

BAPTISM BY FIRE

Interlude One of the RuneQuest

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DEDICATION: This one's for my chicas ... Pat Forte, Chrissie Henderson, Dee Knight, Jennifer Skully & Leigh Wyndfield ... y'all made it a MUCH better story.

Prologue

I am Rhiannon, Moira of the Clan, keeper of the fates, champion of the Fae. Sanctioner of those who would deviate from the prescribed path.

The title of Moira has long been ascribed to the Greeks, but that is incorrect; it has been ours for time unending.

What no one understands, except those who assume the mantle of Moira, is the awesome responsibility we are assigned at birth. Divining the fate of my brethren, be they of wind or earth, fire or sea was never so tiring as these last few months.

Chants have floated on the wind, calling to the very runes I use to determine the balance of our lives. Calling to the four stones lost in the mists of time, and therefore leave our lives and destinies incomplete, even after two hundred years of searching.

The future of the Fae now hangs in the balance between love and hate, life and death. Choices made by the unknowing could tip both the destiny of the Fae and humankind either way. Only the free-willed return of the runes will ensure their true, unfettered power.

What troubles me most, though, is the thought I may soon have to attempt to wield the sword of Sanction, and destroy my brothers and sisters in the process.

As a spirit of air, it goes against my very nature. As Moira, it is my life's calling.

After all, without fate, what is there?

This is not my story, but in truth, how the recovery of those precious four runes and the final call to power of the modern-day Fae began.

Chapter One

Charged fire hoses snaked across the pockmarked parking lot of what had once been a warehouse. Now its smoldering husk was backlit by the bloody glow of emergency lights against the inky San Diego night.

Aidan Hughes squinted smoke-teared eyes. Three engine companies ... too little, too late.

He strode through the swirling mass of turnout-clad firefighters, splashing through mini-lakes and the delicate spray arcing from the hydrants nearest the building. The crowd of exhausted smoke-eaters parted before him like the Red Sea. Something about the blue windbreaker he wore, *MAST* emblazoned across the breast and back of the jacket, always moved the troops.

Raising his face to the sky, he drew the moistened, charcoal-scented air in deep, tasting it on the back of his tongue.

There it was--the same sulfurous perfume he'd detected at the last two fires. It was nothing his fellow firefighters would ever distinguish, nor even the most seasoned of arson investigators. This was something meant for his senses alone. Another of his clan had been here, and the thought shook him no less now than it had the first time.

He dropped his head, eyes boring into the darkness, willing his adversary to make himself known, to end this game before more human lives were lost.

The fire chief bulled his way up to him. "Whaddya think, Hughes?"

Aidan pulled his eyes from the wrecked building and the uncompromising night behind it. "Same as the last two. We'll find the same mystery accelerant, middle of the building."

"You're fucking amazing, Hughes. How do you know this shit?"

How indeed? He wondered what the captain would say if he told him he had almost a hundred years of experience as Fae, and his clan's signature was fire. The Salamanders were suited to only two things ... starting fires, and fighting them.

Ignoring the chief's question, he asked a more important one. "Anybody inside this time?"

"Not so we can tell. This building's actually used by the university, not abandoned like the last one. Guard was taking a leak over by the trees when the whole thing went up. Said it looked like a fucking bomb went off."

Aidan's lips twisted in a mocking grin. If only the chief knew. "You guys about done?"

"Yeah, there's a few hot spots, but you should be fine, especially wearing those shit-kickers." The chief nodded his head at Aidan's steel-toed boots. They didn't exactly mesh with the tuxedo slacks, shirt and bowtie he wore beneath the blazer. His dress shoes were back in his car, along with the rest of his gear. "Love the get-up. Where were you this time?"

"Mayor's Ball." Aidan cracked a smile. "You should have seen Gomez' face when my beeper went off."

The chief shared his amusement. "Bet that put a wrinkle in his Jockeys."

"To say the least. I'll go ahead and suit up while you finish mop-up." Aidan turned, walking back through the parking lot to his SUV. Stripping off the blazer, he

pulled his turnouts from the cargo area of the truck, stepping into the fire-retardant pants and jacket.

