Meanwhile, the fae worship no gods but themselves. And now, as I huddle in the darkness and clutch at Ishanna’s symbol, every whispered rumor—every tale swapped around our kitchen hearth—comes rushing into my head. It’s said the fae exist for their own enjoyment: eating to excess, drinking to forgetfulness, doing it all over again the next day. I’ve heard that sometimes, they even chase each other. Catch each other. Then they couple in public, or under the open sky, or in any place at all, really. Whatever strikes their fancy.

I shudder.

“Look,” my father says, and I don’t have to witness the clench of his jaw or the throb at his temple to know the reserves of his diplomacy have already been exhausted. “Why don’t we just get this over with?”

Another mocking laugh from the fae king. “Why not? Maybe, if we’re quick, I can get home in time to drink myself into a stupor.”

I slap a hand across my mouth, some brand-new emotion splitting me down the middle. I’ve never heard anyone talk to my father this way. I doubt anyone ever has.

Out in the hall, leather creaks. Boots shuffle. When my father finally responds, he sounds as though he’s pushing words through locked teeth. “Very well. I suppose I can’t pretend I’ll regret seeing you off tonight.”

“No, you can’t.” Amusement drips from Amriel’s tone. “At least, not convincingly. So…lead the way to these refreshments, why don’t you?”

My father grunts his agreement. The fae delegation mobilizes with a chorus of murmurs and shuffling. In the midst of the ruckus,

someone raps their knuckles against the armoire door, so lightly it might be an accident.

Instinct sends me scuttling back all over again. But when our visitors' footsteps trail away, a pent-up breath seeps from my chest. I scoot to the cabinet door and press my eye to the slats. My father strides briskly down the hall, his spine stiff with indignation.

But the fae king…he glances back at my hiding place, a knowing grin stamped across his mouth.

CHAPTER
TWO

After escaping the armoire, I take the stairs two at a time, trying to outrun the erratic thud of my heart.

It doesn't work. The disordered rhythm chases me all the way up to Evelyn's bedroom, where I waste no time hurling myself through the door. All three of my sisters stop and stare as I lean against the wood with one hand mashed to my chest.

Goddess, what just happened down there? Did the fae king… *scent me out*?

Evelyn surveys me from her vanity, her nose wrinkling. "Sariah. Why in Ishanna's name haven't you gotten ready yet?"

My throat works around a dozen possible responses. I want to say there's no need, that I refuse to attend tonight's presentation, but that's a lie. Not only do the terms of the treaty demand my presence, but I've longed to put this day behind me all my life. Once the fae king officially passes me over, my future becomes my own. I'm dutybound to face the Claiming—there's no way around that—but once I walk away, nothing stands between me and my dreams of joining the priestesshood.

Which means that in the morning, at sunrise prayers, I'll kneel before our High Priestess and ask to take the robes. By this time tomorrow, I'll be a dedicant, and someday, years from now, a full-fledged priestess. I'll float through the temple hallways, my white robes rippling, my hair so long it brushes the backs of my knees. I'll

have earned my magic by then, like my sisters have already. I'll have made my father proud.

Finally.

The thought girds me, enough that I push away from the door. Yet the fae king's glance still lingers, like a cold shadow cast across the back of my neck. "I have time," I manage.

"Barely." Evelyn huffs. "The Claiming starts at sunset. Less than half an hour."

A protest gathers on my lips, but sure enough, outside the window, the sun burns low, flooding the horizon with creams and oranges and pinks.

Not much time at all, then.

Over by the floor-length mirror, my sister Brynne glares. "Where were you, anyway? Don't tell me you went spying on the fae king?"

Evelyn gasps. So does Carina. Three pairs of hazel eyes pin me in place.

The weight of their stares makes me squirm, but I can't lie. Brynne will know, because like all my sisters—like *every* woman in my bloodline except for me—she's already earned her Grace. The goddess gifted my eldest sister with farsight, which means Brynne has probably spent the last half-hour watching me from here, her rosebud lips pinched in distaste.

"I wasn't *spying*," I say stiffly. "I wanted a glimpse, that's all."

Another collective gasp from Evelyn and Carina. Brynne smooths down her skirts, her expression unchanging—a dead giveaway that she *has* been watching.

I look away. This is why Brynne and I don't get along. Her constant surveillance unsettles me.

Carina takes a hesitant step, her hands trembling as she knits them together at her waist. "Since you saw Amriel, maybe you could...um…you could tell us what he's like?"

The question comes out whisper-thin—at twenty-three, Carina holds the title of not only youngest, but also quietest, and she often speaks as though she doesn't have the right to. As though her own questions frighten her, somehow.

Usually, I'm gentle with her. We all are. But right now, I can't stop the truth from tumbling out. "He's exactly what everyone says. Cold. Frightening. Definitely dangerous."

A squeak flies from Carina's throat. "Oh. I should probably change, then. Try not to draw his attention."

