

CHAPTER TWO

"Jesus t'underin' Christ," Christopher erupted, "we're missin' the show for him?"

We'd wound up on either side of the unconscious Sidhe, looking at each other in mutual consternation, and I scowled down at the figure at our feet. Elessir had much to answer for, teaming up as he'd done with my uncle and his lackeys and helping them kidnap Christopher and me. Tonight, though, was giving me new offenses to add to his list--not only my interrupted date, but also the disappointment brimming underneath Christopher's sire. He was tamping it down, but I'd spotted the brief liquid glimmer in his eyes nonetheless. For making Christopher miss music from fellow Newfoundlanders, I wanted to kick the Unseelie singer right in the ribs.

Problem was, he looked like somebody had beaten me to it.

All at once I remembered what else Elessir had done, when Malandor had turned on him and thrown him in to be sacrificed to

the demon Azganaroth along with Christopher and me. Though he'd taken a literal knife in the back along with the figurative, Elessir had thrown his lot in with us and helped us break out of the chains that had kept us bound within a circle of power. Not long after the dust had settled, his angry Queen had caught up with him and hauled him back to Faerie, ready to unleash upon him whatever punishment she'd find warranted for conspiring against her with members of the Seelie Court.

I hadn't said anything to stop Luciriel then; I hadn't known what to say. The guilt of that hadn't quite left me, and it rose up now, fighting with the guilt I had from the unhappy look on Christopher's face. From all the way back to the Amphitheater I could hear the band gearing up into a still livelier number, full of fiery fiddle playing that even from a distance made me want to moan with admiration and envy. Christopher and I both glanced back the way we'd come. "I'll stay," I blurted. "I'll wait for Millie if you want to go back."

He clearly did. Longing was etched in every line of Christopher's face, needing no words to be expressed. But with a palpable effort he hauled his gaze back to me, offering me a half-hearted smile. "It wouldn't be the same without you, and Security prob'ly won't let me back in," he said. Then his gaze dropped back down to the Unseelie, and even that crooked wisp of a smile faded. "And even if they would, this one's Warder business."

I blew out a breath, bobbed my head, and said, "Let's get him up."

For no good reason I could name, save for a fleeting thought that I was less physically intimidating than Christopher, I kneeled first. It wasn't exactly sound planning. Elessir was obviously ill--his glance up to me had been glazed with delirium, and lurid flushes of color heightened his otherwise haggard complexion, punctuation for the febrile heat I could feel radiating off his skin. I had only a couple months of magical training under my belt, but even I could guess that a delirious mage was a dangerous mage, and there was no telling how Elessir would react to us.

He'd recognized me, though. Thinking I could use that, I leaned down and tried to roll him over, as gently as I could. "Elessir," I said. "Wake up. It's Kendis. Come on."

Elessir convulsed at my touch, a wild thrashing of motion that more or less got him slumping in my arms. I grimaced and fought to catch my breath; he reeked. My senses had grown significantly keener over the last couple of months, and up close, I almost choked on the stench of sweat and blood and sickness. "W-what?" he stammered. "Where am--did I--"

"You're safe," I said, firmer now. "You're in Seattle." I paused and then grudgingly added, "Do you know who I am?"

His eyes, dulled to nearly black, focused on my face. "Miss Thompson," he said after a moment, his voice thin and small.

That name would do as well as any; I still wasn't feeling at all charitable enough to let him call me Kendis. "It's me," I told him. "Can you walk? Christopher and I can get you to a hospital."

"No!" Something that could only be panic flooded Elessir's face, and before I could stop him, he burrowed frantically against my chest, trying to cling to me, trying to hide. All that kept me from violently shoving him away were the tremors I could feel rattling through his frame and the broken syllables he muttered, slurring in and out of his affected drawl, turning his voice from honey to silver and back again. "Pl-please, darlin'... don't let 'em git me... the healers of the Queen of Air and Darkness heal only what she deems is wrong!"

Shit. I looked up at Christopher, whose expression was aghast as mine. But he mouthed 'phone' down at me nonetheless. I'd shoved my phone into a pocket as soon as I'd left the voice mail for Millie, and was eager to fish it out again, even one-handed, and thrust it at him so he could try the old Warder woman again. We could handle Elessir--I hoped--but she was going to have to know about this, even if it was liable to make her spit kittens.