The chief's night was probably over, barring any other torches. His had just begun.

Chapter Two

Leanan Murphy pushed the strap of her agonizingly heavy purse off her shoulder, digging for her ever-elusive keys.

Aha, gotcha, you little buggers, she crowed silently as her fingers closed around the cold steel. Her victory was short lived.

“Doctor Murphy?” The voice behind her was warm, seductive, and shot through her like a dose of good Irish whiskey. Pivoting, she gazed appreciatively at the prime male specimen lounging against the wall opposite her office. Tall, dark hair, rangy build, with a set of to-die-for blue eyes. Brad Pitt ... eat your heart out.

Her head *had* to be in the clouds if she'd missed him the first time around. Coffee. She definitely needed coffee.

She dropped the keys back into the cavernous depths of her purse and extended her hand. “Yes, I'm Doctor Murphy. What can I do for you?”

“Aidan Hughes, Metro Arson Strike Team.” His hand engulfed hers, and for just a moment, she swore sparks flew between their fingers.

MAST? Even she'd heard of them, in her obscure academic life. They were a combination of fire investigators, cops, ATF and FBI agents who were taking the danger of arson fires to the people, instructing parents, teachers and youngsters on the warning signs of what an arsonist might “look” like.

If they were recruiting guys like this, then she was all for educating the populace.

“MAST, huh? I can't imagine what you'd want with me, but hold on for just a sec, and I can get us some caffeine and privacy.” She dug back into her purse, miraculously locating her keys within a few seconds--a first.

The smell of fresh-perked coffee from the automatic machine met her nose.

She waved the out-of-uniform hunk to a seat in front of her desk and hit the coffee credenza.

“How do you take it?”

“Excuse me?”

“How do you take your coffee?”

“Oh, sorry. I'm a bit punchy this morning. Black, please.”

“Coming up.” She poured two cups, adding a generous dollop of the Irish-crème flavored creamer she adored, then slid behind her desk after handing his mug over.

“So what can I do for you, Mr. Hughes? Or should I call you Detective, or maybe Agent?”

“Just Aidan is good, Doctor.”

Leanan smiled. On a first-name basis already? This morning just got better and better. She couldn't imagine a nicer way to start the day than flirting with a handsome stranger.

“Please, don't call me Doctor ... it makes me feel old and stodgy. Leanan is fine.”

“Very well, Leanan.” He paused, looking at her intently. “Unusual name, especially given your office.” He swung a hand around, encompassing the unique wall art and figurines crowding her desk, the windowsill and credenza. They were her pride and joy. Fairies, gnomes, and sylphs, in every medium from glass to clay to marble, danced across the desk, benevolently watched over by a large oil painting of her namesake, Leanan Sidhe, the most beautiful and provocative water elemental of all.

“Do I detect a bit of a brogue, Aidan? While lots of people comment on my name, not too many figure out the significance, at least not so quickly.”

He grinned, making him even more breathtaking. “My clan refused to let us grow up without learning our history. What, may I ask, is your degree in?”

Leanan returned his smile with one of her own. This was so much fun, and she hadn’t had this kind of fun in a very long time. Maybe Aidan Hughes was just what she needed to bring her out of her funk, in more ways than one. Nothing would ever come of it, but it was enjoyable, even so. “Mythological Studies. Can’t you tell?”

“That’s kind of what I figured.” Then he became somber, serious, and her good mood was dashed as quickly as it had begun.

“I’m afraid I’m here for something less than pleasant, Leanan. I need to talk to you about what happened in your warehouse last night.”

Leanan crunched her forehead in confusion. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I was told you were in charge of the warehouse over by the airport.”

“Well, sort of,” she answered slowly, still puzzled. “We house some of our older texts and some antiquities there, in addition to some of the theater props the drama folks haven’t used in a while. It’s basically a catch-all storage space for most of the university, broken up by department.” The reason behind his presence slowly sank in. “It’s gone, isn’t it? That’s the only reason you’d be in my office.”

“I’m afraid so, Leanan. I was sent to you first because your department’s inventory was probably the most valuable, at least in terms of replacement.”

