

chapter one

On the night the faerie world collides with ours, anything can happen and wishes come true—and right now, I'm wishing I had stayed home.

I struggle to keep up with my twin sister as we push our way through the crowd. Revelnox is summer's closing act, when day and night balance perfectly on the edge of the world. In the smaller villages, where people lead calm, productive lives in predictable patterns—back home, I think, with an ache in my ribs—this means that children stay up late, bon-fires are built in the middle of town, and offerings are left on the edges of the fields to prevent unwanted faerie mischief. There are special cakes, and the liquor flows freely, but all the merriment is a thin muzzle over the sharp teeth of the truth. You don't go anywhere alone, and you don't go into the forest.

Not if you want to come back, at least.

But here in the city—Auremore, the shining jewel between the forks of the Harrow River—here, it's something else entirely.

I have to fight not to lose my sister in the crowd of faces and languages blending into a waterfall of color and sound. Children call to each other in the streets, even though it can't possibly be safe for them to be out alone on *this* of all nights. But they're not really alone: it seems like everyone in the city is out, despite the late hour. The ever-present sound of voices crashing over each other is even louder tonight, volume rising with people's spirits (and the amount of spirits they've consumed). Music threads through it all, sparkling and twanging in the air.

The bonfires are the same here at least, adding their roar to the commotion. Each city district has its own, and here in the center of Market Square, everything is golden and cheerful, surrounded by dancers and the sweet smell of candies for sale. Here, they welcome the Seelie, the faerie realm of good intentions, of order and politeness—or, at the very least, neutrality. Pouches of herbed salt meant to ward off evil swing from the torches that keep the darkness at bay and paint the whole block in brilliant amber.

I seriously doubt that the faeries of the Unseelie Court will be scared off by what is essentially steak seasoning, but it's a nice thought.

We squeeze past a man wearing an elaborate mask with goat horns curling around the back of his head. That's the other thing about the Revelnox celebrations here: everyone is masked, and no one dares to utter their own name. For just this one night, faeries walk among us—and the less power they can claim over you, the safer you are.

It's all fun and games for the faeries, whose visits to the Mortal Realm are usually limited to one human at a time, in remote forest glens or moonlit crossroads. For changelings, the not-quite-human-but-definitely-not-faerie in-betweens, *walking among mortals* is less of a novelty. We grow up with humans, hated for being almost like them but not enough. Most of us find our way back to the faerie realms by adulthood. I've never felt that pull, though. My magic and I have what you could generously call a troubled history, and if Revelnox is the closest I ever get to the faerie realms, it'll be more than close enough.

Also—and on a potentially unrelated note—it's my twin's seventeenth birthday.

I can't exactly say that my twin and I have the same birth-day, since I'm not sure if changelings even *have* birthdays. I don't think anyone actually knows where we come from. For all I know, my essence might have been floating around in a cloud of faerie dust for centuries.

Or maybe I formed out of thin air the moment a faerie lifted Isolde from her cradle, stiletto fingernails digging into her soft, honey-colored skin, to exchange her for me.

I don't know.

What I do know is that ever since our parents adopted me, Isolde and I share a birthday every year. Back before it was just the two of us on the run, we always had a homemade cake and presents, and we would all sit outside in the grass and watch the stars come out. It was usually uncomfortable, near the end of summer when everything turns sickly sweet and starts to crumble, but that didn't matter.

It was still my favorite day of the year. And often, that day happens to fall on Revelnox.

The man in the goat mask meets my eye, flashing white teeth at me before turning sharply and disappearing into the crowd of disguised faces.

I shiver, clinging tighter to my sister's hand.

"Too loud?" Isolde murmurs, pressing close to my side. She wears all-black, as usual, from the tips of her scuffed boots to the roots of her glossy black hair.

I shake my head. It is loud, but in a weird way the overwhelming sensations are soothing. My boots feel more solid on the cobblestones, my body more real and alive than ever. Even the heat—of all the bodies, the radiant glow of the fire, the last warm breezes of summer—makes me feel strangely at ease, instead of just sticky and miserable.

No. If I seem on edge, it's thanks to the buzz of magic in the air, a living hum that I don't hear so much as feel, like a mosquito hovering at the back of my neck. I don't think Isolde can sense it.

Magic is technically a part of me, fizzing in my faerie blood, and this is the one night when it isn't considered dangerous and wrong. One night when it's safe to be the thing I have to be every day. But maybe that's exactly why I'm so terrified of it—because I've seen firsthand what magic does.

I stop short, jerking Isolde's arm back, as a woman with a small reddish dragon draped over her shoulders cuts in front of me, obliviously strumming a stringed instrument and belting out a song that would make the most seasoned escort blush.

My sister smashes into me, and we both pause to make sure our masks are still in place. They're the cheapest we could find, a simple painted covering of the eyes and cheekbones held in place by a fraying ribbon. I'm pretty sure they're made of rowan wood to protect against faeries, because mine is starting to itch abominably. It's a familiar itch, and for a second, I'm ten years old again, being held down by a clump of other ten-year-olds while they take turns pressing charms of rowan bark and iron to my skin to watch it blister.

