

CHAPTER FOUR

"Taken?" Millicent leapt on that word with all the vigor of Fortissimo going after the brownies that lurked in all the hidden corners of my house, and with a great deal more sober intent than the cat. "What the hell do you mean, taken?"

"You'd best come have a look, Millie-san."

The nickname Jake had for the senior Warder was half endearment and half honorific; right then, though, he addressed her in so abstracted a tone that it was obvious his mind was entirely elsewhere. I shot a look at Christopher, who frowned back at me, just as much in the dark as I was. Millicent didn't bother to enlighten us, or answer Jake either. She simply sprung off the couch with energy that belied her age, and stalked down the corridor to my room. Christopher and I had no choice but to follow her. I handed what was left of my beer to Carson, and saw him sigh and turn to offer the sake to Jude as I went.

Millie didn't bother to stop at the door to my bedroom. She

did, however, avoid going too close to our surprise guest. Five steps in from my door, she stopped dead and simply scowled at the limp shape sprawled there on my bed, underneath my favorite quilt. The fire pattern looked wrong somehow over Elessir, too strong against his ashen skin, as if the vivid shades of yellow and orange and red might at any moment consume him. And just after that struck me, I realized something else.

Though Christopher's magical signature was far stronger for me thanks to the link between us, he and Millicent were always a background buzz in my senses, one that I could feel even without concentrating. It had been the same so far for every Sidhe I'd met, or at least, the ones who were practicing mages--Elessir, my uncle, both of the Queens of the Courts.

But I couldn't feel a thing off of Elessir now.

I should have done. He'd damn near flattened me more than once with his power, via the thrall of his voice as well as the sheer raw force he'd been able to throw around during a thunderstorm. In fact--though it troubled me deeply to remember it now--a part of me had drunk in that power of his like the headiest of wines. Now, though, I picked up no resonance from him, no more than I'd have gotten from Carson or Jude. The lack of it stood out in stark contrast to the hum I felt from the Warders, and from the quieter current of energy born from the Wards upon the house.

"You feel it, don't you, girlie?" Millicent said to me

softly as I came up beside her. "That hollowness off of him?"

"Yeah," I murmured. "What's the matter with him, Millie? Is it because he's sick?"

"That can't be helping, but my guess is, boy's been drained." Millicent's scowl deepened. "Probably by his Queen, given how she hared off with him last time we saw them."

"His Queen, or mages under her command. There are those that could do it," Christopher said, his tone dark enough that it sent disquiet shivering through me; I didn't want at all to ask how he had that knowledge. Not that it was much of a stretch to guess, since I did know that an Unseelie mage had come to St. John's and killed his mother before his eyes.

The sound of our voices must have reached Elessir on some level, for he stirred beneath my quilt, grimacing, and a faint little growl of panic escaped him. All three of us watching him stiffened in expectation, yet there was nothing to protect against, no wild stirring of magic. After what Christopher had said, the absence of such magic was no reassurance. Neither was the way the Unseelie began to thrash where he lay, pushing blindly at the quilt as if he could not stand its weight.

"You calmed him down before, Kenna," Christopher said with gruff reluctance.

I had, and the hint that I should try it again was plain, though I was no more eager to play security blanket to a delirious Sidhe than I had been the first time. Millicent shot

me a look, though. "Well, calm him down then, girlie," she ordered, clearly not about to let me off easy. "We have to know what happened to the boy, so he either needs to talk or he needs to rest."

Why we weren't just bailing right then and letting him make with the resting was beyond me--or at least, the petty part of me that would just as soon have tossed Elessir right back out the way we'd brought him. But, see previous commentary re: doing what Millicent Merriweather tells you to do. With my lower lip tucked beneath my teeth, I crept forward on careful feet, not at all liking how I had to approach my own bed as if it might explode at any moment. "Elessir," I murmured, to let him know I was on the way.

He thrashed again, though this time his eyes snapped open, unfocused and wild. Then he rolled towards me, first burying his face in the pillow beneath his head and then looking back up again, mumbling something in liquid words I could not recognize. I didn't need to know their meanings to guess what I was hearing, though: the tongue of Faerie. Only once had I ever heard it, and then only in the grip of a dream. To hear it while I was wide awake, even in fractured, rambling syllables, sent a chill coursing along my skin.

Gingerly I eased down onto the edge of my bed. "I don't know what you're saying," I said. "Can you talk to me in English?"

