

Chapter 19

Kiera glanced at her watch for about the hundredth time. It was nearing the deadline she had set for Hunter's safe return, and there'd been no sign of him yet. Maybe Seamus's assertion that the Unseelie forces could not resist this bargain had been wrong. She ground her teeth and ordered herself not to give up hope.

She had spent the first hour or two of her wait parked in front of the window, watching the goblins who guarded the house. One of them had trotted off to take her offer to the Queen, but the four who remained looked formidable enough. Seamus finally persuaded her to leave her post, and he and her mother tried to keep her from brooding. They met with only limited success.

Now, almost twenty-four hours later, Kiera sat alone in the upstairs den, a cup of tea clutched in her hands as she stared out the window once more. The full moon had risen just after sunset and hung low over the city. The moonlight had ill effects on the goblins' glamour, and every once in a while

when Kiera looked at them she'd catch a glimpse of fangs and claws and gray skin. Once more she glanced at her watch, her eyes filming with tears as hope slowly died.

A soft knock at the door behind her snapped her out of the gloom and she turned to see her mom standing in the doorway, her face full of gentle sadness.

"It was worth a try, huh Mom?" Kiera asked, glad that her voice came out steadier than she felt.

Her mom came to stand behind her chair, putting her hands on Kiera's shoulders. "You did everything you could, dear. There are just some things in the world you have no control over. This is one of them. But we're not going to give up. While there's life, there's hope."

Kiera closed her eyes. Did Hunter still have life? Seamus had been so sure the goblins would give in to her demands . . . But if Hunter were already dead, then they couldn't, even if they wanted to. Her heart felt like a lump of coal in her chest.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kiera caught sight of a group of men on the street below. Three of them, walking casually down the sidewalk. She didn't know what it was about them that caught her eye, but once she'd turned to look at them, she found it hard to drag her eyes away.

"Uh-oh," her mother whispered.

"What?" Kiera asked, still watching the three men. The group of goblins had mustered and were moving swiftly away from the house and the approaching men.

"Those are Daoine Sidhe. Your father must have gotten word of the situation."

Kiera sighed. "I don't see how things can get any worse." Her mom groaned. "Oh, *please* don't say that."

Someone banged loudly on the front door.

"Let's go see what they want," Kiera said.

“I don’t want to know,” her mom said, but followed Kiera down the stairs.

Seamus stood at the door, nodding. When Kiera’s foot hit the last step, Seamus swung the door open.

“No!” her mother shouted, shouldering Kiera aside.

In the doorway, Seamus turned and gave her a dirty look. “They can’t get in and I can’t get out, remember? A little faith would be appreciated.”

Her mother came to a halt, her face turning red. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

Seamus shook his head then turned his attention to Kiera. “You might want to hear this,” he said, beckoning.

Kiera took a deep breath to steady herself then joined Seamus in the doorway.

One of the Daoine Sidhe stood on the doorstep, the other two hanging back a respectful distance. The man on the doorstep was a strikingly handsome specimen, tall and elegant and dressed to kill. When Kiera looked up into his blue eyes, she felt in them the same disconcerting sense of otherworldliness she felt when she looked into Seamus’s. She stiffened her spine and raised her chin.

“What is it I might want to hear?” she asked.

The Daoine Sidhe bowed slightly from the waist. “I am Connor, and I come bearing a message from the High King.”

Kiera shivered and tried to pretend it was only because of the cold. “What’s the message?”

“He has in his custody one Hunter Teague.”

Kiera gasped and covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes suddenly swimming. Connor smiled, but it was a cold smile.

“I see this one is known to you.”

“Yes,” she choked out. “Is he all right?”

“He is unharmed, for now. However, he is a member of the Unseelie Court, and the penalty for trespassing on Seelie lands is death.”

Kiera tried to put all the pieces together, but failed. What had Hunter been doing on Seelie land? It didn’t make any sense.

“Teague claims to have assassinated the Queen of Air and Darkness,” Connor continued, and once more Kiera gasped.

Her knees felt weak and she swayed on her feet, her vision suddenly swimming. She might have fallen if Seamus hadn’t taken hold of her shoulders to steady her. She felt as though she’d been struck dumb, her brain filled with fog.

“Have you confirmed his claim?” Seamus asked, taking over when Kiera failed to find her voice.