The moment passes, and I somehow maintain the will-power not to rip the mask off my face.

As I slide it back into place, my fingers twitching nervously over the surface, I pull Isolde closer. I lower my voice, even though it's so loud in the streets that no one could possibly hear me anyway. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"It's Revelnox," Isolde reassures, her easy grin slipping back onto her face. "The manor is empty, and everyone will be too drunk to even notice us. We'll be long gone by the time they even realize we were there. Trust me, Seelie."

This is the part where I pause to say I *know* it's an unfortunate nickname considering...what I am. I wish that my parents had thought of that before Isolde's toddler tongue bumbled *Iselia* so many times that it stuck.

I hesitate, but I've never been good at saying no to my sister. The fight goes out of me with a rush of air before I straighten my shoulders and squeeze the soft, worn fabric of my favorite dress in my fist. "Let's make it quick, then."

"Quicker than lightning," Isolde promises.

I glance up nervously at the clear, dark sky as glittering orange sparks drift up from the bonfire, dancing on the breeze.

As we wind our way upriver, the world flashes by in vignettes of chaos.

People push through the crowds in chains with their friends, arms linked, songs in the air colliding with the louder instrumental music. Some wave flags or toss flowers into the air. Yapping excitedly, a small dog chases at the heels of a group of kids who can't be older than thirteen. The normally drab buildings are draped in garlands of rainbow-hued flowers and tiny pennant flags.

And then there are the faeries.

Even though faeries are an expected part of tonight's festivities, they slip through the mortals almost unnoticed. But I'm not quite human, either, and I keep finding my eyes wandering to balls of light floating over the crowds, or catching the smell of a meadow in the breeze of someone running past. I accidentally make eye contact with a woman wearing a feathered mask that covers from her cheekbones up to the crown of her head, then realize with a start that it isn't a mask.

She winks, her blood-red mouth curving into a smile. Then she turns and blows a kiss towards a pair of revelers sitting at a wobbly wooden table in a brewer's booth. They're deep in the conversation of close friends, hands wrapped around their cups and separated by exactly the right amount of distance so their knuckles don't brush. When the faerie's breath washes over them, the speaker doesn't seem to notice at first.

The listener, on the other hand, stiffens noticeably, something strange and hungry coming over their expression.

My heart stops. Faerie magic is dangerous, and I don't know what—

Then the listener, without a heartbeat's space to think, surges forward, crashing their lips into their friend's.

I wince. Not deadly magic, at least.

Still dangerous.

The speaker freezes for a second, mouth still open in the shape of whatever word was cut off by their friend's lips. Then they melt into the kiss, eyes closing blissfully.

I turn away, blushing hot enough that I worry my mask might burst into flames. The pair will probably regret this tomorrow. They don't need my invasion of their privacy on top of it.

The feather-faced woman is still staring at me with wide, owlish eyes. Then she turns, and her eyes flash red like a cat's in the night. If I hadn't been sure that she was a faerie before, I am now. That gleam in the darkness is the one thing faeries can't change about their glamours.

The one thing that reveals a changeling's true nature.

A cold breeze rushes over my skin, trailing chills as we let the scene fade behind us.

Isolde releases my hand, adopting an exaggerated drunken swagger. She crashes into someone with gold leaf painted over their cheekbones and lips and stops, slurring apologies and patting the person's shoulders.

I roll my eyes as she falls back into step with me. "Can't you at least save it until we get there?" I mutter, barely moving my lips.

Isolde's hand slips out of her pocket, withdrawing a silverplated compact mirror that she definitely didn't have a few seconds ago. "Where's the fun in that?"

"You're not here to have *fun*. You're here to get into the house, grab as much as you can, and get out, ideally without getting us arrested." I know my voice is coming out too harsh, but I don't know how to fix it, so I settle for nudging her in the ribs with my elbow.

Isolde looks at me sideways for a moment, as if she's just now

remembering the seriousness of our situation, before stuffing her loot back into its hiding spot with a chastened sigh.

I am not a pickpocket.

I don't mean that in any kind of morally superior way—the truth is that even if I *wanted* to be a pickpocket, I don't have the talent for it. Not like Isolde.

Isolde steals, grifts, pickpockets, and pawns. I keep us fed. We don't need to be wealthy. We just need to survive until we can scrape together enough to reunite, to start over in a place where no one knows my face.

The noise of the festival fades as my fingers drift to the vial on a leather cord around my neck.

Our parents—Mami, a midwife, fierce and tough, with her homemade remedies for everything from a cold to stubborn zits; Papa, gentle and strong and always coming home from his studio with clay under his nails. They wouldn't want this life for us. They're good people. Honest people.

And they aren't safe as long as I'm around.

So we left three years ago to run from city to city, to steal and cheat and lie and scratch out a living, telling ourselves it would be justified. It would all be worth it when we had enough to make our family a new home. When I could walk down the street without flinching every time someone looked at me a little too long, worrying they'd seen my face on a wanted poster somewhere.

