



**SWALLOWING**

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**DARKNESS**

A Novel

## CHAPTER ONE

HOSPITALS ARE WHERE PEOPLE GO TO BE SAVED, BUT THE DOCTORS can only patch you up, put you back together. They can't undo the damage. They can't make it so you didn't wake up in the bad place, or change the truth to lies. The nice doctor and the nice woman from the SART, Sexual Assault Response Team, couldn't change that I had indeed been raped. The fact that I couldn't remember it, because my uncle had used a spell for his date-rape drug, didn't change the evidence—the evidence that they'd found in my body when they did the exam and took samples.

You would think being a real live faerie princess would make your life fairy-tale-like, but fairy tales only *end* well. While the story is going on, horrible things happen. Remember Rapunzel? Her prince got his eyes scratched out by the witch, which blinded him. At the end of the story, Rapunzel's tears magically restored his sight, but that was at the end of the story. Cinderella was little better than a slave. Snow White was actually nearly killed four different times by the evil queen. All anyone remembers is the poisoned apple, but don't forget the huntsman, or the enchanted girdle and the poisoned comb. Pick any fairy tale that's based on older stories, and the heroine of the piece has a miserable, dangerous, nightmarish time of it.

I am Princess Meredith NicEssus, next in line to a high throne

of faerie, and I'm in the middle of my story. The happy-ever-after ending, if it's coming at all, seems a very long way away tonight.

I was in a hospital bed, in a nice private room, in a very nice hospital. I was in the maternity ward, because I was pregnant, but not with my crazy uncle's baby. I had been pregnant before he stole me away. Pregnant with the children of men I loved. They'd risked everything to rescue me from Taranis. Now, I was safe. I had one of the greatest warriors that faerie had ever seen at my side: Doyle, once the Queen's Darkness, and now mine. He stood at the window, staring off into the night that was so ruined by the lights from the hospital parking lot that the blackness of his skin and hair was much darker than the night outside. He'd removed the wraparound sunglasses that he almost always wore outside. But his eyes were as black as the glasses that hid them. The only color in the dim light of the room was the glints from the silver rings that climbed the graceful line of one ear to the point that marked him as not pure blood, not truly high court, but mixed blood, like me. The diamonds in his earlobe sparkled in the light as he turned his head, as if he'd felt me staring at him. He probably had. He had been the queen's assassin a thousand years before I was born.

His ankle-length hair moved like a black cloak as he came toward me. He was wearing green hospital scrubs that he'd been loaned. They had replaced the blanket from the ambulance that had brought us here. He'd entered the golden court, to rescue me, in the form of a large black dog. When he shape-shifted he lost everything, clothes, weapons, but strangely never the piercings. The many earrings and the nipple piercing survived his return to human form, maybe because they were part of him.

He came to stand beside the bed, and take my hand—the one that didn't have the intravenous drip in it, which was helping hydrate me, and get me over the shock I'd been in when I had arrived. If I hadn't been with child, they'd have probably given me more medicine. For once I wouldn't have minded stronger drugs, something to

make me forget. Not just what my uncle, Taranis, had done, but also the loss of Frost.

I gripped Doyle's hand, my hand so small and pale in his large, dark one. But there should have been another beside him, beside me. Frost, our Killing Frost, was gone. Not dead, not exactly, but lost to us. Doyle could shape-shift to several forms at will and come back to his true form. Frost had had no ability to shape-shift, but when wild magic had filled the estate where we'd been living in Los Angeles, it had changed him. He had become a white stag, and run out the doors that had appeared into a piece of faerie that had never existed before the magic came.

The lands of faerie were growing, instead of shrinking, for the first time in centuries. I, a noble of the high courts, was with child, twins. I was the last child of faerie nobility to be born. We were dying as a people, but maybe not. Maybe we were going to regain our power, but what use to me was power? What use to me was the return of faerie, and wild magic? What use was any of it, if Frost was an animal with an animal's mind?

The thought that I would bear his child and he would neither know nor understand made my chest tight. I gripped Doyle's hand, but couldn't meet his eyes. I wasn't sure what he would see there. I wasn't sure what I was feeling anymore. I loved Doyle, I did, but I loved Frost, too. The thought that they would both be fathers had been a joyous one.

He spoke in his deep, deep voice, as if molasses, and other, thick, sweet things, could be words, but what he said wasn't sweet. "I will kill Taranis for you."

I shook my head. "No, you will not." I had thought about it, because I had known that Doyle would do just what he'd said. If I asked, he would try to kill Taranis, and he might succeed. But I could not allow my lover and future king to assassinate the King of Light and Illusion, the king of our enemy court. We were not at war, and even those among the Seelie Court who thought Taranis was mad or even

evil would not be able to overlook an assassination. A duel, maybe, but not an assassination. Doyle was within his rights to challenge the king to a duel. I'd thought about that, too. I'd half liked that idea, but I'd seen what Taranis could do with his hand of power. His hand of light could char flesh, and had nearly killed Doyle once before.

I had let go of any thought of vengeance at Doyle's hand when I weighed it against the thought of losing him too.

"I am the captain of your guard, and I could avenge my honor and yours for that reason alone."

"You mean a duel," I said.

"Yes. He does not deserve a chance to defend himself, but if I assassinate him, it will be war between the courts, and we cannot afford that."

"No," I said, "we can't." I looked up at him then.

He touched my face with his free hand. "Your eyes glow in the dark with a light of their own, Meredith. Green and gold circles of light in your face. Your emotions betray you."

"I want him dead, yes, but I won't destroy all of faerie for it. I won't get us all kicked out of the United States for my honor. The treaty that let our people come here three hundred years ago stated only two things that would get us kicked out. The courts can't make war on American soil, and we can't allow humans to worship us as deities."

"I was at the signing of the treaty, Meredith. I know what it said."

I smiled at him, and it seemed strange that I could still smile. The thought made the smile wilt a little around the edges, but I guess it was a good sign. "You remember the Magna Carta?"

