

CHAPTER ONE

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

Today. Today. Today.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Today was Larken's chance to be chosen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It is a g."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dance with me, little lark.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Have you ever wanted to be chosen? Brigid asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The whole concept had never sat well with Larken.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Her."

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

“No, love,” he said. “Her.”

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

She would never see Brigid again.

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

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

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

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

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

"Take me, milord!" one girl called.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Murderer!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She and Brigid hadn't even said goodbye.

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

It was over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Murderer.

Murderer.

Murderer.



The word plagued her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Murderer.

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

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

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

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

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