

Chapter 16

Hunter felt strangely calm as he strapped the silver knife once more to his arm and pulled down his sleeve to cover it. He hadn't worn it since the day his true identity had been revealed, and though at first he had felt naked without it, now it felt strange to have it back. He tried an experimental flick of his wrist, and the knife slid smoothly into his palm. He was gratified to see that he hadn't lost his touch. And exceedingly grateful that Jackson was enough of a friend to Kiera to spare a drop of his mortal blood to anoint the blade. Without that blood, the taint of mortality, Hunter knew his knife would be powerless against the Queen.

Returning the knife to its sheath, he swept his apartment with one final, regretful glance. He had been happy here. At least, as happy as he'd ever been in his life. Despite everything, he was glad to have known that brief span of almost-happiness. He only wished Kiera had not had to suffer so for him to experience it.

Telling himself not to look back, he slipped out the door. His nerves were too raw to allow him to wait for the elevator,

so he went down the emergency stairs instead. He wasn't really afraid, not as he should be considering the torment he would face whether he succeeded or failed. But the enormity of the stakes was enough to overawe even him, and doubt plagued him.

The Queen of Air and Darkness was anything but a fool. She knew he hated her, had known it from the moment she'd forced him to watch his father's first flogging. And Bane would not have interfered in the seduction if he hadn't known Hunter had feelings for Kiera. If Bane knew it, certainly the Queen knew it, and certainly she would expect her son's hatred to be burning bright. That knowledge might cause her to be more cautious than she had been in the past, and he might find himself divested of his weapon before he got anywhere near her.

The cold snap that had seized the city during November had now taken up permanent residence, and when Hunter stepped out into the night the air bit into his cheeks like knives. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders against the cold as he strode briskly down the street. Perhaps it would be sensible to hail a nice, heated cab to take him to Logan Circle, but again he balked at the idea of holding still so long. Better to suffer the cold and keep moving.

When he reached the city's unique circular Square, his feet were numb from the cold, as were his ears and the tip of his nose. His breath frosted the air before him as he let out a deep sigh. Once he set foot in Faerie, his decision would be irreversible. But Kiera and the child she carried were worth everything he was about to go through.

His resolve firm and his mind calm, Hunter began walking briskly counterclockwise around the circle. On his ninth circuit, the lights and noise and cold of the city shimmered and

disappeared.

The tension in Seamus's posture and the curl of his lip as he followed Cathy through her inspection of the house strengthened her confidence in the power of the wards she was setting up. She'd put the iron knife back under the doormat, then added a horseshoe for good measure. In her basement, she'd kept several boxes of dried-up rowan branches, which she now broke into twigs and attached to every window with nails and tape.

"I think the house is secure, Cathy," Seamus said gently, but she ignored him and picked up another branch of rowan. Her hands were shaking a bit, and the hammer missed its mark. She yelped in pain, dropping both the rowan and the hammer, narrowly missing her toes.

The pain did what the fear had failed to, and she broke down. Seamus quickly gathered her into his arms and she clung to him gratefully. "Oh, God, Seamus! What's going to happen to my baby?" she wailed.

"Hush, Cathy," he murmured, rocking her. "We'll keep her safe, I promise. No goblin could penetrate these defenses. Trust me, *I* couldn't penetrate them to get *out* of the house, so no goblin is getting in."

She hadn't even thought about the fact that she was trapping Seamus inside. Scolding herself roundly for her loss of composure, she wiped away the tears and tried her best to stop sniffing. "I don't mean to trap you in here, Seamus," she said. "This isn't your battle, and . . ."

He was looking sternly down his nose at her, and she found she couldn't finish the silly sentence. Of course it was

his battle; he'd been sent here by Finvarra to protect Kiera. Certainly Finvarra would order him to remain on guard. She sighed heavily.

"Perhaps Finvarra's been right all along," she said. "Perhaps we should take Kiera to Faerie."

To her surprise, Seamus shook his head. "Bad idea," he told her. "*Very* bad idea."

She frowned at him, for he had seemed very much in favor of the idea in the past. "Why?"

