

## **THIS IS SHE**

While I loved writing THE DARKEST COURT series in first-person, it meant I didn't have a chance to expand on one of my favorite characters: Queen Mab. As the series grew, I wrote down snippets of ideas from her story. I'll never write her full tale out, but I wanted to share the pieces I saved so you could see the woman who was always moving in the background of the other books.

Rather than try to polish these up and present you the most beautiful, well-transitioned compilation possible, I've left them in something close to their original format. There are skips and starts between the events, and not everything is fully expanded on. Don't feel like you're missing chunks of the story ... There isn't an answer to every question here. There's just Mab.

**CONTENT WARNINGS:** power imbalance between previous romantic partners, violence, miscarriage, grieving, brief mention of child abandonment, complications of a difficult pregnancy, implied post-partum depression, death in battle (as mentioned in THE IRON CROWN)

1.

He did not take the news well. Mab had expected as much. The coupling with the noble had been adequate, though nothing more than a release during the spring ritual. His wife had wandered off with a younger, more attractive guard during the celebration. Mab had been serving the king's table that night and when the noble followed her to the woods after the feast to proposition her, to get revenge for his wife's faithlessness, Mab hadn't refused.

She hadn't expected the pregnancy to take. It never had before. She hadn't expected to have to find the noble, to sneak to the back of his cottage one night, and to ask the hob working there to send him out to her.

She hated hiding in the shadows, as if she were a shameful secret. She hated the shock and disgust on his face when he stepped outside and spotted her. She hated his disdain when he reminded her he owed her nothing after their quick fuck, that he had a *wife* inside waiting for him.

Then she'd told him of their bastard.

He blanched. He left her standing in the darkness. He returned with the same hob in tow. He commanded Mab to let his servant terminate the pregnancy, to give her the herbs that would snuff out the tiny, flickering flame within her womb. He stood there, body tight with indignation, and *ordered* her to obey him.

As if he had *any* control over her body. As if she would grant him any such power over her.

She tilted her head back and laughed and laughed.

She didn't expect him to bind her with thorned vines, to refuse to release her, even when she struggled so much her dark blood dripped onto the earth, leaving blooms of frost in the droplets' wake as they soaked into the dirt. She didn't expect him to demand the hob obey him and then to hit the poor fae for refusing. She didn't expect him to have the resolve he needed to solve the issue himself.

So it was a surprise when he turned back to her and said he couldn't risk letting her ruin his life. That killing her was the only acceptable course. That he'd make it quick, for her sake, for the sake of the monster growing inside her.

He assumed she'd accept her fate. For how many millennia had lesser fae like her done just that? They listened to the fae of life and light and assumed the distinctions between their

magicks were justified, that their mistreatment was justified. They kept their heads down and accepted the pain and promised their children life would be better.

Lies. Beautiful, rotten lies.

Rage was familiar. She'd felt it for centuries, had let it grow inside her, twisting through her veins, scratching against her ribs, and sharpening her teeth until every word she bit back soaked her tongue in blood.

This rage was new. Clarifying. Powerful. This rage didn't burn with the light and warmth of the Green Man's magick. This rage cut and carved like a northern wind.

He stepped closer to her, reaching out to brush the backs of his fingers down her cheek while the vines held her in place. He was sorry. So sorry she'd done this to herself. So sorry she'd given him no other choice. This was all her fault and she would bear the consequences of her actions.

"Yes," Mab said as he leaned closer, "I shall bear it."

He gasped when the ice spears pierced his body. All her life, she'd been told her winter magick was an aberration, a destructive force that flew in the face of the Green Man's glory. But as she reached down into the earth of the sídhe this dark power flowed into her freely. The world cried with relief at her cooling touch. For every day, a night. For every summer's growth, a winter to destroy and rebalance the world. The earth understood. For her daring, for her boldness, she would be rewarded.

"I shall bear the consequence happily," she whispered into the dying man's ear. "And I will give it a kingdom of its own."

The vines shattered into chunks of ice when she pulled against their hold. The frozen air around her blinked and sparkled and she *burned* with a fierce joy as she examined the body.

Her child would never know this man. Her child would never know his disgust or irrational hatred. Her child would never doubt its place in this new world she would build.

