

“For he comes, the human child,  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world’s more full of weeping than he can understand.”

- W.B. Yeats, “The Stolen Child”

## PHINEAS

When my mom said to run toward hope, I didn’t think my feet would lead me here, kneeling before Queen Mab in the heart of the Unseelie sídhe. The entire populace of the Court is gathered around us to watch me accept the Winter Knight’s mantle and somewhere in the back of my mind, a little voice whispers that I should be nervous. I’m less than a stone’s throw away from the faerie queen who tried to kill me a few years ago. I’m about to say the words that will bind me to her and her Court while they stand on the brink of war. I’ve come to an agreement with the ley line so I don’t burn out anytime soon, but accepting this position means my death may come on the point of a sword or thorned vine or in the midst of some bloody battlefield before Christmas anyway.

I regret nothing.

Not when Roark’s standing beside me, a dark shadow of a sentinel. Not when, after the Knighthood’s ceremony, we’re going to be declared consorts. Bound for however long we have left.

I can’t help the hitch in my breathing at that thought. He hears it—of course—and the corner of his mouth tilts up in the barest hint of a smile.

“Steady, Smith,” he murmurs to me, quiet enough no one else can hear. “Almost there.”

Queen Mab lifts a dark brow at us, but doesn’t skip a beat in her speech. She still scares the shit out of me, but since saving Roark, she looks at me with something frighteningly like warmth.

“... and so, Phineas Smith, kneel.”

My ceremonial armor makes more noise than I’d like when I obey Queen Mab’s command, but she doesn’t seem bothered by it. Instead, she stretches her right hand out to her side and the moisture in the air condenses, crystallizes, and forms into a glittering sword of ice. She lifts it slightly, her gaze fixed on me, and for a second, the ley line rises to respond to the flash of terror ripping through me.

I'm not in that torture room. Mab isn't attacking me. And Roark—

The gentle pressure of his fingertips against the back of my neck where the armor plating stops grounds me in an instant. The heat of my magick settles with the brush of his glamour. I suck in a breath, refusing to look away from Mab, and then take another breath, slower and calmer.

To her credit, Mab hasn't moved. She waits on me, patient in a way only such timeless beings can be. Once I lift my chin, the ghost of a smile crosses her lips and she raises the sword higher, until its edge catches the light of the chamber and the crowd surrounding us holds its breath.

“To serve as our Knight is to serve as our protector. It is a heavy burden, Phineas Smith. The lives of all in the Winter Court will rely on you. Your shoulders shall bear the weight of their expectations, their needs, and their trust. Do you accept this?”

I force myself to focus on her eyes instead of the blade. “I do.”

“Our Court's power shall flow into you. You shall be the eddy of our river and all shall find shelter in you. Do you accept this?”

The ley line hums in quiet acceptance. The concept of sharing Mab's power—the Unseelie sídhe's power—holds no terror for me. The hope that my own power might strengthen this Court, and Roark along with it, makes it easy enough to answer her. “I do.”

Despite our practice earlier, Mab's next words are unexpected and off-script. “Our bond shall only be broken by death. Should I fall, you shall protect my family and our people with your life—” Her voice dips, fond and knowing. “—and your heart. Do you accept this?”

Behind me, Roark shifts his weight and I know he didn't expect his mother to say this. I can't help but grin at her and she smiles back at me. I don't think I've ever seen her do that before. Not give a real smile, this strange, beautiful thing that's almost childlike in its joy. Pomp and circumstance be damned; this is probably the closest she'll ever get to giving me her blessing.

“Yes,” I promise her. “Yes, I do.”

She's still smiling as she lets the sword drop towards me. Instead of feeling fear, all I know is an eagerness to finish this. The blade falls, slow and graceful, until the flat rests against my shoulder and begins to chill my armor.

“Phineas Smith, I name you Winter Knight. May the Goddess bless this mantle and your future with us.”

Like that, a final thrum of magick snaps into place. Mab and I both suck in a breath at the same moment and I wonder if she too feels this icy weight in her chest. It settles in beneath my ribs, a slow, steady pulse, like the entire sídhe and all its people now reside inside of me, and I’m so busy *feeling* I don’t even notice when the sword disappears or the crowd starts cheering.

Roark’s fingers trace along my neck and I glance up at him. He’s composed, but there’s a spark in those pale eyes that gives away his excitement. Now that the Knighthood has been passed along, there’s only one thing left to do.

