

Chapter 10

Seamus had shifted back to his human form, but Cathy was as ever aware that he *wasn't* human. Upstairs in her old bedroom, surrounded by her childhood memories, Kiera had finally fallen asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Now Cathy braced herself to fight yet another battle on her daughter's behalf.

"We now have concrete proof that the Unseelie Queen knows about Kiera," Seamus said. "It isn't safe for her to stay here, not anymore."

"She is a mortal woman. You are not taking her to Faerie, and that's final."

Seamus fixed her with one of his eerie, wise looks. "Can you protect her from the likes of Hunter Teague, Cathy? What about goblins? If the Queen learns her mission has failed, she could take revenge against Kiera. In my dog form, I could have at least held Teague off long enough to allow her to escape, but I would be useless against a pack of goblins on the hunt. She needs protection, and Finvarra can keep her safe."

Cathy shook her head violently. "I am not sending my daughter to Faerie!" She had visited there once before, when Kiera was away at college. She'd gone in search of Finvarra, seeking to give him the news that he'd fathered a child, hoping to win for Kiera whatever blessings the immortal king might be able to bestow. It had taken but a short stay to realize just how alien the fey were. They had no concept of love or compassion. Perhaps the Seelie fey weren't downright evil like the Unseelie; but they were cold and distant. Kiera would wither under their care, and Cathy wasn't about to let that happen.

"You are being unreasonable," Seamus said. "Her life is in danger." He was now pacing the length of her living room—something he did frequently, whether he was in the shape of a dog or a man. It drove her crazy in either form. "It needn't be forever. Just until the current danger has passed."

"Seamus, sit down!" she snapped, knowing the phooka wasn't half so dense as he was pretending to be.

He stopped in mid-stride, raising an eyebrow at her. "There's no reason to order me about in that tone of voice. Or have you forgotten that I am not really a dog?"

Had he been a normal phooka—Cathy made a mental note to laugh at herself for the oxymoron later—he would have followed a statement like that with a jaunty grin, maybe even a phony pout. However, Seamus was the one phooka in all of Faerie who was born without a sense of humor. Which she supposed she should appreciate right now, for most phookas would be making light of the situation, unable to be serious even in the most dire circumstances.

"I'm quite agitated enough without your constant pacing," she told him. "And don't change the subject."

He shrugged with exaggerated casualness. "I thought you

said the subject was closed.”

“It is. You are not taking my daughter to Faerie. And I would appreciate it if you would not report this little incident to Finvarra.”

Despite his non-existent sense of humor, Seamus laughed. “You’re as mad as your daughter thinks you are if you believe I will keep this from him.”

She stuck a finger in her mouth and started gnawing on the cuticle. Maybe she should have left Seamus home tonight. But without his help, she might not have been able to get Kiera to leave the apartment and face Hunter. And without Seamus, it would have been a lot harder to be certain Hunter was fey. Not to mention he could easily have killed both her and Kiera if Seamus had not been there to guard them.

“I will make my report as I always do,” Seamus said, but he said it gently and rested a hand on her shoulder in a comforting gesture. “It is not a bad thing to have the High King of the Daoine Sidhe protecting your daughter.”

She snorted. “The only reason she needs protecting is because he’s her father!”

The damned phooka actually smiled. “Ah, but if he weren’t her father, she wouldn’t be who she is. Would you have things differently?”

She gave him a curious look, even as she couldn’t help considering his question. It was true that Kiera was the light of her life, and without Finvarra she would never have been born. Cathy had cursed the High King’s name many a night, but for that one thing she could not hate him. Her throat tightened. “Finvarra gave me the world’s greatest gift when he gave me my daughter,” she said, not expecting the phooka to

understand. “I couldn’t bear it if he took her away from me.”

The phooka sighed. “I’m afraid I must tell him what happened. But I will not forcibly abduct Kiera. If she doesn’t wish to come to Faerie and be safe, then she needn’t do so.”

A painful lump formed in Cathy’s throat. She’d prepared herself for an epic battle of wills. Never would she have guessed that Seamus would see her side this easily. And never would she have expected that she would actually trust him. “Thank you, Seamus,” she said, and her voice betrayed her true gratitude.

He inclined his head gracefully. “Thanks to you, I have spent many a year in the mortal world. When first I arrived, I might not have understood your stance. Now, I do.”

Cathy doubted that. True, he had over the years seemed to have gained a greater understanding of mortal behavior. When Finvarra had first sent him, Seamus had stewed in resentment at what he considered a form of exile. He’d been as insensitive a bastard as Cathy had ever met. Now, he no longer seemed to chafe at his mission, and he could even be rather a pleasant companion at times. But he was fey still, would always be, and though he might understand Cathy’s motivations and decisions, she did not necessarily understand his.

“I don’t believe Teague will make any rash moves before I return,” Seamus continued, “but in case I’m wrong, I would suggest you persuade your daughter to stay with you. And shore up your wardings.”

“Yes, yes. Of course.” She walked Seamus to the front door—the only entrance to her house that was not guarded against Faerie intrusion. Decorative iron grills adorned her first floor windows, and the second floor windows sported

miniature iron balconies. She could add some St. John's wort and some twigs of broom to the mix to further discourage intrusion.

"Ward the front door," Seamus reminded her as he slipped out into the darkness.

Usually, the front door was the only entrance to her house that was not warded—if anyone managed to break in, he would have to face Seamus in his dog form, and that was sufficient protection. But, while Seamus was in Faerie making his report, she supposed she should take his advice.

Cathy retrieved an iron knife she had reserved for just such a necessity, putting it under the front doormat. For a long moment, she stared out into the frosty darkness, wondering just how much danger her daughter was in. Then she dismissed that speculation as useless and closed the door.