She rested a hand over her belly and frowned when blood dripped down her torn sleeves and stained the fabric of her dress.

"Where will you go?" the hob asked her quietly. Her cheek was already swelling from the noble's strike.

Mab reached out and brushed her fingers of the injury, cooling the inflamed and broken skin. Maybe now it wouldn't swell as badly. "Anywhere but here." The earth whispered to her

and she smiled. “I’ll know when to stop, when we’ve finally reached somewhere beyond their reach.”

“They’ll come after you.”

“Let them. Anyone who wishes to join me can. We are too many for them to stop us.”

The hob hummed in agreement. “And if they wage war on you?”

Mab lifted her chin and looked up at the stars. They were so much brighter now, sparking with the same freedom she felt coursing through her. “I will find peace. Whatever it takes, I will do it. Whatever cost, I will pay it.”

“It seems a worthy exchange,” the hob said quietly.

“It is.”

“If you’re leaving now, you’ll need a healer,” the hob pointed out. “And a midwife.”

Mab tilted her head. “I suppose I shall.”

“Let me get my things.”

2.

The ceremonial chamber was dark, except for the sliver of low sunlight sliding through the narrow entryway to illuminate the stone she used as her throne. The humans who knelt before her, offering up a heavy silver crown, didn't dare hold her gaze. She understood why. They'd witnessed the battle firsthand, seen the brutality of the war between the Seelie and her new Court—her *Unseelie*—play out. Her victory was worth celebrating, was worth offering peace, especially if it meant she would leave their fragile settlements alone.

She accepted their gift with polite words and gentle brushes of glamour, enough to weave a legend but not enough to scare them away. She didn't smile. She couldn't, not when the pain pulsing through her would transform the curve of her lips into a grimace.

Dea's potions had eased her enough to last through this moment, but wouldn't hold for much longer. She would survive the damage from the Seelie sword that pierced her.

Her child had not.

The moment this was over, she and Dea would retreat to the ragged cavern she'd found and she would face the consequences of her actions. Her legacy would be buried deep in the earth. She would mourn in the quiet darkness where no one would hear her except the loyal hob who watched her carefully for any sign of her pain showing through her glamoured illusion.

Only the crown's weight held her down to the earth, pinned her in place in this sacred spot where magick shivered under her feet. If she knelt down and dug her fingers into the dirt, she might brush against that current. She might let it take her away.

"Your Majesty—" Nickgut stood at her shoulder. The redcap had fought beside her, leading her ragtag troops into battle on her orders. He was steady and quiet and patient. He adored her, had followed her from the *sídhe* and dedicated his life to her service. He called her "Your Majesty" with the same reverence others gave to their lover's names when gripped in the throes of passion. She glanced at him, unsure why he'd trailed off.

"What shall we do now?" he murmured once he'd secured her attention.

She looked out over the remaining crowd. The fae standing before her were a motley crew, bloodstained and injured, but backs straightened in pride. She knew the stories the Seelie would weave about them. They were not creatures of light and life. They were creatures of shadow and decay, of ruination and the promise that only came from the end of life itself. Summer's end was the beginning of new, better things.

“Tomorrow, we create our Court,” she said, loud enough for the rest of hear.

Their cry of celebration reverberated through the stone surrounding her. She closed her eyes and tried to let the vibrations of their joy drown out her sorrow.

“Tomorrow,” she added quietly to Nickgut alone. “Tonight, I shall mourn our losses.”

The corners of his eyes softened in sympathy and he swallowed once, hard, before inclining his head and saying, “Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Dea,” Mab whispered, “assist me?”

The hob stepped forward and waited for Mab to lift herself from her seat. The wave of pain almost took her, but she waited for it to pass before reaching for the hob’s hand. Dea squeezed tightly and led her past the jubilant crowds, towards the cavern they’d prepared, the pit where her future would end.

3.

She lay naked on her bed, enjoying the chill of sweat cooling on her skin even as a low fire did its best to heat the room. She'd sent him away the moment they finished and he'd obeyed. The rules of the coupling had been clear enough when he agreed to them; Dea ensured he understood his role before she let him into Mab's chamber. Complete anonymity. A potion they'd both drunk to hide their glamours from each other. A mask to hide his features. No words spoken.