"That was a human thing, and had little to do with us."

I squeezed his hand. "I was making a point, Doyle."

He smiled, and nodded. "My emotions make me slow."

"Me, too," I said.

The door behind him opened. There were two men in the doorway, one tall and one short. Sholto, King of the sluagh, Lord of

that Which Passes Between, was as tall as Doyle, and had long, straight hair that fell toward his ankles, but the color was white-blond, and his skin was like mine, moonlight pale. Sholto's eyes were three colors of yellow and gold, as if autumn leaves from three different trees had been melted down to color his eyes, then everything had been edged in gold. The sidhe always have the prettiest eyes. He was as fair of face as any at the courts, except for my lost Frost. The body that showed under the t-shirt and jeans he'd worn as part of his disguise when he came to save me seemed to cling to a body as lovely as the face, but I knew that at least part of it was illusion. Starting at his upper ribs, Sholto had extra bits, tentacles, because, though his mother had been high-court nobility, his father had been one of the nightflyers, part of the slugh, and the last wild hunt of faerie. Well, the last wild hunt until the wild magic had returned. Now, things of legend were returning, and Goddess alone knew what was real again, and what was still to return.

Until he had a coat or jacket thick enough to hide the extra bits, he would use magic, glamour, to hide the extras. No reason to scare the nurses. It was his lifetime of having to hide his differences that had made him good enough at illusion to risk coming to my rescue. You do not go lightly against the King of Light and Illusion with illusion as your only shield.

He smiled at me, and it was a smile I had never seen on Sholto's face until the moment at the ambulance when he had held my hand, and told me he knew he would be a father. The news seemed to have softened some harshness that had always been there in his handsome body. He seemed the proverbial new man, as he walked toward us.

Rhys was not smiling. At 5'6", he was the shortest full-blooded sidhe I'd ever met. His skin was moonlight pale, like Sholto's, like mine, like Frost's. Rhys had removed the fake beard and mustache he'd worn inside the faerie mound. He'd worked at the detective agency in L.A. with me, and he'd loved disguises. He was good at them, too, better than at illusion. But he'd had enough illusion to

hide the fact that he only had one eye. The remaining eye was three circles of blue, as beautiful as any in the court, but where his left eye had once lain was white scar tissue. He usually wore a patch in public, but tonight his face was bare, and I liked that. I wanted to see the faces of my men with nothing hidden tonight.

Doyle moved enough so Sholto could put a chaste kiss against my cheek. Sholto wasn't one of my regular lovers. In fact, we'd only been together once, but as the old saying goes, once is enough. One of the children I carried was part his, but we were new around each other, because in effect we'd only had one date. It had been a hell of a first date, but still, we didn't really know each other yet.

Rhys came to stand at the foot of the bed. His curly white hair, which fell to his waist, was still back in the ponytail he'd worn to match his own jeans and t-shirt. His face was very solemn. It wasn't like him. Once he'd been Cromm Cruach, and before that he'd been a god of death. He wouldn't tell me who, but I had enough hints to make guesses. He'd told me that Cromm Cruach was god enough; he didn't need more titles.

"Who gets to challenge him to the duel?" Rhys asked.

"Meredith has told me no," Doyle said.

"Oh, good," Rhys said. "I get to do it."

"No," I said, "and I thought you were afraid of Taranis."

"I was, maybe I still am, but we can't let this go, Merry, we can't."

"Why? Because your pride is hurt?"

He gave me a look. "Give me more credit than that."

"I will challenge him, then," Sholto said.

"No," I said. "No one is to challenge him to a duel, or to kill him in any other way."

The three men looked at me. Doyle and Rhys knew me well enough to be speculative. They knew I had a plan. Sholto didn't know me that well yet. He was just angry.

"We can't let this insult stand, Princess. He has to pay."

"I agree," I said, "and since he brought in the human lawyers when he charged Rhys, Galen, and Abeloeoc with attacking one of his nobles, we use the human law. We get his DNA, and we charge him with my rape."

Sholto said, "And what, he will risk jail time? Even if he would allow himself to be put in human jail, it would not be enough punishment for what he has done to you."

"No, it's not, but it's the best we can do under the law."

"Human law," Sholto said.

"Yes, human law," I said.

"Under our laws," Doyle said, "we are within our right to challenge him and slay him."

"That works for me," Rhys said.

"I'm the one he raped. I'm the one who is about to be queen, if we can keep our enemies from killing me. I say what Taranis's punishment will be." My voice grew a little strident at the end, and I had to stop and take a breath, or two.

Doyle's face betrayed nothing. "You have thought of something, My Princess. You are already planning how this will help our cause."

"Help our court. For centuries the Unseelie Court, our court, has been painted black in the human world. If we have a public trial accusing the king of the Seelie Court of rape, we will finally convince the humans that we are not the villains of the piece," I said.

Doyle said, "Spoken like a queen."

"Like a politician," Sholto said, and not like it was a compliment.

I gave him the look he deserved. "You're a king, too, of your father's people. Would you destroy your entire kingdom for vengeance?"

He looked away, then, and there was that line to his face that showed his temper. But as moody as Sholto was, he didn't hold a candle to Frost. He had been my moody boy.



Rhys came to the bedside. He touched my hand, the one to which the IV needle was taped. “I would face the king for you, Merry. You know that.”

I took my free hand and held his, and met that one blue-ringed eye. “I don’t want to lose anyone else, Rhys. No more of that.”

“Frost is not dead,” Rhys said.

“He is a white stag, Rhys. Someone told me that he may only keep that shape for a hundred years. I am thirty-three and mortal. I will not see a hundred and thirty-three years. He may return as the Killing Frost, but it will be too late for me.” My eyes burned, my throat grew tight, and my voice squeezed out, “He will never hold his baby. He will never be a father to it. His babe will be grown before he has hands to hold it with, and a human mouth to speak of love and fatherhood.” I lay back against the pillows and let the tears take me. I held onto Rhys’s hand and let myself cry.

