

Chapter One

The young human girl hunched on her hands and knees, sobbing as the giggling fae around her forced her to lap like a dog at the cake ground into the moss. The girl licked at the earth, spitting and grimacing as dirt and moss covered her tongue. Her cheeks grew more red, glistening wet with her tears. Still so innocent, still not yet hardened to the point where she would become a shell no longer willing to give her fae captors the pleasure of seeing her tears.

At least her eyes remained clear, her mind her own even as she was forced to the degradation of eating dirt.

A few yards away, a group of human musicians played a variety of instruments. The harpist strummed her golden harp, a placid smile on her face even as her fingers bled, strips of torn flesh snagging on the strings with each note. Nearby, a female violinist sawed her bow back and forth with a vague expression on her face, seemingly uncaring as blood ran down her arm and dripped to the moss from fingers stripped raw by pressing on the strings.

These were those who had given up. To dull their pain, they'd eaten faerie fruit, willingly falling into the lulling, sweet nothingness that the fruit provided. The faerie fruit would make them even more pliable to faerie whims, but its addictive qualities made its victims crave it even as it made them even more a fae's plaything.

At the side of the boisterous crowd of fae, Brigid swirled the wine in her glass, not taking so much as a sip. Even the scent of the strong faerie wine threatened to lighten her head and turn her vision dizzy. If she drank, she'd become as empty-eyed as those poor souls.

As it was, she let some of the headiness of the wine's scent calm the burning in her chest at the sight of her fellow humans suffering the torments of the Fae Realm. As much as she

wished she could rescue them all, she could only save one tonight. And her target had to be the child before she was taken by the lure of the faerie fruit or broken by the torture she'd already suffered.

Brigid's red silk dress swished around her, glinting in the yellow faerie lights that bobbed near the ceiling of the grand, garden palace. Massive rose arbors arched over the space while hedges outlined a variety of gardens, complete with burbling fountains and statues that might or might not have once been living people sprinkled throughout.

Beyond the gardens, ginormous flowers—nothing but massive buds and blooms plopped directly on the moss with no stem, bush, or leaves—provided rooms amid the folds of their petals for the fae when they stopped their revelry long enough to collapse into sleep.

Under the arched ivy arbors that formed the main throne room, the pixie Queen Mab of the Court of Dreams sat on her throne formed of flowers and thorns. The pixies, fauns, naiads, and dryads of her court danced attendance on her, even as the guests from the others courts paid their respects to their host for the lavish party.

Brigid sashayed up to a group of fae ladies from a variety of courts, from the autumn fae ladies dressed in shades of orange to the pixies of Queen Mab's court with their sheer, iridescent wings fluttering at their backs.

One of the fae ladies laughed and gulped down another swig of the faerie wine.

“Hippolyta's Pet!”

Several of the other ladies tittered at Brigid's nickname, whispering to each other behind their hands.

Brigid didn't care what they thought or gossiped about her. The persona of being Queen Hippolyta's entertaining project was her protection—and protection for Hippolyta as well. If

everyone dismissed Brigid as the strange human that Queen Hippolyta, ruler of the Court of Swordmaidens, had taken in as a pet, then they wouldn't realize that Brigid was also the Wild Fae Primrose, the mysterious person stealing away humans from their fae captors.

Brigid plastered on her doltish smile—an expression that came almost too easily to her at this point—and raised her glass. “Aren't I pretty tonight? The dressmaker is commendable.”

Layers of red embroidery in a sparkling, glinting thread weaved patterns over the red silk. Not wild fae primrose, as much as Brigid would have loved that symbolism. Still, the red was enough of a statement, even if only she and her few trusted companions knew its significance. The dress itself was, indeed, splendid with layers of silk that floated around her.

Better yet, the dress had pockets.

Not just any pockets, but the magical fae pockets that could hold an impossible number of items without ever bulging or becoming full. Sadly, the pockets couldn't hold living things, either plants or people. It would have been rather convenient if she could have rescued humans by simply tucking them in her pocket and walking away.