He put his hands on her shoulders, turning her so she faced him squarely. "She's pregnant with a potential heir to both the Seelie and Unseelie thrones. Do you think for one moment that Finvarra would allow a threat like that to live?"

Her knees quivered, and if it weren't for Seamus's firm hands she might have collapsed to the floor. She had realized Finvarra would see the child as a threat, but she hadn't allowed herself to think what that might mean.

"Do you have any idea what a child borne of those two bloodlines could do?" Seamus asked softly, and Cathy had to shake her head. "The only reason neither Court has been able to gain an advantage after centuries of contention is that our strengths are perfectly in balance, each court with unique abilities that counter those of the other. But a child related by blood to both Finvarra and the Queen of Air and Darkness would be able to do it all, would destroy the balance." He shuddered. "Far too dangerous to be allowed to live. No, you cannot take Kiera to Faerie while her child poses such a threat. Not unless you wish to see the infant killed the minute it is born."

Cathy trembled as she looked into Seamus's face.

“Finvarra would kill his own grandchild?”

He nodded. “If he thought he had to, yes. Once, very long ago, one of his sons tried to lead a revolt against him. Finvarra didn’t hesitate to execute him.”

She hugged herself, hating the thought that she had once been in that monster’s arms.

“He does what he has to do, Cathy,” Seamus said, reaching for her, loosening her hands so he could take them again. “He doesn’t mean to be cruel.”

“I’m sure that would make Kiera feel much better about it if he killed her baby.”

He winced. “He won’t kill the baby, because Kiera is going to stay here if Hunter fails. Much though she might chafe at being kept prisoner, I’m sure she could be convinced to submit to it for the child’s sake.”

Cathy chewed her lip, wishing she could stop the old annoying habit. “And what about you, Seamus?” she asked. “You’re Finvarra’s man, and you’ve said yourself that this child is a terrible threat. You’ve obeyed his every command. When he commands you to kill the child, or bring it to him to be killed, will you do it?”

He stepped closer to her, still holding her hands. For a fey man, he wasn’t particularly tall, but she still had to look up to meet his eyes. She found her gaze suddenly locked with his, and she was fascinated by the wise, grave expression in those usually placid brown eyes.

“Do you not know me better than that by now, Cathy?” he asked, his voice so soft she had to strain to hear him. “Do you think I could ever bear to harm you or anyone you loved?”

Her breath caught in her throat and she was struck

speechless by his words, by the emotion that shone clearly on his face. So long she had told herself it was merely an act, that he pretended to feel human emotions in order to disarm her. So long she had convinced herself that he was fey, incapable of compassion or care. But now she couldn’t deny what she saw in his eyes, couldn’t tell herself he was just Finvarra’s servant meant to bedevil her.

She swallowed hard. “No,” she said, forcing the word out through the constriction of her throat. “I know you wouldn’t. And I trust you.”

He gazed down at her another long moment. Then he lowered his head and set his lips to hers.

A little gasp of surprise escaped her, but her own lips parted instinctively. His kiss was feather-light, tentative, and oh so sweet. She rose to her tip-toes to press her lips more firmly against his. He took the not-so-subtle hint and deepened the kiss, letting go of her hands and drawing her into a more intimate embrace. He explored her lips with his own while keeping his tongue chastely in his own mouth.

He broke away from the kiss far sooner than Cathy wanted. Her every nerve tingled with desire. He held her at arm’s length, cupping her face in his hands and looking down at her in silence. Surely he must feel how the blood pounded in her veins!

Twelve years Seamus had shared this house with her. How could she have failed to notice how dear he had become to her? And yet, how could she have guessed that her body would sing at his touch? She might almost have suspected he had wrapped her in glamour, except she remembered what that had felt like, remembered the cloud that had drifted over her mind when

Finvarra had started to pursue her. Now, her mind was clear, her thoughts her own.

Seamus didn't have the unearthly beauty of the Sidhe. He was not so tall, his frame not so slender, his features not so patrician. Had he been human, she would have said his hairline was receding, but as he was an immortal she knew the hairline would stay right where it was for the rest of his life. She thought the high forehead so revealed gave his face even more dignity.

She smiled, savoring the warmth of his hands on her cheeks. "That felt awfully nice. May I have another?"