I grimace. I hate that she looks so terrified. Actually, now that I peer closer, all three of them do. Brynne hides it better than the others, but the tension in her jaw makes me want to rush to the door and lock us all inside.

Because not one of us would survive life in the fae king's castle, where all manner of heathen things take place. As children of Ishanna, we need order. Discipline. An austere marble temple in which to spend our mornings on our knees, communing with our goddess.

And, in my case, striving to earn my Grace.

Carina scurries toward Evelyn's closet, presumably to find a dress even less likely to attract notice than the drab thing she's already wearing. The moment she passes from earshot, Evelyn's narrowed gaze finds mine. "Did you really have to scare her like that?"

Acidic guilt eats its way up my throat, but *everything* scares Carina. She still sleeps with a candle lit, afraid of what lurks in the shadows of her bedroom. "She *asked*. What do you want me to do, lie?"

Evelyn grumbles something indecipherable, then swivels back to her vanity and frowns at her reflection, as if she, too, hopes to find some way to diminish herself. "Just…tell me Amriel was in his human form, at least? Because if he shows up as a goblin tonight, nothing will stop Carina from running away screaming."

The question gives me pause. It's rumored the fae can take two forms—one human, the other…not. Which I believe, because our cook gossips relentlessly about the goblin who joined the fae delegation on their *last* visit to court.

"The fae king's Shadow," she likes to say, clutching her crescent-moon pendant so hard her knuckles go white. "That's what they kept calling him, and I've never seen anything so unnatural. So…beastly.

And Ishanna help me, I hope I never lay eyes on the likes of him again."

That term has always stuck in my mind—*the fae king's Shadow*. I don't know what it means, exactly, only that our cook makes him sound like some kind of cross between a guard and an assassin. One who *always* takes his goblin form. In my imagination, he looms as a monstrous shadow, grotesque and misshapen.

But I saw nothing so gruesome down in the hall just now, so maybe the king's Shadow didn't come, this time. "Actually, they were all in their human forms. You have nothing to worry about."

Evelyn goes to work taming her brown curls. "Well. Thank Ishanna for that."

"Oh, what does it matter?" Brynne cuts in, a sour twist on her lips. "Human or goblin, it's not like the king will choose anyone. He never does."

Her words sink deep, sparking warmth in my marrow. She's right—since the end of the war, Amriel has come to court nine times. And nine times, he's walked away.

"Actually," Evelyn says, "I think tonight, he'll…"

When she trails off, both Brynne and I snap to attention. We know exactly what it means when Evelyn "thinks" something.

Sure enough, Evelyn's gaze turns glassy, her attention shifting to some landscape beyond the mirror. I step in. So does Brynne, catching the hairbrush just as it falls from Evelyn's hand.

I brace to catch my sister if she topples. Evelyn may be Graced with foresight, but sometimes, when a vision grips her, her body shuts down. Once, she fell and hit her head so hard our surgeon had to stitch up her scalp, afterward.

This episode passes quickly, though. After a handful of heartbeats, Evelyn blinks in a way that lets me know she's rejoined reality. Still, I let a few more moments pass before dropping my hands.

Evelyn stares into the mirror, her cheeks ashen, her fingers clamped around the vanity to steady herself. "The king *will* choose someone," she murmurs. "Tonight. I saw it."

"What?" I try to school my expression, but no force in existence can quell the horrified wrench of my mouth. "Are you sure? But… who? Who will he choose?"

"I…" Evelyn's brow knits. "I don't know. Someone in this room. That's all I could see."

My fingers curl, my nails biting into my palms. Of course it's someone in the room. There's no other possibility, because the Claiming only applies to women of royal blood. To *princesses*, in other words. Like me. Or Brynne, or Evelyn, or—

Carina emerges from the closet, wearing a dress that vaguely resembles a potato sack. When she spots us huddled by the vanity, she stops. "What? What'd I miss?"

My sisters exchange a horrified glance, but Brynne doesn't hold back. "Evelyn had a vision. She says Amriel's going to choose someone. Tonight."

The color in Carina's cheeks drains away, along with all the warmth in the room. Cold seeps into my stomach, goosebumps pebbling along my skin.

"You're sure?" Carina whispers. "Absolutely sure?"

Evelyn nods gravely. "That's what I saw."

Long moments drag by. A hard swallow scrapes down my throat, loud enough to echo off the plain furniture and bare floor. We all know Evelyn has never been wrong. And now…

Oh, goddess. Ishanna help us all.

The stony silence has barely settled when Brynne bursts into motion. She flies toward Evelyn's chest-of-drawers, her movements frantic.

I frown. "What're you doing?"

Brynne doesn't answer. She just yanks open the top drawer and fishes out a pair of shears, then darts to the floor-length mirror, where she turns the blades on her own hair. Metal flashes and squeaks. Her long, honey-brown locks float downward and pile at her feet.

Horror lumps in my chest. I try to swallow it down, but the tightness refuses to ease. Within minutes, Brynne's scalp gleams from beneath bristly, uneven stubble.