“We have confirmed that the Queen has been assassinated. We have no confirmation that Teague is responsible. He would be dead already if it weren’t for certain . . . other claims.”

Connor looked like he’d eaten something that had gone rotten. Kiera forcibly snapped herself out of her stupor and glared at the Daoine Sidhe. “Hunter is the father of my child,” she said. “And if he’s managed to kill the Queen, then my child no longer has any tie to the Unseelie throne.”

Disapproval fairly dripped from the Daoine Sidhe’s voice. “Be that as it may, Hunter Teague is still of the Unseelie Court, and he has trespassed upon Seelie lands. His life is forfeit.”

Her heart clenched at the thought that Hunter might die when they were so close to having everything they wanted. But surely Connor would not be here delivering this message if

Hunter's fate were already sealed!

"There must be some reason you haven't killed him yet," she said. "What is it you want?"

"The High King wishes to speak with you."

Kiera's voice died again, but her mother had no such problem.

"Oh, no," her mother said, grabbing Kiera's shoulder and pulling her away from the door. She then placed herself firmly between Kiera and the Daoine Sidhe. "You are *not* taking my daughter to Faerie."

"Mother—"

"He's been trying to get you to Faerie since he first learned about you. Now he's using Hunter as bait. Don't fall for it!"

Kiera heaved an internal sigh. "If that's what I have to do to keep them from killing Hunter, then I'll do it."

"Kiera, please!" her mother cried, tears glistening in her eyes. Seamus slung an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into him. Kiera slipped past them.

"I have to go," she said, stepping over the threshold and out into the cold. The icy December wind stung her cheeks, and her breath frosted.

"At least wear a coat," her mother protested, wriggling out from under Seamus's arm. He smiled fondly at her back as she hurried to the coat closet. Then he turned to Kiera.

"A word of advice," he said. "Unless you wish to remain in Faerie forever, eat nothing and drink nothing you are given there."

The three Daoine Sidhe gasped in horror, and Connor clenched his fists.

"Disloyal dog!" he growled. "You forget your place."

Seamus shrugged. "Cathy would have issued the warning if I hadn't. I've spent twelve long years in the mortal world on Finvarra's orders. If he considers my loyalty to be in question because of my words, then he is not worth my loyalty."

The three Daoine Sidhe grumbled amongst themselves as Kiera's mother returned to the doorway and handed Kiera her coat. Kiera slipped it on and gave her mom's hand a squeeze.

"I'll be back, Mother," she promised. "Try not to worry too much."

"Might as well tell a fire not to burn," Seamus grouched, putting his arms around her mother.

Kiera smiled. "Take care of her for me, Seamus."

He nodded gravely. "Always."

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves as best she could, Kiera turned to face her escort. "I'm ready," she said.

Connor put a hand on her arm, and the other two fell into step behind them. Kiera tried her best to shake the sensation that she was a prisoner and they her guards.

"Let go of my arm, please," she said.

Connor's grip neither loosened nor tightened and he did not look at her. "Mortals can only enter Faerie by walking nine times around a faerie circle on the night of the full moon. You have a faerie circle here in Philadelphia, at Logan Square. As tonight is the night of the full moon, and as you are a mortal, the magical resistance of the circle will tend to repel you." Finally, he looked at her, but she could read nothing in his expression. "As long as I have a hand on you, I will be able to keep you moving forward when the circle urges you to move some other direction."

“We’re nowhere near Logan Square yet,” she protested. “So let go.”

She dug in her heels, and Connor frowned at her. Then, he shrugged and let go of her arm. “Very well,” he said, his voice conspicuously bland.

Feeling as though she’d won a minor victory—over what or whom, she had no idea—Kiera fell into step with her Daoine Sidhe escort as they continued on toward Logan Square.

Kiera felt like her legs had turned to rubber. Only, rubber didn’t ache. It took everything she had to put one foot in front of the other, though it seemed her Daoine Sidhe escorts could walk indefinitely without tiring. She had to bite her tongue to keep from asking how much farther they had to go.

Connor hadn’t been lying about the effects of the faerie circle. As soon as they had turned a corner and Logan Square had come into view, Kiera had found herself spacing out. When she came back to herself, Connor once more had a hand on her arm and she realized she was facing away from the circle. She blinked in confusion, and he gave her a smug smile.