One unsteady hand fumbled towards me and came to rest against my knee, just the barest of contacts, but enough to let me feel the brush of his fingers. Elessir stared for a long moment at his own hand, and then with effort, returned his gaze to me. "Real?" he mumbled. "You're real?"

"I'm real," I promised. "And you're safe. It's okay." He started trembling again at that, trying to rise, and I had to lean forward and press him back down to the pillow. "Take it easy. Can you tell me what happened to you?"

He didn't precisely flinch, but his mouth pulled tight nonetheless while a muscle twitched in his cheek. "Punished," came his hoarse little mutter. "I-I was punished."

I'd been expecting that, but it disturbed me to hear it nevertheless. "Is that why I don't feel your magic?" I asked. On impulse I took his hand and extended my power to it; despite that contact, I still got nothing from him except the warmth and substance of his grasp, and even that was frailer than it should have been, for his fingers shook. "You don't feel the same way you did before. You feel..." I hesitated, but could only come up with one word. "You feel wrong."

Elessir began to giggle at that, surprising me. His head lolled back along the pillow, turning his face toward the ceiling, and he mumbled, "'Course Ah do, darlin', Ah'm Unseelie!" Then he trailed off into slurred singing that should have sounded far fiercer than it did, if the few words I caught

were any sign. "Lookin' for trouble... came to the right place..."

Just beside me, Millicent snorted; she apparently recognized the song. "Focus, boy," she said, harsher-voiced than I was, though after two months of close acquaintance I was able to spot the concern lurking behind her gruffness, and the slightly liquid look to her bright black eyes; she gave more of a damn than she was letting on. "Can you tell us how you got to us? How'd you escape?"

Once she'd said that, of course, it clicked for me. Elessir had a ragged, refugee sort of air about him, even aside from the fever. "What do we need to do to help you?" I added. He still had hold of my hand, I realized. He was clutching at it like a lifeline, or for all I knew, some mystic talisman that Sidhe who'd actually been raised to know a damn thing about their heritage might have found sacred.

"Need," Elessir echoed, a dazed sigh of a word. If he'd heard Millicent speak at all, he gave absolutely no sign of it; his attention was riveted upon my hand in his, with a sudden piercing intensity that should have been beyond someone as ill as he seemed. "I... I need..."

Then he arched along the bed, clapping his other hand onto mine. I started and cried out, but couldn't pull away from him in time to stop the surge of something that welled out from him into me. It felt like Sidhe power and yet not; it was far colder

than what I'd known to be Elessir's normal frost-cool magic, and it was something else as well. Hungry. For an instant, I felt it try to sink teeth of ice into my blood and bone, as if I were the very thing it needed to feed upon.

"Jesus God Almighty!" That was from Millicent, and Christopher burst out with his own oath even as he and Millie both seized me from behind, pulling me up and back off the bed. My contact with Elessir broke, but Christopher hauled me several steps away from the bed before we both stopped, aghast, to stare at the ailing bard.

He writhed where he lay, but now a sheen of sickly light roiled along his chest--no, not along, I saw then, from somewhere within it. It swirled up and out of him into the indistinct form of a slender head and shoulders, with tendrils of fainter illumination, like wafting smoke, forming the impression of hair. Then the shape whipped around, seeking me, and I caught sight of a skeletal face. Its mouth opened in a soundless gape; I heard nothing, but icy prickles of power spread all along my arms, and I was abruptly certain that the face was hissing in agitation.

"Get her out of here!" Millicent commanded. But Christopher was already moving, seizing me again in a determined grasp and bodily hauling me out the door of the bedroom--all but grabbing me right off my feet in his haste to get me gone. I had no arguments. Millie's magic rose with all the force of a Midwest

thunderstorm, lashing out for that ghostly shape clinging like a remora to the Unseelie, clearly on the attack.

Elessir's haggard features contorting in agony were the last thing I saw as Christopher and I hit the corridor, in sharp contrast to the shocked faces of Carson and Jake and Jude, all on their feet and watching us bolt out of the bedroom.

I had no idea what to tell them.

I had no idea what we'd brought into my house.

* * *

We waited twenty minutes for Millicent to emerge. Christopher and Jake and I, the ones capable of registering the cloud of the old Warder woman's power filling the house, couldn't sit still for nervousness--and Christopher in particular kept glancing back down the hall, poised to run back the way we'd come at the slightest buckling of Millie's magic, or any call for aid. Lacking anything else to do, he stalked around the outer walls of my living room and kitchen, adding a new layer of energy to the Wards that already protected the house.