She turns to us, something hard and fiery glittering in her eyes. "I don't care how ugly I have to make myself, I won't marry a fae. A…a *heathen*. I'd rather die."

My throat bobs on a wordless swallow. I have no idea how to respond, only that I agree—I can't think of a worse fate than being stolen away from Aethrolia. Being ripped from Ishanna's grace. *Especially* on the eve of earning my magic.

Because I'm close now, I can feel it. This morning, when I lowered myself to my knees and clasped my hands beneath my chin, the goddess's regard shimmered in my mind. I could *sense* her presence, like a warm breath against the back of my neck.

It was Ishanna's way of reassuring me, I know it. She may have saved my Grace for last, but only because she has a plan for me. One that involves welcoming me as one of her future priestesses.

Which means I can't marry Amriel, either. I *won't*.

Evelyn rises and goes to the mirror, where she wraps Brynne in a hug. For long moments, my eldest sister simply stands there, all stiffness and hard angles, but then she softens into the embrace. "I won't go," she whispers. "I won't let him choose me."

Evelyn runs a hand over Brynne's shorn skull. "I know. I won't let him choose me, either. I won't let him choose any of us." She gently pries the scissors from Brynne's hand, then raises the blades to her hair, too.

My jaw loosens. As I watch, Evelyn shears herself balder than Brynne, then motions for Carina to join.

My little sister obeys. She stands before the mirror, silent tears streaming down her cheeks, as Evelyn snips and snips and snips. The pile of brown hair grows into a mountain.

When the last of Carina's tresses falls to the floor, Evelyn turns to me, expectant. I angle away from her, my hands flitting over my unbound curls, my fingers straining to tie them back, to braid them, to do *anything* other than sacrifice them to Evelyn's shears.

Because my hair means something different to me than my sisters' does to them. I've let it grow since I was sixteen, a symbol of not only my devotion, but of my intent to take the robes. These hip-length locks have required patience. Restraint. The careful

tending of hundreds of brushstrokes each night. In growing them, I've embodied every ideal in Ishanna's Book of Disciplines. Now each uncut strand represents a promise between me and my goddess, a vow I've sworn not to break.

My fingers fall to my throat, prodding at the sudden ache there. "I… I don't think I can."

Brynne's eyes flash. "What? Why not? Do you *want* Amriel to choose you?"

Her words sink icy claws into me. Of course I don't. I can't conceive of a worse fate than marrying that emotionless brute—if I did, I have no doubt he'd hurt me. Subjugate me. He'd probably send me fleeing into the Wildwood just so he could chase me down and force me. It wouldn't matter how loudly I screamed or how hard I fought—that monster would have his cruel way with me, regardless.

And yet, of all the possibilities crashing through my mind, that horror ranks as only second worst. Because, for all that I don't want to marry a heathen fae, I want to fail my goddess even less. And that's what cutting my hair would be—a failure. A betrayal.

I've read about moments like these, in the Book of Disciplines. About how the goddess tries our faith, sometimes. She presents us with temptation, then allows us to choose.

I've faced such temptations before, each time I've lifted the scissors and contemplated my reflection. *Just a little snip*, I'd sometimes think. *A simple, innocuous tidying of the ends*.

But that's how betrayal always begins. With people telling themselves they'll only indulge this once. Just a single, forbidden drink. One tiny, illicit touch. A meaningless promise broken…but then comes the next, and the next, and the next. What starts with a spark soon flares to a wildfire. One that, once lit, proves impossible to extinguish.

And now, with my sisters' expectant stares probing at me, the moment threatens to combust. This is a temptation. A *test*. One in which a single misstep can drag my entire life off-course.

Because if I cut my hair, what's next? Will I neglect my prayers tomorrow? Put off my decision to take the robes? Maybe I'll

surrender to the baker's endless pleas and let him kiss me. And after that, once *that* impurity starts to feel comfortable, maybe I'll let him do other things. Worse things. I'll make a long, slow slide into immorality and never recover.

All because I cut my hair.

I meet Brynne's glare, my chin lifting of its own accord. "Of course I don't want Amriel to choose me. But I trust Ishanna to keep me safe. I trust her plan for me."

Brynne's look turns sharp, digging toward the place where I house my softest secrets. "Plan? What plan?"

I mash my lips together. I've never told her about my aspirations to become a priestess. I've never told anyone. That quest feels fiercely personal, a promise forged within the privacy of my own prayers.

Brynne's eyes narrow. "What's this really about, Sariah? Your vanity?"

I recoil. How can she accuse me of something so sinful? "What? No. I'm not *vain*."

Her stare doesn't waver, and a heartbeat later, understanding dawns in her eyes. "Oh. Right. This is about taking the robes, then. About you playing at being a priestess. Even though you want it for all the wrong reasons."

Her words land hard, driving me back a step. "I… Who said anything about being a priestess?"