What the hell had happened to him, anyway? Did I even want to know? As Christopher dialed I studied the singer, conscious of guilt and more concern than I wanted to admit. I hadn't laid eyes on another Sidhe since the demon incident, which had been

just fine with me. The Seelie Court under Queen Amelialoren's orders had left me to my own devices, and none of the Unseelie had shown their faces in Seattle either, not with two cranky Warders seeing to its protection. I'd been faring well enough, or so I'd told myself, with Millicent helping me start to get a handle on the magic my mother had passed down to me.

Yet, blessed though Millicent and Christopher were with their Warder talents, they were both human. And as much as I adored them both, something restless in my blood locked onto the sight of Elessir and whispered this one is like me. I didn't welcome the feeling. But I liked the terror in Elessir's eyes even less.

"Hush," I said then, cradling the Unseelie against me and smoothing tangled hair back from his face. "It's okay. I've got you. You're safe."

"Do you promise, Miss Thompson?"

I'd heard Elessir a'Natharion bewitch an entire bar, including me, with the strength of his singing. It disturbed me to hear that voice robbed of its power now, drained to something thin and hollow. He sounded like--no, I corrected myself before that thought could finish, not a child. Like a ghost, and a wary one at that, one unconvinced that I could call it back to life.

And one who even in the grip of fever could call for my vow, I noted. My skin prickled with disquiet. One of the first things I'd learned about my mother's people was that lying was

anathema to them, even the Unseelie; I didn't want to consider what it meant that Elessir could beg for my word now.

Once more I glanced up at Christopher. He'd gotten through to Millicent, it seemed, for as I met his eyes he was saying into the phone, "Aye, we'll get him to shelter. Come fast, Millie, we're needin' you." While he spoke he nodded at me, just once, with a curtness that belied the concern in his gaze.

Good, I thought in relief. He had my back.

"Do you promise?" Elessir repeated, dragging my attention back to him. Fright was laced through that hoarse demand, enough that I was dead sure I didn't want to know what had caused it, yet I couldn't help but wonder.

"I promise," I said nonetheless. Only then did the Sidhe subside, pressing his face against me, with a choked and shuddering breath that might as well have been a sob. I could do nothing but hold him, as awkwardly as if he were made of fractured glass, and murmur into his hair, "We'll keep you safe. I promise."

Now all I had to do was figure out how to make good on my word.

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In the end we had to call Jude as well as Millicent, since neither Christopher nor I had a vehicle, and nothing short of

the city in flames would induce Millie to get herself and her failing eyesight behind the wheel of her ancient car. Nor did I get an answer when I tried to call back to my place for my housemates Carson and Jake. Lucky for us, Jude was already downtown, even though she'd declined to join us at the concert; she'd already had a dinner date, with an old college friend in town for a conference. Pulling her away from that gave me yet another thing to guilt-trip over for the evening, but we had no other choice. Getting Elessir an ambulance wasn't an option.

Nor was moving him very far, for that matter. He was half-naked, feverish, and bleeding, and barely able to stay conscious, much less make it to his feet. Plus he kept shivering in the cool October air, but that at least we did something about--or rather, Christopher did, reaching into my bag to fetch the T-shirt we'd bought him at the concert swag table.

"That's yours," I protested.

Christopher didn't look my way as he crouched on Elessir's other side and shifted him away from me, making the room he needed to tug the slate-green shirt onto the Unseelie's slack form. "He'll stand out a bit less this way," he said. His voice was stoic, his motions a trifle too forceful, too controlled. I caught his hand and said his name, and he met my eyes at last.

"I'm sorry," I said lamely. I could hear the last few roaring bars of the band's main set finishing up from the Amphitheater, and a few moments after that, the crowd erupting

into an exultant three-syllable chant of the band's name, hungry for an encore. This time Christopher kept himself from looking in the show's direction, which gave me a full-on view of his unhappy face.

"They'll come back," he said.

"We'll see them," I answered, and that too was a promise.

Jude's truck pulled up then at the other end of the alley then, and I'd never been happier to see her leap out of it in all my life. She was dressed a little more upscale than I usually saw her; at any other time, I might have marveled at the sight of her decked out in a colorful print blouse, jewelry, and even a bit of makeup. Not tonight, though. Nor did she give me time to comment anyway, for the first words out of her mouth were a sharp outburst of Spanish. She bit those back hard, and as she hurried over to join us, she exclaimed instead, "What in God's name is he doing here?"

"Damned if I know," I said, grabbing hold of the ailing singer so I could begin to hoist him off the ground. Elessir was almost out cold again, and he lolled between Christopher and me, his head drooping, as we pulled him more or less upright. "We caught him falling through a portal, and he's out of his head."

Her brown eyes wide, Jude took this in, and then promptly whirled to go throw open the passenger door of her truck. "Right then. Where are we taking him?"