The experience had unnerved her more than she liked to admit. She’d fallen victim to Hunter’s glamour in the past, but that glamour she’d fought off with at least marginal success. The glamour of the faerie circle seemed much stronger, more like a primal force than a contained one. She wondered how her mother had overcome the glamour to make her way into Faerie, but that story would have to wait.

Once they’d made the transition into Faerie, Kiera’s mind had become her own once more. But it had already been a

lengthy walk from her mother’s house to Logan Square, and it hadn’t taken long for her legs to start grumbling in protest. Since they’d come through, it felt like they’d walked about five miles. When it came right down to it, Kiera didn’t even know where they were walking to—until they rounded a corner on the gravel path they’d been following and a massive building rose from the trees in the distance. Kiera halted in surprise, for they had not passed a single house or other man-made structure since they’d arrived.

“That is Tara,” Connor told her. “Finvarra’s palace.”

“Oh,” was all she could think to reply.

Tara towered above the trees that surrounded it, a structure of white stone with slim turrets rising from the walls that guarded it. Too delicate-looking to be a fortress, she nevertheless had the sense that its defenses were formidable. The stone was lit by countless torches that flickered slightly in the breeze.

Kiera told herself firmly that after all she had gone through, she mustn’t allow herself to be intimidated by a building. Before the Daoine Sidhe could prompt her, she recovered from her brief spell of awe and continued down the path.

Dawn was just beginning to light the sky when they finally reached the front gates of the palace. Kiera was stumbling with exhaustion, her throat parched. She wished she’d thought to bring some water with her when Seamus issued the injunction against eating or drinking while in Faerie.

She was so exhausted that she barely paid attention as her escort led her through the gates and into the halls of Tara. She noted ornate silver filigree sconces at regular intervals along

the walls. The floors were covered in rich rugs that shone like silk. Kiera found herself staring at the intricate patterns in that silk. They seemed to waver in the flickering torch light. She swayed slightly. Connor noticed and gave her a superior smile.

“Come,” he said. “You need to rest before your audience.”

Kiera shook her head, trying to clear the exhaustion. “No,” she said. “I want to see my father now.” Later, she would be even more dehydrated, and the urge to accept a drink would be even stronger.

“The High King will see you when he pleases,” Connor said stiffly.

Kiera rubbed her weary eyes. “If he wants to see me at all, he’ll see me now. Otherwise, I’ll just head on back home.”

Connor laughed. “You can barely put one foot in front of another. You will not be going home just yet.”

She straightened her spine and glared up at him. “I’m Finvarra’s daughter, which means I’ve got a well of stubbornness in me that I’ve barely begun to tap. He’ll see me now or not at all.”

For the first time since she’d met him, Connor looked uncertain of himself. A sour expression detracted from his good looks.

“I will relay your request to the King. Now, if you will be so kind as to wait in one of the reception rooms . . .” He made a sweeping gesture toward a doorway a few yards down the hall.

Kiera inclined her head and allowed herself to be deposited in the reception room.

Kiera started awake and found herself lying down on a

plush velvet couch, her head pillowed on the arm. She lay facing a huge fireplace in which a merry blaze danced. The warmth seeped into her muscles and urged her to sleep once again. Instead, she forced herself to sit up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes even as she yawned.

The sound of a warm chuckle from behind her shocked her firmly awake. Slowly, she turned.

Just inside the room stood the most gorgeous creature she’d ever seen. He was tall and slender, his face all clean lines and sharp, perfect angles. Hair of an almost metallic shade of gold cascaded well past his shoulders. Eyes of a spectacular shade of blue peered out from behind long golden lashes, and his decadent lips were twisted into a smile that would make many a woman’s knees go weak. He was dressed entirely in deep blue velvet, trimmed with gold, and on his brow rested a filigree crown that sparkled with diamonds.

His smile broadened at her silent examination. He held his hands away from his sides and turned in a full circle as if to allow her to admire him in his entirety.

Kiera rose slowly to her feet, her mouth so dry she wasn’t sure she would be able to speak. Finvarra made it momentarily unnecessary to try.

“You must be exhausted, Daughter,” he said, and there was a faintly mocking tone to his voice that set her teeth on edge. “You are, after all, only a mortal. Perhaps you should retract your rash demand to meet with me before you’ve had a chance to rest?”

She found her voice easily, though it came out sounding harsh and husky after his musical speech. “I don’t think so. I’ve been in Faerie long enough. I want to go home as soon as

possible.”

