

## CHAPTER THREE

Let me tell you: when Millicent Merriweather tells you to do something, it's pretty much best to do it. That she was nearly eighty-six years old and looked like your prototypical sweet little old lady--that is, if that little old lady had wildly curly white hair and dressed like she'd been caught in a tornado in the wardrobe room of the TARDIS--wasn't the point. The senior Warder of Seattle, on whom Christopher's training and my introduction to the world of the weird depended, packed a lifetime's worth of magic. She also packed her shotgun, a lavishly tended firearm she'd dubbed Butch, and she didn't scruple to use it on anything that pissed her off.

Right then and there, I was about ready to use it myself.

Scowling, I let Millie barge past me to take charge of Christopher and Jude's efforts to get Elessir out of the truck, and focused instead upon the female standing before my door. Her head jerked up sharply as she realized what the others were

doing; that was, I supposed, as good an excuse for an opening volley as any. "Melisanda, right?" I said, not caring that I sounded curt, and jerked a thumb back over my shoulder. "I assume from your reaction that you're about to tell me you didn't have anything to do with that?"

"By the moon and stars and the Oak of the World, I swear I did not," Melisanda said, her eyes round, her brows climbing almost to the line of her shining hair. Okay, granted, the sample set of Sidhe I'd met to date was small and so I wasn't exactly in a position to judge--but she looked genuinely shocked. Affronted as well, I saw, as her expression immediately then closed off into a mask of stony resolve. "I do not know what business has brought that Unseelie to your abode, Kendeshel ana'Kirlath, but I have not come because of him. I have come because of you."

Kendeshel was the name my mother had given me; ana'Kirlath was her surname, which as far as I knew meant 'of House Kirlath'. No one had ever called me either of these to my face, though, and it rattled me to hear Melisanda do it now. "My name is Kendis Thompson," I snapped as I edged past her to open the front door for the others. "And whatever you're here for, talk fast, because we're really kind of busy here."

Millicent slammed the door of the truck and then came stomping back, clearing the way for Christopher and Jude behind her, bearing Elessir's deadweight form. Power scraped along my

skin as they passed, nothing strong enough for me to see, yet I sucked in a breath at the distinct sense that the Warders were forcibly smothering Elessir in all the magic they could muster. Melisanda stepped quickly aside to let them pass, her nose crinkled in distaste, as if she was sure the Unseelie's sheer proximity would somehow contaminate her. "Perhaps now is not the best of times for my purpose," she began.

I had little data on this Seelie, but I did know she was a warrior, with God only knew how many centuries' skill in swordplay at her command. So it would have been less than wise to get physically in her face. "Oh hell no, you spill it right here and right now," I ordered instead, and fought off the fantasy of pushing her up against the side of the house, with hands or with magic, I didn't care which. "You don't get to show up here out of the blue and wander right off again, not after you helped my scumbag uncle try to kill me!"

"Tarrant and I took word of Malandor's treachery to the Queen--"

"And that's the only reason I'm not calling the cops on you, or better yet having Millie blow your head off." Which was against the Pact between the Warders and the Sidhe, of course. Any act of violence could shatter the wary peace between human and fey in a Warded city. But right then I didn't care, and if anything, my mother's brother and his two lieutenants had bloody well started it. "Talk."

Some of the disdain with which she'd regarded Elessir spilled over onto me now as Melisanda studied me. For a moment I thought she might call me on the bluff of my ire; then, stiffly, she inclined her head. "I have come at the behest of Her Majesty Amelialoren," she told me. "The Queen of Light and Morning commands me first to seek your pardon for the offenses I committed against you and the young Warder."

As apologies went it wasn't much, especially given how she delivered it in a tone that suggested she'd swallowed the sword I didn't see her carrying in a last-ditch attempt to avoid delivering it. "How nice," I said. I tried not to sneer. Much.

"Secondly, I bring word that with the passing of Malandor a'Kirlath, the leadership of the House stands vacant. This has caused us..." Melisanda hesitated, and for the first time I saw one of the Sidhe ill at ease as she finished, "Consternation."

"And I need to give a damn about this why, exactly?"

Melisanda's discomfort only increased at this. "Because after fortnights of searching," she said, "we have found but a single heir to the House bloodline. You."

I blinked, gaped, and then growled, "Okay, that's it!" Warrior or no, I seized the other female's shoulder and pushed her away from my door--or tried to, anyway, for she caught my wrist and blocked my lunge at her with an unnerving lack of effort. That should have made me back off, but the aggravation of my and Christopher's interrupted date was nothing compared to

the fury that welled up in me, a fury I didn't even realize I'd been carrying around in me for the last two months until it exploded forth. "I don't know what bullshit you're trying to pull, but I want no part of it. You are not welcome in my home, or near it. Leave. Now."