We're coming up to the bridge now, boots pounding an uneven rhythm on the cobblestones as the crowd around us thins. The streets are too choked tonight for horses or wagons to force their way through, leaving extra space on the wide bridge. The sour smells of warm human bodies pressed together and beer subtly ebb away with every step.

This side of the bridge is plain, a smooth transition into the arch of stone over the sluggish water. Weeds poke up through the mortar and along the muddy banks. On the other side, garlands of golden paper flowers curl around the gleaming brass streetlamps, and an enchanted ball of light changes color every few seconds.

"Last chance to back out," I mutter, as a woman dressed in sky-blue silk passing from the opposite direction stares at us for just a second too long.

"You worry too much." Isolde catches the woman staring and meets her gaze with a brilliant smile.

I move a half step faster, trying to look casual as the dazzling sights of Gilt Row come into view.

Gilt Row is less of a row and more of a blob-shaped tangle of streets draped in more opulence and wealth than anyone knows what to do with. The houses, like the rest of the city, are pressed tight together, tall and narrow, but here they're all white stone and pastel-painted brick, with gardens out front and just the right amount of emerald ivy crawling up their fronts.

Entire eight-story houses, each for just one family. It's hard to imagine what the buildings might look like inside—and I pride myself on my colorful imagination. And presiding over it all, flanked by iron gates and a perfectly manicured lawn, Wildline Manor looms three times the size of any of the others. It's huge, imposing, and—since Leira Wildfall is sponsoring Gilt Row's Revelnox celebrations—totally empty. They might as well have painted a glowing target on it.

I haven't spent much time in this part of the city. Among the perfectly maintained streets populated by well-dressed, respectable families, Isolde's and my rags stick out like thistles in a bouquet of exotic flowers. Someone who looks like we do can't just walk around, without someone rich assuming they're up to no good and signaling the city guard.

To be fair, most of the time we *are* up to no good...but *they* have no way of knowing that.

But tonight is different. I can feel it in the air, smell it in the spaces between smoke and sugar and expensive perfume. Tonight, anyone could be a faerie in disguise, and everyone receives equal respect.

Well, besides a few wrinkle-nosed looks from people who think I can't see them.

Despite that, the crowd we melt into on the other side of the bridge is still almost entirely made up of people dressed in dazzling garments of violet chiffon, tangerine velvet, indigo silk, pure white linen—every color you could imagine and some you couldn't. Gold gleams on throats and wrists and fingers, in embroidery along skirts and cuffs. Each mask is more impressive than the last, each custom-made and totally unique. Servants, dressed a bit more simply but still wrapped in the decadent midnight-blue velvet of Wildline Manor, mill around serving snacks and drinks.

I couldn't possibly feel more out of place, with my plain mask, my simple slate-blue dress, my dusty brown boots. For someone like me, there's no point in throwing away money on a gown that would only be worn for one night—no matter how enchanting it is.

My sister looks even more at odds with our surroundings than I do, but her aura of confidence doesn't waver, even as tiny beads of sweat trickle under her mask. Isolde is the sweatier twin, but that's more because she wears layers of all-black every day, no matter the weather, than because of any innate dampness.

Even though we're identical, I can't remember a time that we could be mistaken for each other. It seems laughable that the fair folk thought leaving me in her place would be an equal trade. Our olive skin and dark brown eyes are exactly the same, but her wavy hair never falls any longer than her shoulders before she chops it off, and I keep mine in a thick braid tied off neatly at the small of my back. Our identical heavy eyebrows look bold and dashing on her face but almost always seem troubled on mine.

I can feel them bunching into that concerned twist now. "Do you know where you're going?" My fingers twist in my apron, fidgeting as always. We've been planning this for weeks, but we're not exactly criminal masterminds. Once Isolde sneaks in the servants' entrance, I don't think there's much of a plan beyond grabbing anything that looks shiny.

"Relax," she replies, taking a flower from a girl dressed in petal-pink handing out bunches to everyone who passes. "Just stay on the lookout, and try to enjoy yourself. This isn't the kind of party you get to see every day, you know." The flower twirls between her fingers before she drops it, leaving it to get crushed underfoot.

We follow the trickle of people towards the center of the district and their bonfire. It's getting late now, and most of the children have been sent to bed.

Which means the party is really getting started.

"Who here'sss try'n'a get...a wisssh granted?" shrieks a faerie, so drunk on Leira Wildfall's liquor that they don't even bother hiding the shimmering wings sprouting from their shoulder blades. A shout ripples through the crowd around them. Then there's a flash of pearly light, and when it fades, the faerie is gone. A stack of gold coins remains where the faerie had been

standing, and I don't know if they intentionally vanished or were banished back home by some Seelie rule about not getting drunk off your ass and offering wishes to mortals.

As people frantically dive for the coins, I lean to speak into my sister's ear. "Those coins are super cursed, right?"

"Oh, *incredibly* cursed. For sure." She squeezes my hand and chuckles. "You know what you're supposed to do, right?"

I groan. My job, of watching the servants' entrance and drawing the attention of any guards who might get suspicious, was supposed to be easy. "How can I possibly top that distraction? What goes on around here? There's something wrong with rich people, Sol. That would have ended the night across town."