His thumbs stroked across her cheekbones as he raised his eyebrows. "What about Alonso? I don't wish to poach on another man's territory."

She snorted. "I am no man's territory you dolt!" He didn't quite smile, but something in his expression told her he was amused. Her indignation faded. "Seamus, are you teasing me?"

Now there really was a smile on his lips. "You always tell me I don't act enough like a phooka, so I thought I'd try it out."

Great. Seamus finally found a sense of humor and it had to be *now* of all times.

His smile didn't last long. "Teasing aside, my question about Alonso was quite serious."

Cathy frowned and took a couple steps backward to give herself some room. Alonso hadn't come into her mind for even a moment when Seamus had kissed her. Although Finvarra had forced her to be unfaithful to her husband, such behavior was anathema to her. That she had not even thought about her relationship with Alonso when Seamus kissed her was the

surest sign in the world that she had been wrong—Alonso was *not* her soul mate. Not so long ago, she had been sure he was. But perhaps that had been wishful thinking. She had searched for her soul mate for so long that perhaps she had pushed to see something that wasn't there.

"I guess I won't be seeing Alonso anymore," she said, only the slightest hint of regret in her voice.

He closed the distance she had put between them. "Well, in that case . . ." He dipped his head and gave her an achingly sweet kiss.

Cathy surrendered herself to the kiss, wrapping her arms around him. When he would have kept the kiss relatively chaste, she urged his lips open with her tongue. The meeting of their tongues made her head spin. She wanted him with an urgency that couldn't be denied. Breaking away from the kiss, she started pulling him to the staircase that led to her bedroom. He followed eagerly, and she felt his eyes like a physical touch.

A twinge of guilt slowed her footsteps when she passed by the closed door to Kiera's bedroom, but she pushed it away. Just because Kiera was in pain didn't mean Cathy had to deny herself. It just meant that she and Seamus would have to be quiet.

She pushed open the bedroom door and switched the light on. Seamus slipped through the open door, then closed it behind him. His eyes promised untold pleasures, and Cathy backed toward her bed, beckoning him to follow with a crook of her finger. He obeyed eagerly.

His lips curved into a mischievous grin. "I hope you like it doggie-style," he teased.

Cathy groaned even as she smiled. “I can see I’ll have to help you lose that sense of humor again.” She pulled her blouse off over her head.

Seamus’s nostrils flared and his eyes glowed with desire. “Laughter is the last thing on my mind,” he assured her as he reached for her.

The faerie circle at Logan Square connected with Faerie in Seelie territory, so Hunter unsheathed his knife when he came through. The transportation left him dizzy, and he had to take a moment to regain his equilibrium. When his head cleared, a brief survey convinced him he was alone, so he resheathed the knife and started jogging toward the Unseelie border.

He drew up short when he reached his destination. The border between Seelie and Unseelie was impossible to miss. On the Seelie side, the ground was carpeted with grass and ferns, leafy and green and lush. The trees grew straight and noble, their orderly branches letting the light of the moon filter to the forest floor.

On the Unseelie side, the ground was covered with dried-up bracken and thorn bushes. The trees twisted as though in agony, limbs misshapen and bulging with rot like open sores. The branches wove together overhead, as though the trees clung to each other for support, creating a near-impenetrable murk.

Hunter’s heart quailed, the fear he had been so successfully holding at bay suddenly taking hold and shaking him by the scruff of the neck. His mind filled with images of his father, tied to the whipping posts, his back laid open, his eyes glazed with agony. His own flesh remembered the fierce

bite of the lash, and he saw his mother watching his punishment with a cruel smile upon her lips.

Kiera. He had to hold her in his mind, his shield against the fear. He took a deep breath, remembering her sweet face, remembering the quick smile and sparkling eyes. She had been willing to risk her life to save him, after he had treated her so badly she should have hated him. If she could give so much, then surely he could find the courage to face his fate.

His fear receding once more to the back of his consciousness, Hunter plunged into the Unseelie forest.

It didn’t take long to encounter the first goblin patrol. They had come at him out of the shadows, momentarily thinking him a Seelie spy. For once, he thanked the goblin love of cruelty, for instead of dispatching him quickly with an efficient knife-thrust, they knocked him down and bound him, meaning to “play” with him before killing him. When they turned him over onto his back and saw his face, they hastened to untie him.

