

Chapter 14

Cathy knew she was confusing the hell out of Alonso, but she didn't know what she could do about it. She watched from her window as he walked down the street toward his own house, the collar of his coat raised against the cold. She hadn't wanted to send him away tonight. The things that were happening with Kiera were unsettling enough that she would have appreciated the opportunity to snuggle into his arms. But Alonso was a practical, no-nonsense kind of man who would surely think she was insane if she started blathering about goblins and evil queens. And she couldn't imagine spending the night with him and *not* talking about the issues that weighed so heavily on her shoulders.

Seamus had been gone nearly a week already, and had sent no word to Cathy about what he was learning. And it didn't take a worried mother to notice that Kiera was falling in love with Hunter. They were spending a lot of time together—supposedly to help keep up the illusion that Hunter was seducing her, and thus keep the Unseelie Queen from recalling him for punishment. Cathy thought the “illusion” was

rather too convincing. She'd asked her daughter point blank if she was sleeping with Hunter. Kiera told her it was none of her business, but the guilty flush that crept over her face revealed all.

It was a terrible, helpless feeling to see Kiera risk so much for a man who didn't deserve it. Kiera was handing Hunter her heart on a platter, and Cathy knew with an aching certainty that it was going to end badly. How could it not, when Hunter would either betray her, or die?

A knock on the door pulled Cathy out of the gloomy thoughts. When she looked through the peephole and saw Seamus, her heart lifted. She opened the door and had to fight to keep from giving him a hug in greeting.

Damn, had she actually *missed* him?

“Well, come in,” she said as he hesitated on the doorway. “You're letting the cold air in.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you forgetting something?”

She frowned at him and shook her head. “Apparently. What is it?”

He pointed at the doormat and she finally remembered the iron knife she had concealed under it. She quickly bent and removed the knife, and Seamus stepped inside.

“What took you so long?” she asked as she followed him into the living room. She'd lit a fire in the fireplace to fight off some of the chill that pervaded the drafty house, and Seamus stood in front of it with his hands out, as if to warm them. It was just an affectation, however, for the fey didn't feel the cold.

“When other sources of information failed to turn up any promising leads, I asked for an audience with Finvarra. He makes a point of being unapproachable, and he made me wait four days before he would see me.”

Cathy folded her arms and chewed her lower lip. She couldn't see Finvarra being in the least bit helpful, and if she were wrong about that, Seamus probably wouldn't be staring so resolutely into the fire.

"He told me what we already knew: there's nothing we can do."

"Kiera won't accept that."

Seamus finally turned to her, and she thought she saw actual sadness in his eyes. "She won't have any choice, Cathy. Hunter is a subject of the Unseelie Court. Finvarra can't interfere."

She snorted. "You mean Finvarra *won't* interfere. If he thought he had something to gain by doing so, he would."

Seamus took her hands and squeezed. "'Can't' and 'won't' add up to the same thing in the end. If we want to save Hunter, we'd have to bring him here. And *keep* him here. Do you really think a life of imprisonment—an immortal life of imprisonment, I might add—is better than a swift death?"

She tried to withdraw her hands, but he kept his hold, his thumbs brushing over her knuckles in what she would almost have termed a tender gesture.

"It is not a life I would choose, were I in his shoes," Seamus continued.

Cathy's eyes stung with tears. Not for Hunter—although she did feel sorry for him and didn't really think he deserved to die for his sins—but for Kiera, who'd suffered heartbreak after heartbreak, and was now headed inexorably down the same path.

Once more, Seamus shocked her, this time by pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly. The sting in her eyes

turned into sobs. "My poor baby," she cried into his shoulder. He said nothing, just held her and stroked her back while the tears ran their course.

When the sobs had slowed to sniffles, Seamus guided her to the couch, sitting close beside her and keeping an arm around her shoulders. She found herself leaning into him and resting her head against his shoulder. If she weren't so distressed about her daughter's plight, she might have put more effort into unraveling the mystery of this sudden sense of kinship.