Well, across the bridge. All the way across town, in the Twilight District, I've heard rumors that they celebrate the holiday with much more unsavory magic, and a few cursed coins would probably be the *least* of their problems.

"You'll figure something out." Isolde grins, slipping away from me. "See you in an hour."

Then she turns her drunken saunter back on with all the ease of the highest-quality actor and stumbles into the crowd, ready to dip her hands into their gilded pockets.

chapter two

Try to enjoy yourself, I repeat mockingly in my head. Isolde darted through the crowd like a shadow, but to me it looks like a solid wall of rioting color.

Try to enjoy yourself.

I straighten my mask and take off in the opposite direction—towards the bonfire. We should end up at the same door, but splitting up makes us less conspicuous. If our timing is right, she'll just be slipping inside by the time I arrive to stand guard.

But maybe our timing won't be right: we've never done anything like this before. We're pickpockets, not burglars. Breaking into someone's house, grabbing more than loose coins and jewelry... It seems more *personal*. And I might feel bad about it, if it wasn't for the absurd excess of Wildline wealth.

Everyone's heard of the Wild line.

Once, far enough back for even a faerie's memories to grow fuzzy, the Mortal Realm was united under one monarch. But that kingdom was destroyed, and now all that's left is the cities, their territories, and the leaders who rule them. In Auremore, for as long as anyone can remember, that's the women of the Wild line—the last of the shapeshifters, mortal enchanters who can transform themselves into any (nonmagical) creature. An ability passed down from mother to child along with the maternal prefix of their surname. Wildstorm, Wildrun, Wildcall: all spring from the Wild lineage, but right now the manor is ruled by Leira Wildfall, and she doesn't seem to want to let anyone forget it. This is her party, in her neighborhood, in her city.

The closer I get to the fire, the thicker the feeling of magic in the air wraps around my skin, calling to the magic within me. Despite the warmth, chills rise on my arms and over the back of my neck.

My fingers go to the vial under my neckline again, like I need reassurance that it's still there, or a reminder of why I don't use my magic. My fingers wrap around its familiar shape, smooth and solid skin-warmed glass.

Going out tonight was a bad idea.

"Care for a drink, miss?"

I trip over myself to avoid bumping into the servant who materialized in front of me while I was distracted. He's tall and broad and suddenly filling my whole field of vision, bearing a tray covered in tiny cylindrical glasses of a bubbling pinkish liquid.

"Oh, um—" I'm flustered, fumbling for a lie.

The servant doesn't budge. "It's free tonight. Courtesy of Leira Wildfall." I can hear the curve of a smile in his voice.

Try to enjoy yourself.

I'm not much for drinking, not like Isolde—and I've made my disapproval abundantly clear to her on numerous occasions.

Then again, it is our birthday. And it's free.

I snatch up a glass and drain it, savoring the slightly sweet taste of the stinging, fizzy liquid. Wiping my mouth gracelessly on my sleeve, I place the glass back on the tray, maybe a little rougher than necessary.

The bubbles are already rising straight to my head as my eyes turn up, actually taking in the servant, who still hasn't moved, for the first time. Blinking, I realize the man isn't a man at all, only my age, maybe a little older.

Realizing I've just used the phrase *my age, maybe a little older*, I feel the need to clarify.

This boy doesn't have dazzling green eyes or a crooked smile that makes me feel weak in the knees. This isn't like *that*.

He's just...here, towering over me, half-hidden eyes glimmering in the firelight. The only remarkable thing about him is his bright red hair, which curls over his collar in messy, shaggy waves.

I can't see much of his face from behind his simple mask, but his cheeks and middle were round with what I would call baby fat if it didn't seem so unlikely that he'd ever grow out of it. His boots are shiny and look too expensive, but his trousers are worn and dirty. The buttons of his ill-fitting servant's uniform strain like the coat is struggling to hold on, but that doesn't seem to affect his good mood. He grins down at me over the tray, like he knows something I don't.

I hate him, and his expensive boots, and his absurd smile, instantly.

The sweet berry taste of the drink I gulped is still rolling over my tongue. It's the best I've ever had, sweeter and sharper than the cheap cider and mead I can afford. Without invitation, I take another drink from his tray.

I expect my rudeness to chase him away before I can finish off the whole tray, but instead, he nods his head approvingly. When he speaks again, his tone has lost the measured politeness of a servant. "Nervous?"

My mouth twists into a frown as the liquid burns its way down my throat, savage and sparkling. "No."

"Just thirsty, hmm?" He doesn't even flinch as I slam the second glass down on the tray, and he lowers his voice conspiratorially. "Might I recommend water, then? This stuff's pretty strong—"

"Who exactly are you?" I interrupt. I don't dare to raise my voice and draw unwanted attention. I need to stay calm, to avoid doing anything likely to get Isolde and me tossed over the bridge. Or, worse, noticed by the city guard.

"Someone like you," he says, quiet and smooth. Like he's telling me a secret and doesn't really fear the consequences. "Though, I was wondering what it is *you're* doing here."

