



DARK FAE

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Dark Fae

“Who so loves believes the impossible.”
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“I’m sorry. Quinn, please believe me that I thought I was doing what was best for Ashling. What you asked of me!”

I kept my back to Bres, unwilling to look him in the eye. How could he think he could possibly know what was best for Ashling? She was my sister first. I’d been the one to chase away her nightmares, to sit at the table after school, and help her with her homework, and to comfort her on Darcy’s bad days. He’d only just found out she was his half sister; there was no way he could possibly care for her as much as I did.

We were waiting on the edge of the Banshee Queen’s bower while Fianna attended to Luke. My hands clenched, along with my stomach. It seemed that everyone around me was doomed to some horrible death or suffering, and the guilt sat heavy on me making me feel as though I was a plague on those I loved. The worst part was that I couldn’t save either Ashling or Luke, and there was nothing I could do to heal the wounds I was causing by being the “Chosen” one. I didn’t have the ability that Ashling did. Glancing at the entry way to the bower, I was grabbed by another twist of fear. The last view I’d had of Luke was one that left little doubt as to the deadliness of the poison coursing through his system. His blue eyes were dull, barely grey now, cheeks sunken, and he had skin the shade of bread dough.

I wished that Lir was with us. But he had gone, left me alone with Bres, and all those feelings swirling between us. I understood that Lir had a job to do, responsibilities that required his attention. Making an attempt to wake the old gods to face Chaos was no small task; it was one that had to be done. That didn’t mean I wasn’t still wishing Lir was at my side instead of Bres. At the very least, his presence would take the strain off me in trying to ignore Bres while secretly wanting to throttle him. Not to mention that I felt safe with Lir; for the first time in my life, I had a parent who cared for me. I snapped off a branch of huckleberries, the tiny red fruit vibrant against the all-green bush. Plucking them off one at a time, I popped them in my mouth, as if I had nothing better in the world to do.

“I’m busy, leave me alone,” I said between bites of the tart, red fruit.

“Quinn, look at me.” His Irish brogue was more than a little tempting, my body swaying towards him. His voice, and I hated that it drew me in. I glanced over my shoulder.

“You made yourself very clear before.” I couldn’t stop the flush that lit up my face. No doubt I was bright red. Without knowing what I’d been doing, I had called Bres in a dream, and all but thrown myself at him. To be fair, I thought he had feelings for me, but after what he’d said, I knew that I’d only been fooling myself.

His words reverberated through my head.

I can’t save you both.

It’s Ashling or you.

You’ll kill her.

Bres’ lips tightened and he looked straight up into the treetops, the muscles in his neck flexing. As he spoke, he looked away from the trees and back to me. “I said those things because of what I saw. What Chaos showed me. I saw ta battle between you and Ashling. I saw you take her head. I know you was in ta future, but I didn’t want to believe. That’s why I said what I said. How could I protect her from you if I . . .” He shook his head.

Anger, hurt, and more anger flared up. “If you what?” I stalked towards him, feeling my power rising up under my skin. “You thought you’d treat me like crap and that would make it easier for you? You

thought that if you beat me down with your words I wouldn't be able to stand against you?" He started to speak, but I went on, not giving him a chance. "You thought that I would be able to kill her? Yeah, awesome. Goes to show how well you know me, and her. Ashling knows I won't hurt her. It's the rest of the world that's trying to kill us, not each other."

Bres didn't back up as I'd advanced on him, and I was toe to toe with him. "You know, you had a lot to say before." I said, "What's the matter now?"

"I was wrong. Chaos has fooled us all, and me. I've lost my chance with the one person I wanted most." His voice lowered, and with it, his head as if he was going to kiss me.

The slap seemed to surprise us both. His head snapped to the side, a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth spraying out. My hand stung, tingling all over.

You have to remember that you are stronger now, Quinn. Cora whispered to me from the back of my mind. My grandmother had been a five-foot-long snake when we'd met, because of a curse. She'd died protecting me; then I'd almost died, and when I'd come back from the other side it was with her as my guide. The whole relationship was weird, but it worked.

He probably is sorry.

"He probably should be," I said under my breath. The whisper of bushes parted and the low hum of voices pulled my attention around.

Fianna, the Banshee Queen, stood across from me, her long white hair floating on some unseen breeze, as her deep soulful brown eyes, as wide as any deer's, looked us up and down. I pulled myself together and walked away from Bres.

"How is he?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He has a very short time. The poison is different than the Banshee poison you were infected with. Aednat was very old, very powerful. The toxin from her bite is beyond fierce."