"Oh, come on." Brynne scoffs. "Do you really think we don't know? You're desperate to earn your Grace. To stop embarrassing this family. You'll do whatever it takes to convince Ishanna to grant your magic. Even if it means pledging your life to the temple."

"Brynne," Evelyn hisses. "Leave her alone."

Brynne snorts. "What? It's true. Don't pretend like you don't know."

I try to swallow, but the thickness in my throat prevents it. *Brynne is just scared*, I tell myself. *She's lashing out because of fear, nothing more*.

But the poison just keeps flowing from her lips.

"But just so you know, Sariah, if you were as faithful as you think, if you were even half as devout, Ishanna would've Graced you already. The fact that she skipped you means you don't have her favor. You're not special, and you're not above us. So take the scissors. Cut your hair."

I blink hard, trying to drive back the phantom fears Brynne has summoned, but they swirl in the silence, snatching at me with cold fingers.

Maybe my sister is right, and I'm an embarrassment. A stain on our family name. It's not like I haven't suspected it myself, when I lie in the dark and probe at the hole in my chest where magic should dwell.

And yet…I can't bring myself to believe Ishanna has abandoned me. If she has, then why did I feel her touch this morning? Why did she whisper in my ear about how life is on the verge of opening up for me?

No, I believe. I have *faith*.

I force the lump in my throat to settle. "You know what? I do want to be a priestess. I want it more than anything. But not because I'm trying to bargain for my Grace. It's because I believe in Ishanna. Because I know every word in her Book is true. Because I don't just want to read her lessons, I want to *live* them. I want to dedicate myself to the goddess, and follow a path of purity, and yes—I want to let my hair grow, like a priestess. Just because I haven't pledged myself yet doesn't mean I haven't already given myself to Ishanna. Deep down, in my heart, I did that years ago."

Brynne makes a frustrated sound. "Your hair means nothing right now. Pledges don't count until you actually make them."

My jaw flexes. "They do for me."

She scoffs. "You're going to get yourself married to the fae king, acting like this."

"No." Something unpleasant swims in my belly, but I force it down. "Ishanna will protect me."

Brynne hisses. "*Or* you should cut your hair off, just to be sure."

The venom in her tone hardens something inside me. "No. That would undermine every promise I've ever made. Every prayer I've

ever said."

"You know what?" She throws her hands into the air, her lip curled in disgust, and shoves past me on her way to the door. "Fine. Do whatever you want. Just don't come crying to me when you end up married to a monster."

She flings open the door and stomps away, her footsteps fading down the hallway. Evelyn and Carina stare at me, stricken.

"You're…sure?" Evelyn whispers.

I hesitate, more moved by her gentle concern than by Brynne's attempts at brute force. "Well, not entirely," I admit.

Evelyn holds my eyes for long moments, then holds out the scissors. "Will you think about it, at least? Please?"

My focus falls to the shears, to the gleam of pink twilight on cold metal. "Yes. But you should go. It's almost time, and Father won't like it if you're late."

Evelyn presses the scissors into my hand. "I'll see you downstairs, then?"

The lump in my throat threatens to reappear. "Yes. Downstairs."

After a brief squeeze of my shoulders, Evelyn steers Carina from the room, leaving me alone with my reflection. *And* the shears, which drag at my grip like a ten-pound weight.

I stare into the mirror, the quiet suffocating. My wide-set hazel eyes peer back at me as I survey my modest dress, the waterfall of my hair. Loose brown curls flow past my shoulders to swish around my hips.

I could cut them off, yes, but it would change me, and I don't think I can bear to be anything other than what I see in the mirror: a future priestess who lives for her goddess, who aspires to earn her Grace. Who understands that faith doesn't actually mean anything if you only have it when it's convenient.

My attention shifts to the crescent-moon necklace at my throat. "You'll protect me," I tell it. "I know you will."

The silence around me warms, turns silken.

It's all the answer I need. With a small smile to myself, I turn and make for the door, leaving the scissors behind on Evelyn's vanity.

CHAPTER

THREE

Downstairs, I hurry through the marble corridors, which stretch wide and bare and empty. On any other night, bustling chatter would fill these halls, but tonight, everyone has gone to the throne room. They've gathered to watch the Claiming, and I'm…*late*.

My pace quickens. I can practically see my father's cool-eyed disappointment, the divot between his graying brows. Not only have I spent half my life failing his expectations, but now I've managed to arrive late for an event I've had twenty-eight years to prepare for.

Ishanna's blood, what is *wrong* with me?

Up ahead, a side door appears. If I duck through to the outside, I can cut across the garden and reenter the castle through the east wing, come at the throne room from that way. The shortcut will save me five minutes, at least.

An easy decision.

I throw open the door, my skirts billowing as I burst into the balmy summer evening. The gardens gleam in the pastel twilight, but I don't spare the manicured flowerbeds a glance. I rush between the boxwood hedges, my hems whipping against the trimmed leaves.