Doyle came to stand beside Rhys, and laid his hand against my face. “If he had known that you would grieve him most, he would have fought it more.”

I blinked back the tears, and gazed up at that dark face. “What do you mean?”

“It came to us both in a dream, Meredith. We knew that one of us would be sacrificed for the return of faerie’s power. An identical dream on the same night, and we knew.”

“You didn’t tell me, either of you,” I said, and there was accusation in my voice now. Better than tears, I supposed.

“What would you have done? When the Gods themselves choose, no one can change that. But it must be a willing sacrifice; the dream was clear on that. If Frost had known it was his heart you held most dear, he would have fought more, and I would have gone for him.”

I shook my head, and moved away from his hand. “Don’t you understand? If it had been you changed into another form, and lost to me, I would weep as much.”

Rhys squeezed my hand. “Doyle and Frost didn’t understand that they were the front-runners, together.”

I jerked free of his hand, and glared up at him, happy to be angry, because it felt better than any other emotion inside me in that moment. “You’re fools, all of you. Don’t you understand that I would mourn you all? That there is none of my inner circle that I would lose, or risk? Do you not all understand that?” I was shouting, and it felt much better than tears.

The door to the room opened again. A nurse appeared, followed by a white-coated doctor whom I’d seen earlier. Dr. Mason was a baby doctor, and one of the best in the state, maybe in the country. This had been explained to me in detail by a lawyer whom my aunt had sent. That she had sent a mortal and not one of our court had been interesting. None of us knew what to make of it, but I felt that she was treating me as she might treat herself if our situations were reversed. She had a tendency to kill the messenger. You can always get another human lawyer, but the immortal of faerie are scarce so she sent me someone whom she could replace. But the lawyer had been very clear that the queen was thrilled at the pregnancy, and would do all she could to make my pregnancy a safe one. That included paying for Dr. Mason.

The doctor frowned at the men. “I said not to upset her, gentlemen. I meant it.”

The nurse, a heavysset woman with brown hair tucked back in a ponytail, checked the monitors, and bustled around me while the doctor scolded the men.

The doctor wore a wide black headband that looked very stark against her yellow hair. It made it more clear, at least to me, that the color wasn’t her natural shade. She wasn’t much taller than me, but she didn’t seem short as she came around the bed to face the men. She stood so that she included Rhys and Doyle by the bed, and Sholto, who was still in the corner near the chair, in her frown.

“If you persist in upsetting my patient, you will have to leave the room.”

“We cannot leave her alone, Doctor,” Doyle said in his deep voice.

“I remember the talk, but you seem to have forgotten mine. Did I or did I not tell you that she needed to rest, and under no circumstance be upset?”

They’d had this “talk” outside the room, because I hadn’t heard it. “Is there something wrong with the babies?” I asked, and now I had fear in my voice. I’d rather have been angry.

“No, Princess Meredith, the babies seem quite”—there was the smallest hesitation—“healthy.”

“You’re hiding something from me,” I said.

The doctor and nurse exchanged a look. It was not a good look. Dr. Mason came to the side of the bed opposite the men. “I’m simply concerned about you, as I would be for any patient carrying multiples.”

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid, Dr. Mason.” My pulse rate was up, and the machines showed that. I understood why I was hooked up to more machines than normal. If anything went wrong with this pregnancy there would be problems for the hospital. I was about as high profile as you got, and they were worried. Also, I’d been in shock when they brought me in, with low blood pressure, low everything, skin cold to the touch. They’d wanted to make sure my heart rate and such didn’t continue to drop. Now the monitors betrayed my moods.

“Talk to me, Doctor, because the hesitation is scaring me.”

She looked at Doyle, and he gave one small nod. I did not like that at all. “You told him first?” I said.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“Then perhaps one more ultrasound tonight.”

“I’ve never been pregnant before, but I know from friends I had in L.A. that ultrasounds aren’t that common early in pregnancy.

You've done three already. Something is wrong with the babies, isn't there?"

"I swear to you that the twins are fine. As far as I can see on the ultrasound and tell from your blood workup, you're healthy and at the beginning of a normal pregnancy. Multiples can make a pregnancy more challenging for the mother and for the doctor." She smiled at that last. "But everything about the twins looks wonderful. I swear."

"Be careful swearing to me, Doctor. I am a princess of the faerie court, and swearing is too close to giving your word. You don't want to know what might happen to you if you were forsworn to me."

"Is that a threat?" she said, drawing herself up to her full height and gripping both ends of the stethoscope around her shoulders.

"No, Doctor, a caution. Magic works around me, sometimes even in the mortal world. I just want you and all the humans who are taking care of me to understand that words you might say casually may have very different consequences when you are near me."

"So you mean if I said, 'I wish,' it might be taken seriously?"

I smiled. "Fairies don't really grant wishes, Doctor, at least not the kind in this room."

She looked a little embarrassed then. "I didn't mean . . ."

"It's all right," I said, "but once upon a time giving your word and then breaking it could get you hunted by the wild hunt, or bad luck could befall you. I don't know how much magic has followed me from faerie, and I just don't want anyone else hurt by accident."

"I heard about the loss of your . . . lover. My condolences, though in all honesty I don't understand everything I was told about it."

"Even we do not understand everything that has happened," Doyle said. "Wild magic is called wild for a reason."

She nodded as if she understood that, and I think she meant to leave.

"Doctor," I said, "You wanted another ultrasound?"

She turned with a smile. "Now, would I try to get out of this room without answering your questions?"

“Apparently you would, and that wouldn’t endear you to me. That you talked to Doyle before me has already put a mark against you in my mind.”

“You were resting peacefully, and your aunt wanted me to talk to Captain Doyle.”

“And she is paying the bills,” I said.