The goblin patrol groveled at his feet, begging his forgiveness. Although his mother had no love for him, Hunter was sure she would inflict a terrible punishment on the goblins for attacking him. Probably they deserved it. They had meant to torture him, after all, and had inflicted similar tortures on other helpless captives. But Hunter didn’t have it in his heart to subject anyone to the Queen’s discipline. He offered forgiveness—for which the goblins, while grateful, looked at him askance. Mercy and forgiveness were unheard of in the Unseelie Court.

And so Hunter returned to his mother’s hall, surrounded by an entourage of goblins. He held his back straight and tall,

his nerves now steady and calm, all his doubts cast aside. He focused all his energies on his mission, the mission he must not fail.

As soon as he entered the palace, he dismissed the goblins, making his way through the obsidian halls to his suite. There he washed away the evidence of his tussle with the goblins and changed into his court attire of black leather edged with silver. His hair he pulled back and secured it with a leather thong. Then he donned the thin silver circlet that his mother insisted he wear as a badge of his status.

Garbed now as a true prince of the Unseelie Court, he was ready to face his final challenge.

Kiera sat cross-legged on her bed, the folded letter in her shaking hand. She didn't know how long she'd been sitting like this, trying to work up the courage to unfold the page. Taking a deep, steady breath, she finally opened the letter and beheld Hunter's strangely antique handwriting.

Dearest Kiera,

I would give everything I have and everything I am not to have caused you the pain I know I've caused. No amount of wishing or remorse can change what I've done, but I will do everything in my power to keep you and our child safe.

I want you know that I don't blame you for thinking I did it on purpose. I hope you aren't giving yourself too much grief because of it. You had good cause to distrust me, and the man you first met would have been guilty as sin. But knowing you has changed me. You have taught me that it is possible to break away from my upbringing. Strangely, in this time when I know I am doomed, I have more hope than I've ever known

before. You have saved me, and I owe everything I now am to you.

I wish that I didn't have to cause you any more pain. But I have to try my best to keep you and the baby safe from the Queen's clutches, and I can't think of any way to do it other than to kill her. The memory of the time I've spent in your arms will give me the strength I need to endure.

Take good care of our child. I wish I could be there to see whether it's a boy or a girl, and I wish I could be there to be a father. But I know our child will be very lucky to have you as a mother.

I love you. I never thought to say those words to anyone, nor even to truly know what they meant. Thank you for teaching me that I was wrong.

All my love,

Hunter

By the time Kiera finished reading the letter, her face was once more drenched with tears. She wanted to launch an invasion of the Unseelie Court to get Hunter back. She wanted to go back in time and tell him how wrong she was to assume his guilt. She wanted desperately to hold him in her arms just one more time.

But it didn't matter what she wanted. Hunter was now out of her reach and there was nothing she could do to save him.

A pair of goblins threw open the massive doors to the throne room, and Hunter stepped through. When he was halfway to the throne, he bent in a courtly bow, waiting as protocol demanded for the Queen to invite him closer. The silver blade still strapped to his wrist felt cold against his skin.

“Rise, my son,” the Queen commanded, her inflection making the last word sound like an insult.

Hunter rose as ordered. His mother sat on the ebony throne, the mink coat she had worn in the mortal world draped ostentatiously across the back of the chair. Her hair cascaded over the armrests and pooled on the floor on both sides of her. Her coldly beautiful face held a hawk’s smile as she looked him up and down.

At her feet sat Bane, using a wicked-looking knife to sharpen his claws while pretending to ignore Hunter’s presence.

“The mortal world has not agreed with you,” the Queen said. “You have bags under your eyes, and your color is not good.”

“I’ve had little sleep, being otherwise occupied during the nights,” Hunter answered, hoping his voice still held the callous tone that had once come so naturally to him.

The Queen laughed. “I’m so happy to hear that!” she cried. “I had been led to believe you were not enjoying the kind of success I had hoped for.”

Bane finally raised his head and bared his teeth at him, but if he thought the sight of goblin teeth would intimidate Hunter he was sorely mistaken.