There was a strange peace in the entire affair. She'd allowed him to take her apart in exchange for his own release, and that was the end of it. No ill-made decisions to mourn. No regrets.

No king or consort would ever sit beside her. She would be beholden to no one. Magick would be her only companion.

She sighed and rested a hand on her stomach, idly running her fingers over the scar there. Centuries had passed, the wound had healed, yet the grief remained. Maybe it too would fade someday.

4.

Her son was born in the depths of winter, when the world was still and silent. He was healthy and strong, but Mab hadn't felt the strong pull of maternal affection she'd expected when the small, snuffling bundle had been placed in her arms.

She wanted to love him. She ensured he had the best tutors. She filled his days with lessons from experts in her Court, spent hours with him at her side, explaining his role and powers to him. She brushed dirt from his cheeks and checked his clothes for tears before he stood at her side during their royal audiences. She would give him the world.

He was too young to remember being kidnapped by two disloyal courtiers who intended to take him to the Seelie sídhe, to give him to Oberon and Titania as a bargaining chip. Mab caught them first. Nickgut and Cybel, two of her most loyal soldiers, had gone hunting for the kidnappers with her. She handed off Sláine to them with orders to take him home, then turned her attention to the fae who threatened her son and her rule. She pinned them to the earth with pointed ice spears and tortured them until they died. She brought their bones back to her sídhe—some fashioned into decorative accents in her newest crown, others carved into chess pieces as trophies. As proof of what she would do if her family were threatened.

No attempts to usurp her touched her son after that, and she survived efforts to overthrow her again and again until there were no more bones to keep and carve.

The stability was welcome. There were other worries to face. Sláine's glamour was strong, uncontrollable, and she had no idea what shape it would take as he aged. She feared she wouldn't keep him in line.

Her worries were assuaged sooner than she imagined.

He found a nest of abandoned bunnies during one of their horse rides. He was so excited, so overwhelmed, and she felt his glamour hum for the first time when he reached out to pet the small creatures.

It was a merciful death for them to fade that way, quick and painless, unlike the freezing or starvation they would have faced otherwise that night.

It was the first time out of his young infancy she saw her son cry. He stopped quickly enough, pulled on gloves, and rode back to the sídhe in silence at her side. He retreated to his chambers and didn't come out for dinner.

He wanted comfort. She couldn't give him that.



He wanted answers. She had none, had no idea who his father was or why his powers would manifest in such a way.

There was only one thing she could offer. So she waited in her throne room for him to come to her.

He waited until the rest of the Court was abed to find his way to her.

“Can you help me control it?” he asked her, expression blank. Only the redness around his eyes and the tight line of his mouth gave away his true feelings.

“I can,” she promised.

And she did. Once he had mastered his control, she presented him formally to her Court. She gave him his title.

The Prince of Earth and Ruin.

He wore it like a badge of honor, not a grim weight, and displayed his abilities to her courtiers. He took up his place at her side. He wouldn't fail her.

She reached out and clasped his bare hand in hers. He sucked in a breath, but his control never slipped. He squeezed back, looking out at the crowd instead of at her, and she told herself this is what love must be.

5.

The houses in the village were buttoned up tight against the storm blowing in at her back. Their Yule festivities the days before had been bright and joyous, something enjoyable to witness, but the dangers lurking in the shadows on the following dark nights encouraged the simple humans off to bed easily enough.

She enjoyed these quiet nightly walks. It was easy enough to make her way back to the sídhe if she needed to, and a veil of glamour would hide her from any human brave enough to dare a look outside as she passed. Stepping through the rapidly falling snow, letting it brush over her cheeks when the cloak's hood slipped, and listening to the peace of winter around her granted a brief respite from the weight of her crown.

The power of Faerie continued to fade. She and Oberon felt it, pretended not to worry about it, and ensured all Rites were followed perfectly in their best efforts to make the waning magick last. They needed to find answers. They had a millennia, maybe less before the former Green Man's power would disappear and leave them to their ruination.

She needed to secure her Court. She couldn't let her people suffer from the foolishness of their Seelie cousins. There had to be a way—

The wind howled at her back and she fought down a smile. It sounded as if it were speaking to her, encouraging her forward. She obeyed the storm, turning with the swirling snow, and made her way toward the edge of the wide lake the village had settled beside.