The doctor looked flustered and a little angry. “She is also a queen, and honestly, I’m not sure how to react to her requests yet.”

I smiled, but even to me the smile felt a little bitter. “If she makes anything sound like a request, Doctor, she’s being very nice to you. She is queen and absolute ruler of our court. Absolute rulers don’t make requests.”

The doctor gripped both ends of her stethoscope again. A nervous habit, I was betting. “Well, that’s as may be, but she wanted me to discuss things with your primary,” she hesitated, “man in your life.”

I looked up at Doyle, who was still by my bedside. “Queen Andais chose Doyle as my primary?”

“She asked who the father of the children were, and I, of course, couldn’t answer that question yet. I told her that an amniocentesis would up your risk of problems right now. But Captain Doyle seems very confident that he is one of the fathers.”

I nodded. “He is, and so is Rhys, and so is Lord Sholto.”

She blinked at me. “Princess Meredith, you only have twins, not triplets.”

I looked at her. “I know who the fathers of my children are, yes.”

“But you . . .”

Doyle said, “Doctor, that is not what she means. Trust me, Doctor, each of my twins will have several genetic fathers, not just me.”

“How can you be certain of something so impossible?”

“I had a vision from Goddess.”

She opened her mouth as if she’d argue, then closed it.

She went to the other side of the room, where they had left the

ultrasound machine after the last time they'd used it on me. She put on gloves, and so did the nurse. They got the tube of gloopy stuff that I'd already learned was really, really cold.

Dr. Mason didn't bother asking if I wanted any of the men to leave the room this time. It had taken her a little while to realize that I felt that all the men had a right to be in the room. The only one we were missing was Galen, and Doyle had sent him on an errand. I had been half asleep when I'd seen them talking, low, then Galen had left. I hadn't thought to ask where, or why. I trusted Doyle.

They lifted the gown, spread the blueish goo, again very cold, on my stomach, then the doctor got the chunky wand, and began to move it across my abdomen. I watched the monitor and its blurry picture. I'd actually seen the image enough that I could make out the two spots, the two shapes that were so small, they didn't even look real yet. The only thing that let me know what they were was the fast fluttering of their hearts in the image.

"See, they look perfectly fine."

"Then why all the extra tests?" I asked.

"Honestly?"

"Please."

"Because you are Princess Meredith NicEssus, and I'm covering my ass." She smiled and I smiled back.

"That is honest for a doctor," I said.

"I try," she said.

The nurse began to clean my stomach off with a cloth, then she cleaned the equipment as the doctor and I stared at each other.

"I've already had reporters pestering me and my staff for details. It isn't just the queen who's going to be watching me closely."

She gripped her stethoscope again.

"I am sorry that my status will make this harder for you and your staff."

"Just be a model patient, and we'll talk in the morning, Princess. Now, will you sleep, or at least rest?"

"I'll try."

She almost smiled, but her eyes had that guarded look like she wasn't certain she believed me. "Well, I think that's the best I can hope for, but," and she turned to the men, "no upsetting her." She actually shook a finger at them.

"She is a princess," Sholto said from the corner, "and our future queen. If she demands unpleasant topics, what are we to do?"

She nodded, with that grip on her stethoscope again. "I've been talking to Queen Andais, so I do see your problem. Try to get her to rest, try to keep her quiet. She's had a lot of shocks today, and I'd just like it better if she rested."

"We will do our best," Doyle said.

She smiled, but her eyes stayed worried. "I'll hold you to that. Rest." She pointed her finger at me as if it were some sort of magic to make me do it. Then she went for the door and the nurse trailed after her.

"Where did you send Galen?" I asked.

"He is fetching someone who I thought would help us."

"Who and where from? You didn't send him back into faerie alone?"

"No." Doyle cupped my face in his hands. "I would not risk our green knight. He is one of the fathers and will be a king."

"How is that going to work?" Rhys asked.

"Yes," Sholto said, "how can we all be king?"

"I think the answer is that Merry will be queen," Doyle said.

"That is no answer," Sholto said.

"It's all the answer we have now," Doyle said, and I stared into those black eyes and saw colored lights. Colors of things that were not in this room.

"You are trying to bespell me," I said.

"You need to rest, for the sake of the babies you carry. Let me help you rest."

"You want to bespell me and me to allow it," I said softly.

"Yes."

"No."

He leaned in toward me with the colors in his eyes seeming to grow brighter like rainbow stars. “Do you trust me, Meredith?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me help you rest. I swear to you that you will wake refreshed, and that all the problems will still be waiting to be decided.”

“You won’t decide anything important without me? Promise?”

“I promise,” he said, and he kissed me. He kissed me, and suddenly all I could see was color and darkness. It was like standing in a summer’s night surrounded by fireflies, except these fireflies were red, green, yellow, and . . . I slept.



## CHAPTER TWO

I WOKE TO SUNLIGHT, AND GALEN'S SMILING FACE. HIS CURLS were very green in the light, haloed with it, so that even the pale white of his skin showed the green tint that usually only showed when he wore a green shirt. He was the only one of my men who had short hair. The only sop to custom was a braid of hair that now trailed over his shoulder and down past the bed. I'd mourned his hair at first, but now, it was just Galen. He had been just Galen to me since I was fourteen and had first asked my father to marry me to him. It had taken me years to understand why my father had said no. Galen, my sweet Galen, had no head for politics or subterfuge. In the high court of faerie you needed to be good at both.

But he had come into the Seelie Court to find me because he, like me, was good at subtle glamour. We could both change our appearances while someone was watching, and stand a chance of having them see only the change we wanted them to see. It had been the magic that had stayed with all of faerickind, as other, seemingly more powerful, magics had faded.

I reached up with my hand, but the IV made me stop the motion. He leaned down and laid a soft kiss on my mouth. He was the first man who had kissed me there since I was brought into the hospital. It felt almost startling, but good. Had the others been afraid of

truly kissing me? Afraid it would remind me of what my uncle had done?