"Can't we call someone? Someone who can heal? Ashling healed me through the mirror, we could do the same for Luke," I said, already wondering where the closest mirror might be.

"It is not so simple, Quinn." She spread her hands out in front of her, the spider web woven skirt she wore billowing with the slight movement. "This poison that he carries within him, you cannot heal. We can only make him comfortable until the end."

Her words didn't really register. Not right away. Because it wasn't possible that Luke wouldn't get better. He was my friend and maybe even something more, something I was only just beginning to appreciate. He loved me more than I loved him, but I had been trying to catch up, had thought I would have time to, not to mention that I needed his help. Without him, how would we convince Nuadha and the Tuatha to help me? There was no way they'd trust Bres, and I was an interloper. Luke was the key to making that happen.

Bres' hands rested on my shoulders from behind. I wanted to fling them off, but I suddenly had more strength in me.

"Fianna, I don't understand. What do you mean we just make him comfortable until the end?" My mind refused to see what she was saying, balked at the truth they were trying to show me.

You know what she is saying, Luke is – I blocked Cora out, shut her down before those words slipped through my mind.

Fianna stepped forward. "You should go see him, before it is too late."

Like in a dream, I stepped forward, the words settling on me like weights, wrapping around my neck, squeezing the air out of me. Everything around me slowed down: my movements, even the air.

My eyes focused on Luke, laying prone, his eyes closed. I waited for him to breathe, and counted the seconds. I started to panic when I got to thirty, then forty. I dropped to my knees, and it was as if the impact of my body hitting the ground reminded him to draw breath, a deep rattling, wet breath that smelled sour, like poorly fermented wine, and vomit.

I took his hands in mine, shocked at how cold they were. “Blankets, don’t you have any blankets for him?” I asked, looking up to see Fianna and Bres staring down at me.

She shook her head. “Feel his face.”

Laying his hands on his stomach, I slipped my hands up to his face, and quickly snatched them back. He was literally burning up, though he showed no signs of it anywhere else. His face was paler than before, without a hint of colour.

“There is nothing we can do now,” Fianna said. “Soon his ancestors will come and guide him home.”

“That’s not true,” Bres said. “What about ta Cauldron?”

Fianna spun to face him, her skirt swirling outwards, skimming across Luke’s face. I wondered if he could feel or hear anything, if he knew he was dying. This was all my fault.

I doubt it. Likely he floats as you did between old memories.

Fianna’s voice was sharp. “Do not fill her with false hope. It has been hidden away. No one has found it in years. Searching for it would be a waste of her time.”

Bres’ voice was tight, clipped. “I say that you are wrong. Ta Cauldron was always kept within the bounds of the Enchanted Forest. Maybe you don’t want to be helping us, maybe you be on ta side of Chaos.”

Fianna and the Banshees around us gasped and, in the silence that followed, Luke drew another rattling breath, the sound filling the tense air. Looking over my shoulder, I eyed Bres as he locked eyes with the Banshee queen.

Standing there, Bres faced Fianna down. “Quinn needs Luke. He’s her future. We have to save him before we go after Chaos. There’s no telling what will happen if Quinn tries to face her alone, without Luke.” He paused. “Not to mention he’s ta only one that Nuadha will trust enough to follow into battle with Chaos.” His words settled over me. Bres was fighting for me, though that meant I was going to be with someone else. A dull aching throb started deep in my heart, but I ignored it, doing my best to push it away. His words echoed my earlier thoughts. We needed Luke more than just my aching heart.

Fianna put her hands on her hips; she let out an exaggerated sigh. After several seconds of staring at Bres, her eyes narrowed, she finally shrugged. “Fine, but if she fails, and the world falls, it will be on your head. I can take you to the place that crosses over, but it will mean your death and hers. I do not want to be the one to end our singular hope against Chaos.”

Luke’s fingers were icy, as if he’d been dunked in water and then set in our freezer back home that kept the ice cream so hard we couldn’t scoop it out. I shook my head knowing that the tangent my brain was running off to was an attempt to escape the truth. Luke was dying.

“I can’t just let him die, not if there’s a chance we could save him,” I said. Guilt clawed at my gut. It was my fault that Luke was dying, just like it was my fault that Ashling had been taken by the Fomorii in the first place. I couldn’t save Ashling, but maybe I *could* save Luke. Bres nodded his agreement.

You don’t have that luxury. You have other things you must do. Luke understands that; he wouldn’t want you to put your life in danger for him.

I didn’t answer her. I just put Luke’s hands back on his chest, and then stood up. There was no longer any hesitation. I couldn’t be afraid, not when the people I cared about were dying around me.