"My place. Millicent's meeting us."

It took doing to get Elessir into the truck. Though he was slimmer of frame he was almost as tall as Christopher, and he was just awake enough to feebly resist our efforts to carry him to where we needed him to go. Blank-eyed, without a trace of recognition, he struggled against Christopher's grasp in particular. Power rolled between them for an instant, and I couldn't tell from whom. Before it could coalesce into something more distinct, I tugged hard at Elessir's shoulders, breaking his contact with the Warder, and trying not to lurch as I bore his weight on my own.

"Elessir!" I ordered. "Remember what I said! You're safe!"

Frustration made my voice harsher than it probably should have been, but then again, it worked. Elessir blinked owlishly down at me, murmuring in confusion, "Miss Thompson...?"

I didn't want my voice to gentle, not when the Unseelie's arm had curled around my shoulders and Christopher's expression had darkened from stoic to thunderous. It gentled nevertheless. "Go on, get in, okay? Let us get you somewhere you can rest."

That last word made his brow furrow, as if the very concept were somehow alien to him. His mouth moved, nearly soundlessly. Christopher and Jude, with hearing no more sensitive than any other human's, most likely missed the way he breathed that single syllable, longingly, like a prayer. I caught it, however, and it made a sharp-edged sympathy rise up from somewhere within me to slice at my throat.

Elessir no longer resisted me, though; that was the important thing. He let me help him into Jude's truck and buckle him in--though I had to urge him once more to calm down, for the feel of the straps confining him at the chest and waist almost set him off all over again. At the sound of my voice he settled, lapsing at last into true unconsciousness. Me, I had no such luck, for it was with as much trepidation as relief that I closed the truck door on him and followed the others to the vehicle's other side.

Christopher was waiting for me, and he held the door open so I could get in first. That this put me behind Elessir didn't escape my notice, but I made a point of ignoring that. As Jude took her place at the wheel and got us going, I reached over to twine my fingers through Christopher's, just to let him know I hadn't forgotten he was there.

Every muscle in his hand was taut. As he wrapped his fingers round mine, they clutched with an almost painful strength, the first real sign of exactly how much disappointment he was trying to suppress. Then, with a sour glance at the inert form up front, he muttered to me, "All I'm sayin' is, this had damn well better be worth missin' 'Mari-Mac'."

That was all he said to me, all the way from downtown to Sand Point, and he stared broodingly out the truck window as Jude drove. Still, he kept his hand in mine. Surely a good sign, I asked myself, that he could accept that comfort? It wasn't,

after all, just about the music. It was about his having to miss a small taste of a home he could never see again, thanks to the constraints of Warder magic.

Elessir stayed slumped and silent right up until we reached my place, which should have been comfort of a kind, except for the part where none of us could pretend we weren't all excruciatingly aware of the elephant in the room--or, as it happened, in the truck. Just as conscious of Christopher's aggravation, Jude kept her mouth shut and her attention on her driving, though she shot frequent curious looks back at me as well as our unexpected companion. There were a great number of reasons Jude Lawrence was my best friend. Her ability to know when to talk and when to act ranked very, very high among them, and I was grateful for it. I didn't want to have to try to explain tonight's little bombshell more than once, if nothing else because I had no idea what to say, and it was going to be hard enough figuring out what to say to Millicent.

But when we pulled into the driveway of my house and I spotted the old Warder woman on the porch, even the beginnings of an explanation vanished completely out of my head--because Millie looked hopping mad. Nor was she alone. Standing beside her, her mouth drawn into a tight line of discontent that broadcast how much she would rather be anywhere else, was the second Sidhe I'd seen in as many months. Though she was unarmed she bore herself with a warrior's grace, and her sunlight-golden

hair and summer-green eyes, even from several paces away, were a shot in the arm against the growing autumnal bite of October. The only name I had for her was Melisanda--though as I clambered out of the truck in Jude and Christopher's wake, I thought of several more choice monikers I'd have liked to slap her with, not a one of which were repeatable in polite company. She, along with Elessir, had been in on the attempt to sacrifice Christopher and me to Azganaroth. Cold dread, laced through with angry frustration, swamped me at the sight of her. Two of my uncle's conspirators showing up out of nowhere in one night surely couldn't be coincidence.

Millie didn't have her shotgun leveled on her though, and before I could move two steps towards the house, the Lady Warder of Seattle came stomping forward to intercept me. "Leave the boy to us, girlie," she sourly advised. "You have a guest."

"I don't have anything to say to--"

"Let her talk then, because you're going to want to hear this. It's going to be rich."