

Chapter 17

Kiera woke with the sun in her eyes. She groaned and turned away from the light that shone in through the slightly parted curtains. Her head ached, and she felt as though a great weight were sitting on her chest. She searched once more for the oblivion of sleep, but it remained out of reach and she couldn't stop reality from creeping into her consciousness. Slowly, she sat up, rubbing her bleary eyes.

It didn't seem like the things that had happened to her could possibly be real. She couldn't possibly be pregnant! She couldn't possibly be trapped inside her mother's house. And, most of all, Hunter couldn't possibly be sacrificing his life to try to save her.

She huffed out a loud breath. Denying reality wasn't going to make it go away. She threw on a bathrobe and headed downstairs to get a cup of coffee and regroup.

The tableau that met her eyes when she reached the base of the stairs stopped her in her tracks.

Her mother and Seamus were sitting at the small kitchen

table. Plates bearing the remainders of their breakfast had been pushed out of the way. Seamus leaned an elbow on the table, his chin resting on his hand as her mother smiled at him. He was holding her hand, his thumb brushing over her knuckles in what could only be a lover's caress.

Kiera cleared her throat and they jumped guiltily apart. Her mother actually blushed, and Kiera would have laughed if her heart weren't so heavy. Seamus turned in his chair to face her more fully. His hair was tousled from sleep and hung loose around his face. His eyes searched her face.

"Don't worry," she assured him, "I'm not going to faint or scream or anything."

"Sit down," her mother said with exaggerated cheer, "I'll get you some breakfast." She pushed away from the table and practically fled to the far side of the kitchen, where she started a new batch of eggs as if she were in a race for her life.

Kiera pulled out a chair and sat. Seamus was looking toward her mother with an expression of fond amusement.

"So," Kiera asked him, "how long has this been going on?"

He turned his attention to her. "Not long."

She waited for him to say more, but he didn't. She supposed he wasn't the type to kiss and tell. She narrowed her eyes at him. "If you hurt my mom, I will kick your ass, even if I have to hunt you down in Faerie to do it."

He smiled. "Fair enough, child," he said, putting a slight emphasis on the last word. Kiera wondered if she was supposed to feel insulted.

In short order, her mother laid a plate of bacon and eggs before her. Kiera murmured her thanks and took a sip from the accompanying glass of orange juice as her mother retook her seat.

They certainly made an odd-looking couple. Kiera's mom had always looked about five years younger than she was, but she still looked old enough to be Seamus's mother. Wanting to return the needle he'd earlier given her, she looked at Seamus and frowned.

"Aren't you a little young for her?" she asked, jerking her chin in her mother's direction.

Seamus laughed. "Looks can be deceiving. I am far older than your mother, Kiera."

The thought occurred to her that she had never asked Hunter how old he was. He could easily be older even than Seamus, and yet he looked like he was Kiera's age or younger. Her heart sank, and her face must have fallen as well, for Seamus reached over and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. She didn't know what he meant to reassure her of.

"Do you suppose he's still alive?" she asked as a frog took up residence in her throat.

"I don't know," Seamus said softly.

Tears blurred her vision. "He probably is. They won't kill him quickly." The last came out a sob, and soon both Seamus and her mother were huddled close to her, murmuring soothing words that couldn't possibly ease her pain.

She reined in the tears with difficulty. Without doubt, this was not the last time she'd fall apart, but it did no one any good and she was determined not to make more of a scene than necessary. A box of tissues appeared on the table as if by magic and she realized Seamus had fetched them without her even noticing he'd left the table.

"Thanks," she managed to choke out. She grabbed a handful of tissues, wiping her tears away and blowing her

nose.

The doorbell rang, and all three of them jumped. Kiera looked from her mother's face to Seamus's and saw grimness in both their features.

"Now it begins," Seamus muttered as he headed toward the door.

"Now what begins?" she asked her mother in an urgent whisper.

"The siege. I'm afraid we're going to be trapped in this house for a long time. Come on, let's see what tactics they're going to use to try to flush you out."

