

## CHAPTER ONE

Larken pressed the heels of her hands into the cool dough, her body slipping into the dance of bread making. The heavy scent of yeast rose to greet her as she worked. The dough pulled at her and she eased her touch, folding and turning again and again.

*Today. Today. Today.*

The Choosing Ceremony was finally here. Her hands moved of their own accord, adding a dash of flour, curling into the dough, shaping it. She let the repetition soothe her mind, though her heart still fluttered with anticipation.

One year ago, her dearest friend was chosen to live in the land of the fey. Larken had thought about Brigid every day since. What was it like living with a faery lord? What was it like living in a world filled with magic?

*You'll be able to ask her for yourself, soon, Larken told herself. If she even wants to see you.*

"Hurry up, Larken!" Papa's voice boomed, startling her. "Get those loaves in the oven and come help me with the cookies."

It was only in the kitchen that his voice turned so officious. Had her father been anything but a baker, he would have been absolutely terrifying. Yet despite his broad frame, his huge hands frosted the cookies

before him with astonishing delicacy. Larken wondered why he even needed her help, as good as he was.

Larken wiped her hands on her stomach, glad she had put on an apron to protect her Ceremony dress. She had settled on a light blue gown with pink stitching, and while she usually strolled around the village with a coat of flour on, the faery lord didn't have to know that.

Beautiful, immortal, and filled with the grace of the Twin gods, the fey were viewed by humans as near deities themselves. They were shrouded in mystery and even possessed the ability to wield fragments of the gods' magic. Their realm, as mysterious and magical as the fey were, was separated from the human lands by a deep chasm, with only four bridges connecting them.

The bridges only opened for seven days each year—at all other times they were closed off by a powerful magic. The Choosing Ceremony marked the first day that the bridges opened, when the four faery lords would cross their respective bridges and select one human girl each to return with them.

Larken's village, Ballamor, was only a short journey from one of these bridges, making it a perfect place to perform a Choosing Ceremony. The three other human towns closest to the bridges held Ceremonies of their own and were visited by their own faery lord.

Today was Larken's chance to be chosen.

Larken shoved the dough in the oven so hastily she almost burned her hands. She cursed, jerking them back.

"Careful," Mama called, sweeping by with a raisin-studded porter cake. "Forget the cookies, your papa can finish them. Help me take these down to the field." She gestured to one of the wicker baskets brimming with shortbread, scones, and miniature cakes. "Wait! Get your cloak—you'll need it." Mama pushed a strand of her hair back with a flustered sigh.

Mama was always ruffled on Ceremony day. With villagers from the farthest reaches of Ballamor and the surrounding cities pouring into town, there were hundreds of more mouths to feed.

Larken raced up the stairs that connected the bakery to her family's

living quarters on the upper level. She grabbed the cloak sprawled across her bed.

Her boot slid on something beneath her. She glanced down—a haphazard pile of unfinished maps stared up at her, the product of her insomnia the night before. Her lips pulled into a frown as her gaze picked up on every line that was out of place on her charts. Brigid would have helped her fix every mistake. But Brigid wasn't there.

Larken had been mapping out the woods surrounding Ballamor when she and Brigid had officially met for the first time.

"What're you doing?" Brigid had asked. Even at ten years old, Brigid had been beautiful. Her dark hair had made her huge blue eyes look even brighter. And even then, they had been opposites. Brigid, willow-thin to Larken's plump frame, Brigid's dark tresses to Larken's mousy blonde.

They were opposites in other ways as well. Brigid had always been so sure of herself, outgoing and talkative, while Larken was quiet and diffident.

"Making maps," Larken had replied, wary. The other children liked to tease her about it. While most of the children her age were playing Faery and Maiden, she was plotting how far away her family's bakery was from the mill where they got their flour.

Papa liked to boast that he was the one who had sparked Larken's love for cartography. He had always gotten lost during his travels to other towns for specialty ingredients. The year he took Larken on one of his trips, they got lost so many times she finally sketched out a chart of the area to use the following year. The hobby had stuck.

Brigid had peered over her shoulder, observing the grid onto which Larken had plotted their entire town. Larken had been toying with it for hours, unable to figure out what was wrong with it.

"That tree there..." Brigid pointed to a tree toward the left of the map. "It should be here." She moved her hand slightly to the right. "It's in front of Da's forge—not to the side." She frowned, noticing Larken's scribbled label. "And 'forge' is spelled with a g, not a j."

"It is a g."

Brigid's eyebrows knitted. "Doesn't look like one."

Larken had giggled instead of taking offense. Brigid was more straightforward than any of the other village children she had met—but she wasn't unkind about it.

They had become fast friends after that. Larken made the maps, and Brigid provided her with helpful insight and artistic skill. She always sketched out the landmarks that dotted Larken's charts. And when the other village children teased her, Brigid always defended her, claiming that one day Larken would be a mapmaker for the Popes themselves.

Larken wondered if her friend would be so willing to defend her, now. Memories of their falling out still haunted her.

Larken pushed down her guilt and the bitter ache of missing her friend. Once the Chosen girls crossed the bridge, they never returned. Larken imagined her reunion with Brigid, seeing her friend's shock and delight that Larken had been chosen. It had been a full year since they'd fought. Surely Brigid had forgiven her by now. But Larken wouldn't rest until she talked to her friend.

*Don't get ahead of yourself,* a voice in the back of her mind warned. *The faery lord still has to choose you. And he doesn't pick girls who look like you.*

The humans revered the fey for their beauty and elegance. Girls living in the towns that performed the Choosing Ceremonies became obsessed with the idea that the more they resembled the fey, the higher the chances they would be chosen. This theory didn't prove to be entirely inaccurate, as Ballamor's faery lord usually selected the beautiful, wealthy girls that lived in estates outside of town. No one had expected him to choose the blacksmith's daughter, but he had.

Larken pushed open the door to the bakery, the smell of sugar and sweet cream enveloping her.

Papa bustled around, making sure everything was in its proper place. "I've got another batch coming. Those will need to go down to the festival as soon as they cool," Papa called to Mama, pointing to the racks of cookies.

Outside, their cart pony, Snowfoot, waited for them. Larken snuck him a few sugar cubes as she and Mama loaded the baskets onto the cart, and then they were off.

Colorful flags waved at them from windowsills as they made their way down the main road. The doors to the village inn were swung wide, people spilling out into the streets. Wreaths of flowers decorated the doors of the local shops, a nod to the girls participating in the Choosing Ceremony, and to welcome the faery lord.

The lord always brought gifts for the villagers—something that Larken, as well as the rest of the townsfolk, looked forward to. Wine that would cause one to fall asleep to only good dreams. Candies for the children that, once eaten, caused them to feel invisible fingers tickling them. Better still were the special presents given to the families of the Chosen girls: necklaces that never lost their luster, tools that never had to be sharpened. Little pieces of the faery world that showed how dazzling it would be for their daughters once they crossed the bridge.

Once they reached the clearing, Larken helped Mama arrange the pastries on one of the food-laden banquet tables. Already, she could smell meat roasting on spits, glistening with honey and grease. The scent of horses and the clamor of a great many people swept in on the breeze. Children ran by with ribbon sticks, shrieking with delight.

The two crossed wooden beams standing in the center of the field were the crowning glory of the festival. Soon they would be set alight, symbolizing the Popes' blessing of the Choosing Ceremony. Before the Order of the Twins had been established as the one true religion of the human realm of Ellevere, the two burning crosses had stood in every town converted by crusaders.

There were no crusaders now. People either followed the Order, or they were killed. But here in the North, the furthest region of the Empire, whispers could still be heard. Of the time before the Order. Here, they still had a semblance of freedom.

A high-pitched scream made Larken freeze, her hand clutched on a berry scone. Across from her, Brigid's older brother led children around on ponies. His large hands, roughed from long hours in the forge, were gentle as he steadied the ponies' clumsy riders. Brigid's mother was there as well, but Brigid's father remained at home. He had suffered through a debilitating horse-kick to the head a few years prior. Brigid's

mother smiled and laughed with the rest, but her shoulders hung low, some invisible mantle draped across them.

Brigid's mother had told her they were happy for their daughter, and still invited Larken over from time to time. Larken didn't see it as anything more than a courtesy. When Brigid had been chosen, Larken didn't just lose her friend—she lost her second family as well. She unclenched her fist, realizing too late that she had reduced the scone to crumbs.

The crowd grew as the day progressed. Rich townsfolk came in from their estates, bringing their splendid clothes and horses with them. Girls dressed in their finest breezed past, and Larken bunched the fabric of her gown self-consciously.

Today was her last Choosing Ceremony as an eligible girl. Girls were presented to the faery lord after they turned twelve and participated until they were eighteen. Larken was seventeen now, and by the next Ceremony she would be too old.

Papa came up behind her, jostling her out of her thoughts. He squeezed her shoulders with his massive hands. Larken was convinced she had inherited her large frame from him, though he looked like a carnival strongman and she more like a powdered doughnut. Still, they both shared round, rosy faces and cheeks, while her upturned nose, short stature, and brown eyes had all come from her mother.

“Dance with me, little lark.”

“Papa, I can't. You know I'm about as graceful as a—”

But Papa wouldn't hear another word of her protests. He spun her around the grassy field, both of them trying to keep up with the stringed instruments and drums. Larken's feet dragged at first, betraying her reluctance, but soon the music swept her into its rhythm and her mood lightened. The smell of meat, ale, and sweets was dizzying, and Larken's nerves slowly melted away into happiness.

A jarring weight hit her shoulder, almost causing her to stumble. A tall, slender girl with black hair and a pale blue dress shuffled past. Larken whirled, straining to get a better look at her face.

*Brigid.* Except it was not Brigid. This girl had brown eyes, not blue,

and she was a few inches too tall. The girl mumbled an apology, her eyes downcast. She quickly disappeared into the crowd.

Memories from her and Brigid's last night together swept in before Larken could stop them.