"Do you agree with me that we should not allow the Queen of Air and Darkness to get her hands on Hunter?" he asked in a gentle voice.

She swallowed and nodded.

"I would take care of the actual killing, of course," Seamus said.

Cathy couldn't help wincing. His arm tightened around her shoulders. "Kiera would never forgive you," she said. "And she would never forgive *me* either."

"Perhaps she would if Hunter showed his repentance to be only skin deep."

She pulled away from him, and this time he allowed her to break his grip. His brown eyes held more warmth than she was used to seeing there, more care than he had any right to show, or even to feel. How long had this been going on? How long had he been acting like a human being without her noticing?

"Tell me what you have in mind," she said, not yet ready to ask what the look in his eyes meant.

"If Hunter really cares about Kiera as he claims, then perhaps he would agree to hurt her for her own good so that his

death need not grieve her so badly.”

Cathy rubbed wearily at her eyes. That Seamus doubted the idea that Hunter really cared was clear from his tone of voice. She could only imagine what the phooka would think if she revealed her suspicion that Kiera was sleeping with him. She would have to walk a minefield to keep things from getting any worse than they already were. “You obviously don’t believe he really cares, so why bother with the charade?”

Seamus’s smile was surprisingly gentle. “Because his death will grieve *you* less if you realize that he’s still lying. If we approach him and suggest that he distance himself from Kiera to save her grief, and he refuses to do it, that will tell you where his true feelings lie.”

She sighed. She was being the worst kind of fool to think Hunter cared in the first place. “You’re right, Seamus. I know he can’t possibly care for her the way he seems to. There’s just something about him . . . It’s easy to forget that he’s fey.”

Seamus’s lips pressed together in a line of annoyance. “Enough fey-bashing,” he said, his voice sharp as knives. “We are not incapable of caring. Finvarra is a selfish bastard, but he is only one man and you should not condemn us all because of him.”

“I’m not condemning you,” she protested. “It’s just the way you are. I know you can’t help it.”

He bared his teeth as though he’d forgotten he wasn’t in his dog form. “You impossible, foolish mortal!” His hands clenched into fists in his lap, and if she didn’t know better she would have sworn she saw hurt in his eyes. He sprang to his feet and commenced pacing in front of the couch. If he’d been a cartoon character there would have been smoke pouring from

his ears.

He halted abruptly and loomed over her. “Are you so daft you can’t see what’s right before your eyes?” he cried, waving his hands for emphasis.

Cathy stared up at him, her heart thundering as she fought to keep his words from getting through to her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, her voice coming out faint and feeble.

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Give me strength!” Acting as though it cost him great effort, he lowered his voice and looked at her once more. “See if you can work this out, Cathy: why have I so delighted in tormenting Alonso?” He said the name with a curl of his lip.

She jutted her chin out. “You’re a phooka. That’s what phookas do.”

“Try again,” he said with exaggerated patience. “Have I shown myself to have the love of mischief that is usual to my kind?”

“No,” she admitted reluctantly.

“All right. So, if I don’t have any particular love of mischief, then why have I made a pest of myself when Alonso’s been around? I know you can figure this out, Cathy, even if you don’t like the answer.”

She shook her head, still fighting off the implications, feeling something very akin to panic taking over her mind.

“Say it, Cathy!” he insisted, but she kept shaking her head.

She couldn’t even look at him anymore. “You’re fey! How am I supposed to be able to understand your behavior?” Her eyes fixed on the floor before her and she clasped her hands until the knuckles turned white.

Seamus knelt in front of her and covered her hands with his. The gesture surprised her into looking at him, and once she met his eyes she couldn't look away.

The anger had faded from his expression, to be replaced with . . . tenderness? "Why does it terrify you so?" he asked in a voice soft as a caress.

She swallowed tears she refused to shed. "Do you have any concept of what Finvarra did to my life? He wanted to get laid, so he picked a mortal woman at random, with not the slightest care as to what consequences she would have to face because of it. He raped me and left me pregnant with a child that my husband knew was not his, and he didn't even care enough to find out that he'd fathered that child. And when years later I finally tracked him down, he *still* didn't care, except for her usefulness as a political pawn." She bit her tongue, for if she kept going the bitterness would escape in a flood and drown her.