“Let’s go to this place, Fianna.” I knew that this was only the first step. We still had to find the Three Smiths in the hope that they could make a new Excalibur, a weapon that would be the death of my sister. Suppressing that thought, I steeled my resolve. Save Luke first, get the sword after. Don’t think about the final step, not yet.

You are a fool, girl.

I nodded, but didn't answer her. I didn't need to. Fool or not, I was doing this my way.

As we prepared to leave, a willowy Banshee bolted into the Queen's bower. She was shaking, and sweat dripped off the edge of her chin. Her eyes—a beautiful hazel—were huge and dilated. Fear radiated around her, infecting the other Banshees. The entire group began to shift, distancing themselves from the messenger. “Calling mirror,” she whispered, handing a silvered mirror over to Fianna. I recognized it; it was the one Aednat had brought me to Call Ashling on.

The thought of Aednat made me sick to my stomach. I'd killed her. Only a few short days ago I'd been like any other twenty six year old. How could it be that, in that time, I'd changed so much that not only was I capable of killing someone, but of killing Aednat, who reminded me so much of Ashling. Aednat had brought out the protective side of me, but I had still killed her, without hesitation. Me. I'd ended her life. Squinting my eyes shut, I took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. The world had spun on me, flipped my perception of it inside out, and I had to change in order to survive the shift. That didn't mean I was happy with that fact.

Fianna accepted the mirror and swirled her hand around it. The silver-edged Calling mirror slipped from her hand but didn't fall to the ground. Instead it hovered in mid air, shimmering and bending. The mirror flexed its borders. The mirror stretched until it was about two feet wide and nearly six feet tall, large enough for a person to see her entire outfit. Or, in this case, it was large enough for Ashling to be completely visible.

“Ash!” I shouted, starting forward in excitement. She had perfect timing. I'd broken through the mirror once, which had allowed Ashling to heal me. Maybe she could do it again for Luke.

“No, Quinn, it isn't her anymore.” Bres said, the urgency and fear that laced his voice stopping me. “Look at her, really look at her.”

The same strawberry blond curls, the same petite figure, the same eyes . . . no, that was the difference. Her eyes, once the colour of new spring grass had darkened to the green of mold and damp things. Things shuffled and shimmered in those now darkened irises. Her head remained half cocked to the right, as if she was listening to music only she could hear. She stepped forward, her joints jerking and popping as if she were a marionette. I couldn't stop myself from stepping back. I knew that mirror could be passed through, I'd done it myself.

“I don't think this is a good idea,” I said.

Ashling sneered at me. “You should listen to Balor's weakest link. He is actually helping you stay alive, more than he could do for your little sister.” Her voice was heavy and thick, as though she were speaking underwater and I was only hearing the echo of it. She snickered. “For now. Soon this world will be mine as it should have been from the start. Chaos will reign.”

Ashling's voice and words wreaked havoc on my heart. Lir had been right. He'd told me before he left that seeking out Ashling would end the only chance we had at stopping Chaos. Seeing her now, I knew in my heart that he was speaking the truth; Ashling was gone forever.

Fianna stepped up to the mirror. “Why have you called us Chaos?”

Ashling, Chaos now, began to pace in front of the mirror with that odd jerking movement. “I want you to do something for me, Banshee Queen.” Her eyes flickered over to mine, those dark shadows behind them made my skin crawl.

“What is that you would ask of us, but more important, what would you give us in return?” Fianna said, clasping her hands in front of her body.

Chaos flung one hand towards me and I flinched. “That one is prophesied to end my life. I doubt she

has it in her to complete the task.” She laughed, her mouth opening so wide the skin at the edge of her lips stretched to the point of splitting.

My spine stiffened and I squared my shoulders. No point in denying that, at least, a portion of what she said was true. As soon as we got Luke healed, I refused to believe there was any other option. I was going after Chaos.

Fianna turned and lifted an eyebrow at me. “Yes, I can see that she has already decided to end your life.”

The air around us shifted, becoming far cooler than any summer air should be. Bres stepped up beside me and bent to my ear. “This is about to get bad.”

Chaos snapped her fingers and the entire screen filled with half her face, that strange shifting eye mesmerizing me. “You, Banshee Queen, will receive everything you always wanted if you do one small thing for me. You will rule this Dark Isle with no interference. I will leave you and your people in peace.”

The only sound was Fianna’s skirts, swishing as she walked towards the mirror. “For what task will I receive these honours?”

Chaos smiled, a half smile on the mirror, and a parody of Ashling’s beauty rippling her skin. “You will kill that one.” She dipped her head towards me. No surprise there. But what shocked me was that Fianna didn’t say she wouldn’t. My gut tightened and my muscles tensed. Chaos went on. “A little task, easy for you and your Banshees. Already one of her protectors is dying and the other, well, he could prove a fun aside for your . . . ladies.”