Finvarra put on a shocked expression that no one would have mistaken for genuine. “You wish to leave already? Why, you’ve just arrived!”

“Yes, I wish to leave. And I wish to take Hunter with me.”

He gestured for her to sit down, and she did so reluctantly. He sat on a chair facing her, watching her with a calculating look that did nothing to lessen her discomfort.

“Why should you want the Unseelie creature to go free?” Finvarra asked. “I’ve heard tell the beast seduced you for his mother’s evil purposes. Even had he not trespassed on our lands, his life would be forfeit for the crime he has committed against my daughter.”

She snorted in disbelief. “Are you really trying to tell me you feel some kind of paternal sentiment for me? Give me a break!”

He leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs at the ankles. “Sentiment? I don’t know if I would call it that. But you are blood of my blood, and such has a ceremonial significance if nothing else. To allow a man who violated my daughter to live would reflect poorly on me.”

When she’d first laid eyes on him, Kiera had felt intimidated by Finvarra. That had quickly passed. “I think it would reflect damned poorly on you if you killed the father of your grandchild. I had to grow up without a father, and let me tell you it was no picnic. I don’t want the same for my own child.”

He straightened, and the look he gave her suddenly seemed wise and grave. “Some fathers are best kept away from their children,” he said.

She swallowed past a lump in her throat. “Hunter isn’t one of them. He risked everything for me and the child. That’s more than many fathers have done for their children.”

He arched a golden brow. “Was that a reproof, Daughter?”

Kiera told herself to think before she spoke. The last thing she wanted was to goad Finvarra into trying to become part of her life. “No. I just . . . I just want Hunter back.”

“Why? After all he has done, I should have thought you would dance on his grave.”

“I love him,” she answered simply.

“Ah. I see.” He frowned, his lips pushed out in something that was almost a pout. “You truly do favor your mother in all ways.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you are mortal to your core. I might have thought that being my daughter, you would at least exhibit some fey traits. But you are homely, and have no special stamina, and are subject to such foolishness as love. I see nothing of me in you.”

Kiera was not overly distressed to hear this, but she figured she’d keep that thought to herself when her father held Hunter’s life and her future happiness in his hands.

“You do realize that the fey are not capable of what you mortals call love,” Finvarra continued.

“So my mother has repeatedly told me.” She thought of the sacrifice Hunter had been willing to make, and she couldn’t help doubting that there was any truth to this assertion. And she thought about the look in Seamus’s eye when he put his arm around her mother. No, if the fey didn’t feel love, it was because of some cultural restriction that it was possible to put

aside.

Finvarra smiled. “Yes, I can imagine she’s told you any number of the aspects of the fey she finds unappealing.”

“I want Hunter back whether he’s capable of loving me or not. He’s a good man, and he deserves another chance.”

“The Unseelie are incapable of being good. It is not in their natures.”

“Well then Hunter isn’t Unseelie!”

Finvarra fell silent, regarding her with penetrating eyes. Kiera caught his gaze and then became trapped by it. She shivered, despite the blazing fire, for she suddenly sensed the power of the man who had fathered her, sensed the magic that clung to him, sensed the ancient wisdom his shallow, selfish facade hid.

Finally, Finvarra blinked and Kiera was able to look away. His voice when he spoke held a hint of seduction. “And what would you be willing to sacrifice to have your lover restored to you?” he asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

The air shimmered, and then he held out his hand. A single seed lay in the palm. “You are a mortal woman, doomed to die. But you are also blood of my blood. You have but to eat this pomegranate seed, and that part of you which is mortal will be purged away. You—and the child you carry—will be immortal.”

Kiera gaped at him, and he smiled.

“You will take up your place in Faerie. Being my daughter, you will want for nothing and will be paid deference by all the Seelie Court. I would gladly bestow this gift on you and on my grandchild. But you will have to give up Hunter

Teague, for I will tolerate no creature of the Unseelie Court in my own realm.”

“He’s not a creature! He’s a *man!*!”

Finvarra grinned. “If you do not realize the two are one and the same, then you have not been with enough men, my child.”

Anger that he dared make jokes while a man’s life hung in the balance thrummed through Kiera’s blood. Only what felt like superhuman willpower kept her from answering back sharply. Instead, she bit the inside of her cheek and tried to force herself to calm down.