*Have you ever wanted to be chosen?* Brigid asked.

*Of course not,* Larken replied. *Why would I? We're going south.*

They planned to leave Ballamor and travel to the South when they turned eighteen; Larken to study map-making, and Brigid to study art.

*Have you?* Larken asked, unable to keep the smile from her voice. Brigid couldn't be serious.

Brigid bit her lip. *I've—I've been thinking about it more. We only have two more Ceremonies to participate in before we lose our chance forever.*

*Bri, you can't be serious. Girls like us don't get chosen.*

*That's not fair.* A crease formed between Brigid's brows. *I could be chosen. My body's changed since we were girls. I have a real chance now.* She gestured to her slim form. Larken recoiled at her words, at the hidden insult within them.

*Are you saying that you're better than me now?* Larken asked coldly.

*Of course not. I'm just saying that there's always a chance. Would it be so bad if I took it?*

*We have plans to move south, Bri, how could you just give that up?*

*Because I can't make a life out of a hobby! And neither can you.* Brigid clenched her fists. *Can't you understand that? There's nothing keeping me here.*

Larken flinched. *If you truly think that, then you aren't the person I thought you were. You're just like every other girl stupid enough to dream about being chosen.*

Larken shut out the rest of the argument. If Larken was chosen, then they could sort everything out, and everything would be as it had been before. She might get to see Brigid that very night. Her stomach pinched with nerves. Or she would have to wait until after she completed the task for the faery lord.

Rumors about why the fey needed human girls for the task had spread over time. Some claimed that that the fey needed human wives to birth their young, or that they took humans with some great skill to

entertain them throughout their immortal lives. Larken could almost believe that speculation as Brigid had been an exceptional artist. Whatever the task was, perhaps she could convince the faery lord that her cartography skills could be of some use.

*Don't be stupid*, a voice inside her chided. *What use could the fey have for a human mapmaker?*

Evening arrived, darkness draping across the field. Two men set the giant wooden crosses alight, and cheers exploded. Larken closed her eyes, letting Papa twirl her around and around. Streaks of flame from the bonfires flashed against her closed lids. When she opened them, torches blazed, tiny stars against the night.

Once Larken and Papa had thoroughly exhausted themselves, she collapsed on one of the wooden benches. Next to her, Mama spoke with a young woman rocking a crying baby.

“Give him yellow thorn for the cough,” Mama instructed. “Mash it into a paste and rub it on his chest—it’ll clear it right up.” She brushed the baby’s fat cheek with her thumb.

Mama had been a healer before she married Papa and began working with him in the bakery. Some of the villagers still asked for her help whenever they couldn’t afford the services of Ballamor’s true healer.

“Thank you, Maeve—truly,” the woman said. “May the Twins bless you and your family. I pray that the faery lord chooses your daughter.”

Larken’s heart jumped at the words. Mama smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. While Papa had lived in Ballamor his whole life, Mama had come from a town further south. The Choosing Ceremony had never sat right with her. She struggled to see how losing a daughter could be considered an honor. Papa, coming from a family of boys, had never had to participate in the Choosing Ceremony directly until Larken’s birth. Her parents both had their doubts—though neither were vocal about them, lest the wrong ears overhear their complaints.

Larken had questions of her own regarding the Ceremony, but she knew she had to reconcile herself to them if she ever wanted to see Brigid again. And while she longed to reunite with her friend, the idea



of getting to map out an entirely new world made her fingertips tingle with excitement.

"I have something for you," Mama said with a twinkle in her eyes. She handed Larken a woven flower crown.

It was stunning—white, yellow, and pink blossoms surrounded a base of twigs, looking as if they had grown into a crown of their own accord. All girls eligible for the Choosing Ceremony wore flower crowns, but Larken had never had one this beautiful.

"I love it, Mama," Larken whispered. Wordlessly, her mother placed the crown atop her head.

At a nearby table, children began to cluster around a black-hooded woman. She was one of the younger members of the Black Guard. Pod—Larken thought her name was.

The Black Guard kept both humans and fey alike from crossing the bridges, save for the faery lords and their Chosen girls. Hand-picked and trained in the Popes' opulent palaces, the Guard spent years training for the moment when the barriers between worlds opened. Members of the Guard were the only humans alive educated in faery lore aside from the Popes themselves.

"When the Twin gods created the world, they separated it into two lands, one for each of them to rule," Pod began. "Asphalion would rule over the fey, and Alea would rule over the humans. But Alea became jealous of the fey's magic and tried to take it for the humans. Asphalion attacked her, and they fought. The two worlds fell into chaos." She raised her arms theatrically, making the children's eyes widen.

"During the war, four Popes rose to power in the human realm," Pod continued. "They convinced Alea to beg for her brother's forgiveness. Eventually, Asphalion forgave her, and as a sign of his good will, he allowed four girls, not yet grown and influenced by a woman's guile, to enter the faery realm each year to experience the magic for themselves. He created a task for the fey and girls to complete, one that forced them to work together despite their differences, as he and Alea had done to end the war."

"What kind of task?" a small girl piped up.

"That is only for the fey, the Popes, and the Twins to know. As well

as the Chosen girl, when her time comes. After the task is complete, the girls want for nothing.”

The four villages nearest to the bridges were the only ones required to offer their girls up to the fey. People outside of these towns were expected to serve the Popes in different ways. But many of those who lived in cities close to Ballamor entered their girls in exchange for their taxes being lifted. Others entered their daughters to avoid military drafts.

They had nothing to lose. Even if their daughters were chosen, they would be showered with luxurious gifts. And if they weren't, well, they didn't have to pay a cent to the Popes or wield a sword for them.

The whole concept had never sat well with Larken.

“After one of the very first Choosing Ceremonies in Ballamor,” Pod continued, “a sister of the Chosen girl, Laila, followed her sibling across the bridge. Laila returned, and spoke of how kind the fey were. She saw the other Chosen girls, and the ones who had been chosen the previous year. Laila begged her sister to return, but the girl refused. She was far too happy to leave.

“But in following her sister into the faery lands, Laila showed that she did not have faith without seeing things with her own eyes. The Popes were greatly saddened when they heard of her disobedience, for they knew she must atone. If not, how many others would venture into the faery realm, disrupting the task and angering the fey and the gods, perhaps even severing the divine bond between our two worlds?”

The children nodded as Pod drew back, her plain features settling into a grim expression. Many of the village children knew the tale by heart, yet they still eagerly awaited what came next.

“The Guard burned out Laila's eyes, symbolizing the blind faith that must burn in all our hearts for the Twins. But Laila gave up her sight happily, repenting her sin and casting doubt from her heart.”

*And she serves as a reminder of what happens when you disobey the rules,* Larken thought darkly. Whispers had spread even as far north as Ballamor about the most recent atrocities the Popes had committed against non-believers in the Twins' name. Larken and her family kept

up all appearances of being devout believers, as did all others who wanted to keep their flesh from being burnt on the Popes' pyres.

Pod spread her hands. "That is the tale of how the Choosing Ceremony began, and now you all will be able to witness it for yourselves." Pod rose to her feet, and all eyes turned toward the tree line.

Tingles exploded across Larken's skin, making her shiver. A nervous titter rose up as girls chatted to each other, shifting from one foot to another as they formed a line.

Members of the Black Guard patrolled the line, taking girls' names and ages, comparing them to their records. They kept track of all the eligible girls in the village, ensured that these girls were presented, and punished families that didn't comply. These punishments were rare, however, as so many longed for the chance to be chosen.

A flash of dark hair next to her caught Larken's eye. It was the girl who had bumped into her earlier—the one she had mistaken for Brigid. Larken finally remembered where she had seen her before: she was the butcher's daughter.

Something brushed against Larken's skirts. The girl's hand, shaking madly, had touched her. Sympathy trickled through Larken. Many girls became overcome with nerves at this point of the Ceremony.

Larken took the girl's hand and squeezed it tightly. It was the only comfort she could think to give her. The girl looked at her, and she gave Larken a tiny nod. Larken had held Brigid's hand during the last Ceremony, even though they had both been too angry to speak.

After Brigid had been chosen, Larken had considered trying to cross the bridge to be with her. But even then, it had seemed impossible. The Guard would have stopped her and punished her. And who was she anyway, to think that she was good enough to enter the land of the fey? The faery lord had wanted Brigid, not her.

If she was chosen today, everything would fall into place. Larken would be able to find her friend and make things right. She couldn't stand knowing that the last words they had said to each other had been in anger.

Despite what Brigid had said, Larken couldn't believe that her friend had given up on their dreams for a future together. Brigid understood

what it was like to pour one's thirst for adventure and knowledge into pens, ink, and paper. To see the world laid out so beautifully and orderly before her, and the excitement she felt when she looked at the world she had yet to explore. Brigid hadn't meant what she said—she knew cartography wasn't a silly hobby for Larken to occupy herself with. It was a passion. A skill.

The Guard finished their task, stepping away from the girls.

A hush blanketed over the crowd. Larken bit her lip. An evening fog rolled down from the hills, twisting through the woods.

The faery lord emerged from the trees like a ghost, obscured by the mist. He was lithe and graceful, with lightly tanned skin. His auburn hair shone even in the darkness. Though she saw him year after year, his appearance never changed—he always looked to be in his mid-twenties. He was dressed casually enough; a white linen shirt tucked into dark pants and boots. Though his journey must have been arduous, not a speck of dirt touched him. He was beautiful—human enough despite his pointed ears, and yet not human at all.

He halted where the line of girls began, unslinging a pack from his shoulders.

Grass rustled quietly in the wind, and Larken tried not to shiver. A horse whinnied. Her blood pounded so loudly in her ears that she was sure the faery would hear it.

Slowly, he made his way down the line. Her fingers twitched. All Larken heard was the faint rustle of his boots and the loud, frantic pounding in her chest.