“Perhaps you should have sent a more reliable observer. As you know, Bane and I are not overfond of one another, and perhaps it was his pleasure to misrepresent my actions and my success.”

The Queen reached down and patted Bane’s head as though he were a dog. He seemed not to mind the insult, his whole being focused on the glare he directed at Hunter.

“I have always found Bane to be quite reliable,” the Queen said, “and I am sure he would not wilfully have misled me. But come, what are you doing back in Faerie? Have you come to tell me you have succeeded?”

Hunter moved a little closer to the throne. He wasn’t quite in striking distance yet, but either his mother or Bane was bound to get suspicious if he stood too close. It was his usual habit to keep as much distance as possible between them.

“I have succeeded,” he confirmed. “The wench is pregnant, and I saw no further reason to remain in the mortal world.”

“But then, where is she?”

Hunter’s heart skipped a beat. “What?”

His mother rose from the throne and descended the dais. Bane hastily rose as well, following close at her heels, the wicked knife still unsheathed. Despite his earlier intentions to get closer to her so he could strike, Hunter had to fight an instinct to back away as she approached.

The Queen stood taller than he, so he had to look up slightly to meet her chilling gaze. “If you’ve seeded her with your child, then where is she? Surely you did not think I intended her to remain in the mortal world while she is breeding? Why, anything could happen!”

Hunter’s stomach lurched as he realized just how ugly this all would have been if he had followed his mother’s orders from the beginning. Kiera would have been brought to Faerie, where she would have spent her pregnancy imprisoned. And when she finally brought the child into the world, she would have been killed. Fury at what the Queen had almost made him do coiled in Hunter’s gut. It was all he could manage to keep

that fury out of his expression, and his heart now drummed so loud he feared she would hear it.

The Queen was near enough now that he could reach her, but Bane was standing close by her side, watching Hunter with studied intensity. The goblin's reflexes were blindingly quick, and the expression on his face suggested he suspected an attack was imminent. He had told Hunter once that Hunter would kill him; was that time now at hand?

Thinking he might never have a better opportunity, Hunter flicked his wrist, the hilt of his knife suddenly filling his palm. He drove forward, the long blade held out before him, aiming for the Queen's heart.

But as he'd feared, Bane was ready for the attack. It was a close thing, even so. Hunter's blade managed to nick the Queen's ivory skin before Bane's head plowed into his abdomen. The blow forced all the air out of Hunter's lungs and he fell heavily backward onto the cold stone floor. He fought his body's instinct to curl up around the pain in his gut, trying to scramble to his feet, but Bane's body slammed into his again and he went down. Bane landed on top of him and shoved a knee right under his ribs. Hunter's vision swam and he might have blacked out for a moment. The next thing he knew, his hand, still clutching the knife, was slammed brutally into the flagstones, and his fingers loosened their grip.

Bane had his own knife in hand and positioned the blade over Hunter's right eye. The threat stilled his struggles, and Bane laughed.

"Fond of your eye, are you Boyo?" he asked. "Maybe Her Majesty doesn't share your fondness?" He looked up at the Queen hopefully.

She stood by Hunter's head, looking down at him with no particular expression on her face, though her fingers toyed with the spot of blood on her breast. "I would not see his pretty face marred," she said. "You may let him up, but keep a firm hand on him."

Bane shoved the knife into a sheath at his waist, then hauled Hunter to his feet, holding him by the wrist and then forcing that wrist up high behind his back. Hunter gritted his teeth and refused to make a sound as the Queen approached and put her hand against his cheek. The throne room was quickly filling with goblins.

"I'm afraid you have too much of your father in you, Hunter," she said. "I thought when I disposed of him that I had purged you of his influence. It seems I was mistaken. You will follow in his footsteps, my dear boy. Bane has often confided in me his desire to hear you scream. I have long denied him the opportunity, for I didn't want you broken. But now your mission is complete and your time is almost through. You will break before you die."

She removed her hand from his cheek and stepped back. "Take him to the whipping posts and strip him," she ordered her goblins. She turned her attention to Bane. "Give him one full hour to anticipate what is to come. Then you may begin."