Bowing her head, chin to her chest, Fianna seemed to be thinking over the request.

“You can’t!” I burst out, unable to contain the words. “You can’t possibly trust this creature!” Even as the words escaped my mouth, I cringed. Creature. Was that all Ashling was to me now?

“SILENCE!” Fianna roared. Then, “Restrain her.”

Ah, shit.

The Banshees swarmed around us, before I could do more than draw my dagger, never mind cast a Barrier. Bres pushed me ahead of him and we started to run, barely making it out of the bower before the Banshees surrounded us, far too many to fight and survive.

“Hold!” Fianna commanded and we all froze, outside the bower, away from the mirror. I could still see the single eye, a small speck in the corner of what had once been Ashling’s brilliant green orb. That was all that was left. It was already hard to think of her as Ashling. This was what the prophecy was about: I wouldn’t truly be killing Ashling, I’d be killing Chaos, that is, if we were able to get out of this current bind.

Bres bumped up against me. “Call to Ashling.”

I tipped my head up to look at him. “What?”

“Call her, see if you can get her to respond. There’s a small chance she’s still in there.” He made a slight motion with one hand and the Banshees around us growled.

My heart thumped, pain coursing through it instead of blood, of that I was certain. “And if she can hear me?”

Bres lowered his head, a single tear dripping from one eye. “Then I’ll help you kill her.”

My throat tightened to the point of closing off the words that wanted to spill up and out. My fingers curled around mine and Bres tried to pull me into a half hug, but I jerked away.

“I tried to stop them, Quinn. But I wasn’t strong enough on my own.” Bres’ voice broke on the last word.

I didn’t bother to hide the tears that slid down my cheeks. He’d tried to protect her, even from me, and I couldn’t fault him for that, much as I wanted to. His actions towards me didn’t mean he didn’t love Ashling. Taking a deep breath, I nodded acknowledgement.

With the Banshees following in a loose semi-circle, we made our way back into the bower. Chaos had pulled back from the mirror. Hand on her hips, she tapped her foot while glowering at Fianna. “Answer me Banshee.”

Fianna lifted her head, but it was me who spoke first. “Ashling! If you’re still in there, you’ve got to fight with everything you have, you’ve got to fight!” I wanted to lay my hands on the mirror and pull her through, shake her ‘till Chaos was thrown out.

Adrenaline raced through me but there was nothing physical I could do. I couldn’t fight this part of her. I couldn’t even try to rescue her; I had no idea if it was even possible. “Ash, please, try.” I whispered. She was stronger than me, fearless in everything she did. I hoped that it would be enough that the strength of Ashling’s heart would help her fight off Chaos.

Nothing happened. There was no change in Chaos’ eye, no glimmer of the little sister I’d tried to protect at all costs. I’d hoped that Bres had been right, that there was some small piece of Ashling left that we could help her be free of the evil that had taken over her body.

Chaos threw back her head and laughed, the sound ripping through the air with a force that caused me to stumble to one knee. “You think to call your little sister? Ha, she buckled under me in minutes. But go ahead, call her.” She winked at me. I shook my head. There was nothing I could do or say to bring Ashling back, and it killed me to admit that even to myself. I dug my hands into the moist ground, the cold damp earth grounding me.

It is all you can do, Quinn. You must let her go. Her soul will move on, when she finally gives up fighting Chaos. Cora’s words didn’t exactly soothe me.

Chaos snorted and waved at us. “Kill them or die yourself. If you do not do as I ask, I will sink this island, just like the last place that defied me, Queen.” She snarled the last word.

Fianna drew herself up. “I do not believe that you will honour what you say you will do. So, I will stand by the one who was chosen to defeat you long ago.” Relief coursed through me. At least we hadn’t lost our one ally.

Fianna clapped her hands and the mirror began to shrink. Chaos flipped her head back and bared her teeth at us. “So be it.” She paused and her eyes narrowed, but it was me she stared down, not Fianna. “You will regret this moment; I will make you wish the Banshees had finished you off.”

In a blinding flash of light the mirror exploded, shards flying every which way. Bres tackled me to the ground, a Barrier springing up around us. The ringing of glass bouncing off the Barrier would have been almost pretty if it weren’t for the fact that it was interspersed with the cries of the Banshees around us.

I made a move to get up, but Bres held me to the ground. “Let the last of the shards fall.”