“Your Royal Majesty,” Roark says, pitching his voice just loud enough to be heard over the slowly quieting cheers, “I beg an indulgence of you.”

*Like mother, like son*, I think with some amusement as Roark and Mab play up the drama and wait for the crowd to fall completely silent before continuing. I’m positive they’ve worked out a plan; Roark was gone scrying with her for too long to not have a specific idea in mind for our ceremony.

“Speak,” Mab urges.

Roark kneels beside me. As always, he makes the movement perfectly fluid, even as he bows his head in extended obeisance. “I would take this man for my Consort.”

The crowd roars its approval. I shouldn’t be surprised by that. Most of the Court was witness to my panicked return to the sídhe and know how I haven’t left his side as he’s healed. We haven’t exactly been subtle about our mutual devotion. Mab looks around the chamber, taking in the Unseelie support for Roark’s request, before returning her attention to *me*.

“My son gave you his heart years ago,” she says. “All I can offer you is his hand and the promise of a life at his side. Would this be—?”

“Yes,” I interrupt. “Yes, I accept.”

Roark makes a faint, choked noise. I flush when I realize my faux pas, but Mab isn’t angry. No, her smile’s taken on a bittersweet twist and I wonder if she always knew it would come to this. That she always knew *we* would come to this, Roark and me, united in front of everyone, or *against* everyone, if it had come to that. I wonder if she’s ready to give him up, if she regrets promising me the assurance of his freedom if he wants it.

If she is, she gives no sign of it. Instead, she says, “Then rise and join me.”

We stand and move closer. Throughout the chamber, the Unseelie are shifting, readjusting themselves so everyone has a clear view of what's about to happen. To our right, a tiny goblin barely old enough to stand on her own tugs at her father's hand to urge him to sit beside her on the ground. She watches us step past her with a rapturous expression and already my damn throat's tightening because this is *real*. We're about to pledge ourselves in front of everyone and Roark wants this, wants *me*, and I don't know how he can be so brave when there is so much he could lose.

I'm mortal, or close to it. I'm the Knight. We're about to throw ourselves headlong into a civil war that may decimate all of Faerie. Yet he's at my side and when he turns to face me, the only thing I see is his half-smile and a gaze full of the kind of love I never dreamed I'd live long enough to find.

The crowd parts enough to allow Bridget through. She carries a delicate, shimmering cord to Mab, handing it over before giving a low curtsy and stepping to the side. I know Roark's using his glamour to hide his true expression from everyone else, but I still catch his small smile when he notices his childhood attendant settling comfortably into the front row of the spectators. After learning how close he and Bridget are, how long she's cared for him, I'm sure Roark considers her to be his guest of honor.

Mab stretches the cord between her hands. "Take each other's hand," she tells us.

Roark lifts a brow at me, waiting for me to make the first move. I stretch out my left hand to him. I don't know if this is how the fae do it, but I know that when Roark and I visit my parents for Christmas, I want them to see the proof of our union and have no doubt what it means. My choice must be okay because he mimics the gesture and his hand settles comfortably atop mine. Mab carefully twists and weaves the cord around our hands, creating an elaborate, loose knot tied beneath.

The sight of the knot does something to Roark because his hand twitches against mine and his exhalation is shaky. I don't care who's watching us. I don't care if this is breaking some ancient, immortal rule. I lean forward until my forehead is pressed to his and whisper, "Steady, Lyne."

His lips twist into a sharp grin and he attempts to glare at me, but his gaze is too soft and gentle to hint at a real threat. "Smart ass," he whispers before closing his eyes and taking a few deep breaths.

Roark pulls himself together quickly enough. I'm grateful to Mab for giving him the moment. Once she's sure he's ready, she places her hands on our shoulders and leans in. Her crown presses gently against my temple and the pressure's somehow soothing. Her grip tightens on my shoulder and I think she's about to lean away and begin the ceremony, but she speaks quietly, to us alone, instead.

"I do not understand love," she admits, "but I know its power. I fear it. The path we walk may end all too soon. Promise me you will not allow the coming trials to destroy what you have forged together."

I want to promise her I won't, but Roark beats me to it. He clears his throat and squeezes my hand. "We lived together for years and managed not to kill each other," he murmurs to me. "What's a few millennia more?"

*A few millennia.* Spoken so easily. Spoken with an assurance that tells me he's been thinking about this for a long time, longer than I could possibly know. I choke out a decidedly soggy laugh. "And a war," I add. "Don't forget the war."