*Choose me. Choose me. Choose me. Please. I'll do anything.*

He was only a few paces away from her spot in line now, and Larken's lungs seized. He examined each girl carefully, eyes drifting from head to toe, holding gazes, studying faces—but he hadn't stopped yet. He could still pick her. She still had a chance.

After what felt like an eternity, yet no time at all, the faery lord stood before her. She was barely level with his chest. The lord was so close Larken could smell him—leaves, apples, and a hint of spice.

She wanted to tell him everything about Brigid, about her mapmaking and how it could be helpful for the special task, but she

couldn't form a single word. Panic seized her. Was this truly what she wanted? To leave Mama and Papa behind forever? And what if she was chosen, but failed at the task the fey needed her for?

Larken shoved those thoughts away. She had to make things right with Brigid or she would never forgive herself.

The lord's eyes locked with hers, and Larken found she could not look away. They were as green as a summer forest, with flecks of brown and gold surrounding the iris. The light of the torches set the gold in his eyes on fire.

Larken forgot everything else as he slowly lifted a finger to point.

"Her."

## CHAPTER TWO

A roar erupted from the crowd, but the voices sounded muffled and far away. Larken had been chosen. It was her, *she* had been chosen. Oh, Twins, she could barely breathe. Dizzying excitement swept over her, her arms trembling.

“Me?” Larken breathed. Her knees were going to give out. The faery dipped his head to look at her again, auburn curls falling across his forehead.

“No, love,” he said. “Her.”

Larken looked slowly to her right. He hadn't been pointing at her, but at the butcher's daughter. Larken's stomach plummeted. She shook her head. No, *no*—he had pointed at her—this couldn't be happening. Everything she wanted had been firmly clutched in her hands, and then it had slipped away like smoke. The world turned quiet and dark, as if she were looking at her surroundings from the bottom of a lake. Black spots swam at the edges of her vision, the air hitching in her throat.

She would never see Brigid again.

Tears brimmed in Larken's eyes. She wrenched her hand from the butcher's daughter's grasp. Cold enveloped Larken's fingers, their momentary bond breaking. The other girl looked at her, hurt flashing through her features as her brow furrowed.

"N—no, please—" A boy pushed his way through the crowd. She recognized the boy—Roger. It was coming back to her now; he and the butcher's girl had been romantically involved for some time. The girl's name hovered at the edge of Larken's memory but still eluded her.

"Please, milord, we're about to be wed," Roger said. He pulled the butcher's girl to his chest. "She turns eighteen tomorrow, she's too old."

The butcher's daughter reached out a shaking hand toward the lord. "Please, not me. Take someone else."

A gasp ran through the crowd, quiet at first, then followed by louder mutters.

"Take me, milord!" one girl called.

"Or my daughter, take her! I could use the coin!" a man's voice shouted.

More murmurs from the other girls. Disbelief. Anger. How many others would want to go in her place? The faery lord offered her a life of honor and splendor. The Twins themselves had blessed her.

Larken waited for the jealousy to wash over her, but it never came. It felt wrong, knowing what was to come. Once the faery lord made his choice, there was no changing his mind. She gazed at the young couple, buried in each other's arms.

Tearful goodbyes weren't out of the ordinary during a Choosing Ceremony, but Larken had only seen this level of resistance to being chosen once when she was a little girl. Even when Brigid had been chosen, Larken had barely spoken a word, shocked and wounded by her friend's blatant happiness at being chosen.

The faery lord studied the butcher's daughter, his brow knit ever so slightly. A glint of what almost looked like panic flickered in his eyes, but when Larken blinked, it was gone, replaced with calm.

"I'm sorry, truly. But it must be you," he said.

"Please." Tears streamed down Roger's face. "I'll do anything. Just don't take her."

A small girl threw herself into the butcher girl's arms. Another little one came running up—her sisters, Larken realized. The butcher's daughter hugged each of them in turn, then untangled herself from

their skinny arms. She didn't say anything, but tears poured down her cheeks.

They tried clinging to her again, begging her not to go, but she pushed them roughly off, sending them stumbling back to their parents.

Larken swallowed. The girl's parents held the children close. Tears glistened in their eyes.

*"Murderer!"*

The word rose like a curse from someone in the crowd. Larken twisted, eyes wide.

A man pushed himself through the throng. His gray hair fell in greasy tangles, an unkempt beard framing the scowl on his lips. An empty tankard hung loosely from his fingers. He stumbled to a halt, using the man next to him to steady himself.

"Murderers. The lot of you!" The man sneered at the faery, then he brandished his mug at the onlookers. "Taking our girls—while the rest of you hand them over like lambs for the slaughter."

A chill ran through Larken. She knew the man—Castor, a former member of the Black Guard. His daughter had been chosen when Larken was only five years old. Though Larken had only been a child at the time, she remembered that the girl had resisted being chosen. Castor had even tried to fight the faery lord to stop him from taking her. After her Ceremony, he went mad with grief and disappeared into the woods near the bridge. He returned for the Choosing Ceremonies, but he had never spoken out this way before. The Guard had stripped him of his position eight years ago on claims that he was spreading poisonous lies about the fey.

"Why haven't we seen any of the girls return after they cross the bridge? The gate opens for seven days each year! You don't think a single one of them would try to come back to see their families? You think they stopped loving us the moment they finished their 'special task'?" His voice turned into a sneer, his thick accent nearly garbling his words.

Larken took a sharp breath. Castor's words dug into her. It was likely that Brigid wouldn't have been able to return in the days following her Choosing Ceremony due to the special task, but what



about this year? Would Brigid try to see her? But perhaps Brigid would be too angry at her to return despite the bridge being open.

She had lost her final chance to see her friend. A lump rose in Larken's throat. The weight of never being able to speak with Brigid again nearly crushed her.

"Why does it have to be *her*," Castor demanded, pointing at the butcher's girl, "when so many others would willingly go in her place? There are too many secrets surrounding this blasted Ceremony. Something happened to them. Something terrible. My girl—my girl would have tried to come home. She would have come back to me," he choked.

Someone grabbed Castor's arm, but he shook them off. The old man and the faery lord locked gazes.

"I know the Choosing Ceremony can be a difficult time," the lord began after a tense moment of silence, "but we cherish your girls, and your sacrifice, deeply. Your girls play a vital role by strengthening the deep bond our two races share. Do not allow this man to put fear into your hearts."

Nods and cries of assent swept through the crowd. Two men grabbed Castor's shoulders, trying to pull him back, but he shrugged them off once more—he was stronger than he appeared.

"Pah!" Castor spat into the dirt. "I'll be in my room at the Drunken Trout. If anyone wants the truth, the real truth, you'll know where to find me. The day will come when your deeds come knocking, Faery, and that day will be a dark one indeed." With that, Castor turned and pushed his way into the crowd. The faery lord's face turned white as a sheet.

"Ignore the old fool!" Pod cried. "We all know he succumbed to his grief long ago."

More murmurs rose from the crowd, but they were not in favor of the old man.

Pod turned toward the butcher's girl. "Do not be afraid, child. The Twins are with you."

Larken wanted to believe Pod, but she couldn't get Castor's words out of her head. Brigid couldn't be dead—she couldn't be. But what if Castor was right that something kept the girls from returning even while the bridge was open?

One day, the Popes would send someone to dispose of Castor; she knew it. He was an old drunk, no doubt crazed from the loss of his daughter and isolation in the woods, but talk like that could get you killed. It wasn't as though those opposed to the Choosing Ceremony didn't exist, but no one spoke their dissenting opinions so boldly, especially not to the faery lord during a Ceremony.

"What good does it do to terrify one's children with false ideas about evil fey?" Papa had said once. "It's not as if the girls can choose not to participate."

The Black Guard's record keeping made sure of that. Beyond that, few would risk offending the faery lord. It would mean no more magical gifts, and no more allocations from the Popes. Families were free to leave Ballamor, but most viewed the Ceremony as a gift from the gods. They wanted to participate, as was evident by people from other towns coming to enter their girls in the Ceremony.

The butcher's girl was still tangled in Roger's arms. They whispered to each other, and although Larken was standing close to them, she couldn't hear what they were saying.

The faery lord retrieved his pack, turning to the villagers. He pulled a small wooden chest from within and approached the butcher, silently handing the box to him. The man thanked him, shaking fingers moving to unhook the latch. Dozens of jewels of every color filled the interior—rubies, sapphires, pearls, and stones Larken could not name. They would never want for anything ever again. The fey kept their promises in this regard.

The faery removed two more chests from his pack, giving them to the High-Reeve of Ballamor.

"Send one to your Popes, keep the other for yourself," the lord instructed. The High-Reeve bowed.

Larken hadn't noticed Reeve Hammond until now, as his family and personal guard were clustered around him—still, he was hard to miss. He was a huge man with flapping jowls and a bulging stomach. A ring with a different-colored gemstone sparkled on every one of his fingers. He thanked the faery and gave the chest to his guards, who swept it away. If the need arose, then Reeve Hammond would use it to buy food

from further south. And if the need didn't arise...well, then his holdfast would gain another spectacular piece of furniture or his stables a new prize stallion. The town had suffered through many harsh winters in the past, and only once had Hammond ever bothered to buy grain to feed them. Larken suspected things weren't about to change.

The faery lord pulled the remaining chest from his pack, offering it to a woman standing near him. Other villagers drifted closer, eager to see what the faery had brought them. Children swarmed, their chubby hands reaching for the box.

The faery lord lingered, watching as a little girl struggled against the crowd to get to the gifts. She couldn't have been older than three years old. The faery snagged a music box from the chest and handed it to her. A shy smile spread across her lips, and she wrapped her arms around the faery's leg. Larken watched, transfixed, as his eyes turned warm and then distant. The look was gone a moment later as he gently untangled himself.

The lord returned to the butcher's girl. "It's time," he said.

"We were...we were going to be wed," Roger said, his brow wrinkled in confusion.

The lord took the boy by the shoulders. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "But she will be well taken care of." He stepped away.