My face was buried in his neck, his hair tickling my nose and I made a mistake of taking a deep breath. Our bodies were flush against each other, held down by the Barrier, but that deep breath

pushed us even closer together. My eyes flew to his as the violet irises disappeared under the instant flush of heat, his pupils dilating with desire. I tried to focus on what Luke had told me. Bres had used his Charm on me, which was why I was feeling this way. Knowing that didn't really help as much as I'd hoped.

"Off," I said, scrambling to push him off. "Get off me." All I succeeded in was tangling our limbs more as I rolled us so that I was on top. Nope, that was not better. "Bres, let the Barrier down!"

His Adams apple dipped, and he gave a nod. The Barrier dropped, and I leapt off him. Everywhere he'd touched me was as if I'd been scorched, my skin tingled, the intensity of that brief contact cutting straight through me.

"Damn it," I muttered to myself.

Shake it off, Quinn. It was only a moment.

The last thing I need right now, Cora, is to have you make comments about awkward moments, I thought back at her.

That wasn't awkward. That was unresolved passion.

My eyes popped open wide and I couldn't stop the gasp that slipped out past my lips.

You can try to deny it, but it was there from the beginning. Luke loves you, of course, but...

"Shut up!" I shouted and the world around me went still. Fianna stared at me, her eyebrows lifted, cut dripping blood down the side of her face. The rest of the Banshees froze and I didn't dare turn to look at Bres.

"Quinn, do you be alright?" Bres asked, his brogue rolling over me, reminding me how good it felt to be up against his hard body.

I ignored him; it was the only thing I could do. To Cora I added, *That was Charm, nothing else!* I closed her out of my thoughts and turned back to the Queen. "Fianna, you were going to take me somewhere."

Her eyebrows were still high, but she placed her hands together and gave me a nod. "Of course. It's deep in the forest; we will speak as we walk."

Raising one elegant hand, she beckoned for us, Bres and I to follow her. I jogged to catch up to her, making sure to keep Bres out of my line of vision.

"Can we go faster?" I asked, thinking of Luke, lying there, his life slipping away from him.

Fianna paused. "If you wish to go faster we can, but you will not be prepared to face the choice you are taken there too swiftly."

Bres walked a few steps behind us, and while he hadn't said a word, every part of me was aware of him. Damn it, this was the last thing I needed right now.

I grit my teeth. I was meant to be with Luke, that's what the prophecy said and so far, the blood thing had been right. Just because I was attracted to Bres did not mean I loved him.

I had to help Luke; there was no other choice. If I couldn't save even a single person, how would I save the whole world? Admitting I was afraid was not an option anymore, not with the number of people who were depending on me to somehow find a way to kill Chaos. So what choice was there? I felt that Luke was needed. The prophecy said he was to be at my side, or at least one version of the prophecy said he was to be at my side. This was a side journey I had to take, no matter what anyone else thought.

Fianna paused at the edge of a tree line I hadn't even noticed. "Here begins the swamp. It is deep within this that we will find out if your destiny brings you here, or some foolish desire to save one who is meant to die."

Before I could come up with any snappy response, she continued to speak, stepping into the swamp and sinking up over her knees.

"What you seek is the Cauldron. It is the one relic of the past that can save your Luke. Within it

the power to heal all wounds, and at one time, it could even bring back the dead.”

I sloshed into the swamp, the tepid water and murk hiding gods only knew what. “If that’s true, why hasn’t it been found already?”

It was Bres who answered me. “Because it is hidden, not only by conventional means, but by your own heart.”

That didn’t make any sense. Fianna half turned to look at us. “Bres speaks truly. You must be honest within your heart for the reasons you seek out the Cauldron. A single lie and you will disappear into the fog of the gateways forever.”

Her words didn’t really make sense, but before I could ask more, something shifted in the water ahead of us. Long, sinuous and fast. Fianna lifted her hand, and made an attempt to command the snake, but it shot past her, right at me. In the brief seconds before it attacked, all I could take in was the sheer size, and the diamond green and black pattern on the two-foot-wide head. This was *not* a natural predator here on the Island, not even close!

Knee deep, I didn’t have a lot of room to maneuver. Dagger out, I met the open-fanged snake as it struck, lunging up at me, teeth dripping with venom. The dagger caught the edge of its mouth and it hissed, curling back away from me its black eyes glittering. A flash of gold in its irises and I knew what I was dealing with—my brother Card. It wasn’t the first time he’d attacked me via an animal.

“Quinn!” Bres shouted, charging forward. I didn’t have the luxury of waiting for him.

Again the snake struck out at me, and again I managed to dodge the bite that I had no doubt would prove to be far more painful than the sting of Cora’s fangs.