My second unwelcome interloper of the evening didn't retreat, not yet. She simply stared at me for a long moment, her hauteur still running high, and then threw a tight nod towards the house. "You accept the moneys of the House, and yet one of the House's own is turned away while an Unseelie is sheltered within? What manner of answer is this for the Queen?"

"Not that it's any of your goddamn business, but I am not in fact taking anything past what was my mother's alone. You all tried to kill me, and I don't want your fucking money. Now did you miss the part where I said leave?"

Then and only then did Melisanda step back from me, and something I couldn't recognize at first in the grip of my anger flickered across her eyes. When I caught on, though, I stood down too. Respect, I thought. That was respect I saw in the Sidhe's face, and maybe even a little regret. "Her Majesty must at least know why you are harboring an Unseelie renegade," she pressed. "Will you at least permit me that, and an opportunity to fulfill the Queen's command and make my amends to you and the Warders?"

When my fey blood had arisen, both of the Courts of the

Sidhe had been all over it. The Unseelie Queen, Luciriel, had sent Elessir to convey an invitation to join her Court's ranks, a plan thwarted in no small part by the fact that the bard had turned against her on the strength of my uncle's promises. That hadn't stopped her though from reiterating the message herself, or trying to scramble my brains with the seductive ability the Sidhe called thralling, right in front of Millicent and Christopher. The Seelie, by contrast, had been subtler. No one had outright asked me to join Amelialoren's Court, but the Queen had gone out of her way to restore the damage that Malandor and his lackeys had done to my life. Truth be told, if I'd had the slightest bit of interest in signing up for a monarchy, Amelialoren struck me as the better option. She'd proved her goodwill, and hadn't tried to thrall me once.

Nonetheless I balked at Melisanda's evident belief that I owed the Seelie anything, especially the subset of them who were my closest kin. They, after all, had been the ones who'd had it in for my mother taking a human as her husband.

"Look, all I know is that Elessir fell out of a portal, and he's hurt and sick and we can't damn well take him to a hospital," I said, scowling anew. I wanted to get snarkier, but held back only for the sudden vivid memory of Amelialoren's tourmaline eyes, and the timeless, ageless force of her power. "Go tell her that, if you want. Either way, just go. If you're serious about making amends, you can start by doing that, and

respecting my wishes."

For a single moment longer we stared at one another; finally, Melisanda straightened, gave me one last nod, and turned to go. "As you wish, my lady. I shall contact you again at a more suitable time."

"Whatever. Just beat it. I am not up for dealing with you."

She left. Which when it came down to it was not much of an improvement, because my night wasn't over yet. I forced myself to avoid watching Melisanda take her leave, and focused instead upon drawing a deep cleansing breath into my lungs and reaching, as Millicent had taught me, for the Wards that permeated the walls of my house. They were Christopher's magic, laced through with more than a little of my own, and they felt like home to me as nothing short of the circle of Christopher's arms could do. The humming resonance of them washed over me, and infused me with a desperately needed and profoundly welcome calm.

Thusly braced, I headed inside to see what the others had done with Elessir a'Natharion. He was a far bigger problem than Melisanda. And he would not, I could not help but think, be dismissed as easily.

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Everyone else was in the living room, with the addition of my housemate Carson, and minus the ailing Unseelie who'd been

the cause of the general upheaval. My cat Fortissimo galloped up to me as soon as I came in and began to headbutt me furiously in the shins, agitated by all the activity. For the cat alone I had to stop dead three steps from the door, but for the humans in the room I demanded, "So where is he?"

"Your room, kiddo," Carson rumbled, with a wave of his brawny hand off down my hallway. "Sorry, but your bed was fastest, and Jake's checking him out. We came over from our part of the house when we heard the lot of you come in."

Heat crept through my cheeks at the thought of the singer in my very own bed. Nobody noticed, one of the perks of being the darkest-skinned person in the group, and I fought off the blush anyway with the grudging acknowledgement that if we couldn't get Elessir to a hospital, Carson's partner Jake, a retired EMT, was the next best thing. "Good," I said with real relief.

Carson gave me a long steady look, and he wasn't the only one. Christopher, Millicent, and Jude all pinned me with gazes in various shades of expectant. No surprise, that, not after what had just transpired. I sighed, straightened from thoroughly scratching Fortissimo's ears, and tossed my shoulder bag onto the nearest end of my couch. "And I suppose now is the time for cluing the rest of you in on how the night's blown up?"