The decision would have been a no-brainer if it weren’t for the child she carried. All well and good to refuse immortality for herself, but could she also do it for her child? Finvarra stared at her, still smiling his smug little smile. She understood better now how her mother could harbor such virulent feelings toward him. He seemed to have no compassion whatsoever. If she accepted his offer, would she lose her own sense of compassion? Would her child never know what it meant to love?

Kiera shook her head. In the end, the decision wasn’t all that difficult after all. “I don’t want to be a part of your world,” she told her father. “Nothing I’ve seen of Faerie has made me think this is a place I’d want to live, and nothing I’ve seen of the fey has made me think I want myself or my child to be one. Especially not if by accepting your offer I condemn Hunter to death. I want a father for my child.” Her voice hitched on a sob and her eyes misted. “I want Hunter.”

Finvarra closed his palm, and when he opened his hand once more the seed was gone. He shook his head. “Truly I am

glad that the fey are not capable of love, for it makes one do unimaginably foolish things. Teague's mortal blood seems to have similarly corrupted him, for when I told him I would not let him near you unless he gave up his own immortality, he did not hesitate."

Kiera's heart did a strange flip. "You *what*?"

Finvarra leaned forward in his chair, a faint smile on his lips. "I have enough experience with mortals that your requests . . . nay, *demands* . . . were not unexpected. If I restored Teague to you in his immortal state, then chances were high that he would abandon you when you began to look too old. So I told him that he had two choices: he could retain his immortality and never see you again. Or he could give it up, and be allowed to see you. He chose the latter."

Kiera was stunned. "So, this was all some kind of test? You never really meant to kill him?"

He shrugged. "There were ways this interview could have ended in his death. But none of them was likely." He rose. "I had hoped to persuade you to remain in Faerie. But, if I could not, I wanted to make sure that Teague would not take advantage of you again. Clearly in both of you, the mortal blood is stronger than the immortal. You belong in the mortal world, not here."

He held out his hand, and Kiera stood to take it. He clasped her hand in both of his, then bent to kiss the top of her head. "Go in peace, Daughter," he said. Then he swept out of the room, leaving Kiera standing nervous and uncertain.

Moments after Finvarra had left, the door opened again, and Kiera's eyes met with the most welcome sight she had ever seen. "Hunter!" she cried, and she flung herself into his arms

and reveled in the warmth of his embrace.

Chapter 20

Cathy felt momentarily bereft when Seamus left her side to throw another log on the fire. When he returned to the couch and put his arm around her shoulders, she gratefully snuggled into his embrace. He kissed the top of her head, and she let out a sigh. She had to keep reminding herself he was a phooka, because right now he felt so damned human. His arms felt warm and strong around her, his body felt warm where it touched hers. And if she didn't know better, she would have sworn he actually *cared* about her. But she knew she'd been engaged in a lot of wishful thinking where Seamus was concerned. She would be foolish to trust in a phooka's mercurial moods.

Seamus tightened his arms around her. "What are you thinking about, Cathy? You've suddenly stiffened up."

She shook her head, trying to extricate herself from his arms. When he refused to let go, she relaxed back into him. "Nothing," she said, unconvincingly.

"Come on. Out with it."

"This isn't a good time. Not when I'm worrying about my baby."

His hand brushed softly against her cheek. "Tell me anyway. Keeping your thoughts to yourself isn't going to do Kiera any good." He shifted his body, then raised her chin so he could look into her eyes.

The warmth in his eyes melted her resistance. "I'm just trying to figure you out," she admitted.

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And what conclusions have you drawn?"

"That's just it: I can't seem to make sense out of you, and it's driving me nuts."

He grinned. "I'm not that complicated, you know."

"You seem damn complicated to me."

The grin faded. "You're only finding me complicated because you don't want to admit the truth."

She shivered in a sudden chill, despite the blazing fire. "What truth?" she asked faintly.

Seamus stroked her cheek with his index finger, his eyes locked with hers. He bent and brushed her lips with a sweet, soft kiss that made her whole body tingle. He broke the kiss quickly, but his lips hovered millimeters from hers. "That the fey are not incapable of love after all," he whispered. "Or, at least, that this one isn't."

Cathy's heart clenched, and she desperately wanted to pull away from him. Somehow, she just couldn't seem to do it. Her mouth went dry, and her pulse throbbed in her throat. His lips were so close, and they felt so good on hers. When he kissed her, it was almost possible to believe his impossible claim.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Seamus kissed her again. Rational thought fled and she lost herself in the sensual pleasure of his lips.