In the distance, pale pink light clings to the horizon, the last glimmer of sun narrowing and vanishing. A weight settles atop my shoulders. Time for the Claiming to officially—

I stumble as the entire garden—the entire *world*—shudders around me. By the time I regain my footing, the disturbance has

passed, but…Ishanna's breath, what *was* that? I glance around for some kind of explanation, but the birds cease their chattering, the garden plunged into stillness.

Anxious energy fizzes inside me. I try to placate it with a lungful of perfumed evening, but the fragrant sweetness offers no relief. My eyes drift as if summoned to where darkness lurks on the horizon. In the dip between two distant mountains, shadows pool, cloaking the lands that lie beyond.

The Wildwood. The ominous, tangled gateway that guards Velindra, the kingdom of the fae.

Even from here, the forest's shadows teem with menace. With *threats*. Dark energy crackles from those trees, and I have no doubt that whatever caused that anomaly just now, it had something to do with—

A twig snaps behind me.

My spine stiffens, my thoughts bursting apart like popped soap bubbles. I start to turn, but rough hands grip me from behind—one at my waist, another at my nape. Whoever has snuck up on me is strong, because I'm locked in place, my stare aimed at the horizon.

"Don't run," a voice behind me growls. "Whatever you do, don't ever run from me."

I try to turn again, but the hand at my neck tightens like a collar, and I can't catch so much as a glimpse. My entire body revolts, my nerve endings screaming.

"Do you understand?" the voice grates out. "Once you see me, you absolutely can. Not. Run."

My heartbeat turns ragged. "O-okay. But why would I run?"

My captor leans in, his breath hot against my ear. He drags in an inhale so blatantly greedy that my vital processes abandon me.

I tremble, chained to the earth not only by his grip, but by a paralyzing burst of fear. Is this the fae king? It must be. No one else would dare accost an Aethrolian princess in her own garden.

"I knew your scent was tempting," he says, his voice dropping into a gravelly register I didn't know existed until this moment. "But shadows take me, up close like this, you're irresistible."

I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I was somewhere else. Anywhere else. My assailant inhales again, concluding with a groan so obscene that if my sisters heard, they'd spend a week repenting for it. As it stands, I'll need a scalding bath later, just so I can slough that horrible sound from my skin. "Irresistible?" I manage. "Because of…what, my smell?"

"Yes."

"But I don't have a smell."

He laughs. It's a dark sound—rough and heavy and inevitable, like the last rattle of autumn before snowfall arrives. "You do. You smell like something I'd chase until the ends of the earth. I wouldn't be able to help myself, in this form. Which is why you shouldn't run."

A thousand urges collide in me at once. I want to scream. I want to flee. And yet this stranger's warning carries gravity, enough to override the panic bubbling in my veins. I need to stay calm. Extricate myself from his hold, somehow.

"If I did run," I hear myself say, "what would happen?"

The hand at my hip squeezes. "I'd chase you."

"And then?"

"I'd catch you."

I force a swallow. "And…then what?"

An eternity slips past, marked by the uneven rush of my pulse, by the pull of warm breath against the sensitive shell of my ear. My captor edges so close his chest brushes my back. "Something you wouldn't like," he rumbles.

Something I wouldn't like. A violent shiver wracks my frame, because the mere thought of fleeing from the fae king—of being marked for capture by those merciless yellow eyes—sends dread spiraling through me.

I wouldn't survive that. Survive *him*. Or, if I did, I'd probably wish I hadn't.

"I *will* let go of you," the voice behind me says, "if you promise not to run."

I breathe around the leaden weight wedged in my airway. "All right. I-I promise."

For a moment, his hold actually tightens, the pressure accompanied by the prick of…what are those, *claws*? But before I can decide, his grip vanishes, leaving me weak-kneed and wobbly, like I've been stranded amid empty air.

I breathe. And breathe. And breathe. Then gather my wits and turn around.

And immediately lose track of myself again, because this is *not* the fae king. At least…not in the form I last saw him in.

No, this is a goblin—indigo-skinned and impossibly tall, his frame so broadly muscled it's as if someone carved him from a solid block of night. His long white hair gleams in the twilight, the top half pulled into a knot that bares his pointed ears, the bottom half cascading over elaborate leather armor. Starlit glimmers play across his bluish-purple skin, but the shimmers seem to be part of him somehow, not reflected from above.

And…Ishanna's blood, I *do* want to run. Some primal instinct courses through me, a bone-deep urge to flee—away from him, or toward him, I can't tell. I can't even separate up from down right now, not with his presence diving into me like a thousand knives.

"You're thinking about it," the goblin says, his moonlight-colored brows pulling together. His eyes bore into me, as cold and bright as yellow planets. "Running. I can tell."

I blink, needing a reprieve from his stare, from the sharpness of his jaw, but it's hopeless. He's too intense. Too overwhelming to possibly shut out with something as flimsy as eyelids.