My breath catches in my throat, making my heart stutter and ache. His eyes don't shine back at me, the light isn't right for that, but how else could he know? Pain pricks my palms as my hands curl into fists. "A changeling?" I whisper.

The boy recoils at that, making all the drinks on his tray clink precariously. "Oh, Fate, no. I meant...someone who doesn't belong here. Didn't you—" He cuts himself off.

I'm regretting the second drink now, even though I'm fairly sure its effects can't kick in *this* quickly. My head feels like it's buzzing as I try to understand. Of course. The ill-fitting coat, the ragged trousers, the air of general mischief. He's in disguise. He doesn't belong here any more than I do.

His surprise melts into a bemused curiosity as he leans back in. "Are you really a changeling?" It's strange, but his tone isn't accusing, just fascinated. By me.

I swallow hard, summoning anger to chase away my nerves. "No, I'm a cave troll in a very clever disguise. What's it to you?"

"Nothing!" I get the feeling that he would put his hands up to deflect the venom in my voice if they weren't occupied with the tray. "Just wondering. What *are* you doing here?"

I cross my arms. "What are *you* doing here, pretending to be a servant?"

The grin returns to the boy's face, pulling at his round, rosy cheeks and making me think that maybe I judged his appearance a little too quickly. "Causing a little trouble."

There's a pause, in which I consider just walking away and pretending this conversation never happened, and he stares at me like he's waiting for me to answer a question he didn't ask.

Finally, he gives up.

"Your turn."

I look around quickly, but no one has noticed us. I probably should have walked away, but I'm feeling a little reckless now. "Same as you," I whisper, feeling the smile steal onto my lips as a little thrill of excitement runs up my spine.

"We should...probably get back to work, then," he says, but he doesn't look like someone who wants to get back to work. He looks like someone who wants to memorize me, to reach out and pull my long braid loose around my face.

"What are you staring at?" I check to make sure my mask is still in place—something about my appearance must have alerted him that I don't belong here, and I should fix it before anyone else notices.

He's still staring down with those thoroughly human, dark blue eyes. "I've just never met a changeling before," he says, with a breath softer than the summer wind.

And just like that, I'm angry again.

"You almost certainly have," I reply, snapped out of my delirium. "Most people don't know—"

His tray trembles again with a delicate tinkling and the shifting of glass, and he leans precariously forward, ignoring the drips that slosh over the rims. "I didn't mean it like that," he says gently, which doesn't really make it better.

I stare at my fluttering hands. Anything to avoid meeting his eyes again. My voice is barely more than a breath, too quiet to carry over the sounds of the crowd still swirling around us unless you were really listening. "Then, what did you mean?"

"I've never met a changeling so *pretty* before," he says, and I should brush it off as empty flattery, but when I look back into his face, he seems so *earnest*.

"Raze!"

A voice leaps over the sounds of merrymaking before I can figure out how to respond, and the boy's head turns suddenly to its source.

A girl even taller than he is, wearing an equally badly fitting servant's coat, strides towards us. The bonfire's light dances over her dark brown skin in a way that almost makes her look as though she's lit from within, and her twisted locks of hair are pushed back from her face by a hair wrap under a simple leather mask.

"Raze!" she repeats, fully taking over his attention. "What are you doing? We don't have time for you to flirt. Our *appointment* is—" She glances at me and cuts herself off quickly. "We need to get going. *Now.*"

He sighs deeply, shoving the tray into my hands before I can protest. As he does, he leans in close.

"We'll have to continue this some other time, I'm afraid, changeling," he murmurs, with that same grin that I've officially decided, after several turns of changing my mind, is *definitely* irritating and *not* charming.

"Don't count on it," I hear myself say, not looking up at him.

"Raze," the tall girl snaps again.

Then they disappear. They melt into the crowd as if they'd never been there at all, and I'm left standing on my own, holding a tray of half-spilled drinks, mouth still hanging a little open.

chapter three

I stand there stunned for several moments, while the world keeps turning around me, until I remember I need to get to the servants' door. The tray is getting heavier by the second. People dance past, twirling carelessly and slinging flowers as they snatch glasses from the tray. Glass crunches underfoot, mingling with crushed petals, shards left from those who couldn't be bothered to return their glasses.

I hear a cry of alarm, and for a second, my heart leaps into my throat, and I'm completely sure Isolde's been caught.

I'm already planning our escape from prison by the time I realize it's a totally different kind of cry. It's spreading now, waves of awe and fear rippling through the crowd. The music stops abruptly as musicians' fingers freeze on their instruments, and a hush falls over the wildest party of the year.

I, with everyone else, push toward the source of the disturbance. I elbow and shove, and when I see a bewildered-looking servant, I hand off the tray with its mostly empty glasses.

I'm shorter than nearly everyone in the crowd, and all I can see is shimmering silk tunics, dusky-purple sleeves, deep crimson coats, the backs of flower-adorned heads. People are pressing in now, too tight, and I can hardly breathe.

Then I'm at the front of the newly formed mass of people, and I can finally see what's going on.

A wolf walks through the middle of the street.