Leanan lurched back in her chair, the hinges creaking as she contemplated the utter loss with horror.

“It *can’t* be replaced, any of it. It’s one of the reasons the exhibit wasn’t here at SDSU, why the warehouse was guarded,” she breathed, staring sightlessly at her hands, which she’d balled into fists.

The warm contact of Aidan’s hand on her shoulder jolted her. It was surprising because she hadn’t even seen him move around the desk. She looked up at him angrily. She wasn’t furious with him, but with the person who could so blithely destroy something so precious. “I wasn’t truthful with you a moment ago, because we’ve been very careful about what we publicly kept in the warehouse. It did house some other department’s things, but it was more. We were using it as storage for a museum exhibit we’re going to open next month in cooperation with the Corcoran.” It didn’t matter the exhibit would have been the culmination of her career. What mattered was all of the beautiful art, the priceless antiquities and texts, were now reduced to ashes. “Is anything left?”

Aidan squeezed her shoulder, shooting heat through her entire body and curling her toes. “I’m sorry, it’s gone, all of it.”

“Well, shit. Excuse me, but that pretty much describes it in a nutshell.”

He dropped his hand and resumed his seat. The heat she’d felt disappeared instantly, and for a moment she mourned its loss almost as much as she mourned her magnificent collection.

“You’re right, that *does* describe it well. You’ll need to start with an inventory for the insurance adjustors, but I wanted to be the one to tell you, and to find out if you were aware of any accelerants in the building.”

“No, we were especially careful with anything that could possibly damage the exhibit, simply because the tapestries and texts were irreplaceable.” She pushed the agony of what had been destroyed away, desperately needing to deal with this in a businesslike manner, just as her position demanded. She’d have time for recrimination later.

“Was there anyone who seemed to have a particular interest in the storage areas? Someone who didn’t belong or asked strange questions?”

Leanan shook her head. “Again, no. The contents were closely held. Only myself, the dean, a few students, and several of the museum’s docents knew exactly what was in there. And no one acted out of the ordinary. We were all excited about the surprise exhibit, wanted to knock everyone’s socks off with our opening, and then move the whole thing to Sea World for the tourist crush.” She was babbling, but couldn’t bring herself to care. Gone. Five years of hard work and even harder acquisitions, all gone in a flash of flame. Damn. It was back again, the emptiness of having lost something which never truly belonged to her in the first place.

Squaring her shoulders, she met his eyes. Startling blue and filled with compassion, Aidan Hughes was any red-blooded American girl’s fantasy--even hers--but right now, she had to deal with reality. “Is there anything else? I need to get with the dean and start figuring out where to go from here. And to top it off, I’ve got a nine o’clock class on Folklore and Fairy Tales. If you’ll give me just a moment, I’ll get the names of the students who worked on the project with me. I’m assuming you’ll want to talk to them.”

Aidan nodded sympathetically, as if he understood her brusqueness, and the reason behind it. But there was something else behind his nod, something she couldn’t quite get a grasp on.

She dipped her head in confusion and wrote the names of the participating students down on a Post-It note as an excuse to ignore his look. Her life was in enough of a shambles right now; she didn’t need to add a hot arson investigator to the mix, even if he was scrumptious. He handed her a business card and pasted the sticky in his notebook. “If you think of anything, and I mean *anything*, give me a call, day or night.”

Leanan took the card, wishing for just a moment, amid the chaos that had become her life, he really meant the “night” part of his statement as more than a business offering.

* * * *

Lush. It was the only way to describe Doctor Leanan Murphy, Aidan decided as he pulled into Fire Station 1 on First Street, where MAST was headquartered.

From her midnight-dark hair and unusual tawny eyes to her generous breasts and hips, she flashed a fire and radiance that reminded him of the gypsies of old. This was not some model-thin impersonation of a woman, but the real thing, shaped by time and fate as carefully and masterfully as a Botticelli.

It had been a long time since a woman had truly caught his interest. Oh, he wasn’t without female company on any given day, but most of the time it stemmed from his desire to be around women, not any woman in particular. Suddenly, this morning, everything changed.