"It's kind of hard not to," I breathe. "You're… You're…"

He waits, but no word exists in this language or any other to adequately conclude that sentence. He's enormous. He's dizzying. He's devastating and otherworldly and *impossible*.

And Ishanna help me, he is *definitely* not what I pictured when I heard the word "goblin."

"Frightening?" he guesses, revealing pointed canines.

That flash of teeth sends an electrical impulse barreling down my throat, which flares to a full-blown wildfire the moment it hits my belly. Yes, he's frightening. Terrifying, even. And yet every second spent staring upward pries my mind apart a little wider. How have I

spent twenty-eight years in a world that contains creatures like this, and never even realized?

The silence between us tightens. The goblin lets his focus travels over the high collar of my dress, the buttons beneath my chin, the loose fall of my hair. After half a century, he drags his gaze back to mine. It lands like a blow, the reverberations rattling in my bones.

Run, my brain screams.

I almost do. I *want* to, so badly my legs quiver. But if I flee, this goblin will catch me, and I don't trust him not to tear me apart with those wicked teeth.

"You're…intimidating," I squeeze out, then widen my feet in an attempt to convince them to stay in contact with the ground. "But you're not so scary that I'm going to run."

He crosses his arms, displaying biceps roughly the same diameter as my thighs. "No?"

"No." I gulp down the nerves boiling in my stomach. "I mean… I'm standing here, aren't I?"

His low chuckle roughens the air. Those eyes—goddess, are they *glowing*?—take another detour downward, consuming every inch of me, from my head to my toes and back again. He doesn't move, but something about his stillness crackles with energy, like he could burst into motion at any moment. Uncage all the strength coiled in those sculpted limbs and use it to force me into submission.

"You *are* standing here," he says. "Impressive. Most humans can't manage it."

"You *did* just make me promise not to run."

"That doesn't usually stop people."

I frown. He holds my eyes without blinking, and…goddess, the look on his face is *hungry*. Greedy enough to steal the pauses between my heartbeats and collapse my insides to a frenetic buzz.

I have to get away from him. Stop him from sizing me up like I'm his next meal. "Look," I say. "I have somewhere to be, so how about I turn around and walk away now? I can do it slowly, if that helps."

An avid light flickers in his eyes. "No. You're not going anywhere yet."

My breath leaves me in a rush. "But…why not? What could you possibly want with me?"

His violet tongue darts out to swipe across those pointed teeth. "In this form? I don't think you actually want to know, Princess. You humans are so easily scandalized."

A spark of annoyance flares in my chest. Scandalized? Why, because we humans have common decency, unlike the fae? Because we have morals that prevent us from accosting people in their own homes?

"Look," I say. "Either let me go, or tell me what you want and *then* let me go."

His smile turns mocking. "Okay. I'll tell you. But you won't like it."

"It doesn't matter if I like it. I have to get to the throne room. Now. I'm already late."

"All right." He leans in, violating my personal space without hesitation. His scent wafts into my nose—cold metal and oiled leather and something else, something I have no name for. "If you really care to know, Princess, deep down, in this shriveled, blackened heart of mine, I *do* want you to run. Because I want so badly to chase you. To terrify you. I want to follow that delicious smell of yours until I catch you, and then I want to pin you down and eat you up. I want to make you *scream*."

A shudder rips through me, forceful enough to hurt. I can't tell if he just threatened me with violence or…something else.

"What's more," he continues, his focus falling to my mouth, "if we were in the Wildwood, I would've done it. I would've snuck up on you without any warning and let you run. And when I caught you, I would've done what I liked. But lucky for you, we're not in the Wildwood right now. We're in Aethrolia, where me hunting you down would cause…problems."

I stand frozen, barely able to formulate a thought, much less a coherent question. Somehow, after half a lifetime, my lips remember how to move. "Do you threaten to hunt down every human you meet?"

That earns me a dark, scorched chuckle. "No. Just you. Shadows take me, do you know how long I've waited to find a scent like

yours? Years. Lifetimes. *Centuries*."

Fear wraps cold fingers around my airway and squeezes. *Is* this the fae king, then? The violet patterns swirling across his skin make it hard to tell, but the longer I look, the more I recognize the shine of his eyes, the brutal slash of his mouth. And if this is Amriel who's singled me out, if he's caught my scent here the same way he did in the receiving hall, and something about it speaks to him…

Oh, goddess.

I shake my head, trying to banish the possibility. Surely this isn't the fae king, but merely his Shadow, the one our cook spoke of all those times. I rake my gaze over him, searching for confirmation, but the covetousness in his expression—the way his nostrils flare as if dragging every last particle of my scent into his lungs—has me longing for a place to hide.

I need him to shift, to show me some unfamiliar face that *doesn't* hold the power to steal me away from my home. "Show me your other form," I whisper. "Your human one."

Another burnt chuckle. "I'm afraid I can't."

"Why not?"