Kiera followed her mother to the window that looked out at the front of the house. Seamus was stationed at the door, peering out the peephole.

"I count five goblins," he hissed.

Kiera looked out the window and saw nothing more than a group of winos in ragged clothes. Four of them were sitting across the street, backs to the wall of the house across the way, passing a bottle back and forth amongst them. The fifth stood on the doorstep.

She raised an eyebrow at her mother. "Glamour, I suppose?"

Her mom nodded as the goblin at the door rang the bell about fifteen times in a row then banged with his fist for good measure.

"Come on, open up," he growled. "We know you're in there."

"You are truly a paragon of intellect," Seamus said, still not opening the door.

"You want to open the door and try insulting me again?"

“Not particularly.”

“Hand over the little lady and no one else has to get hurt.”

Seamus snorted. “Your offer has little to recommend it.”

“There’s only so long you can hide in your hole before you’ll all starve to death. Why don’t you just end it now, nice and peaceful-like?”

“Perhaps I can avoid starvation by feeding on goblin flesh. It is considered a delicacy among my kind.” Although Seamus was in his human form, the words came out as a vicious snarl that sent a chill down Kiera’s spine. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to have the same effect on the goblin.

“Phooka flesh is best eaten fresh from the bone. It’ll be interesting to see how much we can eat before you die.”

Kiera shuddered and huddled closer to her mother. Seamus turned toward them, his face showing he was not particularly intimidated by the threat. His calm eased Kiera’s anxieties some. He moved away from the door without answering the goblin’s latest challenge.

“No point in talking to them,” he said as he gestured the women back toward the dining room. “They’ll just bluster and threaten.”

Kiera looked back over her shoulder. “So are they going to park outside our door forever?”

“I’d say for the foreseeable future, yes.”

She resumed her seat at the table. She’d eaten almost nothing, but she couldn’t move herself to eat the cold remains on her plate. “Could we call the police on them?”

“We could. The police might even be able to get the goblins to move on for a bit, if the goblins don’t feel like fighting it. But they’d just come back. And if the goblins got

testy, we might find ourselves responsible for some dead policemen.”

Kiera lowered her head into her hands. “Then we have no chance? They’re going to starve us out?”

“Let’s take it one day at a time, honey,” her mother said.

The goblin started leaning on the doorbell again before Kiera had a chance to answer. Seamus showed no inclination to go to the door. The goblin was not discouraged, keeping up a continuous ring.

“May I disable the doorbell?” Seamus asked.

“Please do!” her mother agreed.

Seamus slipped away from the table. For a few more minutes, the ringing continued. Then, it abruptly ceased. Kiera smiled at the beautiful silence, until Seamus returned to the dining room and she saw the grim set of his face.

“What is it?” she cried.

He sat on a chair beside her, turning it to face her square on. “Hunter failed.” Kiera gasped in pain and shut her eyes tight to keep from crying yet again. “The goblins claim that if you give yourself up, they’ll let Hunter go. Supposedly, they’ll take you to Faerie until you give birth, then they’ll let both you and Hunter go and keep the child. It’s a patent lie, of course. One cannot make bargains with the Unseelie.”

Kiera nodded numbly. Even if she had reason to believe the Unseelie would keep their end of the bargain, she knew she couldn’t take it. She could not sacrifice a helpless child to the Unseelie Court. Reflexively, she put a hand on her belly. It still didn’t feel real—it was almost impossible to believe that Hunter’s child was growing inside her. And yet the goblins outside the door were further proof.

Whatever it took, she had to keep the baby out of their clutches. Even if it meant . . .

An idea suddenly popped into her head. Probably a foolish one, with no chance of success. And even if it succeeded, that success would be short-lived.

But in the face of hopelessness, even a small success was worth pursuing.

Hunter had retreated deep inside himself. For the first fifteen minutes or so that he'd been tied to the whipping posts, Bane's cruel goading had distracted him. Eventually, Hunter had figured out how to tune him out and had ceased to hear the words until the goblin's voice became nothing but a muffled buzzing sound.