The girl placed her hands on either side of Roger's face. "I'll be fine. Don't you worry. We'll get through this, all right? We'll be fine." She touched his shoulders, his chest, his hair. She kissed both of his wet cheeks. Finally, she kissed him gently on the lips. Larken looked away, an ache spreading in the back of her throat.

She and Brigid hadn't even said goodbye.

The butcher's daughter wiped her cheeks, turning with her head held high toward the faery lord. He offered his arm to her, and she wrapped her hand around it. They walked back past the line of girls and the crowd opposite them. The crowd cheered and clapped, reaching out to touch the lord and his girl. Roger fell to his knees. The faery and the butcher's girl continued into the darkness. Larken watched until they faded into the trees.

It was over.

“Another Ceremony has ended, but the celebrations have just begun!” Pod called. The crowd roared. “Tonight, we drink, we feast, and we honor the Chosen girls!”

More cheers rose from the crowd. But Larken couldn’t tear her eyes away from Roger, still curled in the dirt.

Mama appeared in a rush, squeezing her into a rib-crushing hug.

“I thought it was you,” Mama breathed. “I thought he was going to choose you. Oh, Larken...I know you wanted to see Brigid again, but—”

Blankly, Larken stared down at her hands. She hadn’t been chosen. She would never see Brigid again.

“Come.” Mama supported Larken around the shoulders. “Let’s go home.”

Flaming torches lined the shops and houses, lighting the way. Her heart thudded dully in her chest. She could focus on nothing but the cold and on placing one foot in front of the other.

But nothing could stop one word from clanging through her head like a bell.

*Murderer.*

*Murderer.*

*Murderer.*



The word plagued her.

Larken tossed and turned, trying in vain to get comfortable. The butcher’s daughter...Larken still didn’t know her name. Her dark hair, her tall frame. It was as if Larken and Brigid had been together today, standing side by side.

Larken pulled the sheets up to her throat, then threw them off again as sweat began to coat her lower back and legs.

What if everything about the Choosing Ceremony was a lie? What if the girls never returned, not just because they were chosen for some special purpose, but because they were dead?

No, it couldn’t be true. The Black Guard couldn’t be trained in all

things involving the fey and not know the girls had been harmed. Not tell everyone.

*The Popes wouldn't allow their citizens to be taken from them and killed.*

Flickering images of Castor's outburst danced through her mind. He claimed to know the truth about the fey, and he would know more than most due to his time in the Guard. He truly could have gone mad after his daughter had been chosen. He could just be trying to get revenge on the position he had been banished from.

*Murderer.*

She recalled the flash of feral panic she'd seen in the faery lord's beautiful eyes. He had been hiding something. She rubbed at her lips, picking at the dry skin. The girls couldn't be dead. They couldn't be.

Maybe some of the girls got injured during their task for the fey, but they weren't dead. Brigid was smart, she could handle herself. This was all probably just a mistake, a misunderstanding.

*Don't be stupid. You've known that something was wrong for years—you all have. You just don't want to see it.* Larken tossed and turned. *Don't go asking questions you don't want to find the answers to.* But Larken couldn't shake the feeling that if she did nothing, if she tried to forget about the Chosen girls, then she would be doing what the rest of the villagers had been doing for centuries.

She could talk to Castor. Simply see what he had to say. If he spouted nonsense like a village lunatic then, well, she could go back to sleep knowing that Brigid was in a better world and that she had to let her go.

But she needed answers. If Brigid and the other Chosen girls were in danger, she had to know. Larken had missed her chance to be chosen and see firsthand why the girls never came home. So, she would have to find the answers herself. No matter the odds stacked against Castor, she would not rest easy until she'd spoken with him.

## CHAPTER THREE

Two men stood nonchalantly beneath the sign for the Drunken Trout. Even in the darkness Larken could make out the sigil stitched above their hearts: a double cross wreathed in flames.

The emblem of the Black Guard.

Their presence was warning enough: stay away from Castor. It appeared to be working, as two villagers approached, but, upon noticing the guards, quickly hurried in the opposite direction. It was clear that Larken wasn't the only one seeking an audience with the old man.

Larken hitched Snowfoot to a post and made her way around to the back of the Drunken Trout. She pounded her fist against the door. Even from outside Larken could smell kegs of sweet cider and frothy ale, along with roast chicken and rosemary potatoes. The aroma was almost as comforting as that of the bakery. Pots and pans clanged, and the voices of the tavern guests provided a low hum in the background. The door swung open, and in the entryway stood Helen, the tavern's owner. She towered over Larken, her muscled arms crossed and glistening with sweat. Helen was a kind woman but knew how to sort out a room of brawling drunks in a matter of heartbeats. She and Larken's father had grown up together.

"Larken! Didn't expect to see you here so late. Has your father sent you for something?"

Larken kept her voice low even though the din from the crowd inside was enough to hide it. "I'm here to see Castor."

Helen scanned the alley before pulling Larken inside. "Don't go around saying that, you hear?" She shut the door quickly behind them. "The Guard told me they'd be standing watch outside, and if anyone was to try and get upstairs who wasn't a guest, I was to tell them straight away."

"It's important, Helen," Larken pleaded. "He might know something about Brigid."

The crease between Helen's brows softened. "Ah. I know you've been missing your friend, but Castor's not right in the head."

"All the same, I need to hear it for myself." She took one of Helen's hands in her own. "He might know something that can put my mind at ease."

Helen sighed. "Oh, all right. But be quick about it. First door on the left."

Larken nodded and hurried up the stairs. She kept an eye on the window, making sure that she didn't draw the attention of the Guard.

Her hand hovered above Castor's door, her breath quickening. Whatever she was about to hear, she wouldn't be able to forget it. But she might not get another chance to speak with him. He might disappear into the woods again, this time for good. If the Guard was so desperate to keep people away from Castor, then they must be hiding something.

She rapped lightly on the door. It immediately swung open.

Castor's scowling face greeted her. "Took you long enough."



Larken stepped inside. "You knew I was coming?"

"I knew someone had to. And anyone who did had to outsmart that lot"—Castor gestured to the window where the guardsmen stood a

story below—“or they didn’t deserve to know the truth. You’re that baker’s girl, no?”

“Yes. My name is Larken.” She unfastened her cloak. “And you know about Brigid. About what happens to the Chosen girls.”

Castor didn’t answer for a moment. He crossed the room to the cupboard and pulled out a candle. Larken sat down at a small wooden table. The old man joined her, hunched over in his chair.

“I don’t know anything for certain. But I have my reasons for believing what I do.” He lit the candle, casting the room in flickering hues. “Be warned, child. I do not tell you this lightly. It might be easier if you go back to bed and forget any of this ever happened. But I want everyone to know the truth—I don’t think my mind can take it much longer if they don’t.” He tapped the side of his skull.

Larken knew she would never forgive herself if she turned away now, no matter how difficult the path that lay ahead. “Tell me.”

Castor scrubbed a hand across his face. “It was twelve years ago, but I remember it clear as day. My girl, my Imogen, was taken. I begged my senior officer at the time to allow me to stand watch by the bridge, and he agreed. I waited there day and night, waiting, hoping she would come back to me.

“On the final night that the bridge remained open, near dawn, a faery woman came to the bridge. Only me and one other Guard stood watch. She spoke to us from the bridge, never leaving the stones,” Castor continued. “She told us that a great evil lived in the lands of both humans and fey. She said that we all needed to be wary of our rulers, as their power flowed from the Choosing Ceremony and that the Ceremony itself was...corrupted. She told us the girls weren’t safe in her world. And that wasn’t all.”

Castor pulled a cord from around his neck. From it hung a simple gold ring. “She gave me this. It belonged to Imogen.” Castor looked away. “It was her mother’s wedding band. Imogen wore it everywhere after she passed. She never would have parted with it. And if there was a way for her to come home, she would have. After her mother died, Imogen and I were alone in the world. The only way she would have given up that ring, the only way she would have never returned to me, is



if she was dead.” Castor’s hands twisted in his lap. “The faery woman wanted to warn us. It was as though she were telling parts of the truth, but not all of it. When we pushed her to tell us more, she said she couldn’t break her promise and fled back into the woods.

“I told my companion that we had to do something—that the girls could be in danger. That everything we knew as members of the Guard could be a lie. I told him we had to warn the other villagers. But he and I had never gotten along. We had been trained in the same unit, but we’d never seen eye-to-eye. He attacked me, accusing me of heresy.”

Larken bit her lip.

“I killed him. I pushed him into the chasm next to the bridge and told the others he’d jumped. They believed me, of course. Members of the Guard have committed suicide before. The Popes’ training that we endured was...unpleasant.”

Larken had heard as much. The trials the Guard suffered through didn’t end in the Popes’ palaces, either. Many members of the Black Guard buckled under the pressure of being secret keepers for the realm. They had to live with themselves after they forced heartbroken family members away from the bridge, preventing them from ever seeing their daughters again.

But perhaps the Guard had privileges she had never considered. Since they were so favored by the Popes, maybe they could enter the realm of the fey and not face any repercussions.

“Why didn’t you just cross the bridge and see for yourself?” Larken asked.

“You think the Guard hasn’t thought of that?” Castor said bitterly. “Because the Popes trained us to be loyal above all else. You cannot believe the tortures we endured. Only a few pass the trials. Those who don’t are killed.”

*Of course*, Larken thought. Though the Guard was favored by the Popes, they were still human—and their actions would still be considered a dishonor to the gods. They could disrupt the task as easily as any other human could. But Larken didn’t miss the fact that Castor had avoided her question.

“The secrets the Popes and the fey deal in are no small thing.”

Castor's eyes darkened. "We fear the Popes' punishment should they discover we've doubted them, or that we'd been disloyal. Do you not know the tales of the burning crosses, girl?"

"Of course," Larken replied. "How does the saying go? 'Nothing burns brighter than a heretic.' But you should know that as well as anyone. It's not as if the Guard hasn't performed burnings of their own."