Nearly as tall as my shoulder, all lean muscle under thick golden fur, it pads forward calmly. The crowd parts as its eyes sweep back and forth. For a second, the wolf meets my eyes, and there is something far too intelligent about its steady yellow gaze. My breath catches in my chest.

Then the wolf turns its head. Its form flickers, blurring into one golden smear. When the colors resolve, it's in the shape of a chestnut mare.

The crowd goes wild, cheering and gasping. I stumble back. *Shapeshifter.*

Leira Wildfall.

I never thought I'd actually see her. But there's no one else it could be, unless she has a secret heir she's hiding from the public. I watch as the mare tosses her mane and picks up her pace to a cheerful canter. The crowd parts wider, and then she's galloping circles around wide-eyed mortals and disinterested faeries.

She shimmers again, this time taking the shape of a glowing white swan.

Now everyone is talking over each other, and the bonfire smoke diffuses in the air with the faint, indescribable scent of magic. I force myself to turn and head to the manor, but the crowd around me keeps moving forward, drawn toward the shapeshifter as if she's magnetic. They've almost formed a circle around the swan now, with a few stragglers still holding murmured conversations or chasing down servants to grab another drink.

Still, as I elbow my way against the current, I catch glimpses between the fine dresses and cloaks. The swan raises her ashwhite wings and throws her head back dramatically before transforming one last time. This time, she's human. I guess I had some sort of image of what members of the Wild line would look like in my head—brooding and mysterious, maybe, with hair and eyes dark as a raven's feathers and features sharp as its beak.

Instead, the woman at the center of the crowd is in her midthirties, relatively plain, with freckles and a pinched expression that suggests she's used to giving orders. Her strawberry blond hair is piled on her head in an elaborate updo, and she wears a gown the same intense white as the swan, embroidered from throat to toe with a frosty covering of shimmering silver thread.

Most noticeably, she isn't wearing a mask.

"Good evening, everyone," she says in a voice that must be magically magnified, because despite its soft tone, I can hear it from across the square.

The crowd applauds riotously—at least, the mortals do. It's easy to spot the faeries now. They're the ones with crossed arms, rolling their eyes. Faeries love spectacle, but to them,

Leira's whole production must be like watching a child screaming for attention as she executes a crooked handstand.

Leira motions for quiet, and the crowd calms. "Thank you so much for joining me this evening. I hope my hospitality is to your liking." Another cheer, which Leira allows with a gracious smile.

After that, I tune her out. She keeps the crowd's breathless attention with occasional sparks at her fingertips as she gestures, and they cling to her every word.

I reach the side door, which is wide open so that the servants can come and go with their trays. Golden light spills from the house, along with the clattering of pots and the sound of people yelling at each other. I lean against the ivycovered wall casually, and no one gives me a second glance, thanks to the same plain clothes that made me stick out so badly in the crowd.

A servant wanders outside, trying very hard to look like she's working while she cranes her neck to see what's going on in the packed circle of people. As she pauses, I snatch several miniature almond cakes off her tray and stuff them into the pocket of my apron. Then, since she's still distracted, I take another handful, popping one into my mouth.

The cake is delicious, delicately sweet with a dusting of sugar clinging to the top that puffs up as I bite down. The sugar is going to make my pockets a mess, but there will be plenty of time to clean my apron later. Each bite dissolves in my mouth, leaving a faint, nutty aftertaste coating my tongue. I start mentally deconstructing the ingredients, wondering how they got it so fluffy without the richness of eggs in the batter. I've been baking with my father since I was old enough

to hold a spoon, so I know a good cake when I taste it, and this is definitely—

"We need to go," Isolde huffs into my ear. "Now."

I startle, bashing my elbows into the stone behind me. My twin has materialized, as if out of nowhere. There's still at least half an hour until we were supposed to meet back up. But before I can even think of questions to ask or respond to the breathless urgency of her tone, Isolde is already hauling me away.

"Sol—" I start, panic leaping up my throat. Was she caught? What went wrong? Then I realize she's pulling me inside the house, instead of sprinting for the bridge. "Where are we going?"

She looks over her shoulder, grinning. "I found something."

Wasn't that kind of the point? I think, but I let myself get dragged along, ducking to avoid the chaos of the busy kitchen. The sounds and smells all clash in the air, making it impossible to pick out any details other than loud and delicious. At least all the servants are so focused on whatever they're doing that they're too busy to notice two nonuniformed girls slipping inside.

Isolde moves quickly, with the confidence of someone who's taken this route a hundred times. The kitchens lead into more service areas, through twisting knots of hallways, until they eventually spill into the main house.

We slow as I trip, and Isolde hauls me back to my feet. It's not my fault, though: my imagination failed me. My mind can't even understand what I'm looking at as someone's house. It's impractical, with ceilings almost three times my height and not an inch of wall that isn't covered in some kind of gilt

adornment or tapestry or painting of golden-haired Wildline forebears. The hallway seems to go on for miles, intricately laid wooden floor covered in a plush rug with the design of a hedge of roses, lit by the even yellow glow of a ball of light like the one out in the street. It's totally breathtaking.