The goblin flashes a tight smile. The display of razored teeth sends me stumbling backward, and he closes the gap in a blink, the smile dropping from his face, his fists clenching at his sides as if he can barely refrain from sinking those claw-tipped fingers into my flesh.

"Don't run," he grinds out. "I *told* you not to run."

A squeak bursts from my throat. "Yes, right before you told me you secretly wanted me to."

"I do," he says through gritted teeth, "but not here. It'll ruin everything if you do it here. Because I *will* come after you. I can't help it."

My lungs spasm, my breaths coming so quickly each one blurs into the next. My body shouts at me to spin on my heel and *go*, but I clamp down on my willpower and hold myself in place. "Okay," I force out. "I'm not running, then. I'm just…standing here. Standing in front of you."

The goblin's enormous chest heaves, his pulse flickering wildly in the hollow of his throat. For a moment, I'm certain he'll cross the remaining inches. A threat burns in those yellow eyes—something hot and dark and ancient—and I can *feel* us hurtling toward the inevitable. Toward the moment when those claws will close around me, those fangs break tender flesh—

But in the next moment, he pulls back, locking himself into stillness with visible effort.

"I'll make you a deal," he says, when he's mastered himself. "Come with me right now. We'll skip the formalities, the Claiming, all of it. I don't care about the treaty if you'll just let me possess you. Let me wreck myself with that smell of yours. Let me wreck *you*, over and over. Just come to the castle now, and I'll belong to you, and you'll belong to me. And that way, I can keep you from the Wildwood."

For long moments, I simply stare, caught between terror and outrage, between the shriek trapped in my chest and the words scrabbling for purchase on my tongue.

"*Belong* to you?" I finally spit. "No. I don't belong to anyone but Ishanna."

"It'll be so much easier this way," he continues, as if I haven't even spoken. "Once you go through with the Claiming, you'll have to run the Wildwood. You'll have to break the curse. Or…try, at least."

"Curse?" A creeping silence invades my mind. "What curse?"

"*The* curse," he says, as if it's obvious.

I blink once, twice, but his words fail to summon any understanding. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The curse." His brow tightens. "The one your ancestor laid on him, back when all this started. Don't you know your history?"

I search my memory for some clue to his meaning, but I don't recall covering any ancestral curses in school. Even if I had, it wouldn't matter right now. "No, I don't. And forget that part. When you say 'him,' who do you mean? Your king? Please say you mean your king."

The goblin's stare intensifies. "Yes, our king. Who else?"

A wave of relief crashes over me, so intense my knees almost buckle. This isn't Amriel, then, but his guard. And under the terms of the treaty, the king's Shadow holds no sway here.

"But you don't want him to Claim you," the goblin continues. "Better to come with me now. If you don't, he'll make you run the Wildwood. And then I'll end up…" Something tortured passes across his expression.

"What?" I prompt, when he fails to finish. "You'll end up what?"

He doesn't answer. His stare turns possessive, tinged with manic light, and I swear that with his next breath, he'll throw me over his shoulder and abscond with me, regardless of my refusal.

Goddess, how did I get myself into this mess? I should have bolted the moment every bird in this garden went silent.

I angle away, opening space as calculation flashes through my mind. Maybe, if I run toward him—*past* him—I'll catch him off-guard, enough that I can—

"There you are," someone says behind me.

The goblin jerks away from me, his trancelike focus broken. I chance a sidelong glance and find a fae delegate approaching—a man with dark brown skin, waist-length black locs, and eyes as pink as the clouds strewn across the sky. Filigreed beads glint in his hair, but unlike his brethren, he wears no armor. A wine-red velvet doublet strains across his chest, its cut extravagant, its sleeves alight with metallic embroidery.

I scan him up and down, sourness gathering on my tongue. He looks rich and entitled and vain. He looks like he's never repented for his immodesty, has never even considered it.

Thankfully, the newcomer ignores me. "What're you doing out here?" He glowers at the goblin. "The sun's set, and everyone's waiting. *Amriel's* waiting."

The goblin eases between me and the delegate, his teeth bared, as if he intends to shield me. "Amriel's free to start at any time."

I lean around the goblin's shoulder and find the newcomer countering that with a frozen smile. In his human form, his teeth look no different than mine, but that doesn't stop menace from pouring off him in waves.

A shiver rolls through me. Ishanna's blood, are *all* the fae this threatening?

"You're the king's Shadow," the delegate says coldly. "We can't start without you. So come on."

"No," the goblin snaps. "I'm not finished here."

"Finished?" The newcomer snorts, then shoots me a glance, his inspection so cursory that I wonder if he has any concept of my identity. "With what? Terrifying the locals?"

"No. With making the princess an offer."

"The princess? *Her*?" The delegate's attention returns to me, only this time, it lingers. "Shadows below, is *this* is the fourth one? Why hasn't she cut off her hair, like all the others?"

The goblin responds with a snarl so vicious that every blood cell in my body goes scrambling for cover. "Who cares? Stop looking at her like that. She isn't for you."