It seemed as though fifteen minutes had passed when Seamus finally came up for air. Cathy's heart pounded fitfully, and she wasn't sure but she thought she might actually be shaking.

"Do you believe in my feelings for you?" Seamus asked. "Or do you think this is some kind of phooka trick?"

His face looked open and vulnerable as he awaited her reply. Without consciously deciding to do so, Cathy reached out and ran her fingers down the side of his face. His eyes closed in pleasure and she felt his skin shiver under her touch. "It's so hard for me to believe," she said, and felt him flinch. Guilt stabbed through her. "I'm trying, Seamus. There's just a heavy wall of resistance I have to break through. Finvarra—"

Seamus's eyes snapped open, and the look in them was fierce and furious. "I am *not* Finvarra! Why must I continue to pay for his sins?"

"I'm sorry, Seamus. You're right, it's not fair. But he bruised my psyche, and I can't just force myself to recover at will."

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. "So I have no chance with you at all." His voice came out flat, and it was hard to convince herself that she was not seeing a man in pain.

"I didn't say that," she told him. "I've come a long way, you know." She pressed her hand against his chest and felt the steady beat of his heart. There was no denying how Seamus made her feel. If only she could put to rest the fear that resided stubbornly in her heart!

"I wish you'd take that last step. I wish you'd trust me." He rubbed a hand over his eyes, looking tired.

"I *do* trust you, Seamus," she said. "Really I do."
"Just not with your heart."

As she looked into his earnest, reproachful face, realization stabbed through her. Who the hell did she think she was kidding? All right, so maybe some small part of her was still afraid that Seamus would hurt her, would turn out to be just as fey and unfeeling as Finvarra. But however that part might scream and shout warnings, there was a much larger part that had somewhere within the traumas of the last ten days finally seen what had been in front of her eyes for who knows how long.

Cathy smiled and snuggled close to him once more, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I guess, I'm going to have to learn to trust you with my heart. Because, you see, I've already given it to you."

Her smile broadened to see the look of mingled relief and surprise on his face. Then, she kissed him, and she thought perhaps she had taken a running start down the road that would lead to trust.

Hunter had insisted Kiera get some sleep before starting the return journey. She'd protested, telling him she'd been warned against eating or drinking while in Faerie. She was desperately thirsty and eager to get home. Although Finvarra had stripped his immortality, Hunter felt confident in his ability to detect enchantments and demanded some pure water for himself and for her. She had gratefully drunk her fill, then fallen asleep on the couch, her head pillowed in his lap.

Hunter couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. He ran his fingers gently through her tangle of red curls, listening to the soothing rhythm of her breaths, looking at those sweetly parted lips he so loved to kiss. She slept so peacefully on his lap, as though she felt utterly safe in his presence. He was confident that she held no lingering doubts about his motives, and that thought filled him with warmth and joy.

Although he heard the door crack open behind him, heard the near-silent footsteps approaching, Hunter couldn't take his eyes off Kiera's dear, beautiful face.

"You seem genuinely fond of her," Finvarra said, keeping his voice low enough not to wake her.

Hunter nodded but still didn't look at the High King. "I think the word is 'love.' It wasn't something I'd ever expected to feel. But now that I feel it, I can't imagine how my life ever felt complete before."

Finvarra leaned forward, resting his forearms on the back of the sofa and regarding his daughter's sleeping frame with undisguised curiosity. "I've always wondered about love," he said. "The feeling appears to be more valuable to mortals than anything but life itself, and yet we fey manage to get along just fine without it. I think perhaps it is a protective mechanism, that with immortality comes the inability to love. It creates such . . . volatility in the mortal race. Such passion, such commitment, such pretensions to permanence. And yet it truly is nothing more than an illusion. One that an immortal cannot abide."

"I loved her before you took my immortality," Hunter reminded him. "And the phooka loves her mother."

Finvarra raised both golden eyebrows. "Oh? I had heard

no rumor to that effect."

"If you saw them together, you wouldn't need to rely on rumors. So I don't think it's impossible for the fey to love."

Finvarra shrugged as though the issue were hardly important. "Perhaps you are right. But it is at the least very rare." He gave Hunter a pointed look, daring him to argue, but Hunter couldn't help agreeing with him. Finvarra nodded thoughtfully. "From what I have seen of love, it is capable of causing both great joy and great sorrow."