It's totally ridiculous.

Golden hallways and staircases streak by, all one unmemorable blur. I have no idea how Isolde can remember which way to go, but in just a few moments we're standing before a door grander than any of the others.

But before I can memorize the look of the gleaming gold inlay or the exact height of the soaring arch it's set into, Isolde is dragging me into place. "Watch the hall."

The door boasts an enormous lock, the likes of which I've never seen. Isolde has some practice with lock picking, along with a natural light touch, but I can't imagine she's ever laid a hand on something as complex as this.

The tightness in my chest loosens just enough that I can whisper, "Sol, why are we here?"

She looks up at me from her crouch and scratches the frame with a fingernail.

"Don't—" I start, but she's already scraping gold shavings from under her nails.

"This is gold, Seelie. Real gold."

I sigh. "Okay, why am I here?"

Ignoring me, she twists her lock picks in the shiny brass opening. "Because it's the only lock I've ever seen that takes four hands to open. Or a special key, but four hands should do it. Which means...?" she prompts, still focused on the lock.

"There's something very special back there that no one

wants us to see," I mutter, leaning to look around the corner. It's too far to see what's on the other side from here, which means if anyone's coming, we won't have much time to get out. I try to breathe slowly. To count the seconds. To stay as calm and steady as my sister.

My hands flutter anxiously. We're totally exposed, with nowhere to run. "What if they have guard dragons?" I blurt, giving my wildest anxiety a voice.

"No such thing," Isolde says, a pick held between her gritted teeth. "Dragons are fluffy little pets with dulled teeth and clipped wings. *Guard* dragons are a myth rich people invented to keep poor people from doing—"

Click.

"This," she finishes triumphantly. The lock springs into place, and I feel my knees go weak with relief...but the door doesn't open.

"Hold," Isolde says urgently, her elbows angled awkwardly so I can take hold of the picks. "Exactly like that. Yes, perfect. Don't move!"

Now I'm staring at the lock, at her hands fitting another smaller set of lock picks between whatever it is I'm holding open, at my shoes, at the shiny floor. My eyes blur a little. I can hear my heart beating in my ears, louder than the Revelnox drums. It feels like someone could spring on me at any moment.

But I stay perfectly still.

A queasy churning in my stomach is making me start to regret those two drinks earlier, but my head is completely clear from the terror of being in here. My palms are sweaty, but I can't let the lock picks slip.

Then I hear something else: a soft click, click, click—like footsteps, but not quite. Whatever it is, it's going to be around the corner any second now.

"What's that, Seelie?" Isolde whispers, still focused on the lock.

Was I still supposed to be keeping watch? I'd been given a new task, but—

Then the sound echoes around the corner, revealing a dragon slightly smaller than the wolf. Its scales are a mottled green, like weathered copper, and its undersized wings are held tight to its thickly muscled neck. Its mouth hangs slightly open as it paces, showing hundreds of spectacularly maintained white teeth. I know that firedrakes—the giant, wild, fire-breathing dragons—are long extinct, but I always imagined they'd look about as scary as this.

"Seelie?" Isolde repeats, as a chill runs all the way down my arms, and I squeeze the lock picks tighter in an attempt not to drop them in frozen terror.

"A myth," I whisper, hoping its hearing isn't great. It hasn't spotted us yet, but that's only because its snout is stuck to the floor, and it's clearly puzzling over our unfamiliar scent.

Isolde glances up for less than a second and returns to the lock, swearing quietly as she tries to pick it faster. I manage not to let go and run screaming, but my hands are trembling so hard I can't imagine it's much help.

Less than a second before I'm about to make a run for it anyway, the lock gives, and the door glides open on silent, oiled hinges. We throw ourselves inside, not caring what might be lurking in the total darkness of the room beyond.

I ease the door back as far as possible without letting it ac-

the hall

tually click shut: I don't want to risk being locked in here. Wherever *here* is. We wait several seconds, trying to listen to the dragon's approach over the sound of our own shallow breathing. It pauses in front of the door, snuffling loudly, and Isolde squeezes my hand as we both try to stay completely still.

Then it moves on, and its claws click, click, click down the hall before disappearing. Finally, after another long pause, we slump in relief.

"What is this place?" Isolde asks, voice still cautiously quiet. I'm imagining piles of gold, or some kind of treasury hiding magical artifacts, something that would warrant a lock like that on a door like that, when soft yellow light floods the room's corners. Isolde and I both jump instinctively, backs bumping against each other, as we wait to be caught—but

The enchantment must activate whenever someone speaks. There isn't actually anyone here.

it's only another ball of enchanted light, just like the ones in

Finally, I take in our surroundings. Nothing inside the room suggests the same kind of grandeur as the intricately decorated door. We must have passed a dozen studies that look exactly like this on our way up: a small, tidy space with a desk and soft carpeting and bookshelves lining the walls. The only things that seem out of place are a glass display case next to the desk and a tacked-up map covered in scribbles.