Hunter was not in the habit of keeping bandages around the apartment, so the best he could do after he'd thoroughly cleaned out the phooka's bite wound was to rip up a shirt and use the strips to bind the wound. As wounds went, it wasn't too serious. The dog's teeth had sunk into the fleshiest part of his leg, clear of vital arteries, and though it throbbed relentlessly, he had endured much worse.

What ached far more was the wound in his soul.

He would never forget the stricken look on Kiera's face when he had admitted his mission to seduce her. Nor would he forget the even worse look when he'd said why. The despair that flooded him at the memory told him he cared about Kiera far more than he'd allowed himself to admit. But then, hadn't his actions proven that already? He had endured a terrible

beating for her sake, and last night had risked another more dire punishment for not taking her to bed when he had the chance. If that wasn't evidence of how he felt, he didn't know what was.

After he'd cleaned himself up, he returned to the sofa where the fateful interview had taken place, bringing with him a bottle of Scotch. He steadily worked his way through the bottle. The alcohol did little to drown his sorrows, but perhaps if he drank enough he would eventually pass out.

Kiera would have her revenge, if only she knew it. He hadn't bothered defending his actions earlier, hadn't told her what price he would pay for failure. That did not mean he had forgotten about it himself. He smiled grimly as he took another swig of Scotch. In the end, as badly as he had hurt Kiera, it was he who would suffer the most. How long would it take him to die? A week, as it had taken his father?

A shudder ripped through him. Best not to think about what fate awaited him. Best instead to be thankful he had refrained from bedding Kiera tonight. At least he would not have that stain on his soul when he went to his death.

He didn't know how much longer he had before Bane learned of his failure. He might be able to bluff for a little while, put off his ultimate torment. Perhaps it was the coward's way out. Perhaps he should just admit his failure and take the consequences like a man. Even so, he could not deny his own will to live, and he would do what he could to extend his life, if only for a few more days.

Wondering whether he could do anything in those few days to ease Kiera's pain at his betrayal, he eventually drank himself to sleep on the couch.

Kiera nursed a cup of coffee as she sat cross-legged at her mother's kitchen table. She had slept like the dead last night, once she'd finally fallen asleep. Her head felt stuffed with cotton this morning, and it was hard to believe anything that had happened last night had not been part of a dream. But if it had been a dream, she would not now be in her mother's house.

"Talk to me, honey," her mom prompted. "You must have more questions. Or even some harsh words you'd like to get out of your system. I'll hold still for it, and I promise not to fight back."

Kiera blew on the coffee, producing a puff of steam that momentarily blurred her mother's face. For one of the few times in memory, she honestly didn't feel like yelling at her mother. How could she, after all? Her mother had proved that all of her fanciful, ridiculous notions—well, some of them, at least—hadn't been so ridiculous after all. And her mother had revealed Hunter Teague for what he was.

Kiera's heart clamped down hard in her chest. She gritted her teeth and ordered herself not to cry. Why should she be surprised? Her common sense had told her from the very beginning that men like Hunter didn't pursue women like her. If she'd listened to her damned common sense, she wouldn't have let him hurt her like this.

Her face was turning red—she could tell by the heat in her cheeks. She braced herself in case her mother started pressing her, but instead she merely poured herself another cup of coffee.

"Seamus has returned to Faerie to give your father a

report," her mother said.

Kiera tried to shake off the funk, taking another sip of coffee and burning her tongue. Seamus, at least, was a relatively safe topic. She remembered when her mom had first gotten the wolfhound, about twelve years ago. "So, has Phantom always been a phooka, or was there a real wolfhound around here at some point that he just substituted for?" Kiera didn't know why she bothered to ask. The dog had been weird from the moment she'd met him, and now she knew exactly why. But if she kept her mother talking about Seamus, perhaps she could avoid talking about—or thinking about—Hunter.

Her mother grimaced. "When you were away at college, I finally figured out how to get into Faerie—not an easy thing for a mortal to do, let me tell you. I went to tell Finvarra about you, thinking that even an immortal king might care that he'd fathered a daughter. Unfortunately, I was right."

"Unfortunately?"

Her mother met her gaze, looking sad and wistful. "As Hunter said last night, mortals who tangle with the fey invariably wish they hadn't. From the moment he learned of your existence, Finvarra has pressed me to take you to Faerie. He thinks you will be safer there, and you certainly will be, at least physically." She swallowed audibly, and when she continued her voice held the rasp of incipient tears. "But it is a cold and lonely land for a mortal. Finvarra could never love you. He's no more capable of love than any of the other fey. His interest in you is solely because you are his daughter, and therefore a likely political pawn."

Kiera reached over the table and clasped her mother's hand. "Don't cry, Mom," she begged, fearing her mom's tears

would send her over the edge as well. “I couldn’t care less if my father loves me or not. I’ve never even met him.”

Her mother shook her head. “I know, honey. I’m just afraid he’ll take you away is all. I’m afraid he’ll keep you physically safe and you’ll live in Faerie alone and miserable.”

“I’m not going to Faerie!” Geez, could this mess get any worse?

“No, you’re not. Not if I have any say in it. But if Finvarra fears that Hunter can still get to you . . . He would never allow a child with Unseelie blood to threaten his throne.”

Kiera frowned in puzzlement. “Finvarra’s not exactly a spring chicken, is he?” she asked.

Her mom looked equally puzzled by her question. “No,” she said slowly, “he’s . . . ancient.”

“So doesn’t he have lots of older heirs running around? How could a child of mine threaten his throne?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but the Unseelie Queen seems to think there’s a way, and I tend to believe her. There is great significance and magic in fey blood. I imagine the mingling of those two bloodlines would create an unusually powerful character.”

Kiera chewed on that a little while. Surely there was no longer any threat to Finvarra’s throne. Hunter would go home, now that he had failed. He couldn’t possibly believe he could get her to bed after all she’d learned, and though she supposed he might try to rape her, he could hardly guarantee that would get her pregnant.