When it lifts its head to strike, the throat is exposed.

Cora’s words distracted me, and I stumbled back, the water sloshing over my body as a coil from the snake wrapped around my legs, jerking me down and under. Even though I knew I wouldn’t drown, something kept me from opening my mouth in the darkness that closed over my head.

Clawing at the coils, I slashed at them with my dagger, feeling the flesh part under the tip of my blade. A hand grabbed my hair and pulled me to my feet. “Already Chaos sends death our way,” Fianna said as she steadied me on my feet.

“Not Chaos.” I grunted. “Card!”

A shout and the heavy thunk of blade meeting flesh spun me around. Bres stood over the now lifeless body of the massive snake. Dripping wet, he turned just his head, sword gripped in his hand. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” That was about all I could manage. My mouth was dry, my heart pounding.

Fianna tugged on my hand. “Hurry, the creatures here are no longer mine to command. If you are right, your brother is near, and that does not bode well for any of us.”

Bres sloshed through the water to my side, asking the question I wanted to. “Why is it that you cannot control your own forest?”

“Quinn destroyed my staff. It held the key to controlling the forest. Without it, I can only control my Banshees, nothing more.”

Right, there was *that* minor detail. “I didn’t know that at the time. I was just trying to stay alive.” I said, feeling the need to defend myself.

Fianna shrugged. “It is the path you walk now, taking Bres and me with you.”

The swamp seemed to close in around us, blocking out the sun and sky, even the sounds of the birds were muted under the low hanging branches.

“Quinn,” Bres said.

I paused, waiting for him to catch up rather than look over my shoulder at him. I couldn’t meet his eyes; there was too much between us. For all that, we’d only known each other a short time.

“What?” I asked when he reached my side.

“Before we get there, I have to tell you something. I need to say it before I lose the chance,” Br said.

I was shaking my head before he finished speaking, still not willing to meet his eyes. “No need to confess, Luke told me that you’d Charmed me.”

The silence lasted for a split second. “WHAT?”

Cringing, I turned to face him. “It will wear off, right?” His eyes were wide and his jaw was hanging open. With a shiver that ran through his body, he seemed to wake up. Brushing past me, he changed the subject completely.

“There will be a choice when we get to where the Cauldron is. Only one of us will be able to go through at a time.”

“Fine, then I’ll go through.” I said, letting him change the subject. I didn’t want to rub it in that I knew he’d tricked me. The swamp reluctantly let go of my foot with a slurp, as I stepped over the felled and rotting tree.

“No, Quinn, do you not hear what Fianna is saying? You could very well die if you go through the gateway, if that’s *still* what you must step through?” He aimed the question at Fianna who lifted her hand.

We stopped, and there ahead of us was the gateway to the Cauldron. Or should I say, *gateways*.

Two large arbutus trees were mirror images of each other. One was the brilliant gleaming red skinned trunk that stood out even in this darkened swamp, the other, though the green leaves and twisted growth were the same. The trunk was blackened as if by a fire or bolt of lightning.

Fianna pointed. “There is your choice, Quinn. The gateway of gleaming bright represents the fae who have only good intentions, those who seek to do what is right, the ones who will give up their lives for the greater good.” Shifting ever so slightly, she pointed to the blackened tree. “There lies the gateway for the dark fae, those who have seen that which is good and turned away, those who would murder to achieve their goals, the ones who will only do what is best for themselves, forsaking the greater good.”

My eyes flicked back and forth between the two trees. “And I have to choose what? The one that I think the Cauldron is in?”

“No, you have to choose the one that you believe yourself to be. If you choose correctly, the Cauldron will wait for you on the other side. If you choose incorrectly, you will die,” she said.

Bres touched my forearm, the heat from his fingers made me jerk away from him. “That is why I should go, Quinn. I know what I am. I am one of the dark fae; there is no question.”

I shook my head, “No, that’s not true. I know you.” Even as the words slipped past my lips, the truth of them hit me. I knew him as if I’d known him my whole life. He was no dark fae, no matter that we were at times on opposite sides. Even if the bugger did Charm me.

Reaching out, I touched his hand, tentatively at first. “This is something I have to do. It is not on your shoulders. It isn’t your fault that Luke is hurt so badly.”

“If I go first, and fail, you still have a chance. You are the one the prophecy speaks of, and *if* it is right, you are the only one who can save us from Chaos.” He brushed his fingers along my jaw, his eyes softening. “I’m doing this for you, Quinn. I’m sorry,” he said as his hand dropped. I didn’t understand what he was about, not until it was already happening. He grabbed my hand, and then spun me around. Pushing me, he sent me into the deeper water, and I tripped over a submerged log, my body getting sucked under by the swamp. Fighting to reach the surface, I pushed off the mushy bottom.