Castor shook his head. "The Guard's true purpose isn't burning heretics. And it's not to keep people from crossing and upsetting the fey, either. It's to keep the truth from causing chaos."

Cold seeped into her bones. Castor's words made sense. If the faery realm was as bounteous as the Popes and the fey claimed, then humans shouldn't be forbidden from all real knowledge of it.

The Popes said that, aside from the faery lords, the fey were mischievous, prone to pranks that could irritate the humans if they were allowed to cross the bridges. But that seemed like a weak reason to create an entire army.

"But I do know of a few guardsmen who have snuck through and somehow kept their treason from reaching the ears of the Popes," Castor continued. Larken's head snapped up at his words. "They were never gone for long, only a few hours at most. And when they returned, they only spoke of the beauty they saw. None of them saw the girls, but something wasn't right...when they returned, they were different. Stayed different."

"Different how?" Larken's brow furrowed.

"It was like they were in a trance," Castor said. "They spoke of how lovely the faery realm was, how they knew the girls couldn't possibly be in any danger."

Larken blinked. That sounded suspiciously similar to Laila's story.

"The Popes told us about this enchantment during our training even if my brethren saw the need to test that theory for themselves. The Popes said the magic was the very embodiment of faith. That the Twins used the magic to show us that the girls were safe, without us ever having to see it for ourselves. The Popes claimed that only the Chosen girls were immune to its potency. But we were never allowed to share that knowledge with the people."

Larken stilled. "How could an enchantment that makes one *believe* the girls are safe possibly be better than actually seeing the girls for themselves? And what about Laila? Does that mean that she was enchanted, too?"

Castor leaned back in his chair and nodded. "Now you're starting to get it. I believe that Laila never saw the Chosen girls, or her sister."

Larken swallowed. The only explanation she could think of for why the fey and the Twins would enchant the humans to believe that the girls were safe was if the girls weren't safe at all.

"But you never tried to see it for yourself? You never tried to go after Imogen after she was chosen?" Larken pressed.

Even if Castor hadn't heard the faery woman's story until the last night the bridge had been open, he still could have crossed the bridge that night after his fight with his fellow Guard. He had lifted a sword against the faery lord to try to keep him from taking Imogen, for Twins' sake. Even though he would have known he would have been trapped in the faery world for another year, she figured that would have been a small price to pay to see Imogen again. Or he could have tried the year after that. For twelve years he could have tried.

Castor flinched. "No. And it's the greatest regret of my life. I was too afraid. Too afraid of losing my wits in the faery realm and forgetting who I was, forgetting who *she* was. I wanted Imogen to return to me, as she would be able to see through the magic. I was a coward." Castor hung his head.

Larken's brows lifted. He had tried to fight the faery lord himself; he used to be a member of the Guard. Castor couldn't be a coward.

But Larken had only been a child at the time of Imogen's Ceremony, she could hardly remember it in much detail. Had Castor truly fought the faery lord, or had he only unsheathed his sword? He had told his fellow Guard that they had to tell people that the fey were dangerous, had even killed the man when he had refused—yet this was the first time he had truly spoken out against the fey.

"After I spoke to the faery woman and she gave me Imogen's ring, after my girl didn't come back that year or the year after, I knew she was dead. I knew that nothing else would have been able to keep her

from me.” Castor slumped, his shoulders curling inward. Pity swept through Larken. Castor was alone. His wife was dead, his daughter was gone....

Castor hadn’t tried to enter the faery realm because he had given up hope. He had given up on Imogen.

“I knew I had to find answers,” Castor said. “I wanted to tell people what the faery woman told me, but I knew I needed more proof. And I didn’t want to be killed before I could find out the truth.”

“But you were in the Guard,” Larken interrupted. “No one knows more about the fey, aside from the Popes.”

“Even the Guard doesn’t know everything. We know the fey are immortal. We know that they can move objects with their minds, that they can control parts of the earth itself.”

Larken’s breath hitched. The humans knew that the fey had magic, as evident in the magical gifts they gave the villagers, but they had never been told exactly what aspects of the gods’ magic they possessed.

“We know where their palaces are, and that the girls are taken there. And we know there are creatures that roam their realm so monstrous that humans have no name for them.”

Her suspicions had been correct. There were dangerous creatures in the faery realm, ones that would cause a lot more than mischief if they ever entered the human realm. Could these monsters somehow be involved in the task the girls had to preform?

“But there is still so much we weren’t told,” Castor said. “The Popes don’t want their secrets getting out. So, I went looking for answers. For four years after Imogen was chosen, I searched, talking with the families of previous Chosen girls, traveling to other villages to see what their faery lord looked like and what kind of girls they picked. None of the girls have ever come back. No matter if they were overjoyed or devastated to be chosen, none of them are ever seen again.” Castor ran shaking fingers through his hair. “I visited houses of the rich and the poor alike and dug through the books in their private stores. I found books that should have been burned—and the people who would have been burned alongside them if the Popes ever discovered that those tomes were in their possession. According to those books, the fey also

have the magic of deception. And more monsters walk their earth than the ones the Guard were told about. Ancient creatures with dark powers, and a being strong enough to rule over them all.”

Even if the Chosen girls were not in danger from the faery lords or the special task, the faery realm itself was more dangerous than the Popes allowed people to believe. A realm inhabited by monsters that the Popes kept secret even from the Guard. Larken felt as though she had pulled a thread from a sweater, and the harder she pulled the more the whole thing unraveled.

“I was banished from the Guard because I went digging for answers. I made myself known as the village madman so I could plant the seeds without being taken too seriously, but it’s only a matter of time before I take it too far. Before my bribes and secrets don’t keep me safe any longer. Before they come for me. But I’ve never told anyone all of what that faery woman told me, not until today. I know if I tell the villagers everything she told me, then the Guard will kill me. And I don’t even know if anyone will believe me. Or if it’s already too late.”

Guilt scraped at her for calling him a coward. Yes, it was cowardly not to follow Imogen into the faery realm after she had been chosen, but had Larken not done the same with Brigid? And she didn’t know half of the knowledge that Castor did about the fey. And now, as one of the only humans trying to find answers, of knowing some part of the truth from the faery woman, Castor was just trying to stay alive long enough to spread the word.

“Why are you telling me this?” Larken asked. “I know I came to you for answers, but this...this is heresy.” Her blood chilled. “Why are you trusting me with this? Or would you have told anyone who came here?”

Castor rubbed a hand down his wrinkled face. “No, girl. I would not tell this to just anyone. I saw your face last year when Brigid was chosen. I remember that look of devastation—I understood. And you probably hoped to be chosen today, right? To be with her again?”

Larken bit her lip, nodding.

“But I saw your face again today when that poor butcher’s girl was chosen. When she was ripped away from her lover and siblings. You knew it wasn’t right. And when I said my piece, you didn’t look at me

like I was the village madman. You looked like you'd seen a ghost. You're no fool. You knew there was a chance that those girls could be in danger. I have to be vigilant these days. I have to be on the lookout for those I can trust. You could hand me over to the Guard right now, but you won't. There are those who suspect something is wrong but do nothing. And then there's you, who came here because you needed answers, like I did."

Larken studied Castor, his wrinkled face, his greasy hair. He had no reason to lie to her. Not when it came at such a great risk to him. She thought of everything she had seen so far: the faery lord taking the butcher's girl against her will, the fact that none of the girls were seen or heard from again. The faery woman's warning. Castor's research. Something wasn't adding up about the Choosing Ceremony, and if Castor and the faery woman were correct, it was because the Chosen girls were in danger. Something was keeping them there, keeping them from returning and seeing their families again after they completed their task for the fey.

She had a choice. She could return home, try to forget everything Castor had told her, try to ignore anything suspicious surrounding the Choosing Ceremony. She could leave Ballamor and go south to study cartography like she had always wanted.

But Larken knew she would never be able to forget. She would never be able to move on. Each year that Brigid didn't return would only confirm the suspicion that her friend was in danger—that something was keeping her there. And if Brigid never returned, then Larken would have to carry the weight of her guilt forever.

Castor had tried to find answers, but there was only so much he could do in Ellevere. Castor had been searching for answers for twelve years and look what he had to show for it. His most vital piece of information had come from the faery woman. Real answers could only come from within the faery realm itself. And maybe they could be discovered by a girl who wasn't chosen, who didn't have to complete a special task, one who had nothing trapping her there and who could still come home.

Her stomach twisted into knots. But what could she do? Even

Castor, a trained member of the Guard, had been too afraid to enter the land of the fey. Even he had given up hope.

But Larken never had. She had never given up on Brigid, despite her doubts. To say she had completely let go of her anger toward her friend would be a lie, but she still cared for Brigid deeply. She had wanted to be chosen to reunite with her, and though she knew more now, though Castor had warned her, she still couldn't give up on her dream to see her dearest friend again. Now that she knew Brigid could be in danger, that there was something keeping her and the other Chosen girls from returning home, Larken was even more desperate to find her.

Castor had given up hope. But Larken would not give up. Not ever.

Larken would find Brigid and the other Chosen girls. And she would find out what was keeping them there.

"I have to go after her."

Castor shook his head. "There's nothing you can do. You can only live with the truth and try to spread it, as I have. There's nothing you or I can do to stop the fey and the Popes from carrying out their dark contract."

Castor was right. If the fey were hurting the girls with the Popes' blessing, then Larken would stand no chance. If they weren't and she returned, she would lose her sight. Or worse. That was if she got across the bridge at all and made it through the magic that shielded their realm.

But she had to try.

"You said that the lords take the girls to their palaces. Where is the palace that belongs to Ballamor's faery lord?"

"Straight shot northwest. But—"

"I'll head in that direction until I catch up with them," Larken said. "But I'll stay hidden. I'll follow them and try to discover what the special task is. Even if I don't figure it out, they'll lead me to the palace where the other Chosen girls are. I can sneak in, talk to them, and then sneak them out."