“Indeed.” Another of the fae ladies plucked at Brigid's sleeve. “You are such a lovely doll to dress up. You humans are such fun. Alas, I lost the last human I stole away.”

“The Wild Fae Primrose?” Another of the ladies grimaced, then swigged her wine as if to bolster her courage after so much as saying the name.

The lady dropped Brigid's sleeve and wiggled her wings, making her flower petal dress float around her. “I still can't believe one of our own would so brazenly break the laws of our realms and steal what we have rightfully stolen.”

One of the other pixies fluttered her wings and her lashes. “If he wasn't such an annoyance, it would all be a little dashing, don't you think?”

That set off another round of titters, and Brigid giggled along with them, despite the little twist curling her own smile.

These ladies couldn't conceive that the person who had rescued so many stolen humans could be a human, someone they saw as far inferior to themselves. Nor that he was actually a she.

But Brigid gladly let them continue thinking that. The more wrong the gossips and rumors were, the safer she and those who helped her would be.

Brigid lifted her own glass, sloshing some on herself so that she would smell as inebriated as the rest of the revelers. "Sink me, I have it! A delightful little rhyme I have been mulling over to entertain my queen, and I finally have the final line!"

"Let's hear it, pet!" The surrounding ladies giggled and drank, then giggled some more.

Brigid screwed up her face, as if coming up with a simple rhyme took intense concentrate. She slurred her words a bit as she spoke in a sing-song voice,

"They seek him here, they seek him there,

Those faeries seek him everywhere.

Is he in the Fae Realm or with the monsters below,

That wild elusive Fae Primrose."

For a moment, the group of ladies blinked at her, as if they weren't sure if they should applaud that performance or decry it. She was, after all, subtly jabbing at their inability to catch the Primrose so far.

Then one of the ladies snorted, wine spewing from her mouth. That started the giggles all around the circle, and Brigid beamed as if she thought coming up with that rhyme had been a great accomplishment.

In truth, it was an atrocious poem. The last rhyme was a stretch, and the rhythm was off in the final line. But it hardly mattered as long as the fae around her found it amusing.

Boots clicked on the garden paving stones a moment before a tall figure dressed all in black joined their circle.

“Lord Chauvlyn!” One of the ladies looped her arm through his, leaning on him with breath that reeked of faerie wine even from where Brigid stood. “You absolutely must hear the rhyme that Hippolyta’s Pet came up with. She is *such* an entertaining darling!”

Several of the fae ladies started repeating the rhyme over each other, correcting each other as they each tried to remember the exact words.

Lord Chauvlyn eyed them, looking down his nose at each of them, before he turned his dark, forbidding sneer on Brigid. “The Wild Fae Primrose is no laughing matter.”

“Oh, really?” Brigid raised her glass and kept her tone light, her eyes wide and innocent as if she were genuinely confused. “He seems to make those chasing him quite the laughingstock.”

“He will be caught, human.” Lord Chauvlyn studied her far too sharply, as if he wanted to see beneath her light words.

Perhaps she shouldn’t tweak him so. Lord Chauvlyn, by appointment of King Oberon of the Court of Revels, had made it his personal mission to catch the Primrose. He had the support of many of the kings, queens, lords, and ladies across all the courts, except for the rare court like the Court of Knowledge or Court of Swordmaidens.

Brigid widened her eyes and her smile. “Perhaps he will; perhaps he won’t. But you, dear Lord Chaubertin, should worry less about the Primrose and more about your attire.”

“Lord Chauvlyn.” The fae lord growled under his breath.

Brigid continued over him as if she hadn't heard the correction. "It's dreadful, really, for a lord of the Court of Revels to go around in basic black. And that tailoring...shameful, really. Surely the favorite of King Oberon and Queen Titania can dress far better."

This set off another round of tittering as the ladies jumped to agree, adding their own attempts at witty comments on Lord Chauvlyn's attire.

Lord Chauvlyn's jaw worked, his nostrils flaring as a redness crept up his neck. He flexed his fingers. "You mark my words. I will catch the Primrose."

With that, he spun on his heel and stalked off, his shoulders stiff beneath his stark black coat.