He found it ironic the first woman to set off a spark within him in years was also his direct opposite, at least in name. Leanan, Daughter of the Sea God. The one deity in

all the worlds who could put out the flame of a Salamander, if she chose. It was a damned good thing this Leanan was a mortal.

Aidan shook his head with amusement. He'd never expected to find a true complement, here of all places. And while his ultimate destiny awaited him back in Ireland, in the company of his clan, it intrigued him to think about the merry chase a woman like Leanan Murphy could lead him on, and the more than ample rewards he could collect.

As much as he would like to follow such a course, he had bigger things to do, namely tracking down the Salamander responsible for using his awesome power in a human environment. It was not only foolhardy, but forbidden by their people, and would result in expedient, ruthless Sanctioning.

Personally, Aidan didn't have the stomach to act as Moira. Rhiannon, his playmate of old had donned the hat and taken on the responsibility of assigning every creature in the Realm their lot in life, be it on the outside, as in Aidan's case, or aiding their people from within. Unfortunately, the Moira also held the final responsibility in Sanctioning.

Aidan knew Rhiannon, with the backing of the High Council, should be here within a day of his report, searching for the one who dared to stray beyond the confines of the Realm.

In truth, he had waited two fires too long to contact the clan, but he had to be sure, had to *know* what he suspected was true before calling on the Moira. He would do it tonight, for contacting the Realm required solitude and concentration. Right now, he needed to check in and maintain appearances.

He stepped from the SUV into the picture-perfect San Diego morning, greeting firefighters as they continued the never-ending process of cleaning their rig.

"Hey, Inspector. What's the world coming to when a white shirt rolls in before lunch?" jibed Mikey Alvarez, one of the few people he was fortunate enough to call friend, at least in the Outer World.

The attitude of the smoke-eaters was always different when they were away from the fire, at least in how they treated Aidan. Even though they were on the same team, arson investigators were cops, "white shirts", different from the regular troops, and that difference was never more evident than in the aftermath of a blaze.

"Hell, Mikey, gotta keep you on your toes, don't I?"

Alvarez chuckled and fell into step with Aidan. "So what's the good word, Hughes?"

The fireman was referring to last night's fire. "Same shit as before, Mikey." He raked a hand through his hair, not really faking his frustration. While he knew *what* had set the blaze, *who* was still an overriding question.

"I go off shift at four, wanna get together and hit Old Town?"

Aidan shook his head. "Love to, but I've got to call home. And you know my mathair, it may take a while."

Mikey laughed. "One of these days I'm going to have to meet your mom, she sounds ... interesting."

Fat chance, unless you're planning on hanging out in the middle of a remote forest in Ireland, chanting incantations lost to humans for two centuries.

* * * *

Leanan's hand paused in mid-knock. She could not believe she was standing on Inspector Aidan Hughes' doorstep. While she certainly had a purpose behind the visit besides the rampant hormones that had plagued her all day and into the twilight hours, she certainly could have used the telephone.

Finding the address on Aidan's business card was residential, rather than MAST headquarters, had taken her by surprise and intrigued her. The house she stood in front of now gave her the same feeling.

It was a quaint cottage tucked away under the trees of an older neighborhood, reminding her of Aidan's barely-heard brogue. It pulled her under his spell as surely as his presence had. Night jasmine scented the warm, dusky air, soothing and arousing her senses in equal measures.

Enough of this. She shook herself mentally. *I'll turn around, march right back to my car, and call him from my place. It's not like I have to invent a reason to get a date, and I've got more than enough to do trying to reconstruct the exhibit.*

Instead, against all better sense, she let her hand fall, palm now open, against the carved mahogany door.

A surge of something hot and desperately primal arched through her as her palm flattened against the ornate wood. Sucking in a breath, she yanked her hand back, rubbing it against her shorts, watching shell-shocked as silvery, watery mist rose from the unmistakable mark of her palm against the door. *What in the holy hell is that?*

Her instincts told her to turn around, to be the rational woman she almost always was. Things like this did not happen to a professor. They just didn't. Almost against her will, her hand returned to the door. Anticipating the jolt this time, she pushed.

Eerie, powerful sensations shot through her again, head to toe, crackling the hair on her nape. The door swung open silently.