Unbidden, an image came to her mind of his anguished face as he’d told her the truth last night. Something within her thawed, just a little. The seduction had all been an act, but she

suspected his guilt was not. Despite his terrible mission, he had indeed spared her when she would have gladly given her body to him, and there was no reason for him to fake his distress during his confession. For whatever reason, Hunter truly wasn’t anxious to hurt her, and so she pushed aside any thought that he might try to take her by force. If he was still around.

A chill crept up her spine. If Finvarra knew Hunter’s mission, and if he was determined not to risk the possibility of her having Hunter’s child, there was an even more sure way of preventing it than taking Kiera to Faerie.

Kiera turned to her mother, sure her face had turned white. “Will Finvarra try to kill him?” she asked.

Her mother’s eyes turned fierce. “I hope so!” she snarled, and Kiera was startled by the force of those words. Her mother leaned her elbows on the table. “That bastard hurt you, and would have hurt you much, much worse if Seamus and I hadn’t stopped him. The only reason I didn’t let Seamus rip his throat out last night is that I knew it would upset you.”

Kiera gaped. Where was the genial goof she had grown up with? The woman sitting across the table from her was a lioness protecting her cubs, and Kiera felt as though she’d never met her before. “Yes, he hurt me,” she said, “but he doesn’t deserve to die for it. Finvarra had better not kill him!”

The lioness disappeared and was replaced with her mom again. “Finvarra does *what* he pleases *when* it pleases him. There was never a more selfish creature born, either in Faerie or in the mortal world. If he decides he wants Hunter dead, nothing anyone says to him will sway him.” She shook her head. “Keep in mind, however, that the Queen of Air and

Darkness is much, much worse.”

Kiera’s coffee had gone cold from neglect, and she rose to dump the contents and pour a fresh cup. “Tell me more about this queen,” she said as she hunted through the refrigerator for the half and half. “Why do you call her the Queen of Air and Darkness? Doesn’t she have a name?” She poured a shot of half and half into her coffee then returned to the table.

“Actually, she doesn’t. She’s not like Finvarra. He’s a real, living being—immortal, but still tied to the flesh. The Unseelie Queen is more like an elemental force. She has a body, and it’s flesh and blood, but the body is not her. If that makes any sense.”

“None whatsoever.”

Her mother laughed. “The Queen is an incorporeal being. However, that being is clothed in flesh. It’s kind of hard for an incorporeal being to rule, not having a body or voice. So, the magic of the Unseelie Court creates this body, this host for her spirit. But that body is not really her. You could kill that body, and the Queen would still exist, and the Court would generate another.”

Kiera shivered. “Weird.” An understatement, to be sure, but she couldn’t think of a better way to describe it. She wondered what it was like to have that as a mother, and she felt a moment of sympathy for Hunter. Then she remembered that he had been planning to sacrifice his own child to the Queen, and the sympathy faded.

Still feeling shaken to her very core—and wondering what on earth she was going to do with her life after all that she’d learned, Kiera fell silent. Her mother let that silence last for maybe ten minutes.

“When Seamus gets back, we should go to your apartment and pack a bag for you.”

The words jolted Kiera out of her thoughts. “Excuse me?”

“For the time being, at least, it would be best if you stayed here with me. This house is well protected, and between me and Seamus—”

Kiera held up her hand. “Hold it right there!” Her mother jerked back, as if surprised. “You won’t let Finvarra whisk me away to Faerie and hold me prisoner for my own protection, but you think I’ll agree to be held prisoner in your house for the same reason?”

Her mother looked gravely offended, though Kiera suspected it was an act. “Why, Kiera, how could you think such a thing? I’m not talking about holding you prisoner, for heaven’s sake! All I want is for you not to be completely alone and vulnerable.” Her voice gentled. “Besides, you’ve been deeply hurt. You would not be the first woman to spend time at her mother’s house under those circumstances.”

Kiera rubbed her eyes, really wishing she could wake up and find out this was all a dream. “I’m thirty-one years old. Mom, I love you, but I could never live with you.” It would be dangerous to her health. Her mother’s, too, as Kiera had already exceeded her previous record for being in her mother’s company without wanting to strangle her.

“It would just be for a little while.”

“No. Nothing has really changed between yesterday and today. The only thing that’s happened is I’ve learned more of the truth. I’m going to live in my own home, and I’m going to try to put my life back exactly where it was.”

“With Hunter living in the apartment right below you?”

“I’m sure he’s gone by now. Why would he stick around?”

Her mother gave her a long, hard stare. “He’ll still be there,” she said, her voice sounding certain.

Kiera frowned. “But why?”

Her mother shook her head. “Never mind. Just take my word for it, he will stick around as long as he can.”

“Mother, what do you know that you’re not telling me?”

“Many, many things, dear child.”

Kiera rolled her eyes. “Fine. Be mysterious about it. See if I care.” She pushed away from the table. “I’m going home now.”

Her mother pushed away also. “No, you most certainly are not! I’m telling you, Hunter will still be there, and he is still dangerous. If you can’t bear to stay here with me, at least let me put you in a hotel incognito.”

Kiera shook her head. “No. Mom, it’s not like the guy is going to be able to seduce me now anyway, so stop being so overprotective.” She started toward the front door.

“Are you sure?” her mother asked, halting her in her tracks.

She gave her mother a dirty look. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“Remember the glamour, dear.”

The glamour that had almost moved her to have sex with Hunter in the elevator. Kiera frowned. But she had shaken the glamour off that time, despite how hot it had made her feel. And she was sure that last night, Hunter hadn’t used it against her even for a moment. Which was either a sign that he had a conscience, or a sign that he realized the glamour didn’t work well enough on her.