“Bres!” I screamed, as I broke the water’s surface, already knowing that I was too late. A flash of light and the dark gateway swallowed him whole. Damn him and his heroics!

I struggled forward, tangling once more in unseen roots under the mud slurry of water. Fianna stepped in front of me. “Give him a chance to be your hero, Quinn. It’s what all men want.”

She came to my side and helped me to my feet. The water and muck clung to me as if it were my second skin. “I’ve yet to decide if you are twice blessed or twice cursed,” she said.

Wiping my face, flicking the mud off my fingers I shivered. “What do you mean?”

“To be loved by not one, but two men of strength and heart. It is a blessing to have one, but two. I’m not so sure I’d want that even for myself.” She stared at me, then cocked her head to one side, like her little sister it gave me a chill.

“He doesn’t love me. He Charmed me,” I said. The words sounded hollow even to my own ears.

Fianna laughed. “Bres is many things: warrior, guide, teacher, Fomorii and Tuatha. But even I know he is not a Charmer. It is the one thing that wasn’t passed on to him by his father. Bres can’t Charm. It isn’t one of his abilities.”

I tried to tell you.

The water dripped off the tip of my nose and chin; I was too stunned to even try to wipe it away. M

brain couldn't handle this new information. No, I wasn't being honest. It was my heart that was struggling with it, not my mind.

"Come, let us stand on higher ground while we wait." Fianna led the way to a tree that was downed in some long ago windstorm, but it was not submerged as so many of the others were. Climbing up, I stood with one hand braced on a branch that jutted up to the sky.

"The Cauldron will test him, to see if he is worthy to bring it back to the realm of the humans. It has not ventured out for many, many years," she said.

I glanced over at her, the white dress dry and unmarked as if we hadn't just sloshed through miles of swamp. "You say that like it's alive."

Fianna didn't look over at me, but continued to stare at the two gateways. "It is. Like all objects with power, it lives and has a will of its own. Even Excalibur carried with it consciousness. It is how Arthur did so well in battle." She said this as if everyone knew what she was talking about.

"How will we know if Bres . . ." I wanted to say lived or died, but I couldn't. I had a hard enough time thinking about Luke dying. I wasn't sure I could handle the thought of losing them both.

"One hour. If at the end of that time he has not emerged, it will then be your choice. I would ask you for the sake of our world to not go through with this." Now she did look at me, her brown eyes wide with her pleading. "You are our one chance at ending Chaos' reign before it begins in earnest. In that case, Bres was correct. You must believe me when I say that these two men of yours, no matter their love for you, are not worth throwing the world away for."

"I need Luke, I need him at my side if I'm to face down Chaos. It says so in the prophecy, and more than that, I feel it. Here." I put my hand over my heart. "I will do whatever it takes to save him, even if that means putting my own life in danger."

"And if you put the world at risk?"

I gripped a branch, the flaking bark crunching under my fingers. "If I need Luke to save the world, then I need to save him first. Period."

Silence reigned between us for some time after that.

A thought had been rolling around inside my brain, ever since I'd faced down Aednat, and I broke the uneasy silence by changing the subject. "How could you face your sister knowing that you'd have to kill her?"

She let out a sigh.

"We were not always enemies. I loved her more than anyone — would have died for her even."

The words were so like my own when I spoke of Ashling I wanted to put my hands to my ears and tell her to stop, but I had to hear this. I needed to if I was going to face Ashling, even if it was just her body and no longer her heart and soul.

Fianna swirled her hand over the swampy water and a foggy image rose up: a miniature picture of Aednat and Fianna. They were holding hands, walking along, smiling at one another.

"Aednat was seduced long ago by Chaos. Long before Balor ever came to her with a plan to release the demon. Chaos will always seek out those who are afraid, those who seek to control the world around them. Aednat was one of those. I begged her not to listen."

The foggy image shifted and the two girls broke apart; Aednat lashed out at Fianna and then disappeared. Waving her hand over the picture, the queen wiped it away in a swirl of mist.

"I couldn't save her, Quinn. Chaos poisoned Aednat's mind, and I couldn't stop it." Her voice dropped low, a tear slipped from her eye. "If I could have changed things, I would have, but Aednat . . ."

The screech of an owl broke through Fianna's remembrances. We both turned towards the huge bird that sat across from us on a large deadfall.

"Bres does not have much more time," Fianna said.

I shivered, my skin rising in goose bumps all over my arms. "What happens if I go in now?"