The dark water was frozen over and covered with snow, a vast, eternal nothingness of swirling white. She watched the gusts of flakes rise and fall for a time, unsure why she'd been brought here. Until she heard the cry.

She stepped out onto the ice and made her way towards the deep center. The cries ignited something warm behind her ribs, urged her forward, and she obeyed mindlessly, only aware of how *needed* she was.

The child—the infant—stopped wailing when he noticed her standing over him. He should have been blistered from the cold, nearly lifeless, but his skin was warm when she brushed her fingers over his cheeks. The violent snap of his magick bit into her bones like lightning. He *burned* and even the winter's cruelty couldn't kill his power.

He was silent when she picked him up from the ice. He was silent when she cradled him to her. He was silent when she began walking again, though he had no idea where she was taking him.

Foolish humans, abandoning a child of such power. She would not repeat their mistake. This child would be her Court's salvation. She didn't understand his magick, how he was so firmly rooted in the earth already, but she knew he could save them. A new wellspring to draw from.

"You shall be Roark," she mused.

She smiled when Roark gurgled his approval and that strange warmth in her chest branded her heart when he grabbed hold of her finger and wouldn't let go.

"Let's go home," she whispered to her son.

6.

The sídhe changed him. Bridget knew, of course, as she helped care for him. She was a good helper, as dedicated and quiet as her mother Dea, and she doted on the child. Goodfellow also knew the newest prince wasn't what Mab claimed him to be, but a few bottles of her best wine quickly kept his tongue from wagging. Her threats to kill him ensured his silence once the wine ran out.

Mab tried not to mourn when she watched her changeling crawling about the throne room, desperate to follow after Sláine.

She'd felt the magick in him shifting slowly over the past few months. Staying in the sídhe made his power wilt and adapt, transform into something new, something she didn't understand. Every day, his features looked more and more like hers. Every day, his magick grew colder, just as strong and powerful, but more like hers. He was an enigma. The only thing she *did* know was that he no longer contained the sunburst of heated magick she'd first sensed in him on that lake.

"Mother," Sláine called eagerly, "he's following me!"

"Yes, dear," Mab called back.

Sláine was already distracted by his younger brother and didn't hear her response. He reached down to pick Roark up and talked nonsense at him about the newest school lessons he'd finished that morning. Roark watched his brother's face seriously and broke in with babbled commentary here and there. They seemed content with each other's company.

Perhaps that would be enough.

7.

Her partner had been a force of nature, wild and dark, and she'd never felt such passion in another's arms. He left her skin bruised with bite marks that had drawn cries of ecstasy from her lips, and even after he left, his presence lingered in her chambers.

His ghostly touch slid over skin at night, and her normally silent chambers seemed to echo with the grunted promises of pleasure he'd dared let her hear as he took his fill of her body. His seed gifted her with a final gift, a last child to stabilize her Triumvirate.

She should have known the pregnancy would be difficult. Bridget began splitting her time between serving Roark and watching over Mab as the pregnancy progressed. Nightmares plagued her sleep. She felt drained, as if her life were trickling out of her and into the child growing in her womb. She saw things flicking in and out the edges of her vision.

For the first time in her long life, Mab felt fear.

It pricked at her now, when Bridget soothed her and patted Mab's hands as they clutched at the sweat-drenched sheets of her bed. The fear coiled tighter with every contraction, until her nerves ached and her skin felt as if it would split from this monstrous birthing.

"One last push," Bridget encouraged.

Sláine's birth was clean, simple, as easy as reaching into the earth during the harvest.

This child made her scream. Made her bleed. Made her weep.

Its cries joined with its mother's as Bridget checked it over.

"A son," she told Mab, offering her the bundle.

Mab turned her head. Bridget hummed and stepped away with the child, setting it aside so she could tend to Mab.

In the eerie quiet, Mab ignored the tears sliding down her skin. Her Court was secure. Nothing else mattered.

8.

It had taken Bridget every ounce of her expertise to stop the bleeding and even then, Mab's recovery was long and slow.