“I’m not worried about the glamour,” she finally decided, once more heading for the door. Her mother ran up behind her and put a hand on her arm.

“Kiera, please—”

Kiera shrugged her mother’s hand off. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “I’ll put the damned horseshoe on my door, and if I have even a hint of trouble I’ll call you.”

There was a tense moment when Kiera thought her mother was going to use brute force to get her to stay. The moment passed, and Kiera hurried out the door before her mother changed her mind.

Kiera spent a half hour trying to concentrate on work, then decided to stop fooling herself. She shut off the computer and leaned back in her chair, wondering if she was being a total fool for insisting on coming home.

In the end, her insistence could end up being in vain. She imagined that as soon as Seamus returned from Faerie, he and her mother could very well arrive on her doorstep and physically remove her from the premises. She wasn’t sure it would be any protection against any such kidnaping “for her own good,” but she nailed the horseshoe firmly to the door, mangling the nails badly enough that her mother wouldn’t be able to pry the horseshoe loose and let Seamus in herself.

Although she’d been initially skeptical of her mother’s claim that Hunter would still be here, Kiera now felt a strange, intuitive certainty that it was true. It was almost as though there were a link between them, for she was painfully aware that he even now prowled the apartment below hers. Before last night, she would have dismissed that intuition as silly, but

now she wasn't so sure. Her mother had hinted that there was some reason he would remain, some reason she'd been unwilling to reveal.

Damn it, how was she supposed to protect herself against the threat if her mother refused to tell her all the facts?

Kiera wasn't even aware of what she'd decided to do until she felt herself moving toward her front door in purposeful strides. When she pulled the door open and saw the horseshoe, she paused, her conscious mind catching up with her unconscious.

Hunter was a threat to her in so many ways. He threatened her body, her heart, maybe even her soul. Far and away the most dangerous man she had ever met. But last night, he had been on the brink of victory and had spared her. It didn't even come close to forgiving his actions, but it did give her reason to believe she might be safe in his presence. And she had things she wanted to say to him, things she had not been able to say last night, for she had been far too shocked to think coherently. Not to mention some of those things were not meant for her mother's ears.

"Mom will have a heart attack if she ever finds out about this," she muttered under her breath as she stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the ninth floor. Going to face Hunter alone and unprotected was objectively one of the stupidest things she'd ever done, but her instincts were leading her to do it anyway. So far, every instinct she had ignored had turned out to be right. Just this once, she would try listening to them.

The self-assurance faded when she found herself faced with Hunter's front door. Seeing his face again, remembering

how she had started to feel about him, was going to hurt. But perhaps it would be a good pain, a cleansing pain. "It's for your own good," she whispered to herself, then rang the doorbell before she had a chance to chicken out.

No sound of footsteps stirred within, and she wondered if her sense that he was here was just a fantasy. She chewed her lip, trying to decide whether to ring again. Maybe the fact that he hadn't answered was a sign that she needed to get the hell out of here. She was just taking a step backward when the door swung open.

Hunter looked dreadful. His skin, always pale, was now a ghastly white. His shadowed eyes were bloodshot, and he was still wearing last night's shirt, now badly wrinkled, though he had at least changed out of the blood-stained pants. Instead of the usual seductive scent she associated with him, she now smelled stale alcohol. He glanced up and down the hall then focused on her again with a frown.

"Why are you here?" he asked, and she could tell nothing of how he felt about her presence from that flat, dead tone.

"I thought you and I had some unfinished business to take care of."

He sighed heavily, his whole body seeming to sag. He stepped back and opened the door wider. "All right. Come on in. But let me warn you, you'll have a hard time making me feel any worse than I already do."

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she said as she brushed by him. The living room seemed the best place to have this discussion, so she headed for the couch she had occupied last night during the explanations. She halted when she saw the dried blood that stained the carpet, then turned to see Hunter

limping toward her. He lowered himself into the love-seat, stretching his injured leg out in front of him.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he said, gesturing her to sit down.

Reluctantly, she did so, noticing the half-empty bottle of Scotch that sat on the end table beside Hunter. She jerked her chin in the direction of the bottle. “Are you drunk?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not anymore. Just hung over.” He leaned back in his chair, resting his head against its back. Despite the pose, he did not look in the least relaxed.

“Are you all right?” Damn it, why did she care? She was here to give him a piece of her mind, not sympathy!

“Physically? I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.”

Her backbone stiffened. “Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” He looked away and didn’t answer. Her words had been scornful, but it was damned hard *not* to feel sorry for him when he looked so miserable, no matter what he’d done. Some of the tension eased out of her shoulders, and with it some of the anger. “The good news is that I don’t feel quite as awful as you look,” she said, and bad as she felt, it was true.

Her words surprised a hint of a grin from him. “In that case, I had better stay away from mirrors.”

She looked down at her hands. Better not to be looking at him, better not to let sympathy melt away her anger. “I deserve an explanation, don’t you think?” she asked.

To his credit, he didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Ask me anything you want to know, and I swear I’ll tell you the truth.”

“All right. What happened last night, in your bedroom?”

“Just as I said: I couldn’t go through with it. I had

condoms, but I’d poked holes in all of them. Unfortunately, unlike my mother, I have a conscience.”

Her head jerked up and she met his eyes. “Unfortunately?” she cried. Everyone seemed to be losing their minds these days!

This time, he did not flinch from her gaze. “For me, yes.” He sat up straight. “Believe me, Kiera, you will be well and truly avenged.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

He shook his head. “Why have your mother and the phooka let you out of their sight?”

“Oh, no. You are not changing the subject on me. Tell me what you meant.”

“I’ve said enough. More than I should have, actually. I’m a fool.”

“You said you would tell me the truth. Or was that just another of your lies?”