"I'm not Finvarra," Seamus reminded her. "He's the king, Cathy. He's everything fey to its greatest extreme—the most beautiful, the most powerful, the most arrogant, and, yes, the most selfish. Just because he's all those things doesn't mean the rest of us are."

Still she fought it. "You forget; I've been to Faerie, I've seen more of the fey than just Finvarra."

"Yes, you've seen the cream of the Seelie Court, who emulate the king. That's why they're his favorite courtiers. But there are also the simple people, those who don't play the power game, don't aspire to being in the king's inner circle. Peasants, as it were. Like me."

"You've been with me for twelve years, but that doesn't

mean I've forgotten those early days when Finvarra first foisted you on me. You were as arrogant and lacking in compassion as any of your compatriots."

His lips turned up into a small smile. "You said 'were.'"

"Semantics, Seamus!" she snapped, cursing herself for the slip-up.

His smile didn't fade. "One of the greatest differences between the Seelie and Unseelie Courts is that those of us who are Seelie have free will. And we can change. The Unseelie can't. So you see why I distrust Hunter's supposed change of heart."

He let go of her hands and stood up. "I shouldn't have tried to force this conversation on you. Not now, when you're so worried about your daughter. I meant only to give you comfort and remind you that you're not alone. When you're willing to admit the answer to my question, we'll talk of it more. For now, let us instead focus on how to help Kiera."

The relief almost made her dizzy. But somehow, she didn't think the reprieve would last as long as she needed it to.

Hunter suspected he had smiled more in the past week than he had in his entire life. An amazing fact, considering death hung over his head. But he thought perhaps all the suffering that was to come would be worth it just to have spent this precious time with Kiera. She was so warm and open, had such an easy laugh. When he was with her, it was as though the outside world—and his past—didn't exist, and he felt . . . purified.

And the sex! He'd thought he'd had good sex in the past. How woefully mistaken he had been! The experience was so

much richer when you l—

Hunter shook his head violently before the thought took root in his head. There were places it wasn't safe for his mind to go, and that was one of them. All he could do was count every day he remained in the mortal world as a blessing and live entirely in the now.

He was planning another in a series of romantic dates—dinner and a comedy club, followed by a roll in the hay that would leave them both too exhausted to move—when the phone rang. He answered with only half his attention, still thinking about his plans for tonight. When the desk clerk announced that Cathy Malone was here to see him, his attention snapped into focus.

He agreed to see her, though with some reluctance. He had managed to avoid her quite neatly since he'd started sleeping with her daughter. But, he suspected she was here because the phooka had returned from Faerie. And he suspected it was not good news.

Hunter opened his front door and leaned against the frame, affecting a casual pose though his heart was in his throat. He reminded himself that he had already given up hope, so Cathy's bad news shouldn't bother him in the least. The reminder did nothing to help.

When the elevator doors opened, the look on Cathy Malone's face confirmed his fears. There was a grim, worried set to her eyes, and her shoulders screamed with tension. He let out a quiet sigh and stepped silently aside to let her into the apartment.

"I take it the phooka did not return from Faerie with a miracle?" he asked.

Cathy turned to face him, her chin lifting. "I'm afraid not. He went so far as to petition Finvarra himself, but of course the king couldn't be bothered to help."

The bitterness in her voice was stunning. How Cathy hated the King of the Seelie Court! For committing the very crime Hunter had almost committed upon her daughter. It was amazing that the woman didn't buy a gun and shoot him dead.

"The King of the Seelie Court should hardly be expected to start a war over me," Hunter told Cathy gently.

She waved that off. "I'm sure wars have been started between the Courts over far less."

Hunter wasn't entirely sure that was true. Certainly, there had been many wars over the centuries. But through those wars, neither Court had ever been able to gain an advantage. All that had been accomplished was a lot of immortal dead. It seemed under the circumstances that Finvarra and the Queen of Air and Darkness might be less eager than they once were to resort to open warfare.