In his near-trance, Hunter had no sense of time passing, didn't know how long he had before his torment was slated to begin. He knew from bitter experience that he would snap back into full consciousness at the first bite of the whip, but for the time being he savored the peace. When the pain got too much to bear, he would find his way back to this trance state and escape, at least for a while.

An explosive crack and a fiery trail of pain across his shoulder blades snapped Hunter back to the real world. It had begun.

He clamped his jaw tightly, grinding his teeth until his face ached with it as lash after lash bit into his back. He tried to will himself back into the trance, but it was no use. He could only put himself in that peaceful place when there was no pain, or too much pain. He almost welcomed the continued lashes, in hopes that they would help him find his way to oblivion.

He thought he might almost be there when the blows suddenly stopped coming. He cursed foully as his back burned and his breath came in short gasps. Bane circled the posts until he stood in front of Hunter. Hunter saw spots of his own blood on Bane's body. The goblin was grinning in sadistic pleasure.

"Can't be letting you slip away like you've been known to do, can I?" Bane said.

Hunter's mouth was almost completely dry, but he gathered what moisture he could and spit weakly at the goblin. He missed.

Bane crossed his arms over his chest and regarded Hunter with cocked head. "Quite a puzzle," he said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Looks for all the world like your time is almost through. And yet, I know you're going to kill me." He shook his head and sniffed. "Doesn't seem quite possible."

Hunter wondered if the goblin was trying to further torture him with false hope. And yet, Bane had made the same outlandish claim long before Hunter condemned himself.

Hunter rattled the chains that held him to the whipping posts. "Let me loose," he rasped, "and I'll get on with it."

Bane laughed. "Don't get me wrong, Boyo. I'm not eager to face my doom. Not that you'd match up so well against me right now anyway. Your knees must be feeling a little weak, no?"

Hunter wondered what the chances were of goading Bane into setting him free for a fight. He decided the chances were nil as long as the goblin was convinced Hunter would kill him somehow.

Bane came closer and gave Hunter a shove in the chest. Hunter staggered, but managed to keep his legs under him.

Bane made a disapproving noise.

“Still pretty steady, aren’t you? Let’s see if we can weaken those knees a bit.”

Hunter made a vain attempt to kick the goblin, but of course Bane was ready for it and dodged easily.

The lashes resumed, starting at his already-raw shoulders and inching down his back. He held on to his sanity with desperate strength, for if he let himself go he would start screaming. He refused to give Bane that satisfaction.

He had just enough rational thought left in him to realize that Bane had stopped the whipping when Hunter had started to slide into oblivion. He would surely do it again.

Urging himself to patience, Hunter slowly let himself sag, though much of his strength still remained. He bent his knees, letting the manacles support his weight as he lowered his chin to his chest.

Unbelievably, the lashes ceased. Hunter had to fight against a surge of adrenaline. He mustn’t let the illusion slip. In the end, the ruse would not save his life, and would save him only a fraction of the pain he was destined to suffer. But it was the only hint of reprieve he would have, and he embraced it.

Her mother was pale as death, and Seamus looked as though he’d been turned to stone.

Kiera sat up straighter and met their shocked stares with a calm she would not have thought she could muster. “The Unseelie Court wants this child more than anything,” Kiera said, laying a hand on her belly. “If they have to give me Hunter in exchange, they’ll do it.” And, she suspected, they’d

do it even if they didn’t believe she’d hold up her end of the bargain.

For a long, tense moment, silence reigned. Seamus recovered from the shock first, shaking his head violently.

“You would gain nothing by such a plan,” he said.

“Not true,” she argued. “I would gain *time*.”

He curled his lips in disdain. “*Time* will do us no good.”

She ignored him, turning instead to her mother. “I can’t just let Hunter suffer without trying to help,” she said, a pleading edge in her voice. “If they think they can trade Hunter for the child, then they’ll have to keep him alive. Maybe it will only delay the inevitable. But the attempt would be worth something, at least to me. Besides, if they don’t go for it, there’s no harm done.”

“Oh, there you’re wrong, I can assure you,” Seamus interrupted. “They’ll take you up on your offer, all right. And they’ll turn Hunter into a Trojan horse.”