"Christopher's already done that," Millicent said. She sat sprawled in the middle of the couch, nursing a frosted bottle of

one of the local microbrews, which she waved at me imperiously. "But you can tell us what that Sidhe girlie had to say."

Without my even asking, Carson ducked into the kitchen and back out again, bringing me a bottle of the same apricot-flavored brew I had stashed in my refrigerator. I accepted it willingly, and then went straight to Christopher. The younger Warder had claimed a stool out of the kitchen and brought it into the living room, leaving the couch to the women, but he stood and embraced me as soon as I was within reach. "Two of 'em in one night," he said hoarsely. "I don't like it, Kenna."

"You and me both," I murmured with feeling, taking one long pull off the bottle my housemate had handed me before pulling Christopher close. In his arms, I realized at last that I was shaking.

So did Christopher. Taking my chin in his hand and drawing it up to see my eyes, he demanded, "Did she hurt you, lass? Did she threaten you?"

I let out a choked little laugh. "No, bizarrely enough. She claimed Queen Amelialoren sent her to apologize." For the rest, more alcohol was definitely required. I belted back a second swallow, leaned against Christopher's chest, and added, "I think she just offered me a job. As, uh, leader of House Kirlath."

"What!" All four of the others started, but the yelp of surprise was from Jude, who sat perched on the nearest arm of the couch and watched me with round, astonished eyes. "You are

totally shitting me, chica! They want to make you a faerie princess now?"

Carson spluttered, shook his head in wonderment, and then strode off towards the tiny, open hallway that led to his and Jake's half of the house. "Sorry, kid, I'm having a hard time imagining having to call you Your Worship. This calls for something stronger than that frothy stuff you drink. Be right back."

Dunking what was left of the night into a nice tall homemade margarita sounded utterly rapturous, but I couldn't let myself succumb, not yet. Turning to Millie, without breaking contact with Christopher, I went on to them both, "I sent her packing, but she seemed serious about making amends, to me, to you, and Christopher. Should I let her?"

Millicent gave me one of her lighter scowls, the kind that signaled her being merely deep in thought rather than about to unleash the full force of her Texas-bred temper. "She's Seelie," the old woman said, "which says something at least about the likelihood of her meaning what she says."

"You told her no? About leading the House?" Christopher's voice was casual, but his grip on my shoulder was anything but.

"Well of course I did," I replied, looking up into his face. His tension hadn't eased much, and, hoping to smooth it away, I reached up to toy with the thick comma of hair that curled down practically to his cheek. He felt warm and alive.

The link of magic between us hummed, and that it could be there even after the shocks of the evening soothed me more than anything else could have done, even the apricot beer. "Do I look like a faerie princess to you? What in God's name would I know about leading anything?"

"It's true," Carson deadpanned as he came back into the room, armed with a bottle of his and Jake's best sake. "She can barely lead her cat."

"Never could get her to lead a meeting at work," Jude agreed, and Carson winked at her.

"You two? So not helping," I said. The prospect of decent sake was tempting, but I already had a hand full of a bottle and an arm full of Christopher, and I didn't really want to move. Moving meant thinking of something else, such as the Sidhe who'd been carried off to my bed--the very last place I wanted to envision him being.

Millicent, naturally, kept us all on the hook. "Speaking of the job this girlie doesn't have anymore," she said, looking past me down the hall to the approaching Jake, "how's the boy who took it from her?"

Jake looked worn and worried, much as he'd once done after hard ambulance runs when he'd worked for the Harborview Medical Center. With the smooth ease of a long relationship, Carson intercepted him and handed him a cup of the sake; the speed with which Jake knocked it back made my worry spike all over again,

for it took much to make my other housemate look so gravely concerned.

"Well?" Millicent barked.

"From the look of him," Jake reported, his voice tight with affronted disgust, "he's been tortured. By whom or for what purpose, I couldn't tell you. But he's been whipped and he has other wounds as well, some infected, and he's probably feverish from that. He's weak and dehydrated. I got antibiotics and water into him, which should help some of this, but..." He paused, frowned, and then finished, "I can't tell these things well from Sidhe, but he's a mage like you, yes, Ken-chan?"

"Yes," I affirmed, my voice small. Jake was no more happy with the Unseelie's participation in my uncle's plot than the rest of us had been, but Jake was also myobu, and arguably the best natured of the lot of us. In the face of his reaction to Elessir's state, I couldn't hold onto my own irritation very well at all.

"Then you or one of the Warders should come and look him over, because whatever power he had is gone. Or taken."