"Layin' down backup defenses," he told me when I asked. "If that thing gets past Millie, I can at least help her keep it from getting out of the house."

Which didn't leave the rest of us anything to do but worry.

On some feline level known only to him, Fortissimo seemed just as aware of all the bipeds of the power and the tension in the air, and thankfully he stayed out from under everyone's feet. Less reassuring was how he parked himself in the hall, staring straight at my bedroom and growling lowly, his orange-striped fur puffed up to twice his normal size. We all tried to ignore the cat along with whatever struggle Millicent was waging. If nothing else, in that mood, Fort was likely to draw blood if any of us went near him.

Carson, with Jake backing him up, pulled me aside and asked what the hell was going on in my bedroom; they both paled as I filled them in, and Jake breathed an oath in Japanese, something I'd never heard him do. "I sensed something in the Unseelie when I examined him," he admitted. "But I couldn't tell if it was his own nature, or something else."

"Maybe it liked me better because I'm part Sidhe myself," I said, not liking that thought at all.

Nor did the others. Christopher stepped back over to me, wrapped his arms around me, and kissed the top of my head. "Whatever it is, lass," he rasped into my hair, "it'll have to come through me to get at you."

"Ditto," Jude said, before she gave a self-deprecating little laugh. "Listen to me, like the human chick's got clue one about what's going on here. Ken, is there anything the rest of us should do?"

"You don't have to stay, babe." It wasn't much of an answer, and I didn't really want her to leave. I turned from Christopher to go to her, my best friend, who'd already interrupted her night for me. And then some. Friends help you move, but friends like Jude help you move delirious Unseelie bard-mages who apparently had weird magical things embedded in--

I cut that thought off before it could go any further, offered Jude a lopsided smile, and took her hands in mine. "You've already helped out a lot tonight," I went on. "But if the rest of the night's going to be long and weird, you might not want to be here."

"Oh, bullshit," Jude said, squeezing my fingers. "Of course I want to be here." Then her face fell. "But I don't have a change of clothes or my toothbrush or anything here. Are you going to be okay if I go home?"

"We've got her back," said Carson.

"We always do," Jake added, with a certain growling note to his voice that made me suspect that if he were in his kitsune form, his tail would be lashing right along with Fort's.

As for Christopher, he came up behind me to lay a hand on my shoulder as he told Jude, "We'll not be leavin' until we're sure it's safe, Millie and I. Don't worry."

Just as he was speaking, though, a ragged scream, deep enough that it had to be Elessir, poured out of my room. In the same instant Millicent bellowed, "Boy, I need you! Get it!"

I had no time to react before Christopher whirled, his Warder power roaring into greater life, spreading out to fill the room even as it braced itself upon the earth beneath the house. The shape I'd seen on Elessir's chest careened down the hall, sending Fortissimo scrambling out of its path with a terrified snarl; behind it came Millie, her face gone gray and streaked with sweat, yet her magic was unabated. It rolled out ahead of her, meeting and merging with Christopher's like two fires forming a single, greater blaze. These were firebreaks, though, not wildfires, and my lungs suddenly fought to breathe as the newly formed trap strove to box the fleeing luminescent shape in.

Jake pushed Carson behind him, and never mind that his partner was significantly larger than he was. Once he'd done that, Jake's human form melted away in a blur of color and light, until he stood before the other man in fox shape. He was huge for a fox, almost wolf-sized, and he stood with white hackles raised and white teeth bared, snarling.

Christopher covered me, both physically and magically. Unlike Carson, though, I was equipped to help. I seized Christopher's hand and threw him a current of my own young magic, bolstered not only by the blood-born link between us, but also by the simple fact that I was a resident of Seattle. As far as the Warder magic was concerned, I was a sublimely powerful source of strength.

The thing cut a wild swath through my living room, shattering the blown-glass vase atop one of my stereo speakers, and the picture of my Aunt Aggie and me on the wall. The steadfast wall of Christopher's power sent it veering off on another tangent. Jake's shining-furred form was enough of a threat to make it veer again--straight to Jude. Millicent dove at her, but not in time. The smoky, glowing shape reached my friend first. It caught her directly between the eyes, and immediately vanished on impact.

As I let out a shriek, as both the Warders dove to her side, Jude's eyes went round. She lifted a hand to her head.

And then, without warning or a single word, she collapsed.