*A vague plan*, she admitted. Larken chewed the inside of her cheek. She was nobody, she had no skills. What could she possibly do to help

the Chosen girls? She could go to Mama and Papa for help. They had their doubts about the Choosing Ceremony.

But something held her back. Filling them in on everything would take too much time, time she needed to catch up to the butcher's girl and the faery lord. They knew she missed Brigid, and they knew how badly she wanted to be chosen to reunite with her. They would just view this as a reckless attempt to see her friend again. While neither of them fully consented to the Choosing Ceremony, neither of them had ever done anything to aide in stopping it. Mama and Papa did not understand her need for answers, to know what lay hidden beyond the edges of a map. They didn't understand that Larken had lost everything when Brigid left—her friend, her confidence, her passion. They didn't understand the guilt that slowly gnawed away at her, knowing she and Brigid had fought. They would only try to stop her.

Her fists clenched. Doing something was better than doing nothing. The look in the faery lord's eyes had betrayed him. He was hiding something. And now Larken had heard Castor's story when no one else had.

"I have to try," Larken said. Her mind tore down a darkened path, imagining Brigid hurt during whatever trial the fey asked of her. Or trapped in some palace, unable to leave even if she wanted to. Larken thought of the last words she had ever spoken to her friend, and guilt rose within her like a crushing tide. "And you have to help me."

Castor scoffed. "No. I already told you they'll kill me."

"I can't do it without you," Larken pleaded. "If they catch me trying to cross the bridge, they'll come after me. They could hurt my family... Castor, please. You were a member of the Guard—you're the only one who can help me get past them."

She wanted to beg the old man to come with her, but she knew he would refuse. If he hadn't gone for Imogen, he wouldn't go for her.

Castor narrowed his eyes.

"There's a reason why you told me all of this. Because you feel guilty. Because you've known all this time that the girls are in danger—you even suspect that they could be dead—and you've done nothing. Even for your own daughter."

"Watch yourself," Castor growled.



"I don't know if I'll be able to do anything." Larken squared her shoulders. "But I'm going to try. And I can't do it without you. So, please, Castor. Help me. And know that you're helping those girls, too. I'm going to find out what happens to the Chosen girls—to Brigid and Imogen—and I'm going to try and bring them home."

Castor stared at her for several uncomfortable moments, and then something shifted in his eyes. "Even if I wanted to, girl, I'm being watched. You might have made it past the Guard, but I won't."

"I know a way out," Larken insisted. She and Brigid had used it many times during their adventures. "This tavern used to be a brothel before the rise of the Order in the North. The cellar has a tunnel that empties a half-block from here so patrons could come and go discreetly. The Guard didn't see me come through the back, so even if they see me now, they won't suspect anything. I'll find you a horse, and I'll meet you there." Larken held her breath, waiting for his reply.

Castor scrubbed his jaw. His hand fell to the chain around his neck, and he rubbed at the gold ring. "Fine. I'm not saying it isn't a fool's errand, but I'm not going to be responsible for you and your family's punishment at the hands of the Guard. So, I'll help you." He stood. "You only have seven days until the bridge seals, and then you'll be trapped there for another year, if you even live that long. Best hurry, now."

Larken's heart picked up a frantic rhythm. Was she truly doing this? She had no supplies and hadn't even left a note for Mama and Papa. She had no other family, no friends—her parents were all she had.

*Please forgive me.* She would be back, she had to come back. Hopefully with Brigid, Imogen, and the butcher's girl in tow—as well as any of the other previous Chosen girls who wished to return home.

Larken pictured Brigid's face, the tiny splattering of freckles across her nose. Her blue eyes, always filled with such kindness. She had been there for Larken through every hardship, every triumph. They had both said things they regretted, but Larken would make it right.

"Let's go."



She and Castor stood hidden in the tree line on Snowfoot and Helen's brown mare. Larken was glad she wouldn't have to see the tavern owner's reaction when she discovered that Larken had borrowed her horse.

Larken had arrived at their meeting spot before Castor, half afraid that he wouldn't show up. But he had.

Before them stretched a grassy plain, and beyond, the chasm. Countless stories from Ballamor centered on this place: the deep divide that separated the human and faery lands, and the bridge that joined them. Fog billowed from the chasm like smoke from the mouth of a fire Drake. Moonlight shimmered through the mist, turning the very air to silver.

They had left the safety of their village. The pastures, trees, and everything else familiar were all behind her. Had Brigid felt this way, one year before? Had she been afraid to leave behind all she had ever known, as Larken was now?

Ahead, swirling in mist, stood the bridge.

Jutting from the Elleverian side of the chasm and spanning all the way to the faery lands, it rose in a graceful arc like a half moon, the stones strong and sturdy despite their age.

The villagers all knew it, either from stories or from seeing it personally. She and Brigid had received countless dares from other children to go see the bridge for themselves. They had, of course, stealing glimpses of it before the Black Guard chased the nosey children away. Still, it had been years ago now since she'd last seen it. She could barely remember it. She wished she did, for it might have made this moment less terrifying.

Scattered across the grassy plain and near the bridge itself stood members of the Guard. Their black capes fluttered gently in the wind, their bodies obscured by the fog. Only two stood by the bridge itself, with three others spread out on either side along the chasm's edge. So few... Larken swallowed. They were highly trained. They didn't need numbers.

Castor shifted next to her on Helen's mare. Only a small stretch of grass and trees separated them from the ancient stones. Whatever this plan was, they had to time it just right if it was to succeed.

"As I said, the faery lord's palace is to the northwest. Once you're across, keep heading in that direction. Always remember, fey magic will try and deceive you. Keep your mind focused on the task ahead, especially when you experience the magic near the bridge."

Larken nodded, hiding her shaking fingers in Snowfoot's mane. What if she wasn't strong enough to pass through the magic? What if she went mad like the members of the Guard?

"Now, get ready," Castor muttered.

"For what?" Larken hissed back.

"Just ride, girl, and don't look back. Good luck. You'll need it." With that, he jammed his heels into the mare's sides and took off across the field.

"I've waited long enough!" Castor screamed.

The Guard's figures in the mist stirred.

"The fey are murdering our girls"—Castor jabbed a finger across the bridge—"and you're letting them. The Popes aren't our rightful rulers, they're *tyrants*." Castor wheeled his horse around as shouts rose from the Guard. "They let the fey give them magical gifts in exchange for girls from our village. Money and power in exchange for human lives," he snarled.

Larken tightened her grip on the reins.

The Guard swung onto their horses.

"I won't stay silent any longer. You won't be able to pass me off as the village drunk—or madman. I'm going to tell everyone the truth, and I won't stop until all of Ballamor—no, until all of Ellevere—knows!" Castor whooped, circling once more before the Guard, then he took off toward the woods. The Guard tore after him.

Now. She had to act now.

She kicked Snowfoot into a gallop. Dirt flew beneath his hooves as he streaked across the open plain. Shouts rang out. Faster, Snowfoot had to go faster. Before the Guard realized their mistake.

The chasm loomed before them, the rocks dropping away into sheer nothingness. Larken yanked the reins, and Snowfoot slid to a stop. Wind whipped around her, tugging Snowfoot's mane toward the chasm, sucking him in. The thought of the drop alone was enough to turn

Larken's mouth sour with fear. If something spooked her mount, they would plunge over the side together.

Larken clung to the saddle, her muscles nearly paralyzed with terror. This was wrong. Only Chosen girls crossed the bridge. She was nothing, no one....

She clenched her teeth and dug her heels in. Snowfoot's hooves clattered upon the stones. More shouts from behind her, but they sounded far away. Castor had done his job well. Fear enveloped her as she thought about what they would do to him, but no, she couldn't think about that now. He'd made his choice as she'd made hers.

She coaxed Snowfoot slowly across the bridge, worried that anything faster would get them killed. Nothing but air kept them from tumbling into the abyss. Unable to help herself, she glanced past Snowfoot's shoulder and into the chasm below. Vertigo hit her, and she jerked her gaze up, making sure to keep it focused on the end of the bridge beyond.

Black nothingness. That was what was beneath the stones of the bridge. Barely a foot on either side separated Snowfoot from the drop, and had Larken been on a larger mount, it would have been much less than that. Larken heard no sounds of rushing water beneath them. Somehow the thought of nothing below was even more terrifying. The idea that there was no beginning or end to the abyss. That it cut straight to the center of the world, or straight to the Twins' Hell.

She glanced behind her, but only mist greeted her. The Guard's shouts faded away into silence, sucked into the chasm below.

At the end of the bridge, Larken pulled Snowfoot to a stop. One more step and she would enter the land of the fey. A steady beat pulsed in her ears, a string tugging her toward the entrance. Her fear churned inside her, a living, breathing beast with claws. Home had never felt so far away. But she had made it. Made it all the way here, and she would make it a little farther. She would find Brigid.

Breathing in, she urged Snowfoot on.

PART II  
BONDS AND BLOOD



## CHAPTER FOUR

The caress of an entirely different world brushed against her skin. Like a shift in the breeze, the slippery, equivocal feeling disappeared as quickly as it had come.

The faery realm. A place supposedly a thousand times more vibrant and beautiful than her human one. The stories claimed that instead of grass there would be a carpet of wildflowers, and the rocks would be jewels instead of stones. The landscape before her did not quite live up to those legends—the stones were still stones, but they somehow felt older than the ones back home. Like they had stood in their positions for thousands of years, watching and listening to what occurred around them. No, the faery realm was not quite the legend she had imagined, but it was beautiful all the same.

The moon spilled silver light onto her path. While Ballamor was on the very cusp of winter, here the land was in high autumn. The tall grass whispered on the breeze. Crickets chirped. The leaves hanging from the trees were nothing like the brittle, dead things of Ellevere. Here, they were awash with color—dipped in ruby reds, fox oranges, and buttercup yellows. If Larken hadn't known better, she would have mistaken them for precious gems, strung up in the trees like dew clinging to blades of grass in the early morning.