"Yes. Kiera and I have already experienced both extremes."

"Although she will not accept my offer of immortality, she is still my daughter." Finvarra's eyes turned cold and hard, and Hunter found himself suddenly unable to look away. "See to it that from this day forward, she experiences nothing but the joys of love. You are alive only by my sufferance, and should you cause my child pain, you will live only a short while to regret it. Are we understood?"

Hunter was finally able to blink. An electric shiver ran down his spine, a shiver that suggested magic filled the air. Finvarra's threat went above the merely verbal, and Hunter would be bound by his answer. He took a deep breath and answered carefully. "I can't promise I will never cause her pain. Love is not perfect. *I* am not perfect. But I will do everything in my power to make her happy. Will that suffice?"

Finvarra cocked his head and regarded Hunter with an intense scrutiny that seemed to delve into his very soul. Then the High King's lips twitched into a faint smile. "I think it will do."

He started to rise, but Hunter called him back. "I have a

favor to ask of you,” he said when Finvarra inquired.

“A favor? I believe I’ve granted you quite a number of favors already. Perhaps you should endeavor to be satisfied with what you have.”

Hunter ignored the High King’s quelling look. “You have ordered me to make your daughter happy. I will have much more luck doing so if I’m alive.”

Finvarra held his hands out to his sides in innocence. “You seem to be alive and well. Or is that an illusion of some kind?”

The mockery in Finvarra’s voice grated on Hunter’s nerves, but he swallowed any hint of protest. “The Queen will want her revenge against me, when she is corporeal once more.”

“If you could convince your lady love to remain in Faerie with you, I could keep you both safe with ease.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen. However, you could claim to have executed me as you originally planned.”

The look on Finvarra’s face was distinctly dangerous. “You suggest I lie? Do you know nothing about the practices of the Seelie Court?”

Actually, he did. Although he suspected the Seelie fey were as capable of lying as any other living creature, they prided themselves on never resorting to the outright lie. When pressed, they preferred to deceive by careful wording or omission.

“You took my immortality,” Hunter reminded the High King. “I am now a mortal man, doomed to die. It seems you might be able to claim my slow execution without it being an outright lie.”

Finvarra thought about that a moment, then nodded. “Very

well, then. I shall send word to the Queen that I have dealt harshly with her erstwhile son. I might suggest, however, that you and Kiera take up residence somewhere rather farther away from Logan Circle. It is the only connection between the mortal world and Faerie in all of the Americas, and thus sees far more immortal traffic. If one of the Queen’s creatures should accidentally catch sight of you, no illusion in the world will save you.”

Finvarra circled the couch until he was standing in front of them, looking down at Kiera’s face as Hunter had been doing for so long. The High King bent and laid the back of his hand very softly against Kiera’s cheek. She did not stir at the touch, nor at the faint tingle of magic in the air. Hunter looked at Finvarra suspiciously. “What did you do?” he asked.

Finvarra smiled. “I merely gave her my blessing. Something her mother would never allow me to do once she’d met me with unclouded mind.”

Hunter had no response, and returned his gaze to Kiera’s face as Finvarra quietly left the room. When the door snicked shut, Kiera’s eyelashes fluttered and she murmured sleepily. Hunter’s heart ached with love. Even knowing he should let her sleep longer, he couldn’t resist bending to touch his lips to hers. She returned the kiss hungrily, wrapping her arms around his neck.

When the kiss finally ended, they were both breathless, and it was all Hunter could do not to strip off her clothes and take her right there in her father’s reception room. She smiled, her eyes shining with joy. “Enough napping,” she said. “It’s time to go home.” She wriggled against him, sending his pulse soaring, before sitting up. “Much as I love your lap, I’d rather

sleep in a real bed.” She yawned and stretched. Her cheeks still looked pale from exhaustion, her expression somewhat pinched, but at least she didn’t look ready to collapse in the first gust of wind.

Hunter drew her to her feet and gathered her into a hug, holding her tight so she could feel the inevitable effect she had on him. “When I get you to a real bed, sweetheart, I plan on making sure sleep is the *last* thing on your mind.”

Laughing, she extricated herself from his arms. She grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the door so hard he almost fell.

“Well,” she said, “if that’s the case, then you’d better hurry up!”

Hunter didn’t have to be told twice.

The End