“I like the smile better,” Galen said.

I smiled for him. He’d been making me smile in spite of myself for decades.

He touched the line of my cheek, as delicately as a butterfly’s wing. That one small touch made me shiver, but not with fear. His smile brightened, and it made me remember why I had once loved him above all others.

“Better, but I have someone here who I think will help the smile stay.” He moved so I could see the much smaller figure behind him. Gran was more than a foot shorter than Galen.

She had my mother’s long, wavy hair, still a deep chestnut brown even though she was several hundred years old. Her eyes were liquid and brown and traditionally lovely. The rest of her wasn’t so traditional. Her face was more brownie than human, which meant she had no nose. The holes were there, but nothing else, and very little lips, so that her face seemed skeletal. Her skin was wrinkled and brown and it wasn’t from age, just taking after her brownie heritage. The eyes might have been my great-grandmother’s eyes, but the hair had to be my great-grandfather’s. He had been a Scottish farmer, and farmers didn’t have portraits painted. I had only glimpses of Gran and my mother and aunt to see what I could see of the human side of my family.

Gran came to the edge of the bed and laid her hand over mine. “Dearie, my little dear, what ha’ they done to thee?” Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears.

I moved my free hand to put over hers, where it lay over the IV. “Don’t cry, Gran, please.”

“An’ why not?” she asked.

“Because if you do, so will I.”

She gave a loud sniff, and nodded briskly. “That’s a good reason, Merry. If you can be this brave, so can I.”

My eyes burned, and my throat was suddenly tight. It was irra-

tional, but somehow I felt safer with this tiny woman beside me than I had with the guards. They were trained to give their life for me, and they were some of the finest warriors the court could boast, but I hadn't felt safe, not really. Now, Gran was here, and there was still something of that childhood feeling that as long as she was with me nothing truly bad could happen. If only it were true.

"The king will suffer for this outrage, Merry, my oath on that."

The tears began to fade, on a wash of pure terror. I gripped her hand tightly. "I've forbidden the men to either assassinate him or challenge him to a duel, Gran. You are to leave the Seelie Court alone, too."

"I am not your bodyguard to be bossed around, child." The look on her face was one I knew well, that stubborn set to her eyes, her thin shoulders. I didn't want to see it on this topic.

"No, but if you get yourself killed trying to defend my honor, that won't help me." I rose, grabbing at her arm. "Please, Gran, I couldn't bear to lose you and know it was my fault."

"Ach, 'twouldn't be your fault, Merry. It would be that bastard king."

I shook my head, almost sitting up with all the tubes and wires tugging at me. "Please, Gran, promise me you won't do anything foolish. You have to be around to help with the babies."

Her face softened, and she patted my hand. "So it is to be twins like my own girls."

"They say twins skip a generation. I guess it's true," I said. The door opened and the doctor and the nurse were there again.

"I told you gentlemen not to upset her," Dr. Mason said in her sternest voice.

"Ah, and it were me," Gran said. "I'm sorry, Doctor, but as her grandmother, I'm a wee bit upset at what has happened."

The doctor must have already seen Gran, because she didn't do that double take that most humans do. She just gave Gran a stern look and waved her finger at her. "I don't care who is doing it. If you

can't stop sending her vitals up and down and sideways, then you are going to have to leave, all of you."

"We've explained before," Doyle said. "The princess must be under guard at all times."

"There are policemen just outside the door, and more of your guard."

"She can't be alone, Doctor." This from Rhys.

"Do you truly think the princess is still in danger? Here in the hospital?" she asked.

"Yes," Rhys said.

"I do," Doyle and Sholto said together.

"A powerful man with magic at his beck and call, who'd rape his own niece, might do anything," Gran said.

The doctor looked uncomfortable. "Until we have a piece of DNA to compare to the king's, we don't have proof that it was his. . . ." She hesitated.

"Sperm," I said for her.

She nodded, and got a death grip on her stethoscope. "Very well. His sperm that we found. We have confirmed Mr. Rhys and the missing guard Frost as two of the donors, but we can't confirm who the other two are yet."

"Other two?" Gran asked.

"It's a long story," I said. Then I thought of something. "How did you get DNA to compare for Frost?"

"Captain Doyle gave me some hair."

I looked past Gran at Doyle. "How did you just happen to have a lock of his hair with you?"

"I told you of the dream, Meredith."

"So what?"

"We exchanged locks of hair, to give to you as a token. He had mine and would have given it to you to remember me if I had been chosen. I gave a few strands of the lock to the doctors for comparison."

“Where were you hiding it, Doyle? You had no pockets as a dog.”

“I gave it to another guard for safekeeping. One who did not travel into the Golden Court with us.”

Just saying it that way meant he’d planned on the possibility of none of them surviving. It didn’t make me feel any better to hear that. We had all survived, but the fear was still there deep inside me. The fear of loss.

“Who did you trust to hold such a token?” I asked.

“The men I trust most are in this room,” he said in that dark voice that seemed to match his color. It was the kind of voice that the night itself would use, if it were male.

“Yes, and by your earlier words, you planned for failure as well as success. So you left the locks of hair with someone you didn’t take inside the Golden Court.”

He came to stand at the foot of the bed, not so near Gran. Doyle was aware that he had been the Queen’s Darkness, her assassin, for centuries, and many folk of the court were still nervous around him. I appreciated that he gave Gran room, and I approved of him sending Galen to fetch her. I wasn’t certain there was another guard among my men whom she would have trusted. The rest had been too much like enemies for too long.

I studied his dark face, though I knew that his face sometimes didn’t help me at all. In the beginning he had let his emotions show around me, but as I’d come to read his face better he’d schooled that face. I knew that, if he didn’t wish it, I would gain nothing from his face but the pleasure of looking at it.

“Who?” I asked.

“I left both locks of hair with Kitto.”