He squeezes my hand and the air around us seems to crackle from the sudden cold. "A war we will fight together."

"Until the end," I whisper. My words rise in delicate steaming tendrils.

He nods. "Until the end."

Apparently pleased at our promise, Mab draws back and looks out over her subjects. "We are grateful for the joy found today." The crowd murmurs back an agreement and Mab continues, "We stand and bear witness to this handfasting as a testimony of its strength and our approval."

Somewhere, far in the back of the crowd, someone shifts. But no one leaves. No one speaks out. I don't realize I've been holding my breath until Mab gives a short nod. I guess I'd imagined that one of Roark's ex-lovers would step forward like they do in the movies and cry out that this couldn't happen. Instead, when I give a quick glance around us, I only see pride and happiness on the faces of the fae in the crowd.

Mab clasps her hands over the wound cord and I try not to shiver at the gentle brush of her magick. Roark's eyes narrow and he stares at our hands with the same intensity he wears into battle. I should probably look down too, witness what strange magick's happening against my skin, but I can't look away from his expression.

The lights of the hall reflect over his hair and cast shadows against his face and I have to swallow hard when it hits me that I'll be able to see this—see *him*—every day for the rest of my life. Enchantment pales in comparison to that truth.

“You are bound, one to the other, and none shall come between you. In life and in death, this promise lives on.” Mab’s words resonate deep in my chest, a private, precious conversation despite the way she lifts her voice so it can ring out over the crowd.

Her magick seems to soak into the cords around our hands. It’s a strange cold, only existing in the places the cord touches and not extending out, so there’s a noticeable difference between those thin lines of sensation and the rest of my skin.

“Your path awaits. Walk it hand in hand. This, your people command of you.”

A single cry of approval explodes from the crowd. A single syllable of affirmation, without a clear word or meaning since one isn’t needed. The people have commanded.

“This,” Mab says with something dangerously close to sadness, “your Queen commands of you.”

Roark trembles and glances up at me, holding my gaze. The cord must flash freeze. The shock of pain from the release of magick at Mab’s decree is enough to make me suck in a breath. Inches away, the corners of Roark’s eyes have tightened in similar discomfort. For a moment, I worry that the ley line will react to this, will consider Mab’s action a threat. It doesn’t rise though. Instead, it gives a low purr of contentment, even as my hand continues to ache with every heartbeat.

And then, it stops hurting. Sensation leaks back in and in a matter of seconds, it’s easy enough to believe that I imagined it all. Mab reaches forward and clasps our hands in hers once more, whispering something too quiet for us to hear.

When I look down, the cord’s gone. Nothing is left to show it was ever there except the shimmering web of lines on my skin. The pattern extends onto Roark’s hand as well. We’re both marked. We’re both undeniably tied to the other.

Roark breathes out. It’s a slow, steady exhalation, one that wipes away the tension in his expression and helps his shoulders drop. His mouth curves into a pleased smile and he glances up at me through his dark lashes. “You’re stuck with me now,” he announces.

“Good.” I reach up to cup his face with my free hand, and run my thumb along the curve of his jaw. He freezes, but before I can drop my hand, the soothing weight of his glamour settles

around us, hiding us from the sea of eager eyes. Safe in our own private world, he allows the touch, leans into even, and my heart threatens to burst from the rush of affection that courses through me. Roark, so perfectly composed in the view of his subjects, drops his mask for me alone. I'll do anything to prove myself worthy of his trust. I'll do anything to prove myself worthy of *him*.

There's nothing I want more than to stay in this moment with him, but the evening's work isn't quite done. I allow myself one last touch, the barest tracing of Roark's sharp cheekbone, before asking hopefully, "I don't suppose there's a way we can sneak out of the festivities early?"

He gives an amused huff and shakes his head. "I'm afraid not. Welcome to my world."

"You seem strangely okay with dancing through the hoops tonight."

He leans in and his lips brush against my ear when he whispers, "That's because I know what's coming *after* all of this."

"Oh God," I whimper, mind fracturing out in a million inappropriate directions.

He nods and steps back, wicked smile lighting up his expression like a sunrise. "I'm going to take you apart, Finn. Husband." His voice wavers a little on that last word. Of all the titles I've received tonight, it's the only one that matters. Roark straightens, squaring his shoulders and composing himself one last time. He never releases my hand. "Shall we?"