The child was healthy. Bridget named him Lugh. Mab didn't mind. She could barely stand to look at him. Every time his small fingers grasped at her skin, she felt the cool brush of death against her spine. This child would undo her. She knew it.

But the Court was thriving and all her people adored the strange child who went from crawling to running overnight. Her stable master had him riding before he could talk. The cook baked him special loaves of bread small enough for him to carry around when he went on one of his "adventures" in the *sídh*e. Her redcaps taught him how to hold a sword. His laughter brought smiles to the faces of all Unseelie who met him.

By the time he began talking, she could stand to look at him.

His first word was her name. *Mab*, not *Mother*. She hadn't expected that to pain her so.

She focused on rebuilding their relationship, of finding ways to span the distance she'd created between them. She would make him breakfast and speak to him quietly. He would bring her animals he found outside the *sídh*e. She would tell him stories about brave heroes from other pantheons and he would gape at her before falling asleep with small twitches and huffed sighs as he battled in his dreams. He was small and fierce, as wild as the hellhounds he liked to wrestle with in the stables. He loved his brothers more than anything. She found that perhaps her youngest son could hold a place in her heart as well.

It was harder for Sláine. His control over his glamour never slipped in Lugh's presence—Mab watched carefully for that—but Sláine never seemed to understand how to act around Lugh. He was too afraid of hurting the boy. By silent, mutual agreement, they kept their distance from each other.

Roark, on the other hand ...

Mab sighed and rested her chin on her hand as she watched her favorite child and his younger brother playing. Roark had abandoned the language lesson they'd been working on together after seeing Lugh's utter boredom and frustration. Now they were circling each other with wooden practice swords in hand.

Roark was patient and continued to correct Lugh's form and footwork, but their matches never lasted long. Roark easily disarmed Lugh time and again.

Across the hall, Sláine, who'd been practicing his footwork with Nickgut and *real* swords, paused long enough to wipe the sweat from his brow while he watched his brothers set up for yet another bout. Even from this distance, Mab could see his brow crinkling, though he gave no other indication of his thoughts.

"Lugh," Sláine said, "come here."

If Lugh was surprised by his brother's call, he didn't show it. Instead, he trotted over with painful eagerness. Sláine leaned down and whispered something to Lugh, something that made his eyes go wide. He looked from Sláine to Roark to the wooden sword still clutched in his tiny grip and back to Sláine.

"Are you sure?" he whispered to his oldest brother.

"The most important thing," Sláine told him seriously, "is to survive. Do you understand?"

Pride flared through her. Her son had learned his lessons well, and now he taught them to his brother.

Lugh bit his lower lip and nodded.

"Go try it," Sláine urged.

Lugh dutifully returned to his place opposite Roark and lifted his sword to its ready position. Roark gave the count and they went at it again.

At least, Roark did.

Lugh hurled his sword at Roark, who had to twist awkwardly to bat it away. His surprise granted the opening Lugh needed. The boy dove for Roark's legs, taking him out at the knees, and before Mab knew it, Roark was on the ground, sputtering and swearing while Sláine laughed from across the hall.

"That's not how you fight!" Roark complained. "Lugh, get off me!"

Lugh ignored Roark's ineffectual threats and protests. He sat heavily on his chest, giggling when Roark tried to squirm his way free, and looked back to Sláine with a wide grin.

"Did I do it right?"

"Perfectly," Sláine declared. "I'm proud of you."

Mab was too.

9.

She hated the human. The boy—Keiran—was too thoughtful, too quiet, and too enmeshed in Lugh’s life. Lugh looked at him as though he hung the stars and, though Keiran didn’t know it, he watched Lugh with the same humble awe.

She hated him, but he’d saved her son. Lugh would survive his injuries because of Keiran, and Mab owed him a debt.

“You did well for a human,” she said to him in the grim silence outside the healer’s chamber.

Keiran said nothing, simply stared at the floor. His hands tightened and relaxed unconsciously, still stained dark with the creature’s blood. With Lugh’s blood.

“He lives because of you,” she reminded him. For Lugh’s sake, she would try to work with this foundling. “He was right to bring you back with us. You’ve proven yourself worthy of his faith.”

“If I’d been a little later—” Keiran mumbled, cutting himself off with a sharp swallow.