I stared at him, and didn’t try to keep the surprise off my face. Kitto was the only man in my life who was shorter than Gran. He was four feet even, eleven inches shorter than she. But his skin was moonlight white like mine, and his body a perfect male replica of the sidhe guards, except for the line of glittering, iridescent scales down his

back, the tiny fold-away fangs in his mouth, and the huge slit-pupiled eyes in their sea of blue. All that proved that his father had been, or was, a snake goblin. His curling black hair, his white skin, and the magic that sex with me had awakened were from his mother's bloodline. But Kitto had not known either parent. His sidhe mother had left him to die at the edge of the goblin mound. He'd been saved, because newborns are too small to make a good meal, and sidhe flesh is valued for food among the goblins. Kitto had been given to a female goblin to raise until he was big enough to eat, like a piglet being saved for Yule dinner. But the goblin female had come to . . . love him. Love him enough to keep him alive and treat him as another goblin, not as food on the hoof, as it were.

The other guards had not considered Kitto one of them. He was too weak, and though Doyle had insisted that he hit the gym along with the rest so there were muscles under that white skin, Kitto would never be a true warrior.

Doyle answered the question that must have been plain on my face. "Everyone I trusted more went into the faerie mound with us. Of those we left behind, who would have understood what those two locks of hair would have meant to you, our princess? Who but one of the men who had been with you since the beginning of this adventure? Only Nicca was left behind, and though a better warrior than Kitto, he is not stronger of will. Besides, our Nicca is soon to be a father, and I would not involve him in our fight."

"It is his fight, too," Rhys said.

"No," Doyle said.

"If we lose, and Merry does not take the throne, our enemies will kill Nicca and his soon-to-be bride, Biddie."

"They would nae dare harm a sidhe woman who carried a child inside her," Gran said.

"I think some of them would," Rhys said.

"I agree with Rhys," Galen said, "I think Cel would rather see all of faerie destroyed than lose his chance to follow his mother onto the throne."

Gran touched his arm. “Ya have grown cynical, boy.”

He smiled at her but it left his green eyes cautious, almost hurt. “I’ve grown wise.”

She turned to me. “I hate to think that any sidhe noble is so hateful, even that one.”

“The last I heard from my aunt, my cousin, Cel, had plans to get me with child, and we’d rule together.”

A look of disgust showed on Gran’s face. “You’d die first.”

“But now, I’m already pregnant, and it can’t be his. Rhys and Galen are right; he’ll kill me now if he can.”

“He’ll kill you before the babes are born, if he can,” Sholto said.

“What concern is my Merry to ya, King Sholto of the sluagh?” Gran didn’t even try to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

He moved closer to the bed, standing at the foot of it. He had let the other three men do most of the touching. I appreciated that since we were still more acquaintances than friends. “I am one of the fathers of Merry’s children.”

Gran looked at me. It was an unhappy, almost angry look. “I heard the rumor that the sluagh’s king would be a father, but I didnae credit it.”

I nodded. “It’s true.”

“He cannae be king of the sluagh and king of the Unseelie. He cannae sit two thrones.” She sounded hostile.

Normally, I would have been more diplomatic, but the time for diplomacy was past, at least among my inner circle. I was pregnant with Gran’s great-grandchildren; I might be seeing a lot of her. I did not want her and Sholto bickering for nine months, or longer.

“Why are you angry about Sholto being one of the fathers?”

It was a very blunt question, rude by any standard among the sidhe. The rules were a little less subtle among the lesser fey.

“One day of being the next queen and you would be rude to your ol’ granny?”

“I’m hoping to see a lot of you while I’m pregnant, but I’m not

going to mess with bad will between you and my lovers. Tell me why you don't like Sholto."

The look in her lovely brown eyes was not friendly, not at all. "Did you nae wonder who struck the blow that killed your great-grandmother, my mother?"

"She died in one of the last great wars between the courts."

"Aye, but who killed her?"

I looked at Sholto. His face was its arrogant mask, but his eyes were thinking too hard. I didn't know his face as well as Rhys's or Galen's, but I was almost certain that he was thinking furiously.

"Did you kill my great-grandmother?"

"I slew many in the wars. The brownies were on the side of the Seelie Court, and I was not. I, and my people, did kill brownies and other lesser fey of the Seelie Court in the wars, but whether one of them was your blood, I do not know."

"Worse then," Gran said. "You killed her and it meant nothin' to ya."

"I killed many. It becomes difficult after a time to separate the dead one from another."

"I saw her die at his hand, Merry. He slew her and moved on, as if she were nothing." There was such pain in her voice, a raw hurt that I had never heard from my grandmother.

"Which war was this?" Doyle asked, his deep voice falling into the sudden tension like a stone thrown down a well.

"It was the third call to arms," Gran said.

"The one that started because Andais boasted that her hounds could out-hunt Taranis's," Doyle said.

"So that's why it's called the War of Dogs," I said.

He nodded.

"I do nae know why it began. The king ne'r told us why we were to fight, only that to refuse was treason and death."

"Think about why the first one is called the Marriage War," Rhys said.



“That one I know,” I said. “Andais offered to marry Taranis and combine the two courts, after her king died in a duel.”

“I can’t remember anymore which of them took insult first,” Doyle said.

“That war was more than three thousand years ago,” Rhys said. “The details tend to get fuzzy after that much time.”

“So all the great fey wars have been over stupid reasons?” I asked.

“Most of them,” Doyle said.

“The sin of pride,” Gran said.

No one argued with her. I wasn’t certain that pride was a sin—we weren’t Christian—but pride could be a terrible thing in a society where the rulers had absolute sway over their people. There was no way to say no, no way to say “isn’t this a stupid reason to get our people killed?” Not without being imprisoned, or worse. That went for both courts, by the by, though the Seelie Court was more circumspect over the centuries, so that its reputation among the media had always been better. Andais liked her tortures and executions more public.