~~"I do not know," she said, her face not giving me even a flicker of emotion. "I doubt anything good."~~

Fantastic.

I rubbed my arms. "I can't wait any longer."

She bowed her head, her shoulders slumping. "I will not stop you. I believe you are the Chosen one and as such, you must be free to do as you see fit."

What did I say to that? I didn't want to tell her I didn't care, didn't want to say that the world could go to hell. Ashling was gone, Luke was dying, and I would lose Bres if I didn't act now. The only one who would maybe miss me if I didn't make it back was Lir.

Leaping off the high ground, I sloshed my way towards the two gateways. The one filled with light almost vibrated with energy. It drew me, like a child to a shiny object. I found my hands reaching towards that gateway before I could stop myself.

Clenching my fingers I pulled back, and faced the dark gateway. There was nothing particularly evil about it, more an absence of light than anything.

"One last piece of advice, Quinn."

I turned to look back at Fianna.

"Do not lie. Be honest not only with those you meet, but with yourself and your own heart. Show them the respect they deserve."

As if it heard her words, my heart thumped painfully in my chest. I thought of Bres in there fighting for me; fighting for Luke. He and Luke did not like each other, barely tolerated one another when they were working together, with reason it seemed, and yet for me, he would save his rival. Two quick strides, and I was standing directly in front of the darkened archway. The green leaves of the arbutus tree were incredibly vibrant against the black trunk. With one finger, I traced the leaf closest to me, the foliage shuddering under my fingertip.

A rush of air poured out of the gateway, the smell of the ocean heavy within it. Clenching my hands at my sides, I stepped through the arch, and found myself plunged into a raging ocean, the black night surrounding me.

I didn't fight the waves, just let them pull me where they wanted and within minutes I was thrown by a huge wave up onto a rock-strewn beach, my body hitting it hard. For a brief second, I struggled to get my wind back, and with a gasp, finally drew air.

Blinking, I took me a moment to see the dark shapes surrounding me. The helicopter pilot who died trying to fly us off the island, the Banshees I'd killed, the Fomorii I'd killed, and Aednat, her eyes narrowing as she stared at me. Slowly, I stood. None of them moved towards me and I didn't really know what to do.

"Why are you all here?" I asked, fearing I might already know the answer.

Aednat laughed. "You killed us, so now you must face your deeds, dark Fae."

My jaw clenched and I gave a nod. "As much as I wish it weren't true, I'd do it all again, if I had to."

The rat-faced Banshee, who'd poisoned me and killed Cora, stepped forward. "Truly?"

"Yes."

Each of them stepped forward, one at a time, and I had to face them. The wounds I'd inflicted were still on their bodies, the blood still dripped. The Fomorii were the most numerous, thirteen in all. I didn't realize I'd ended so many lives.

Aednat tipped her chin up and looked down her nose at me. "You killed us all. Now feel the pain of our deaths as if they were your own."

From the first Fomorii I'd killed, right on through to the Banshees and Aednat, my body was suddenly pulled in every direction. The shock of my limbs being sliced into, my body ripped out of the helicopter, lit on fire, gutted, and slammed into with bolts of power, hit me all at once. Then the emotions hit. Fear of dying, shame of losing to a Tuatha, anger and sorrow for those left behind, and even remorse. *Those* were worse than the physical pain. Sobbing, I held my head in my hands, the emotions more than I could deal with, so I just let them pour out of me.

Combined, the pain in my body and in my heart left me feeling as if I were being pulled apart an inch at a time. I didn't fight any of it though. I'd done this to them, the least I could do was honour and respect it.

As suddenly as the pain and emotions had started, they stopped. Laid flat out, the sand was grit against my tear-soaked cheek. With great care, I pushed myself to my feet, wobbling as I stood.

The ones I'd killed, directly or indirectly, still held a loose circle around me.

The helicopter pilot stepped forward first. "I am satisfied." A breeze blew in from the ocean and his image was dispersed as if it were made of smoke. One by one they stepped forward, stating the same thing until they'd all gone. Except for one.

Aednat.

"Aednat is not satisfied with your pain and suffering."

A sharp crack of thunder and the bite of electricity sung through the air.

I spread my hands. "What would you have me do, Aednat? You threatened the life of my sister, you wanted to be Chaos' host body, you fought against your sister who is a good Queen."

She snapped her teeth at me. "You ruined Aednat's world she had made. You should die."

It was so simple for her. As if she truly was a child. I scrubbed my hands over my face. "One day, you will die, probably very soon as I'm going to face Chaos with no training. Is that not enough for you?"

She tipped her head and chewed her lower lip. "Perhaps. Aednat wishes to be there, when the fat

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