The muscles of his jaw danced as he ground his teeth. She waited patiently while he waged his internal war. Finally, he reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose again. “Damned if I do, and damned if I don’t,” he muttered. He threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. “I’d promised myself not to make excuses, but there’s no way I can explain without sounding like that’s what I’m doing.”

She shrugged. “My next question was going to be ‘why did you do it,’ so you’re going to have to give me your excuses no matter what.”

His lips twisted into a wry grin. “You are a pitiless interrogator.” The grin disappeared as though it had never existed. “All right. I’ll do my best to explain.

“I told you last night that my father was a mortal man. When I was a child, he tried to take me away from the Unseelie Court. We were caught, and my mother had him executed—slowly—before my eyes.”

Kiera recoiled in horror.

“She isn’t capable of affection, or loyalty, or mercy. The fact that I’m her son gives me no protection. When she gives me an order, I *have* to obey her.” He met her eyes, and she read the truth of his words. “I can endure a lot of pain, Kiera. This,” he continued, indicating his wounded leg, “wasn’t even enough to make me flinch. But the Queen can inflict such torments as no man, mortal or fey, can endure.

“So when she ordered me to seduce you, I had no choice but to do as she wished. It was never something I *wanted* to do. I suppose at first I was mostly bothered by the idea of handing a helpless child—*my* child—over to my mother.” He licked his lips. “But that’s not what stopped me last night. I just couldn’t bear to betray you like that.” He hung his head once more. “You won’t believe me, but I’ll tell you anyway: I wasn’t faking anything last night. I wanted you very badly, and it had nothing to do with my mission.”

Kiera blinked, tears beading in her eyes despite her stern reprimands to herself. Hunter was a liar of the worst sort. She shouldn’t believe a word he said. No matter how much she wanted to . . .

“My mother doesn’t take failure much better than she takes disobedience,” Hunter continued. “When she learns I have failed, I will suffer for it, and you’ll have your revenge.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly chilled by the thought. True, she’d had flashes of anger, when she’d felt

like she could have torn him apart with her bare hands. But the overwhelming emotion had been hurt, not anger. “I don’t want revenge, Hunter,” she said, recognizing the words as true only when she spoke them. “I just want . . . closure, I guess.”

He propped his elbows on his knees and lowered his head into his hands, shoulders slumped in despair. “Please stop being so damned gentle about this. Yell at me, call me names, kick my shins. Something!”

Not so long ago, that’s exactly what she’d thought she would do if she had the chance. But not now.

Kiera stood and crossed the distance between them, tentatively sitting beside him on the love-seat and putting a hand on his back. “You’re not the first person who’s hurt me, Hunter, and you surely won’t be the last. I’m built of some pretty stern stuff. Don’t flatter yourself to think that in so short a time you can completely destroy me.”

He turned his head enough so he could see her, his expression suggesting he thought she was nuts. Slowly, he raised his head from his hands, staring at her all the while. “After what I’ve done to you, you would sit here and offer me comfort?” he asked.

Never had she guessed that this was how she’d feel upon confronting him, but she grew steadily more certain of herself. “The thing is, you *didn’t* do it. Despite all you had to lose, you let me go last night.”

He narrowed his eyes, looking stubborn as a little boy. “I would have tried again, if your mother hadn’t intervened.”

“And if you couldn’t do it last night, what makes you think you could have done it the next time? If I’d been willing to give you a second chance, that is?”

He sputtered a moment, then gave up, looking comically helpless. “All it takes to defeat me is feminine logic!” he declared, but if he thought the sexist remark would get a rise out of her, he was mistaken.

“I think beneath it all, you’re not quite as much a villain as you would have me believe.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if savoring her words. Then he threw open his arms and drew her into a lung-crushing hug. “And you, Kiera Malone, are a priceless gem,” he murmured into her hair with fierce affection.

Kiera was still trying to decide how to react to his effusive gesture when the doorbell rang.

Chapter 11

“Uh-oh,” Kiera said, and Hunter released her immediately, his body going stiff with tension.

“Stay here,” he told her, rising to his feet. His calf throbbed in protest

“It’s probably my mother and Seamus tracking me down.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Keep out of sight.”

Suspicion momentarily tinged her glance, but she nodded her agreement. He tried not to limp as he approached the door and put his eye to the peephole.

As he had suspected, it wasn’t her mother; it was Bane. Hunter distributed his weight between his two legs as best he could, enduring the pain for the sake of not appearing weak. The goblin would probably smell the blood and know he was injured even so.

Hunter opened the door a crack, leaving the chain on. “I’m not alone here,” he said in an irritated, urgent undertone.

Bane looked him up and down, an ugly grin creeping over

his face. “Look’s like you’ve had quite a night, Boyo.” His nose wrinkled. “Have you gotten a whiff of yourself lately?”

The goblin thought *he* smelled bad? How had Kiera let him put his arms around her under the circumstances? “If we have to have this conversation, can we do it some other time?” he asked.

Bane stretched his neck to try to see into the apartment, but Hunter blocked his view. The goblin shook his head. “If you had anyone in there, you wouldn’t look like such shit. Let’s have a nice little chat, shall we?”

For all that he was hurt and hung over, Hunter’s reflexes served him well, and his hand darted out to grab Bane’s wrist before the goblin managed to shove him into the apartment. Hunter squeezed hard—although it hardly seemed to bother Bane—and leaned forward. The last thing he wanted was to let Bane anywhere near Kiera.

“If you ruin everything, your head will roll,” Hunter said in a low and deadly voice. He hated even to pretend that he was still planning to do Kiera such harm, but he had already decided he would try to delay his punishment as long as possible.

Bane chuckled. “Somehow, I don’t think it’s *my* head that’s gonna roll.”

“Hunter?” Kiera called, and Hunter had to stifle any number of curses. Her voice was not coming from the living room where he’d ordered her to stay.