I looked from Gran to Sholto. His handsome face was uncertain. He tried for arrogance, but there was a flinching in his tri-yellow eyes. Was it fear? Perhaps. I think he believed in that moment that I might cast him away, because three thousand years ago he had slain my ancestor.

“He waded through our people as if they were so much meat, something to be cut down, so that he could get to the main fightin’,” Gran said, with rage in her voice that I’d never heard even for the abusive bastard who had been her husband at the Seelie Court.

“Sholto is the father of one of your great-grandchildren. Sex with him awakened the wild magic. Sex with him is what has given back the dogs and faerie animals that are appearing in the courts and among the lesser fey.”

She gave me a look—such bitterness in that one look. It fright-

ened me a little. My gentle Gran, so full of hate. “Rumor said that, too, but I didnae believe it.”

“I swear by the Darkness that Eats all Things that it is true.”

She looked startled. “Ya did nae ha’ to make that oath to me, Merry-girl. I would believe ya.”

“I want this clear between us, Gran. I love you, and I am sorry that Sholto slew your mother, my great-grandmother, in front of you, but he is not only the father of one of my children, he is also the consort who helped me bring back much of the magic that has returned. He is too valuable to me and to faerie to be accidentally poisoned.”

“The sidhe cannae be poisoned,” she said.

“Not with anything occurring in nature, no, but you’ve lived in the human world for decades. You know very well that there are man-made poisons now. The sidhe are not proof against artificial creations. My father taught me that.”

“Prince Essus was a very wise man, and for a sidhe royal, he was a great, great man.” There was a ferociousness to her words. She meant them, for she had loved my father as a son, for he, more than my mother, had loved me, and had allowed Gran to help him raise me. But the rage in those words didn’t match what she was saying, as if there were other words in her mind than those on her tongue.

“He was, but his greatness is not what is in your mind, grandmother. I see a rage in you that frightens me. The kind of rage that all the fey seem capable of, so that they will trade their lives and the lives of those who depend on them for vengeance and pride.”

“Do nae compare me to the lords and ladies of the court, Merry. I have a right to my anger, and my thoughts on it.”

“Until I can trust that you are more my ally and grandmother than a revenge-seeking daughter, I cannot have you around me.”

She looked startled. “I will be with you and the babes as I helped raise you.”

I shook my head. “Sholto is my lover and the father of one of the children. More than that, Gran, sex with him brought back the

most magic to faerie. I will not risk him to your vengeance, unless you make our most sacred oath that you will not harm him in any way.”

She searched my face as if thinking that I must be joking. “Merry-girl, you cannae mean this. You cannae think that this monster is more to you than me.”

“Monster,” I said softly.

“He has used sidhe magic to hide that he is more a monster than any a’ the rest.”

“What do you mean, ‘the rest?’” I asked.

She motioned to Doyle. “The Darkness kills withou’ mercy. His mother was a hell hound, his father a phouka who bedded the bitch when in dog form. You could ha’ puppies inside ya. They act as if the high lords are perfect, but they are jus’ as deformed as we are. They can just hide it behind their magic better than us lesser folk.”

I looked at the woman who had helped raise me as if she were a stranger, because in a way she was. I’d known that she resented the courts—most of the lesser fey did—but I had not known that she had this prejudice inside her.

“Do you have a special grudge against Doyle too?” I asked.

“When ya came to me, Merry, you had Galen with ya, and Barinthus. Them I ha’ nothin’ agin’, but I didnae dream you would go to the Darkness. Ya feared him as a child.”

“I remember,” I said.

“Do ya not understand, girl, that if the queen had had your father killed, who she would ha’ sent to do the deed?”

Ah. “Doyle did not kill my father.”

“How do ya know, Merry? Did he tell ya he did nae?”

“Doyle would not have acted without the queen’s express orders, and Andais is not a good enough actress. She did not order my father, Andais’s brother’s, death. I saw her anger over it. It was real.”

“She didnae love Essus.”

“Maybe she loves only her son, but her brother meant something to her, and she did not like that he died at someone’s hand. Maybe it was anger that she had not done the ordering of it. I do not

know, but I *do* know that Andais did not order the deed done, and that Doyle would not have acted without that order.”

“But he would ha’ done it, if ordered. You do believe that,” Gran said.

“Of course,” I said, and my voice was as calm as hers was growing strident.

“He would ha’ killed your father at the queen’s orders. He would ha’ killed you.”

“He was the Queen’s Darkness. I know that, Gran.”

“How can ya sleep with him, then? Knowing the blood that must be on his hands.”

I tried to think how to say it so she would understand. Her reaction had caught me completely off guard. I didn’t like that, and not just for the normal reasons that a granddaughter might not like her grandmother hating her husband-to-be. I didn’t like that she had been able to hide this level of hatred from me all these years. It made me wonder what else I’d missed, what else she’d hidden.

“I could say simply that I love him, Gran, but the look on your face says that won’t do. He is my Darkness now. He would kill at my orders now. He is one of the greatest warriors to ever walk the courts, and he is mine now. He is my strong right hand, my killing blow, my general. In all the courts I could not have taken a king who would have made me stronger than Doyle.”

Emotions chased across her face so quickly that I couldn’t follow them all. Finally, she said, “So ya took ’im to your bed because it was good politics?”

“I took him to my bed because the Queen of Air and Darkness ordered him to my bed. I never dreamed that I could part her Darkness from her side.”

“How do ya know that he is nae still her creature?”

“Gran,” Galen said, “are you feeling all right?”

“Ne’r better. I just want Merry to see the truth.”

“And what is the truth?” Galen asked, and his voice held a tone. I studied his face, but his eyes were all for Gran. It made me

study her, too. Her eyes were a little wide, her lips parted, her pulse rate up. Was it just anger, or was it something else?

“They cannae be trusted, ana of them.”

“Who, Gran?” Galen asked. “Who cannot be trusted?”