The Harrow River cuts a sharp curve across the map like the slash of a dagger. One side is taken up by the Western Mountains, a range of rocky cliffs on the opposite side of the continent from the foothills of the Eastern Range, where I've spent my entire life. The Eastern Range butts up against the sea, dropping down in a sheer sheet of rock. I've never been as far as the Western Mountains, but I know they're the border between us and the Dragon Lands, a plateau of active volcanoes, covered in sleek obsidian and riddled with unmarked gateways to the Unseelie Realm. So, basically, uninhabitable for pretty much any other species besides the one that gave the land its name, back before fire-breathing dragons were hunted to extinction.

Throughout the ages, more than one power-hungry half-wit has had the brilliant idea that a mountain castle overlooking the Dragon Lands would be badass, inevitably ending in disaster and littering the cliffs of the Western Mountains with grander, stranger ruins than the normal ones scattered from sea to sea. It's this border that's been marked up the most on Leira's map, concentric circles closing in on a spot she can't seem to find. Some of the circles are crossed out with violent slashes.

I freeze uncertainly, but Isolde takes a step closer to the case and peers inside. "It's just a compass," she says.

The door bursts open, and the red-headed boy from earlier tumbles inside, landing in a heap at my feet. I step back, stifling a scream with my hands over my mouth, as he glares up at me from the floor. "You!"

"You!" I echo.

Isolde's knife is already drawn. "Who's this?"

"By all means, Raze, bust the door down." The girl he was with follows him inside, pulling the door half-closed behind her. The boy stands up with as much dignity as he has left, which isn't much, hand resting on the hilt of his own dagger.

The four of us stare at each other.

Finally, the tall girl breaks the silence. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Isolde's blade twists lazily in her fingers. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Okay, clearly we're all breaking in." Raze says it goodnaturedly, but there's an edge to his smile I don't like. "But you see, changeling, it was our idea first."

At the word *changeling*, Isolde shoots me a wide-eyed look. Then she smooths her face out again, addressing him. "Well, we got here first."

I feel like I should say something, like maybe if I was cleverer there would be a perfect string of words that would make everyone put their knives down, but I'm too tongue-tied. At least it doesn't look like they're going to turn us in.

Raze looks past us, taking in the room. His smile flickers, and he lets his hand drop. "I have to admit, it's a disappointment."

"Hoping for treasure?" Isolde's tone drips honey, as if mocking him for the exact same thing we were doing. Before he can respond, she flicks the case open and snatches the compass.

"Olani, now!" Raze and the girl both lunge forward. I'm pretty sure they don't know what they're grabbing for; they just don't want *us* to have it. I shove myself forward, too. I may not have a weapon, but at least I can stand between them and my sister. Unless she meant for me to run, in which case I'm in trouble.

Raze trips over me, dropping to the floor for the second time, and this time taking me with him. We land in a heap,

cushioned by the soft carpet, and Olani leaps over us to make another grab at Isolde, who dodges nimbly out of the way.

"Well, this is new." I can't see the speaker, but it definitely isn't any of the four of us. The voice sounds lazy, almost amused, and as cold as ice cracking over a frozen river.

Caught, I think through total panic. Caught, caught, caught. I kick Raze viciously away, not caring where I hit him as long as it untangles our limbs.

He doesn't resist. He's perfectly still.

I look up in the direction of his gaze and see a figure standing in the display case...or perhaps the display case is standing in him. He's tall and ghostly pale, slightly translucent, and I can make out the glass through his torso. He looks down at himself, a little annoyed, and steps forward to remove the offending furniture from his lower half.

"What an interesting bunch," he says. "I don't think I've seen any of you before. Oh, is this a heist?"

Isolde and I exchange a look. I don't know what he is, but he isn't human. And I don't think he's any kind of sentinel guarding this space, because he doesn't seem particularly upset that we're in here. Her eyes dart from me to the compass in her palm. "It's broken," she murmurs. "The needle doesn't move." She looks up at the figure. "Is this yours?"

His lips twist. "I suppose you could say that."

Olani snatches the compass from Isolde's hand. In the brief second that it passes from palm to palm, the figure flickers and disappears, before crackling back into existence. "I'd prefer if one of you would hold onto that," he snaps. "It's very disorienting going back and forth like this."

"What are you?" Raze's voice is soft as he stands up, peer-

ing more closely at the ghostly figure until they're practically nose-to-nose.

"If this *is* a heist," the figure says, ignoring Raze's question and looking at each of us in turn instead, "you'd better get on with it. I've been in Leira's keeping too long, I think, and I can't imagine her letting you just stroll out of here if you keep wasting time."

I finally find my voice and blurt, "So you're...in the compass?"

"Something like that." He smirks again. "But think of it less as a compass and more as a guide."

"A guide to what?" Raze asks, reaching to the tall girl to take the compass. She hands it over easily. The figure flickers but quickly schools his irritated expression, meeting Raze's eyes with a slow smile.

"The great Wildline legacy, of course."

In the silence that follows, the sound of footsteps echoes from far down the hall—humanlike, this time, several pairs of boots. If the dragon's with them, its claws are lost in the noise.

"And that'll be Leira's people," the figure says lightly. "Better hurry."