The delegate cocks an eyebrow, then picks some lint from his doublet and flicks it into the breeze, as if the goblin's aggression doesn't concern him. As if he does this every day. "I'll look at whoever I like. Now come on. *Both* of you. You're late, and I don't want to spend a moment longer here than necessary. This place is so…sterile. It's unsettling." He glances around the orderly garden and shudders, then looks expectantly at me.

As if *I* have any say in what happens next.

The goblin raises a clawed purple hand to his belt. A sheathed dagger hangs there, a wicked-looking thing. "What did I just tell you? Stop. Looking at her. Or I'll carve those pretty eyes right out of your face."

I recoil. That seems like…overkill.

But the delegate remains unfazed. He surveys the goblin's weapon, then chews on his cheek for a moment before tossing his hands up and pivoting away. "Fine. I'm not looking at her. So *now* will you come?"

"In a minute." The goblin releases his weapon and turns, his gaze cutting back to mine. "Last chance, then, Princess. Will you come with me? Or take your chances with the Claiming?"

I open my mouth, prepared to answer the easiest question anyone has ever asked of me. But something about the goblin's look makes the words stall in my throat.

I stare upward, caught in his thrall. A dozen details edge into my awareness—the slant of his lips, the slope of his nose, the way his eyes plead with mine as if begging for my agreement. As if he'd do anything to steal me away.

Ishanna help me, he's somehow…beautiful in his desperation. Horribly, painfully so. At the realization, a thrill cuts across my nerves, a hum rising to fill my blood. A sense of…recognition, almost, like a song I once heard and only just now remembered.

I *know* this fae, I swear it. Which made sense earlier, when I thought I caught traces of Amriel in his face, but…if that's not the case, what's this familiarity tugging at my insides?

"Please." His gaze dips to my mouth again. "Just come. Just let me have you."

Have me. *Have* me? The words have the same effect as a bucket of ice water upended over my head. My glare goes cold, refusal rolling off me in chilly waves.

"I'm not going anywhere," I say. I won't belong to him, or any other man. Only to my goddess.

The goblin's jaw tightens. A cloud passes behind his eyes, dimming their glow. "You will, though. It's just that this way, you'll regret that it's not with me."

I hesitate, but his warning amounts to nothing more than a scare tactic. He can't possibly know what Amriel will do. "The only thing I'll regret is standing here for so long, listening to you talk."

A guffaw erupts to my left. I glance over to find the delegate studying me with interest now, as if he *appreciates* me challenging his friend. Or his…enemy. Or whatever these two are to each other.

"Come on." He inclines his head in the direction of the throne room. "Sunset was fifteen minutes ago, and I'd *really* like to make it home tonight."

I open my mouth, but before I can respond, he turns and glides away.

Blowing out a breath, I move to follow, but the goblin yanks me back with a growl. "Don't do that. Don't turn your back on me, even for a second."

My chest constricts, sucking at air that feels much too thin to sustain a breath. "Or what?"

"You *know* what."

Silence coils between us. His clawed hand tightens, his grip so vast it swallows my upper arm in its entirety.

Ishanna's blood, I want to run from him so badly. The soles of my feet ache with the need. But I won't. No, I'll follow this goblin into the Claiming and prove Evelyn's visions wrong. And tomorrow, I'll pledge myself to the temple. My life will be decided. Cast in stone.

"If I let you go," the goblin snarls, "will you be good?"

I scoff. "For a fae? Never. But go ahead and go first, if that's what you want." Shaking off his grip, I sweep out an arm to indicate the way.

The goblin studies me with narrowed eyes, then spins on his heel and stalks away. And goddess help me, he moves like something not of this world. Like he expects the shadows to part before him, and for a moment, I swear they actually do.

I'm imagining things, clearly. With a shake of my head, I square my shoulders and trail after him.

Mere minutes from now, this will be over. Amriel will refuse me *and* my sisters, and when he departs, he'll take this goblin with him. I'll never see these awful fae again, not until they return for the next Claiming.

At which point I'll be fifty-three years old, and a priestess. Most likely, I'll have gotten in the habit of telling stories like our cook, about how I once saw a goblin in a garden and have never forgotten it.

But by then, the goblin will have forgotten me. Regardless of what I smell like.

I thread between the flowerbeds, my hand rising to the moon pendant at my throat. When I squeeze, the metal warms against my

skin, and the response relaxes something inside me. Soon, I'll belong to Ishanna. Not to the fae king *or* his Shadow.

I just have to get through the Claiming, first. I have to stand face-to-face with the fae king, then let him make his choice.

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About the Author



Kris K. Haines is a fantasy romance author and lover of stabby, swoony stories. A Jeopardy!® silver medalist and self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie, Kris can be found barreling down mountains in the winter and hugging the turns on her motorcycle in the summer. When she doesn't have her nose stuck in a book, of course. She lives in southeastern Wisconsin with her husband and two anarchist pugs.