Brigid remained for a few more minutes before she swayed off to the next group, this time a mixed group of fae ladies and gentlemen. She trotted out her little rhyme several more times until nearly everyone at the party was repeating it with gusto.

Finally, the little human girl on the stage collapsed in a heap, and she was taken away from the party by a goblin servant belonging to Lady Belania, the girl's captor.

Brigid giggled and swayed with an apparent increasing drunkenness before she finally stumbled to the edge of the party and collapsed face-first onto the moss, half-in and half-out of the flower assigned to the Court of Knowledge for this event.

She lay there for a few minutes, feigning drunken slumber. A few fauns clopped by, then a few more fae whispered as they passed by about Hippolyta's Pet unable to hold her faerie wine.

As it grew silent around her, a faint rustling came from the giant rose in front of her. "Brigid?"

"Is it all clear?" Brigid eased her head up, peeking at sixteen-year-old Rosaline, one of the assistant librarians of the Court of Knowledge and part of Brigid's league. Since she was the

daughter of nobles of the Court of Revels, she'd been included in the retinue sent to this party from the Court of Knowledge.

Dressed in a dark purple dress that complimented her swarthy skin and dark hair, Rosaline crouched next to Brigid's head just inside the rose's petal walls. Her gaze darted around before she nodded. "Yes."

Brigid quickly crawled into the rose, already fumbling with the clasp of her dress even before she was fully inside the safety of the rose.

With Rosaline's help, she quickly shucked the dress. Then she helped Rosaline change into it.

Perhaps it was an added risk, swapping dresses instead of having Rosaline snatch the child herself. But Rosaline was only sixteen, and Brigid wasn't going to ask her to put herself at that kind of risk. At least this way, Rosaline could deny any knowledge of why Brigid had asked to change dresses with her and claim complete ignorance if Brigid were caught.

Besides, Rosaline was fae while Brigid was human. That meant that Rosaline was a bit more bound to the Laws of Bindings that governed the Fae Realm than Brigid was. Snatching a human from a noble of one's host as a guest in that court was a bit tricky for a fae. While Brigid could just take the child with impunity. As long as she wasn't caught doing it.

With another glance around, Rosaline rolled out of the rose, then sprawled on the moss in the same position that Brigid had been in a moment ago, facedown, her head and hair, which was far darker than Brigid's, hidden by the petals of the flower. At her side, she clutched an empty goblet.

With Rosaline now in place as Brigid's decoy, Brigid dressed in the brown and orange drab dress she'd brought along for this part of the plan. She covered her hair with a wig, turning

her into a red-head whose hair verged more towards orange than red. She added a pair of fox ears clipped into her hair, plastered some fur over her nose and added whiskers, then tied on a bushy fox tail.

In a few minutes, she stepped out of the rose, the picture of a goblin girl servant. After collecting the tray that Rosaline had set nearby, Brigid kept her head down and bustled through the crowd.

A few of the fae barked orders at her, and she quickly complied. The noble fae didn't give her a second glance as she took their empty glasses, filled their wine goblets, or brought them more food. Good. Her disguise was working.

She meandered her way through the party, then into the maze of flowers and gardens that formed Queen Mab's palace. Here, away from the main party, goblin servants, fauns, and lesser pixies flitted about, keeping their heads down and giving Brigid not so much as a first glance, much less a second. She was just another one of the servants.

Finally, Brigid reached the flower, a giant peony, assigned to Lady Belania of the Harvest Court and her retinue. A few servants and guards remained, and Brigid bustled by them with purpose.

The guards didn't give her a second glance. After all, she was just another goblin servant. A lesser in their eyes. While most of the lordly fae in all the courts looked down on goblins, those of the Harvest Court, as another Autumn Court, especially scorned goblins.

Something Brigid planned to use to her advantage.

Inside the flower, she found the fold of the petals where the young human girl had curled up on a blanket. Her blonde hair lay in tangled strands around her face while tear-streaks stained her cheeks, showing that she had cried herself to sleep.

Brigid crept up to the girl, then pressed her hand firmly over the girl's mouth.

The girl's eyes flew open, wild and wide.