"I don't think I'd particularly want to be responsible for a war," he said. "I can't say that I disagree with Finvarra's decision to stay out of it."

"Are you sleeping with my daughter?"

Hunter jerked back in surprise at the abrupt question. Anger surged, but he bit it back and answered calmly. "That's not really any of your business."

Her back stiffened. "She's my daughter, and you've admitted you were plotting to seduce her and get her pregnant. I think it very much *is* my business to know if you've managed to breach her defenses."

"If you want to know about my relationship with Kiera,

ask *her*. Even if you think it's your business to ask me that question, I don't think it's my business to answer it."

Cathy's shoulders crackled with tension when she rolled them. She took a deep breath, and Hunter could almost see her marshaling her self-control. He waited patiently to see what else she had to say to him, for she clearly was not through yet.

"Here's the thing," she finally said. "We can't think of any way to keep you out of your mother's custody except to imprison you in a heavily warded house. But once you went in, you'd never be able to come out, and we all know your mother will not slacken her guard."

He nodded. "Yes, that's true. And you're right if you're about to say that such is not a viable alternative."

"I know." She breathed out loudly. "Seamus is willing to, uh . . ." Her voice trailed off as her cheeks turned a shade of red reminiscent of her daughter's.

Hunter gave a short bark of bitter laughter. "The phooka is willing to do me the great favor of killing me, is that what you're trying to say?" The deepening of the red in her cheeks confirmed his assumption. He wished he hadn't got out of the habit of wearing the knife up his sleeve, for right now he'd love to brandish it. "Keep the damned dog away from me, Cathy, or I'll gut it."

Her cheeks went from red to white, and a look of near-terror came into her eyes. Hunter forced himself to gentle his tone.

"I am perfectly capable of keeping myself out of my mother's clutches, and knowing what awaits me if I return to Faerie, I will take care of it. The phooka needn't soil his jaws on me."

He felt a stab of guilt—once so foreign to him, and yet now a frequent companion—at the frightened look on Cathy's face. Apparently, she had some fondness for the dog, although from everything Hunter knew, even members of the Seelie Court generally found phookas to be a terrible nuisance. A mortal's tolerance should have been tried to the limit by the creature.

"I'm not threatening to go after him," Hunter said. "I mean only to warn him away. There's no need to look so worried."

"I'm not . . ." she started, but the protest died on her lips. She shook her head. "That wasn't actually what I was here to talk about."

"Oh?"

"Perhaps we should sit down?"

Internally, he groaned. That did not sound promising at all. But, if truth be told, Cathy had treated him much better than he deserved, accepting and even aiding her daughter's quest to save him. So even while internally he cringed, he led Cathy into his living room and they sat down. Hunter could almost see the tension flying from her, and he wondered what she could have to say that was worse than offering Seamus as executioner.

"I'm going to make the assumption that you're sleeping with my daughter, since you won't tell me one way or the other," she said. Hunter folded his arms and leaned back in the couch, keeping his face entirely impassive. She searched his expression for a moment before she continued on. "She's become very attached to you, in spite of everything. I'm afraid losing you will be very hard on her."

Hunter suppressed a surge of irritation. “I’m not particularly looking forward to her losing me either,” he said, his voice conveying dry humor instead of anger. Cathy bit her lip and looked even more uncomfortable than she had when she’d started out. Hunter sighed. “Whatever you have to say, Cathy, just get on with it. It’s obvious I’m not going to like it, but you needn’t be afraid of me.”

That lit a fire in her eyes. “I’m not afraid of you.” The fire died down. “I just . . . feel like a heel for asking this of you. But I love my daughter, and if I can save her even a tiny bit of the pain I’m afraid she’s going to suffer, then I have to do it.”

“Spit it out already!” he snapped, patience at its end.

“All right.” She took a deep breath that seemed to steady her. “If you care for my daughter at all, if you want to lessen her pain, then push her away. She’s falling in love with you, Hunter. I can see it in her eyes. The end will be so much easier to bear if you don’t let it go any further.”