He turned his head and gave her his most chilling glare, willing her to retreat, but though he thought she understood the silent command, she continued to approach. Before he could figure out his best strategy to chase her back into the living

room and out of Bane's sight, she sidled up to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"I thought you said you wouldn't keep me waiting long," she said, her voice conveying a sultry pout as she blinked up at him.

Hunter's head ached, and he couldn't make sense of anything. He looked at her as though she'd gone mad, and she snaked her other arm around him, pressing her cheek to his back. He wondered for a moment if this was some kind of liquor-induced hallucination. He turned his gaze back to Bane and saw that the goblin looked almost as surprised and perplexed as Hunter felt.

"Well," Bane said, gathering his wits faster than Hunter did, "I can see you're . . . busy. I'll stop by some other time."

"Uh, sure," Hunter managed to say, painfully aware of the warmth of Kiera's body against his back. "Nice of you to drop by."

"Uh-huh."

With a last shake of his head, Bane backed away from the door, and Hunter swung it shut. The moment the door caught, Kiera released him, and he had to fight a wave of yearning. How good her arms had felt around him! The need to feel them again almost overwhelmed him.

With a deep, shaky breath, he reeled himself back in and turned to face Kiera. She had her arms crossed and was watching him with a jaunty grin. It took him a couple of tries to find his voice.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, then bit his tongue for being so abrupt.

Kiera appeared unaffected by his tone of voice, though her

grin did fade to be replaced by a grave look. "That was one of your . . . associates, right?"

Hunter wanted to spit with distaste. "Yes."

She shrugged. "You said you would suffer if they found out you failed. I thought it would be best if they didn't find out just yet."

He gaped at her, her kindness making him ever more aware of how badly he'd wronged her. "You would help me after what I've done?"

She put a hand on his arm, then urged him into the living room once more, where he sank helplessly into a chair. Kiera sat across from him, peering at his face in concern. "Maybe I'm being an idiot and fooling myself," she said, "but I think you're feeling shitty enough that I don't need to make it any worse." She sighed. "You hurt me pretty bad. But I'm not really the vindictive type."

He tried to think of any other instance in his life where he'd experienced true forgiveness. Oh, he'd read about it in books, and seen it on the occasional TV show during his forays into the mortal world, but it had always seemed a fiction, not something that happened in real life. "You know, I've never been able to forgive my father for dying and leaving me in my mother's care. Even though I know he had no choice. And yet you can forgive me, when I almost . . ." He shook his head. His heart felt full to bursting, and he longed to draw Kiera into his arms. If he didn't know such a thing was impossible, he might almost have convinced himself he was in love with her. But he was fey and Unseelie, and love was forever denied him, perhaps the bitterest curse his mother had inflicted upon him.

Kiera's smile was still tinged with sadness, but her eyes no

longer seemed shadowed with hurt or fury or even pity. In fact, except for the dark circles around her eyes, she looked almost herself again, and Hunter allowed himself to hope that the wound he had inflicted on her heart was not a fatal one.

“So,” she said, “do you think it’s time for you to take a shower and rejoin the living?”

His lips stretched into a grin. “I suppose it is. I promise to stop wallowing in self-pity, all right?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that what you were doing?”

He grimaced. “Yes. Thank you for reminding me what a worthless exercise that is.”

“You’re welcome. Now, tell me how long you have before your cover is blown.”

He was sure she saw the cloud of dread that passed over him, but he did his best to hide it anyway. “You certainly bought me some time today. If you’re willing to visit with me occasionally, I can probably stretch out the charade for a few weeks before anyone gets suspicious enough to sniff out the lie.”

“And what happens when they do?”

I die. “Let’s not talk about it.”

“Hunter, tell me what’s going to happen!”

“Don’t ask me that.”

Her eyes filled with worry, and a fierce frown furrowed her brow. “They’re not going to kill you or anything, are they? I mean, you are the Queen’s son after all.”

“No, they’re not going to kill me,” he said, and he thought he managed to do so without any noticeable hesitation.

Kiera crossed her arms and glared at him. “You promised me no more lies, remember?”

He looked away and cursed under his breath. He had made that promise not considering the possibility that he might need to lie for her own good. But after betraying her trust so badly, he couldn’t bear to do it again, especially not when it looked like she’d already sniffed out the lie. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

“All right,” he agreed. “No more lies. They’re going to kill me. In the Unseelie Court, failure is a crime punishable by death.”

“Oh, Hunter!” she cried, her eyes glistening with distress.

“There is, perhaps, some sort of poetic justice to it. Before I was ordered to seduce you, my primary duty at Court was to hunt down those who had failed the Queen. I brought many an Unseelie creature back to Court to face the Queen’s ‘justice.’ It’s only fitting that I end the same way. Besides, in the long run, it might not be such a bad thing.” His voice had dropped to almost a whisper. “There is no joy living in the Unseelie Court. All my life, my highest goal has been to survive. The weeks I’ve spent here have given me a taste of the freedom I’ve been missing. I don’t know that I could have borne going home anyway.”

Kiera looked as though she was about to say something, then changed her mind. She blinked away the sheen of tears and gave his hand a warm squeeze. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, I suppose.”

He raised her hand to his lips in a shadow of his old courtly gestures. Their eyes met when he planted that delicate kiss on her knuckles, and for a moment the heat between them stirred again. Hunter let go of her hand quickly, before she could rebuff him. Then, he escorted her to the door.

“No more drinking, right?” she asked as she stood in the doorway.

“No more drinking,” he agreed. “When next you see me, I’ll be clear-headed and decently dressed.”

“And when will that be?”

“I think that’s up to you. I’m more grateful to you than I can possibly express in words for giving me this extra time. Call the shots however you want—in this, I am your slave.” He gave her an ironic little bow and she laughed at him.