The words were rough-edged, threatened by tears, and Mab closed her own eyes against the thought of Lugh’s loss. Sláine would mourn, despite his recent efforts to antagonize Lugh for refusing to take on a greater role in Court. Roark loved Lugh fiercely. He would never forgive her.

She would never forgive herself.

“You’re weak,” she said to Keiran.

He reared back from her words as if she’d slapped him. She’d been callous. Awkward. She tried again. “You fought bravely, but you *are* human. You are ... limited. That is not your fault.”

The boy’s dark gaze held hers and she marveled at his pain and guilt. So open, so unafraid to show the world his heart. His weakness made her skin crawl.

“I couldn’t save my family,” he whispered to the darkness around them. “I don’t want to lose Lugh too.”

His confession confused her. His debt to Lugh had been repaid. A life for a life. She would release him if he desired, but he didn’t seem to want that. “You wish to stay at his side?” she asked.

He glanced towards the healer’s door. “Forever,” he murmured.



As if there were no other choice. No other option. Keiran said the word with the same soft conviction Nickgut used when he said Mab's name. Keiran said the word as if his humanity didn't exist, as if it wouldn't separate them in the end.

He wanted to protect her son, and she wouldn't refuse his offer, no matter how much sorrow it may bring later. "You need to become stronger."

"How?"

Strangely, one of the stories she'd told Lugh when he was a boy came forward in her mind. Surely, it couldn't be that difficult to create such a gift, not with her gifts and power.

"There are stories," she told Keiran, "of warriors called berserkirs—"

10.

Roark lifted a brow and watched Sláine stalk past him, out of the great hall. Mab was surprised to see Roark back in Court; the term at Mathers had just begun and Roark was busy with his classes. At least, that's what he told her when scrying.

"What was that about?" Roark asked as he neared.

"We disagreed about some of the formalities with the Rite Hibernum," she demurred. No reason to tell Roark all the details of Sláine's frustrations, not when she needed to process the suggestions he'd made and determine whether or not they had merit.

Perhaps she should have told Sláine about the Courts' waning powers. He *was* her oldest, her heir, and at some point she would need to come clean with him about their state. Perhaps then he would be less cautious and forgiving in their negotiations with their Summer cousins. Perhaps then he would understand her urgency in securing the Unseelie Court's magick.

But that could wait.

"I didn't expect to see you back so soon, darling," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"No. I just wanted some space from my roommates," Roark said, glancing away too quickly.

Something must have happened with the human. Roark's silences often tied to stories about him. She regretted forcing Roark into such an untenable situation, but finding a ley line host this many centuries later, and having the opportunity to watch him, to woo him to her side ... They couldn't lose such an opportunity. When she'd learned of the human's existence, Sláine offered to kidnap the man and bring him to the *sídhe*. It was Roark who suggested a subtler approach. His attendance at Mathers meant he needed a place to live and it was easy enough to pull some strings and ensure he shared the same space so he could spy for her.

"How fares the human?" she asked.

Roark made a face. "Still alive, but as idiotic as I feared. His spellcasting is atrocious. He lit the sofa on fire this week."

"How interesting," Mab lied.

"And his habit for drawing creatures from the Wylds is becoming irritating." Roark sighed. "I should send a raven to Lugh and ask him how best to keep wraiths away from the apartment. I've found three inside this week alone."

"Did they give you any trouble, *mo leanbh*?"

“Of course not, Mother. They’re easy enough to dispatch. I simply would like to walk into my apartment *once* and not see a shuddering shadow hovering in the corner. But enough about school.” He looked back to her. “Shall I go speak to Sláine and mend your bridges for you?”

“He’ll be fine,” she said with a wave of her hand.

The frown that crossed Roark’s face surprised her. He was the most diplomatic of her sons and she couldn’t remember the last time he’d dared show such open disapproval.

“Sláine is trying,” Roark told her quietly. “He’s *been* trying for months.”

“I know, darling.”

“Do you, Mother? Did you realize you haven’t given him a kind word since Lugh’s last visit?”