Hunter clenched his fists. She *wasn’t* falling in love with him. That was just a mother’s worry speaking. Kiera was fond of him, and they certainly had a nice little fling going, but it wasn’t as serious as all that. Obviously, Kiera cared about him enough that it would hurt to lose him, but she would get over it.

She’s willing to risk her life to save yours. She wouldn’t do that if she were merely “fond of” you.

Hunter wished he could silence the damned voice in his head, but it continued to batter against his defenses. *You’ve noticed the way she looks at you. You’ve noticed how open she’s been, despite having every reason not to trust you.*

Cathy was apparently unable to bear the silence any

longer. “If you go on like this, you’re going to become the worst sort of tragic martyr in her mind.” Her voice quavered, although her eyes remained dry. “It’s the kind of blow she might never recover from. She’s been gun-shy about men for a while now, and if she has your glorious memory to honor, she might use that as an excuse to push them away entirely.”

He held up his hand in a peremptory demand for silence. Cathy complied, looking nervous and wary. He leaned back into the couch, propping his head on the back cushions and closing his eyes. His throat ached.

Cathy was asking him to hurt Kiera, to betray the trust she had shown him. For a good cause, to lessen the later pain of his death. It sounded reasonable, in a twisted kind of way. It would be gut-wrenching for him, would require the greatest acting job of his life. But he had endured so much pain in his life, he was sure he could do this. The only question was whether it was truly the right thing to do.

Which was worse? To have someone you l— To have someone you cared about die, or to have that someone betray you?

Hunter raised his head from the cushions and opened his eyes. Cathy was watching him anxiously, her lip raw from chewing. He sat up straight.

“No,” he said.

Her jaw dropped, though she quickly regained her composure. That fire kindled in her eyes again. “No? You refuse to do the one thing that would help Kiera through this ordeal?”

“No, I refuse to do anything that will make this worse. I cannot believe that my destroying her trust is the lesser of the

evils. If I die, at least it will be clear to her that it is not my choice to leave her.”

Cathy’s face was filled with fury and . . . something else. She said nothing, just sat there and bored holes in him with her eyes. He met her angry gaze and tried to interpret what else he was seeing in her expression. He frowned and concentrated until everything popped into place.

“Ah,” he said with a nod of understanding, “now I see. This was a test.”

Cathy blinked, and some of the hostility left her face to be replaced with guilt.

“You thought if I selflessly agreed to push her away for her own good, that would prove that I had no evil plans still up my sleeve.” He shook his head, surprised to discover that he wasn’t particularly angry about the deception. “It isn’t as simple as that. I’ve seen this little tactic you’re proposing over and over in books and movies. It always sounded reasonable enough to me. But then, I’d never allowed myself to feel much of anything for anyone. I couldn’t betray her trust when I knew torture and death awaited me if I didn’t. I can’t betray it now.”

“Even for her own good?”

“If I believed it was for her own good, I’d do it. I think betraying her would be the worst thing I could do.”

“You wouldn’t have to *betray* her. You’d just have to—”

“I’d just have to pretend that my courtship of her was shallow and soulless, that I never really felt anything for her, that I deceived her with sweet words. If that isn’t a betrayal, I don’t know what is. The subject is closed, Cathy. I won’t do it.”

To his horror, Cathy lowered her face into her hands and

burst into tears. Although he’d seen signs of her vulnerability before, she’d usually hidden it well with anger and spirit. He couldn’t say he was overly fond of her, but he couldn’t help sympathizing with her plight. How terrible it must be to see one’s child in danger and be helpless to make it better. Surely his own father had felt much the same way, and that was why the foolish mortal had risked the Queen’s wrath to try to whisk Hunter away. Where his father had hoped to hide him, Hunter had no idea. Even now as an adult, with far more resources available than his father had had, Hunter knew there was nowhere he could hide from the Queen, at least not forever.

And with that thought, an idea struck him.

Pure adrenaline surged through his veins. He rose from the couch and knelt in front of Cathy’s chair, putting a hand on her shoulder in hopes of quieting her sobs.