“Go take a shower. And drink some coffee—I think you’re not a hundred percent sober yet.”

Echoing her laugh, amazed that he was able to do so, he watched her step into the elevator. For a long time after she had left, he stood there in the doorway, wishing that by some miracle he could stay here in the mortal world with her, that he could court her once more with no hidden agenda. But she offered him the chance to spend time in her company, and she offered him the chance to delay the inevitable, and that was far more than he deserved from her. He would be content with what he had, no matter how much he longed for more.

Kiera made herself a pot of coffee, then sat on her living room sofa cupping a mug between her hands as she chewed on her lip. Not so long ago, her life had been simple. Perhaps not as satisfying as she would have liked, but she’d thought she had a firm grip on reality and a clear vision of where she was heading. Hunter had tipped her life over on its side, and she no longer felt certain she knew up from down.

Faerie was a real place.

Her father really was the King of the Seelie Court.

Her mother’s dog was really a phooka.

And she was at least halfway in love with an immortal man who just happened to be the son of evil personified.

Now how stupid was that? The man had lied to her, repeatedly. He’d tried to seduce her, and he’d meant to get her pregnant. By all rights, she should hate his guts, should be doing a little dance of celebration at the thought that he would be punished so thoroughly. But of course, that did not describe her feelings at all. If she’d hated him as she should have, she never would have gone down to his apartment this morning, and whatever resentments she’d had left had died when she’d seen him.

Was he lying to her again? Was it all just an act to try to salvage what he could from this adventure, maybe get her into bed after all? Perhaps a wise woman would assume so and stay well away, protect her heart and her body from unspeakable danger. But Kiera didn’t think he was lying, not this time. She’d seen things in his eyes, things she flat out didn’t believe he could fake.

Which left her with a dilemma the likes of which she’d never faced before: Hunter was going to die, and if even half of what she knew of the Unseelie Court was true, it would not be an easy death. Something constricted painfully in her chest and she struggled for breath as tears stung her eyes. Damn, she had it bad! There had to be some way to save him from his fate, some way to hide him or protect him.

She let out the breath she’d been unconsciously holding. One thing of which she was certain: this was not something she could handle on her own. She’d spent too much energy ignoring her mother’s supposed nuttiness to have any clue how

to help Hunter, if it was even possible.

Kiera reached for the phone. Calling in her mother and Seamus was a calculated risk. Her mother might not be as forgiving as Kiera, and Seamus was already actively hostile. But it was her only hope.

Her mom answered the phone on the third ring. Seamus had just returned from Faerie, and the two of them had been halfway out the door, heading for Kiera's apartment. Without further explanation, Kiera said it was a happy coincidence.

She seriously considered leaving the horseshoe affixed to the door, for fear that with Seamus at her side, her mother might try to force Kiera to leave the apartment. Not so long ago, she would never have suspected her mother of such decisive action, but she had to admit that she didn't know her mother as well as she'd once thought she did. But it was a risk she would have to take, she decided, and so she pried out the mangled nails and tossed the horseshoe back into her cramped study.

Seamus had dispensed with the wolfhound disguise, although as she invited him in Kiera thought she recognized the inscrutable expression in his eyes that she had always hated on Phantom.

"You should remain in the safety of your mother's house until the danger has passed," he said without greeting.

Kiera blinked and shared a look with her mother. "Hello to you too," she said. "Mom and I already had this conversation."

"Hmm, so she told me." He was only an inch or so taller than Kiera, but the aura of aristocratic dignity he bore gave him an imposing presence. "I don't believe you understand just what is at stake."

"Look, my position on this is non-negotiable, so unless you're going to drag me out of here by physical force and lock me in my mother's house, let's just skip it."

His eyes narrowed, but her mother interrupted before he mustered a response.

"Give it up, Seamus. My daughter is one of the most stubborn creatures on the planet."

Seamus shook his head, his mouth pinched in disapproval, but he declined to argue any further. Kiera directed them into the living room and offered coffee, the gracious hostess with her perfectly ordinary guests. A laugh almost escaped her at the absurdity of it all. Her guests declined the offer, which was just as well, as the coffee had to be nasty and stale by now.

"So, what's on your mind?" her mother asked.

Kiera laughed briefly. "God, what a question." She huffed out a deep breath. The beginning of this little interview was bound to go badly, but she was just going to have to bull her way through it. She raised her chin and hoped her voice conveyed the proper combination of confidence and competence. "As you predicted, Hunter's still here," she said, directing her words at her mother while keeping a wary eye on Seamus.

The color leached out of her mother's cheeks, though her voice remained relatively calm. "You've seen him?"

"You sought him out!" Seamus said, and it was an accusation.

Her mother's eyes widened in alarm. "Oh no, say you didn't!"

A light sweat betrayed her nerves, but she held her mother's gaze steadily. "Yes, I did. He owed me an

explanation.”

A stream of angry-sounding nonsense burst from Seamus’s lips and he sprang to his feet.

“Oh Seamus, do sit down and shut up!” her mother snapped, and Seamus gave her a dog-like snarl.

“Your child delivered herself into the hands of the enemy!” Seamus growled, jabbing a finger in Kiera’s direction and ignoring the command to sit down. “You should be cursing and gnashing your teeth right along with me, Cathy.”

“If cursing and gnashing my teeth were likely to be effective, I would do it. But as it will only get Kiera’s back up, I’ll take the high road and stay calm.”

Kiera watched as the two of them engaged in a silent staring match. She could almost hear the crackle of flames from the heat of their gazes. For a fey man who was supposed to be cool and distant, Seamus seemed to be awfully emotional about this. Kiera wondered if that was the effect of living in the mortal world for twelve years, or if the fey weren’t really as foreign as her mother thought.