“The queen’s men, girl.” She addressed me now. “Ya grew up knowin’ the truth of that. She must see the truth.” The last was whispered, and she had lost her accent. She was upset: the accent wouldn’t lessen, not on its own.

“Did you see anyone from either court when you went to her home?” Doyle asked.

Galen actually thought about it before saying, “No, I didn’t *see* anyone.” He put too much emphasis on “see.”

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked softly.

“There be nothin’ wrong with me, girl,” Gran said, but her eyes were a little too wild, as if the spell, for it was a spell, was growing stronger.

“Gran, you and I were buddies once,” Rhys said, moving up so that Doyle could move back out of her sight.

She frowned at him, as if she were having trouble recognizing him. “Aye, you ne’r did me or mine harm. You kept to yourself in the old days, and you were on the side of gold and dreams. You were allied to us once, white knight.” She grabbed his arm. “How can you be with them now?”

The accent was gone; the voice was almost not hers at all. “What’s happening to her?” I asked. I reached out, and she reached for me, but Galen and Rhys stepped in the way, nearly knocking each other over in their haste.

“What is it?” I asked, and this time my voice rose. I could hear the monitors getting excited again. If I didn’t calm down, we’d have doctors and nurses in here. We didn’t need humans in the middle of what looked to be a magical attack. I tried to calm down, while my grandmother tried to push past Rhys and Galen. She was trying to persuade them, as well as me, that we were on the side of evil.

Doyle's voice cut through mine, "There's something in her hair, a thread, or another hair. It glows."

"I see it," Rhys said.

"I don't," Galen said.

I couldn't see around the two of them. I had only glimpses of Gran's long brown arms trying to reach past them, almost frantically.

The door opened, and Dr. Mason and two nurses came in. "What the hell is going on in here?" she asked. And this time she sounded truly pissed.

I guess I couldn't blame her, but I also couldn't think of a way to explain. Was being pregnant making me slow to think, or was I still in shock?

"Everyone out. I mean it this time!" Dr. Mason had to shout to be heard over Gran's progressively more piercing words.

Then the glass of water on the bedside table levitated, slowly, up into the air. It hovered there about eight inches above the table-top. The bendable straw in it moved a little bit from the upward movement, but the cup was steady. Gran was really good at levitating, like all brownies. She'd served me tea in china cups like this since I was very small.

The lamp beside the cup also began to rise. Then the water pitcher bobbed upward. The lamp got to the end of its cord, and moved gently in the air like a boat moored to a dock. It was all very gentle, so why was my heart rate skyrocketing, and my pulse choking me? Because brownies don't lose control of their powers. Ever. But bogarts do. What's a bogart? A brownie gone bad. What do I mean by that? Darth Vader is still a Jedi Knight, right? The Christians still believe that Lucifer is a fallen angel, but what most people forget is that he's still an angel.

Dr. Mason had a death grip on her stethoscope again. "I don't know what's happening here exactly, but I know it's upsetting my patient. So, it stops now, or I will call security, or the police, and have this room cleared." Her voice was only a little shaky as she watched the bobbing lamp and floating cup.

“Gran,” Galen said, his voice sounding loud in the sudden silence. She had stopped yelling. In fact, the room felt too quiet, like that hush that falls upon the world just before the heavens open and a storm crushes the world.

“Gran,” I said softly, and my voice held the panic of my pulse in it. “Please, Gran, please don’t do this.”

Galen and Rhys were still between her and me, so I couldn’t see her, but I could feel her. I could feel her magic as it spread through the room. The pen lifted out of the doctor’s pocket. She made a small yip.

Rhys said, “You told me once, Hettie, that Meg went bogart because she was weak, and let her anger best her. Are you weak, Hettie? Will you let your anger be your master, or will you be the master of your anger?” There was more to his words than just what I could hear. There was power to his voice that was more than just words. Power, magic of a sort, filled his words like the push of the tide fills the riffling of waves. Waves can be small, but there is always that sense that behind the easy froth that curls around your ankles, there is something much larger, much less gentle. So it was with Rhys’s voice, simple words, but there was a feel to them that made you want to agree with them. Made you want to be reasonable. He would never have tried such a trick on another sidhe, but Gran wasn’t sidhe. Try as she might, even to marrying one of the great sidhe, she was lesser, and magic that would not work on the great might work on her.

It was both an insult from someone she thought a friend, and a move of desperation, because if it didn’t work, then Rhys might have done the proverbial sowing of the wind. I prayed to Goddess that he wouldn’t reap the whirlwind.

Doyle said, “Go, Doctor, go now.”

She started for the door, but said over her shoulder, “I’m getting the police.”

Rhys kept talking to Gran, slow, reasonable. Doyle said, “Unless the officers can do magic, they can’t help here.”

Dr. Mason was at the door when the water pitcher smashed it-

self to pieces so close to her head that the plastic cut her cheek. She screamed, and Galen started to go to her, then hesitated at the foot of the bed. He was torn between helping the woman and staying at my side. Rhys, Doyle, and Sholto had no such conflict. They moved up to the bed. They meant to simply shield me, I think, but Gran stepped back. I could see her, now that Galen was halfway to the door.

She stepped back, hands at her sides balled into fists. Her brown eyes were too wide, showing white. Her thin chest rose and fell like she'd been running. The big chair in the corner rose into the air.

"Gran, no!" I yelled, and reached out, as if my outstretched hand could do something more that my voice alone could not. I had hands of power, but none I was willing to use on my grandmother.

All the small objects in the room rushed toward the three men around my bed. Rushed toward me. But I knew that the small objects were a ruse. Throw the small then hit them with the big.

I had time to take a breath, to warn them. Then Doyle was on top of me guarding me with his body. The world was suddenly black, not from passing out, but from the fall of his midnight hair across my face.

I heard the doctor scream again. I heard unknown voices shouting from the direction of the door. Then Rhys yelled, "Sholto, no!"