\*

## **ROARK**

It took far too long to get here. Everyone in the crowd wanted to talk to us, congratulate us, celebrate with us. I have never been so relieved to use the sídhe's hidden passages to finally escape and return to my room.

*Our* room, now.

The floor's littered with pieces of armor and clothing and, despite my desire to keep the space neat, I have a better distraction to occupy my attention. Finn is stretched out beneath me and the passage of time no longer matters. My consort. My husband.

Goddess, I never dreamed we'd find ourselves here. I thought he would damn me for my interference and walk away from me forever. I thought one of us would be dead. Instead, we're

in my bed and the flicking lights of the fire and the candles around the room make the twined lines of our bond around his left hand shine.

My gaze may keep returning to his hand, but it's easy to be sidetracked by the picture he makes against my sheets. His hair's darkened with sweat, plastered against his skin. I've worked him so long a beautiful, glowing flush has bloomed over his neck and chest, all the way down the flexed expanse of his abs. His voice is hoarse from begging and now nothing escapes his throat but ragged, desperate whines every time I crook my fingers inside him or nip at his heated skin. The ley line keeps rising, climbing higher and higher until its energy buzzes under his skin. I bask in its warmth. With Finn in my life, there's no chance I'll ever feel cold again.

"I love you," I say.

Those three words do the most incredible things to him. His hips arch up from the bed and he tosses his head against the pillow. After this many years of hiding and lying, he deserves to hear me tell him that truth again and again.

I lean down and press a chaste kiss to his parted lips, smiling when he pants against my mouth. "I love you, Finn. I have for so long."

He chases after my lips when I draw back, but gives up and lets his head drop back down to the pillow. The light cuts across his face and the sight of tears trickling down his temples makes my ribs creak with worry until he whispers back, "I love you, too. Always will."

"Always," I repeat, heart too full for any other words. Only actions can suffice. He deserves this, deserves to be worshipped.

He groans when I brush over his prostate again. His cock leaks against his stomach and he manages a choked laugh before looking up at me through half-lidded eyes. "I swear to God, if you do that again, this'll be all over. Stop stalling already."

He's always called me out. Sometimes, I don't even realize the truth until he says it. But he's got a point now. The thought of taking him, of feeling him around me, makes me ache so much I have to grip myself tightly to stop from coming right now.

"I don't know how long I'll last," I admit. Though I withdraw my fingers slowly, the noise he makes is all pained pleasure. I reach for the bottle of oil we've been using and pretend not to notice how much my hands shake.



He notices. Of course he does. And again, he gives me that gorgeous laugh. Deep and delighted and ringing with exhausted affection. “You and me both, Roark.” His eyes spark with mischief and he adds, “*Husband.*”

I almost drop the bottle and end up bobbling it instead and dumping almost half the liquid inside it. Finn laughs again at my swearing. I ignore him and focus on wiping away the excess oil spilled over me.

Eventually his laughter fades and is replaced by a wondering smile. “Is it normal to be so attracted to the person you’ve married?” he asks as he watches me.

“Maybe just lucky,” I counter, failing to wipe my thigh clean with a corner of our mussed sheets. I frown at the mess, wishing I’d been more careful.

Finn’s fingers skim against my jaw, coaxing me to turn my focus back to him.

“Guess I’m *very* lucky then,” he says, holding my gaze.

I can’t wait any longer. I need him now. There’s no other way of sating this hunger consuming me.

His entire body tenses when I press into him, a relentless, smooth slide, and then we’re both shivering and whispering wordless declarations of pleasure to each other. Finn’s legs tighten around my hips and he drags me even closer, whimpering when I give in to the pressure coiling in my muscles with a jagged, uncontrolled roll of my hips.

“Roark,” he whispers, “*yes. More.*”

I will never deny him. He writhes against the sheets when I find a rhythm, when I find the angle that drags gasped cries from his throat. His chest flushes darker and his mouth falls open on a panted oath and then—

Falling.

Falling.

Arms catching me. Hugging me to a broad chest despite the stickiness between us. A hand stroking down my spine.

“I’ve got you,” Finn murmurs into my hair. “I’ve got you, Roark. I promise.”

Before Finn, there was one thing in life I knew to my bones: I am nothing but a tool to our Court. Now, a second truth wraps itself around my heart and burns away that previous directive.

I am Finn’s.

He presses a kiss to my temple, sighing happily when I close my eyes and nuzzle into the crook of his neck. There, sore from my still healing injuries, desperate to sleep before tomorrow's war meetings, I breathe for the first time in millennia.

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