Eventually, Seamus backed down and returned to his seat, but his body still radiated tension. He began bouncing his knee, hard and fast. Kiera felt the faint reverberations of his movements through the soles of her feet.

“So,” her mother said, “you visited with Hunter when you got home. Tell us what happened.”

“He was a wreck. And no, he didn’t attack me or try to seduce me or anything. We just talked. He promised me to tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Seamus snorted loudly, but she ignored him. “He says his mother’s going to kill him for failing.”

“And you believe him?” Seamus asked, his knee bouncing ever more frantically. “May I remind you how many lies he’s already told you? You must be the most gullible mortal I’ve ever met.”

Her mother punched Seamus in the arm, and it didn’t look like a light little love tap either.

“Don’t insult my daughter!” Kiera’s mother said. “And I will not be a party to any lies.”

“Cathy . . .” he said, a warning in his voice, but it was too late, for Kiera understood the nuances of her earlier discussion with her mother.

“That’s why you were so sure he would hang around,” Kiera said. “You knew that he would die when he returned home. And you didn’t tell me.”

Her mother shrugged. “If I could have kept it from you, I would have. I know you too well, honey. No matter how awful he’s been to you, it’s got to hurt to know that he’s going to die.”

“I don’t *believe* this,” Seamus said. “If you know it’s going to hurt her, then why are you telling her?” He shook his head in evident exasperation. “I don’t know whether it’s mortal logic or just *female* logic I don’t understand.”

“Hunter already told her, remember? And she obviously believes him. I’m not going to make things worse by lying to her about it. We’re only going to be able to help her if she trusts us, and lying to her will make her *not* trust us. There, does that logic meet with your high standards?”

“There you go again, talking about me in third person. It’s really getting on my nerves, Mother.”

“Deal with it. I have to explain these things to Seamus

because the fey don't understand why us mere mortals put so much value in trust and react so poorly to betrayal."

Seamus rolled his eyes dramatically, and Kiera suspected they'd had this discussion before. Many times. That thought led Kiera to speculate about just what might have happened between her mother and the phooka during the twelve years they'd been living together. How much of that time had he spent as a dog? From the sparks that flew between them, she suspected the answer was, very little. She quickly closed her mind off from that avenue. There were some things she just didn't want to know!

"Okay," she said, interrupting the little battle between her mother and the phooka, "so I know that Hunter's supposed to die because he failed. The question then becomes is there any way we can save him?"

"No!" Seamus barked.

Her mother's answer was less abrupt, but no less discouraging. "I'm afraid that's a pretty tall order, sweetheart. It's not like his mother is one to forgive and forget, and she has some pretty terrifying henchmen."

"Can't we . . . I don't know, hide him somewhere?"

This time it was Seamus who answered, and his voice had turned surprisingly gentle. "Hunter and his mother are both immortal beings, Kiera. Even if he could find a good hiding place—which would be highly difficult, given her resources—she would find him eventually, and his suffering would be that much the worse." He rubbed his hands together and his knee stopped bouncing. Kiera could see he was considering his words carefully before he spoke. "The kindest thing we could do for him would be to give him the quick

death his mother will deny him."

"No!" Kiera cried, shooting to her feet, her heart in her throat.

Seamus rose more slowly. "Personally, I'd just as soon let him suffer. I think his remorse is no more than skin deep. He is Unseelie, and the Unseelie delight in all things wicked. However—"

Rage at his callous words coursed through Kiera's body and ignited her nerves. That rage demanded release, and before she had an inkling of what she meant to do, she had slapped Seamus hard across the face. "How dare you!" Her voice hitched on a sob. "I want you out of my apartment. Now!"

Seamus hadn't moved a muscle, just stood there with his head cocked, blinking at her as his cheek reddened. Her mother put a hand on his shoulder and nudged him back into the chair, parking herself between them. Kiera realized that tears were coursing down her cheeks and she swiped at them angrily with her sleeves.

"I know that was hard to hear, sweetheart," her mother said. "And I know Seamus could have said it in a more tactful manner. But you shouldn't dismiss it quite so forcefully. The chances of succeeding in a fight against the Unseelie Court are very slim."

Kiera shook her head. "Slim chances are better than no chances."

"But if you try to save Hunter from his fate, you are also putting yourself into great danger."

The tears calmed as resolve crystallized in Kiera's heart. "He could have had me last night, and he let me go. He put himself in the worst kind of danger for me."

Seamus made an ugly choking sound, and her mother snapped at him immediately. “Seamus, keep your mouth shut unless you want to be the victim of violence!”

“I would be happy to be the victim of violence if it would get me out of hearing the rest of this—”

”Seamus!” Kiera and her mother yelled simultaneously.

He subsided, but his face looked distinctly sulky.

“I thought he was bad when he was a dog,” Kiera mumbled under her breath, winning a hint of a smile from her mother.

The smile quickly faded. “You understand that as your mother, it’s almost unbearable to hear you say you would risk your own life to help a man who did such a terrible thing.”

Kiera tried to put herself in her mother’s shoes and realized she was right. She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Mom. But how can I just let them kill him without even trying to help? He has some pretty damn good qualities under that rough exterior of his.”

“If you absolutely refuse to be sensible,” Seamus said, “then I suppose I can make some inquiries in Faerie. I’m not at all sure it’s possible to save him, but if there is a chance, I’ll sniff it out.”

Kiera fixed him with a hard, cold look. “Give me one good reason why I should believe you’d do any such thing!”

He rose to meet her challenging stare. “Because your mother does.”

Kiera looked quickly to her mother, who nodded. “If Seamus says he’ll do it, then he’ll do it.” She flashed him what Kiera would have described as a fond smile. “This would not be the first time he’d done something he did not

wholeheartedly approve of.” They looked at each other as though they shared a secret memory.

Kiera decided she would do the one thing she had so often in her life refused to do: she would trust her mother.