Brigid's heart ached, knowing what fear and torments this girl must have suffered already in her time in the Fae Realm. She was a plaything for her faerie captors. Treated as less than a dog to be laughed at and tormented, driven to insanity if left to the fae for too long.

Dressed in her disguise, Brigid looked just like one of the fae. When she started rescuing humans, she had wasted precious time having to reassure each human that she was actually a friend.

Now, she reached into one of the hidden pockets of her skirt—of course this dress, too, had pockets—and withdrew a small, red flower. She held it out to the girl.

The girl tentatively reached out, then gripped the wild fae primrose in her fist. She stared at it for another moment before her gaze swung up to meet Brigid's with a look of supreme trust calming her features.

Brigid withdrew her hand from over the girl's mouth. "I'm here to guide you home, wanderer. Stay silent and do exactly as I say, and you'll be home soon, all right?"

The girl nodded, folding her fingers over the flower so that she had it pressed, hidden, inside her fist.

Brigid bundled the girl into the blanket, then picked her up. To anyone watching, she would look like she was just carrying soiled linens to the laundry for washing.

She strode right past the other servants and the guards, trying to pretend her burden was nothing but blankets and not a girl who was becoming increasingly heavy the longer she walked.

Thankfully, the girl remained absolutely still and silent.

Brigid only had to wander down a few, mossy pathways before she reached a giant dandelion. The guards here were already well into their own cups of wine, and a few of the servants were passed out between the petals. Only a few of the sprites remained awake and bouncing around, repeating rhymes and cackling to themselves.

Brigid kept her head down. Just another goblin servant bringing a new blanket for a visiting fae noble.

Deep inside the flower, she located the trunks. She set the girl down and unwrapped the blanket.

The girl peered up at her, blinking.

Brigid opened one of the largest trunks, then pulled out stacks of garments, cloaks, and sundries. “This next part is going to be a bit uncomfortable for you. I need you to curl up in this trunk. You’ll need to stay still and silent for hours. You can doze, but when this trunk starts moving, you’ll need to be awake and alert. When you hear someone outside of the trunk say, ‘Welcome to the Court of Knowledge, my lord,’ you’ll know that the next person to open this trunk will be a friend. Go with them and leave the primrose behind. I’ll see you shortly after that to bring you home.”

The girl nodded, then climbed into the trunk without hesitation. Brigid piled as many of the clothes on top of the girl as she could without smothering her. Then she stuffed the rest of the clothes into the magical pocket of her dress.

After shutting the trunk, Brigid gathered the blanket and strolled past the servants and guards once again.

She wandered the pathways until she found a secluded, empty bee balm flower where she stashed the blanket. She might be willing to steal a human and temporarily abscond with a fae’s

clothing, but she wasn't going to steal from a court if she could help it. Such things got tricky, here in the Fae Realm. Some servant would find it and wonder how it had gotten there, but it would be an unremarkable find that no one would report to Queen Mab.

While Brigid wanted to hurry, she kept her pace brisk but unworried. Finally, she reached the rose.

Rosaline still lay sprawled before the flower. A few fae wandered by, shaking their heads and giggling at Hippolyta's Pet.

Brigid slipped into the rose and quickly peeled off the fake nose and fur, unclipped the ears and wig, and untied the fake tail. She sloughed off her plain dress until she was down to her shift, then she peeked between the rose petals.

She had to wait for several minutes before the area around the rose was completely empty. "Rosaline, now."

Rosaline pushed upright and launched herself into the rose. Hurriedly, Brigid helped her out of the red dress, then pulled it on herself once again.

Rosaline wiggled into her own bright purple dress and settled her headdress of flowers onto her head once again. "I'd better get back out there before anyone realizes I've been missing."

It was a risk, having Rosaline go missing. But her absence would be less noticeable than Brigid's. Brigid had purposely made herself incredibly popular and visible. It was her cloak of safety, but it had its downsides. "Go on. I'll be here."

After sharing a smirk, Brigid glanced out of the rose, ensuring that it was still clear. She settled into her spot on the moss once again, wiggling to get as comfortable as she could.

Now she just had to wait out the night.