Her eyes adjusted slowly to the dim light, then were drawn to the magnificent, fully lit fireplace, which sizzled and spit as if in defiance of the temperate night. And hovering in front of the blaze was a small, winged figure bathed in a blue shroud of energy.

Transfixed, Leanan watched as the phantasm swung her way in slow motion. She could actually see the shimmer of its movements against the dark room as its delicate body pivoted. Her eyes locked on the almond-shaped, tilted gaze of the fairy, and in a flash, it was gone, disappearing in a streak of cerulean light that arched across the room like an afterthought.

She shook her head once. Again.

The second shake brought her to her senses. She was definitely seeing things. She wasn't ten years old any more, imagining the flit and flare of fairies around an ancient gnarled oak. This was San Diego, not Ireland, and it was time to get the hell out of Dodge. She'd call the delectable Aidan Hughes in the morning when she had her wits about her and miles of telephone cable between them.

Too late.

Aidan strode out of a back room, wearing low-slung shorts and little else. If she'd thought he was gorgeous this morning, she'd been seriously delusional. Aidan was, quite simply, the most stunning example of prime male flesh she'd ever seen, and every inch screamed *man!* Her mouth went dry as her eyes devoured his sculpted chest, abs

and horseman's thighs. A jolt of desire shocked her nerve endings, setting everything on fire and rooted her firmly in place.

"Leanan? Doctor Murphy?"

Leanan shook her head, this time to rattle some comprehensible words of salutation into it.

She was in serious trouble.

"Um, Aidan, hi," she began weakly, still staring at his chest. Forcing her eyes upward, she swallowed hard when she saw the amused expression on his face. How was she supposed to explain why she'd come?

Then it hit her. She really *did* have a reason for showing up here. "I, uh, had some information I thought you could use." As the words left her mouth, she realized how totally lame they sounded. God, could she be any more pathetic? She was the youngest professor to ever seek tenure at SDSU, and right now she sounded every bit of her thirty sheltered years.

Aidan's eyes snared hers; the smoldering heat he projected nearly had her melting into a puddle at his feet.

They stared at each other, and each second intensified the experience until Leanan swore she could feel his hands on her breasts, brushing the hardened tips of her nipples, sending liquid fire to her core. Her clit throbbed in time to her heartbeat. The air thickened until she was panting in quick little bursts, barely able to catch her breath. Each inhalation became a sensual, carnal experience unlike anything she'd ever felt. Ever.

A particularly loud crackle from the fire broke the moment, slingshotting Leanan back into herself. Drawing in shuddering breaths, she stared at Aidan, trying to ignore the moisture between her legs, the pounding of her heart, the insistent press of her nipples against the suddenly too-tight t-shirt.

Aidan was no less affected than she, if the tent in his shorts was any indication. His chest gleamed with sweat and he visibly trembled as he glared angrily at the fireplace. Leanan heard him mutter something like "a pox upon you, Rhiannon," before he swung those mesmerizing blue eyes back to her.

He exhaled loudly. "How about we start again? Come on back to the kitchen and I'll get us something cold to drink."

Leanan sighed in relief. Whatever *it* had been, she was free from it for a moment. Even if she didn't really, deep down in her heart and body, want to be.

Chapter Three

Aidan poured two glasses of Chardonnay, proud his hands didn't betray the tremors still racing through him. His cock was doing a dance of its own, demanding to be let out and complete the mating ritual begun so torridly moments ago.

He wasn't sure what had happened back there in the living room, but his body and soul had responded to Leanan Murphy as it never had to anyone. How could a mere mortal draw him so? And why did it shake him right down to the marrow?

Turning, he pressed the cool, stemmed glass into Leanan's hand. "Please, have a seat." He gestured to one of the four chairs surrounding the old oak table, pleased when she took the seat directly opposite him. He needed as much distance from her as possible, at least until he figured out exactly what she'd seen.

He'd been deep in conversation with Rhiannon when his *locked and warded* door had swung open, and even though the room had been dark, lit only by the ritual fire, it was possible the good doctor had seen more than she should have.

"So," he began, glancing down at the glass of wine framed between his hands, looking anywhere but at her. "What can I do for you, Leanan?"