She searched her memory, uncomfortable under the weight of Roark’s stare. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Mother.” Roark’s tone was gentle, soothing, but his shoulders were set and his spine stiff and she fought down her first instinct to cow him for daring to stand against her. “It is difficult for me to watch their animosity towards each other grow. Perhaps indulging Lugh so often feeds it—”

“Lugh is not our High Prince,” Mab interrupted. “His responsibilities are different from Sláine’s.”

“True,” Roark agreed.

“Just as your responsibilities are different from your brothers’.”

Roark’s shoulders slumped. He bowed his head. “I understand, Mother.”

“Do you?” she pressed.

“Yes,” Roark said. “I have been obedient to our Court’s needs since I left for Mathers.”

“You have,” Mab agreed. “But your brothers must learn similar obedience or our Court’s stability shall suffer.”

“I know their hearts beat for our Court,” Roark said. “I simply wish for Sláine to be recognized for what he is accomplishing. Please, Mother.”

Since he was a baby, Roark did not make requests of her. He simply existed at her side, her dark right hand, an extension of her will. If he asked this of her, if he said *please*, perhaps she had lost her way with Sláine.

“I will speak with him,” she said at long last. The sight of Roark’s smile seemed reward enough for such a simple capitulation. “Now, tell me what rumors are floating around your school about the Rite Hibernum.”

11.

Sláine was alive. She clung to that as she raced down the passages of the sídhe, following the trail of blood spotting the floor. Bridget was taking Sláine to the healers. The rapier slice across his face had missed his eye, but had cut deep enough even he would scar.

Roark had not been so kind to the redcap retinue who'd tried to defend their High Prince.

And the human—Phineas Smith—was gone.

How had she missed it? She'd listened to every one of Roark's weekly reports about his life on campus. She'd never connected his stories about Smith to anything greater.

It was her fault. Her own deficiency. Her inability to understand love had kept her from recognizing it tangling its noxious roots into Roark's heart. If she'd known he'd fallen for the human, she would have ripped that man from the world without hesitation, his magickal power be damned.

She had lost her son. Roark's falling out with her over her orders would ripple through their family, through their Court. The peace she'd fought so long to secure would shatter.

She had failed.

12.

Robin Goodfellow flinched when the tip of her ice dagger brushed his eyelashes.

“You lie,” Mab said quietly.

“N—no, Your Majesty,” he stammered. “I swear to you, I saw it with my own eyes. High Prince Sláine leaving Delos with High Princess Aoife of the Summer Court. There are whispers throughout Oberon’s lands that the High Prince has defected.”

The words still didn’t make sense the second time she heard them. She ignored Goodfellow, sniveling creature he was, and reached out through the *sídhe*, through the magick of their Court to find her eldest son.

Nothing.

She reached for Roark. There, a cool twist of magick. She reached for Lugh. His odd, unsettling power brushed against hers. She reached for Sláine again, her heartbeat quickening, her nerves sparking, desperate for any sign of him.

Emptiness met her.

Sláine was gone.

“Nickgut,” Mab whispered. He appeared at her elbow in a breath, his face contorted with worry. Good. Let him bear all the confusion and sorrow for her. “Nickgut,” she said again, louder this time, clearer. “Bring me Prince Lyne. Now.”

He didn’t waste time with words. He ran to do her bidding instead.

“Your Majesty,” Goodfellow squeaked, “what can I do?”

She dropped the dagger away from him. The weight of the world fell heavy on her back. She swallowed past the lump in her throat and gave Goodfellow her back. She had no time for him now. There were problems to solve, powers to redistribute, *choices* to make.

“You shall do nothing,” she told him. “You are not of our Court. This is our matter to deal with. Leave me.”

“Perhaps I can hel—”

She spun and the dagger pressed against his throat, drawing a thick drop of blood where the blade bit into flesh. “Go or die.”

He went, leaving her alone in her throne room, struggling to find a way to tell Roark of his brother’s betrayal.

13.

She couldn't lose him too. She'd barely survived Sláine's defection. Seeing him at the Rite Hibernum and hearing him parrot back Oberon's refusal to return the power, knowing Sláine had turned away from their Court, on his family ... She held herself together long enough to secure her people's safety and thought she would have time to break apart in private.

And then Roark had been kidnapped. Tortured. Returned, by miracle, to the sídhe.