The human world had never experienced autumn, not truly. This was how autumn was meant to be seen.

Still, she needed to be careful. She tensed, waiting for the magic Castor had spoken of to overpower her. Would she become the next Laila? An ordinary girl who had followed the Chosen One into the land of the fey, only to return under an enchantment?

*Stay focused*, she told herself.

Larken guided Snowfoot northwest, and he walked on, his furry ears alert.

A breeze caressed Larken's skin, blowing strands of hair across her face. The wind was cool, but not unpleasantly so. They passed under the branches of a tree, and an intoxicating smell drifted toward her. It was exquisite, a mix of crushed leaves and crisp night air.

Snowfoot relaxed. Larken's limbs grew warm and heavy. Something pulled at the back of her mind, something she needed to remember, something about time running out. But as soon as the anxious thoughts entered her mind, a soothing calm washed over her like warm honey, carrying them away with it. This world was too beautiful to be treacherous. What ill could befall her here? She had been wrong—the fey weren't conspirators or murderers, they were benevolent beings, just as all the villagers had thought.

They traveled deeper into the forest. A smile played about her lips. Her mind slowly drifted from one thought to the next. The girls would be happy here in this lovely place, and she was sure Brigid and the butcher's daughter were safe. Why had she come here again? She should turn around now. It felt as though some string was tugging her back toward Ballamor. Her hand working of its own accord, she began to pull Snowfoot back the way they'd come.

Snowfoot stopped abruptly and Larken lurched forward. Cursing, she righted herself. Snowfoot's ears flattened down his neck. The pony took a step back.

Larken leaned on his neck, patting him. "It's all right Snow, nothing to be afraid of here." Her words slurred.

His nostrils flared, his eyes trained on the dark forest beyond. The



crickets fell silent. Larken frowned. There was something she needed to remember, something about magic...

Dark clouds drifted across the moon, plunging her into near darkness. A flash of white flitted past in the gloom.

A huge, scuttling thing lunged out of the edge of her vision and Snowfoot reared. He let out a terrified equine scream, throaty and wild. Larken lost her grip on the reins and grabbed desperately for Snowfoot's mane, her hands clutching empty air.

He reared again, haunches bucking wildly toward the side, sending Larken sprawling from her seat and halfway down his shoulder. Her world tilted, everything working in slow motion as Snowfoot bucked once more, and Larken fell, hands outstretched but not quite quick enough to stop her head from smacking into a tree branch. Her vision spun, but she could still see Snowfoot galloping off through the trees, leaving her far behind.



Larken cursed, clutching her head while scrambling to her feet. Though the pain nearly blinded her, her thoughts were clear. She had nearly succumbed to the spell Castor had mentioned. It was as though her mind could no longer be addled by the magic as it was now consumed with pain. The flower crown from the Choosing Ceremony dug into her scalp, and she ripped it off, tossing it aside. The bridge, the trees... some *thing* crawling through the forest, and Snowfoot...

Her mount was gone.

"Stupid pony," she growled, hot tears of frustration welling in her eyes. If only she had clung to the saddle just a little bit tighter, then maybe she could have calmed him down. The thing she had seen... it had to have been one of the monsters Castor mentioned. A part of her wanted to turn back, this time of her own volition. She couldn't face a creature like that.

But the butcher's daughter was in real danger, too. And Brigid, who had lived for a whole year in this place. Larken swallowed. She had to

keep going. But her head was pounding so loudly she didn't know which way was up or down, let alone how to find her way again.

Whenever she and Brigid had played in the forest near Ballamor, Larken had always been able to guide them out no matter how deep in they got. Larken wasn't sure if it was from years of drawing maps or some innate skill, but she could always tell where she was going and where she had come from.

She closed her eyes, and doubt swept in. What if her senses didn't work here? What if her skills had depended on Brigid's constant encouragement and faith in her? Gritting her teeth, Larken pushed those thoughts away.

*You're here to make sure Brigid is all right, she reminded herself firmly. And to find the other Chosen girls. Castor sacrificed himself so you could know the truth.*

Sadness welled inside her as she thought of Castor. Had he escaped the Guard? A stab of fear pierced her heart. Seven days. She had seven days to find Brigid and the butcher's daughter. To get back to the bridge before the gate sealed, trapping her here.

*You can't think about that now.* Larken took a deep breath, letting her mind settle. She brought up an image of the forest surrounding her. The trees came first, then the bushes. However different this place might be, north, south, east, and west were still the four points of a compass. She angled her body north, letting her senses guide her.

Opening her eyes, she scanned the terrain again. Though there were no distinguishable markers, she knew she had angled herself northwest—toward the faery lord, the butcher's girl, and eventually the palace. Larken's lips lifted in a smile.

She would follow the path until she found them. She would keep herself hidden and gather as much information as she possibly could. They would lead her straight to Brigid, and then she would figure out what was keeping the girls there and how to free them. Then she would use her senses to guide her back to the bridge.

She could do this.



Feeling exposed without Snowfoot, Larken hurried on. Every snap of a branch made her flinch, and she quickened her step with each jolting noise.

She reached a small copse of trees and stopped, the back of her neck prickling. Twigs snapped. Branches scraped and shifted against a hide. Some great, creeping thing was making its way through the forest toward her. The noises were accompanied by a deep susurration of breath that certainly was not human or equine. Larken darted toward a clump of bushes on the outskirts of the clearing. She stayed low, peeking through the underbrush.

The thing that crawled from the trees was a nightmare given flesh. It was completely hairless, with pale, wrinkly skin that sagged off its body. Spines lined its head, back, and shoulders. Its hands—if one could even call them hands—sporting talons as long and sharp as any knife. Its chest was so bony that she could count the creature's ribs, and its sternum and collarbone jutted out at sharp angles. Tiny black eyes the shape and size of coins sank back into the creature's head, glaring about with a greedy intent.

Yet the most terrifying thing of all was its huge, gaping beak of bone, nearly as long as her arm. Larken swallowed at the sheer mass of it. The creature began to open and close its maw, creating a clacking sound that made every hair on Larken's body rise. It opened its beak, revealing a red mouth. Then it screamed. The rasping, guttural cry grew higher in pitch until Larken was forced to clamp her hands over her ears.

Within moments, more cries reverberated through the forest.

Larken bit her lip so hard she tasted blood.

The creature slowly closed its beak.

*Blooooood. Human blood.*

No sound came from its mouth besides the horrid clicks, but Larken could hear it as clearly as if it were speaking before her.

More clicks responded, moving closer through the trees.

*Master promised us the girl. Now, we feast!*

She pressed her lips together, the coppery tang of iron spilling into her mouth. She closed her eyes, certain that the monster would soon be bearing down upon her, but then the creature began sniffing around the

bushes on the other side of the clearing. It fell into a sort of frenzy, slashing its claws in the air and emitting more clacking sounds. Shredding the leaves, it let out another cry, then scuttled off into the trees. Its movements were jerky and unnatural—like a corpse brought back to life.

Larken waited until she could no longer hear any trace of the creature, then crawled out of her hiding place. The woods seemed too quiet, like the trees were holding their breath. Larken crossed the clearing to examine the place where the creature had been. Splattered on the leaves were drops of blood.

If the creature had not been searching for her, then which human had it been referring to?

*The butcher's daughter.* Larken wanted to smack herself. The butcher's daughter would have been here recently. The blood had to be hers. The creature would be headed straight toward the lord and the girl.

Forcing her legs to move, Larken followed the creature deeper into the woods.

The monster did not travel gracefully. The crushed sticks and leaves of the beautiful faery realm littered the beast's path, along with deep gouges in the earth. A pang of sadness struck her at the destruction the creature wrought.

She slowed as the sky's blue-black melded into a feathery gray. Dawn approached. She had lost a whole day of the bridge being open already. A breeze billowed through the trees, lifting the sticky strands from the back of her neck. Larken sucked in a deep breath, willing herself to still, listening to the sounds of the forest.

No, not just sounds. Voices. And not the rasping hiss that had penetrated her mind or the guttering clicks of the monster, but human voices. No, too melodic for that. *Fey* voices. More than one.

A small hill blocked her view. Crouching, Larken pushed through a tangle of bushes on the top of the mound. Stretched before her was a small ravine. The gray light was gone, replaced with hues of orange, pinks, and blues amongst the rocks and trees, and below...

She'd found them. By some astonishing stroke of luck, she had found them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The sunlight glanced off the faery lord's hair as he stood scanning the trees opposite of where Larken crouched. The butcher's daughter was with him, as were three other fey. Her eyes widened—she had never seen another faery aside from the lord.

The faery closest to the lord was tall, the tallest of his companions, with rich brown skin and a mass of shoulder-length black curls. His entire body rippled with muscle, and he hovered behind the lord, his gaze watchful. Dark stubble lined his jaw. His eyes, luminous in the morning sun, were a rich, golden honey.

Plates of metal armor covered the faery's shoulders, ending above his pectorals, and the rest of his torso was covered by a brown jerkin. He mirrored every movement the lord made, like he was an extension of his lord's own body.

The butcher's daughter sat on a moss-covered boulder, and at her side was another faery. He was slim, with short, straight black hair. He had a wide, flat nose and a rounded chin, and eyes so brown they were almost black.

The faery rolled up his sleeves, revealing tawny brown skin. He inspected a cut on the girl's hand. The wound did not appear to be deep. If the monster had attacked already, the wound would surely be far

worse. Larken's eyes darted around the ravine, but there was no sign of the creature. She frowned; there was no way she could have beat it here. Had the monsters simply passed them by? She remembered the crazed frenzy the creature had gone into upon smelling human blood, and she dismissed the idea immediately. It was coming. And judging by the cries that had reverberated through the forest, there was more than one.