“I have an idea,” he told her. The excitement in his voice seemed to reach her, and she slowly but surely regained control of her emotions, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. “Have you told Kiera about Seamus’s findings yet?” he asked.

Cathy shook her head, still dabbing at the tears. “I hadn’t the heart to tell her. I was hoping you would . . . you know . . . before I broke the news to her.”

“Are you capable of lying to her?”

Cathy’s face was tinged with suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“Tell her Seamus found someplace in Faerie where I can hide out. It would have to be some place she couldn’t visit. I’m sure we can think of some reason. And wherever it is, I can’t ever leave it, or the Queen would catch me.”

The tears dried up completely. “And why can’t you at least write to her?” she asked, and the light of hope in her eyes showed that she’d followed his thoughts fully.

He pondered the question for a moment. “She is not terribly knowledgeable about Faerie, considering her heritage. Right?”

Cathy acknowledged that with a faint nod. “I told her plenty when she was a child, but she always thought it was just a fairy tale—forgive the pun. She isn’t completely ignorant, but she’s hardly an expert either.”

Hunter felt himself smiling and was amazed that he could feel so joyous about a solution that would still leave him dead. “So we tell her Seamus has found a spell that will turn me into a fish or a dolphin or something like that. I live underwater in Faerie, so she can’t come with me. And I have no hands, so I can’t write. She would have no reason to believe this isn’t really possible.”

Cathy started to chew on her lip, then winced, for she had already chewed it raw. She went to work on a cuticle instead, her brow furrowed with thought. She removed her finger from her mouth just long enough to speak. “I don’t know how comforted she would be by the idea of you spending your life as a dolphin.”

He managed a hint of a grin. “A *fey* dolphin. Cavorting in the seas of Faerie with others of my kind. Alive and free from the Unseelie Court. I don’t think she would see much amiss in that.” He looked more closely at Cathy’s face. She wasn’t much good at schooling her emotions. “Only, I think you had best let me tell the tale. I doubt you are as accomplished a liar as I am.”

She gave him a sharp look at that. “How convenient—you deliver the lie, and I trust you to do as you’ve promised. If you’re lying to *me*, I’ll never know until too late.”

Hunter reminded himself sharply that she had every reason to doubt his word, and he managed to keep his temper in check. “Have Seamus tell her, then. But you must not be present when he does, or she’ll take one look at you and know it’s a lie.”

“It’s a lie I’ll have to uphold the rest of my life.”

“But it will become a silent lie, one you don’t talk about much. As long as you can keep her from the truth in the short run, you’ll be able to keep the illusion up.”

The clarity in his mind startled him, for everything had seemed so muddled not long ago. He had wanted to stay in the mortal world, to preserve his life, for as long as possible. Now he realized the fallacy of that plan: the longer he stayed, the stronger would become the bond between himself and Kiera, and the harder it would be on her to lose him.

Perhaps the best solution would be for him to leave now and never be heard from again. But he would not leave Kiera without saying goodbye first. Perhaps it was selfish of him, but he needed that goodbye to be at peace with himself enough to do what he had to do.

He tried to speak, but his throat closed up on him. He coughed, trying to hide the source of the choked voice. “There is no reason to delay things. I will . . . disappear . . . tomorrow. I have a date with your daughter this evening. I’ll give her the story and tell her that I am going tomorrow. Have the phooka come by at ten tomorrow morning, and I’ll go away with him to complete the illusion.”

She stared at him. “In other words, Kiera will be here.”

“If she wishes to be. Oh, and by the way—I’ll be going to my own death, so tell the phooka I will not be in the mood for any insults or humor. Understood?”

She nodded and looked away. “I’ll tell him. And . . . I’m sorry. That we haven’t found a better way.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” he said sourly. “Now leave me in peace. I will need to gather myself before I can face this evening.”

Cathy rose, and he rose with her. An awkward silence followed. After a long moment during which neither of them seemed able to find the right words, Cathy headed for the door. She did not look back as she let herself out.