The human knelt beside him, frantic with worry, desperate. She couldn't touch her son and risk iron poisoning herself. The flimsy trace of Roark's humanity was all that kept him alive now, and she had to trust it was strong enough to tether him to this world while they worked.

No, not *they*. While Smith worked.

The ley line was a barely contained fire raging under his skin. It thawed her frozen heart, reminded her of the cost of freedom and peace and creating a home for her people. It begged her to do something, *anything*, to change the course she was on.

She couldn't bury Roark's body beside the bones of her first child. She wouldn't survive that.

"Give me back my son," she whispered. To Smith. To the ley line. To whatever gods were listening. "Do that, and I will give you anything you desire."

The air changed. Smith looked at her, gaze hot and furious, and she wanted to shrink from the rawness of it. She hated seeing his heart bleeding before her, but couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Swear it," Smith growled. "For the life of your son, swear it."

The Unseelie magick rose to her, just as it had all those millennia before in the Seelie sídhe. A whisper of a promise, a reminder of the faith required to create something new and stronger.

"You have my promise, Phineas Smith," she said.

The words fell without thought. Even as the binding dug in around her heart, painfully reminding her of the gravity of her promise, she found she could breathe again. Could focus on Smith drawing on his power and starting the slow, grim process of healing Roark's injuries. She wished she could love something as deeply as Smith loved her son.

She pressed her hands harder onto the floor as she leaned forward, close as she dared, and watched the ley line work. Smith's love would have to run deep enough for them both.

14.

An unfamiliar face stared back at her in her mirror. She didn't recognize the woman she saw, not after her sons' rebellion tonight. She had spent her life building this Court so they would be safe, so they could have a home without the pain and suffering she had grown up with. She clawed for every scrap of power she could find. She fought and killed and told herself it was worth the sacrifices she'd made. At least her sons would have a kingdom to inherit.

A kingdom none of them wanted.

Sláine had found his place among the Seelie. Roark would stay by her side for Smith's sake, but if she crossed him too many times, her promise ensured he could walk away from the Court without issue. And now Lugh—

A speaker for that berserker-turned-thegn. A seer who could recite all the cruelties she'd inflicted to hold her crown. A child haunted by her mistakes and choices, just like Goodfellow.

Lugh's accusations echoed through her mind still. *The gods have sent you a reckoning, and he nearly killed us all tonight.*

Goodfellow was *her* creation. Her rise fed his imagination. Her cruelty taught him his control. He had perfected her methods and risen above her in his own quest for glory.

A fourth son—created of magickal balance, not carried in her womb—and more her child than any of the others.

Tomorrow, he would kill them all.

She waited until she felt Roark and Sláine leave the sídhe, probably sneaking off to see Lugh one last time. Only then, the night before the battle for Faerie, did Mab allow the tears to fall.



15.

Smith, alive and safe behind the lines.

Sláine clutched Roark to his side, bearing his weight.

Lugh, with Keiran protecting his back, watching her through the crowd.

Goodfellow screaming his challenge to her, demanding knowledge and answers. As if he had earned them. As if she *owed* it to him. He wanted to know what else a king would need to learn. She would teach him.

She tried to hold to the fleeting glimpses of her sons, even as she fought against the stolen power of the Green Man hurtling and pressing against her glamour. Sláine, Roark, Lugh, all alive. Nearly united and only missing a single push to finish binding them together. Needing a reminder that this was *their* kingdom as much as it was hers. Needing to know she had done this for them, so they could live as she hadn't been able to.

It was so simple. The law she'd followed all her life. Balance. There was a comfort in the choice.

One last look. A final smile at Lugh, the son who had nearly taken her life as he was brought into this world. If he had, would any of this have happened, or would the balance have been repaid all those years ago? No matter now.

He opened his mouth to say something and she turned away from him for the last time. She tightened her grip on the sword.

She had made promises to the earth when she fled the Seelie sídhe. The cost would be paid, no matter how high. For every day, a night. For every summer, a winter to destroy. She would be rewarded, in the end.

Goodfellow drew back. His sword glinted and she let her blade drop. *Sacrifice*. A final price for peace. Beneath her feet, magick crawled out of the icy earth to claim her.

She smiled and thought of her sons.

**THE END**