The final member of the group stood nearby, another red-haired faery like the lord, though this one had pale skin and freckles. His hair was lighter than the lord's deep auburn, more akin to the orange hues from a flame. He stood over the girl, watching as his friend tended her hand. A lump of packs lay next to them.

Larken's gaze darted around to each of the fey as she tried to memorize their features. They were not what she expected. In Ellev-erian paintings, the fey all towered over the humans, their ethereal bodies as slender as tree saplings. The fey before her were undeniably beautiful, but their bodies were more muscular, and they all varied in height. Even the lord, who she had seen several times before, appeared different under her scrutiny. Artistic renditions of him stripped him of his powerful body, which Larken now found unfair. His natural beauty was unparalleled—the artists should have depicted him as he was.

Larken moved closer, trying to hear what they were saying.

"If Dahey hadn't been so bloody stupid with his sword," the black-haired faery snapped, "we wouldn't be stopping at all."

The faery with the freckles, Dahey, smiled sheepishly. "Apologies. Just showing off for the lady." He grinned at the butcher's daughter. The girl gave him a tentative smile in return.

The black-haired faery murmured something to the girl, wrapping a bandage around her hand. She seemed hesitant, but not frightened or angry. Despite her outburst at the Ceremony, the butcher's daughter looked content in her new role as the Chosen girl.

Dahey glanced at the girl's hand, then flicked a piece of dirt from his lapel. While the lord dressed plainly, this faery clearly had a taste for finery. A silky, black coat with gold stitching covered a dark linen shirt and pants. His boots were broken in but shiny as though just polished. A

sword, intricately wrought with a pattern of steel leaves, lay sheathed at his side.

The armored faery prowled from his spot by the lord's side and made his way toward his other two companions. He inspected the bandage on the girl's hand, praising his friend's handiwork with lifted brows. The black-haired faery snapped something to the effect of "stop looking so surprised."

*Pay attention*, Larken chided them.

Scanning the ravine once more, a flash of movement caught her eye. There, creeping down from the trees opposite her. Flashes of white skin, glimpses of that monstrous beak. Larken clenched her teeth. The lord now faced his companions, watching them as they tended to the butcher's daughter. Larken's gaze darted between the group of fey and the thing shuffling toward them, panic rising in her throat. The creature was almost directly behind them now. It slunk in the shadows, its white, saggy skin camouflaged amongst the stones. From any other vantage point, she might not have even noticed it.

Movement caught her eye. To her left, another creature descended into the ravine. It stalked its prey silently despite the destruction it had left in the forest. The monster's talons hooked into the grooves and crevices, and it kept its beak low to the ground.

They were here. They would kill the fey, the girl, and then they would kill Larken as well. She had to do something. *Now*.

The first creature was almost upon the faery lord. She bit her tongue, hesitating. Castor's words rang through her head. *Murderer*. What if the faery lord before her was exactly that? Did he not deserve to die at the hands of the monster, if he himself was one?

Then Larken pictured the knife-sharp talons and what damage they had inflicted on the mere earth. She could only imagine what the beast would do to flesh. The suffering it would render.

She might not know the truth, not yet, but she knew one thing: the faery in front of her, no matter his sins, did not deserve to die like that.

The creature reached out a long, spindly talon toward the lord's back.

"Behind you!" Larken screamed.

The faery jerked, glancing in her direction before he turned, ripping his sword from its sheath in the same movement. The creature let out its horrible scream and launched itself at him, slashing viciously with its talons.

Claws grappled with steel. The lord swung his sword, the light from the rising sun blinding as it lit the metal. The sword appeared weightless in his hand, his movements effortless. The creature scuttled forward, quick, but not graceful. It attacked sharply, jabbing out with its beak, but the lord flowed around it like water. He cried out a warning to his companions, but they already had their weapons drawn facing the second monster. The armored faery shifted toward his lord, poised to give aid, but the lord stopped him.

“Protect her!” he shouted. He hit the first creature on the beak, but his sword rebounded against the bone maw. The creature lunged again, screeching horribly. The butcher’s daughter whimpered, clinging to the black-haired faery. The faery lord sliced a deep gash into the monster’s shoulder. Black blood sprayed, coating him in gore. The creature’s arm was now attached to its body by only a few bloody ligaments, and it screamed in agony and fury.

The black-haired faery hauled the butcher’s daughter to the cluster of boulders and left her tucked between the stones. He pulled out two knives before launching into the fray.

Larken’s eyes flashed back to where the faery lord battled with the first creature. Despite only having one arm, the creature didn’t slow. The lord ducked, lunged, ducked again, then brought the sword up through the creature’s sternum. It let out a blood-curdling shriek, beak snapping, then slumped further onto the lord’s blade, finally still.

Breathing hard, the faery kicked the dead creature off his sword. It landed in the dirt with a thud.

The other monster battled fiercely but seemed to be slowing down. The armored faery fired bolt after bolt from his crossbow into the creature, but it still staggered forward. The black-haired faery with the knives avoided each bolt faster than should have been possible, slicing at the creature’s hide. The creature lunged just as Dahey appeared in a blur of fiery hair, thrusting his sword under the beast’s jaw and through



its skull before whipping out of the way. The beast made no sound, just collapsed to the ground in a heap, taking the dark-haired faery with it. Shouts rang through the ravine.

"Madden!" the lord cried hoarsely, sinking to his knees before the creature. The fey heaved the monster off their companion.

The dark-haired faery sat up, his skin and olive-green jerkin splattered with gore. He grinned fiercely.

"Thought you could be rid of me that easily, did you?" He turned and spat, the liquid black with the monster's blood. The lord briefly clasped arms with his friend, then rose to his feet. Madden wiped the black blood from his hands on Dahey's coat, making him snarl.

Larken leaned forward, and a twig snapped beneath her. The faery lord's head turned toward her. Impossible—he couldn't have heard her. But he had heard her cry out, so he must suspect she was there. Surely, he would punish her for following them, even turn her over to the Black Guard. They could burn out her eyes, hurt her family—

A high-pitched scream tore through the air.

Across the clearing stood the butcher's daughter—three grisly talons pierced through her stomach. A third creature emerged from the shadows. Larken cried out, tearing down the rocky slope into the ravine before she could think. As she ran, Madden pulled two knives from his baldric and hurled them at the creature. They both struck home, striking the monster in its eye and above its jutting collarbone. It hissed, yanking its talons out of the girl. She choked and fell forward into the dirt.

Madden launched another knife, hitting the creature directly between the eyes in a silvery flash. It sagged to the ground. Larken fell to her knees beside the butcher's daughter, tearing her eyes away from the gaping wounds below and focusing on the girl's face. Larken should have been watching, she should have known there was another creature, but she had been too captivated by the fey battling before her.

The girl's eyelids fluttered, tears leaking down her cheeks. Larken took her hand and clutched it tightly.

"Y—you," the girl said, blood trickling from her mouth. She heaved a wet cough.

Larken nodded, stroking the girl's dark hair. Warmth seeped into Larken's dress as the girl's blood pooled beneath her. The girl grew paler by the second as her lifeblood left her.

The faery lord sank to his knees beside them. Larken wanted to snap at him and tell him to get away—after all, it was he who had brought her here—but the sorrow in his eyes stopped her.

He passed his hands over the girl's wounds, his brow furrowed. His hands hovered over her torn stomach, then lowered.

"If we take her to a stronger vein, we could—" the armored faery began, but the lord gave a tiny shake of his head. Slowly, he pulled the girl into his lap. She moaned, tears still leaking from her eyes, but didn't tell him to stop. He held her, gently stroking her hair and murmuring to her. The three other fey surrounded them, eyes somber. The girl still clutched Larken's hand, her fingers cold and hard.

"It hurts," she gasped, holding her stomach with her other hand. She moved her glassy gaze to the faery lord's stricken face. "Oh, Twins, Finder, it hurts."

Larken stole a glance at the faery lord. *Finder*.

"I know, love," he murmured.

She pressed his hand into her torn stomach. "Can you... can you save the baby?"

Finder's eyes widened and Larken's mouth fell open.

"What did she say?" Madden breathed.

"He's so little," she whispered. "I wasn't even showing. Roger and I were going to be wed today. No one would know..." There was blood everywhere, soaking the ground, coating Larken's hands, running from the girl's mouth. "I was so scared, but I thought—I thought me and the baby could make a life here. Be happy here."

Madden dropped onto his knees, his eyes wide with horror. He pressed his hand into the girl's torn stomach, trying to staunch the flow of blood. She whimpered.

"We have to do something," he said hoarsely. "Finder, *do something*. You have to save the baby, you have to—"

"Madden," Finder said, holding his companion's gaze. "You're scaring her."

The armored faery pulled Madden back by the shoulder. "She's not Senna," the faery murmured. Larken was too preoccupied with the butcher's girl to try to figure out what he meant.

"Everything is going to be all right, Rosin. You and the baby are going to be just fine." Finder tucked a strand of Rosin's hair behind her ear. Tears ran down Larken's cheeks now, but she didn't bother to wipe them away. She finally knew the girl's name.

Rosin turned toward Larken, reaching bloody fingertips to touch her cheek. Warm wetness greeted her, but Larken didn't pull away.

"You..." Rosin whispered. "Tell my Roger...tell my family..." Her voice was fading fast now, and Larken leaned close to her, holding her hand again. Rosin's brown eyes started to darken and cloud over.

"Tell them I know it's a boy. That we're all right," she breathed. "Don't let them worry, please..." Her lips parted and she coughed, spraying Larken's face with blood. Rosin shivered, convulsing slightly.

"We've got you," Finder said, and with gentle fingers he wiped the blood away from her mouth. "Let go now, love." He stroked her cheek once more. "All the pain will go away. I've got you." He held her, and her ragged breathing faded. She took one last hitching breath, then her hand went limp in Larken's. Larken held it tighter, refusing to believe she was gone. But all the light had left Rosin's eyes, and Larken knew she was far from this world.