“Seamus—” she tried, but he spoke loudly over her objections.

“You’d have to lift the wards over the doorway to let Hunter in. You think he’d be the only Unseelie creature to enter?”

“Why don’t you turn into a dog and shut up!” she snapped.

Her mother held out a placating hand to each of them. “All right,” she said quietly, “let’s just stay calm and talk this over rationally.”

Seamus turned his glare to her. “Your daughter is going to risk everything on a futile venture that could very well get you and me killed right along with her.”

“Your damned guard dog is sticking his nose in where it

doesn't belong!" Kiera retorted.

Her mother rubbed her face wearily. "How did I become the referee?"

Seamus sniffed. "You volunteered."

She sighed. "Do you really think they'd fall for it?" she asked him.

"No. But they'd pretend to fall for it in hopes of getting us to move the wards away from the door."

"Listen," Kiera said, "the situation is desperate however we cut it. We're trapped in this house. Even if we keep holding them off and manage not to starve to death, what will that gain us? Are we to stay here forever? And when I have the baby, is it supposed to live its entire life trapped in this house?"

"I don't see how promising to give them the baby if they bring Hunter to you is going to improve the situation any," Seamus growled. "Even if we held the door against them, you would merely add a fourth occupant to help diminish our food supply."

Her temper far past the breaking point, Kiera shot to her feet and did her best to tower over him, though his fey dignity made him seem taller than he was. "Why don't you just go back to Faerie and save yourself, then? It's not *you* the goblins want. You can just wash your hands of us and be done with it. Chalk it up to mortal stupidity!"

Seamus rose from the sofa, his eyes blazing. When he reached his full height, the aura of strength and anger that surrounded him caused her to take an involuntary step backward. "I'll chalk it up to mortal stupidity that you think somehow my concerns are centered upon my own well-being."

If he'd looked any angrier, sparks would have flown off

him. Kiera's mother approached him warily, reaching for his shoulder. "Seamus . . ."

His posture still rigid, he turned to face her, and Kiera let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"If Kiera is dead set on doing this, then there's nothing we can do to stop her," she said, her voice low and soothing.

"I can think of any number of ways," he countered.

"None that I'd let you get away with!"

"Do you think you could stop me?"

Kiera remembered how fondly they'd been looking at each other this morning when she'd come down for breakfast, and she experienced a twinge of guilt. Her mother's face was flushed with anger, and Seamus was leaning into her like a bully, fists clenched at his sides.

"Don't do this, okay?" Kiera begged, her own anger melting as she realized the strife she was causing. "Maybe we can set up some kind of secondary barrier around the doorway. Mom could ward that barrier and you two could stay behind it. That way if the goblins do breach the doorway Hunter and I will be the only ones at risk."

"And the child," her mother reminded her.

Kiera raised her chin. "We're all at terrible risk anyway."

"That doesn't mean you have to invite it in!" Seamus snapped. The air around him was shimmering, as if he were on the verge of changing into his dog form. Kiera had a feeling that if he did, he might very well bite someone. Her, to be more precise.

"Please try to understand. I can't just hide in here and do nothing. Not while I know they're torturing the man I love." Her voice choked and she swallowed a sob.

Seamus's anger seemed to have dulled to a brooding simmer. "He may be dead already."

Kiera winced. "If that's so, then all of this arguing is pointless." She waited to see if Seamus was going to raise another objection, but he stayed quiet. Then she turned to her mom. "Can you create a ward behind the doorway?"

Her mom shook her head. "Not necessary, sweetheart. You'll need all the help you can get keeping them out."

"I don't want you risking yourself. Or Seamus, for that matter!"

But her mom's expression was implacable. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it together. Period."

Reluctantly, Kiera conceded. She forced a nervous laugh. "I guess I'd better brush up on my acting skills."

"You won't need them," Seamus said sourly. "They'll jump at the opportunity no matter what you say."

She took a deep, steadying breath. "Well, then. Let's get on with it." Heart pounding, she strode toward the door to deliver her ultimatum.