It wasn't purposeful, the way her name slipped across his lips like a lover's song, but it was there, and there seemed to be nothing he could do to stop it. Nor could he stop the want, the need to look up at her, to watch her expressive face as she answered his question.

Her eyes darkened from that unique golden color to almost brown, pupils dilating as she studied him across the table. The scent of her arousal teased the air around him for a long moment, and then she shook her head slightly, shrouding her face behind a mane of dark hair.

When she surfaced again, it was as if another woman had taken her place. The woman who had flirted with him this morning, the woman who had been a hair's-breadth of consummating something beyond words this evening, was replaced by the professor, anguished to find her collection had been destroyed.

"I think I may have a lead for you."

With those words, Aidan's purpose was restored. He could handle his libido ... the rogue Fae was another thing altogether.

He reached back, snagging a pen and tablet from the counter and faced her again. "Go on."

Something like relief flooded Leanan's features. Yes, it *was* relief, and it was then he realized Leanan Murphy was as disconcerted by the strong pull of attraction between them as he was. For some reason, it spiked his interest even more.

"This morning I told you there wasn't anyone strange hanging out at the exhibit, and there wasn't," she quickly amended. "But I've got a new kid in my class, a mid-semester add-on and he's a bit odd. Sits apart from the other students. He's very knowledgeable about folklore, and while he never volunteers anything, he always has the answers when I call on him. His papers are nothing short of brilliant. To be honest, I was thinking of asking him to be an aide next semester."

Aidan rolled the pen absently between his fingers. "So what's so odd about him? Maybe he's just shy."

“That’s what I thought. Until he missed my class today. I knew it was something he’d been looking forward to, so I was concerned. After class, I went to the dean’s office to get his address. Then I went to see if he was home.”

Without thinking, Aidan exploded out of his chair, the thought of the risk she’d taken shaking him to the core. What if she’d confronted the rogue from his clan? She could have been killed. He stalked around the table until he stood directly in front of her, towering over her. “You did what?”

“I went to his address.”

“Did you once stop to think how dangerous searching him out was? How stupid?”

Leanan surged up and poked him in the chest with a finger. Hard. “It’s not stupid; it’s called being a good teacher. It’s not like I was even thinking of the fire. I was just worried about my student.” Absolute fury claimed the fine lines of her face, and instead of making her look ugly or bitter, it emphasized the passion he now understood she was capable of. “Don’t you *ever* call me stupid again.”

Aidan drew in deep breaths, trying to calm himself. His mind kept flashing on her burning alive, flames leaping from her body as she died and everything inside him screamed to protect her, to make sure she was safe.

He needed to ground himself, and clasped her arms. Gently, so she couldn’t break his grip. “Listen to me closely, Leanan. Our suspect has already burned three warehouses to the ground, and killed a vagrant in one just two weeks ago. Going to your student’s house was foolhardy and could’ve gotten you hurt. What if he’s my arsonist?” He released his hold, running his hands slowly down her arms to grasp her hands. “Promise me you won’t do anything like that again.”

“I promise,” she answered shakily. When she lifted her eyes to his, he could see her anger had changed to something else, something elemental--and dangerous--for both of them. His pulse soared in response, and it took everything he had not to swoop down and claim her mouth with his, finishing what they’d started back in the living room.

Disengaging their hands, he pushed down on her shoulders, guiding her into a chair before he circled the table and reclaimed his own.

“I didn’t mean to call you stupid.” Aidan took a long sip of wine, giving himself time to control his expression and heartbeat. His own reaction to what she’d said had his mind in a whirl. He’d never felt such an overwhelming compulsion to protect, defend at all costs. “You scared me,” he finished simply, placing the glass on the table.

Leanan’s indrawn breath forced him to glance up. Her eyes were locked on his, filled inexplicably with moisture. Those unshed tears undid him and he started to stand, to go to her, when she held up a hand, forestalling him.

“I’m sorry,” her voice wavered, but the strength behind it was obvious. “I’ve never had a stranger, hell, even my own father, express so much concern over me.”

Aidan fought back a grin, relieved and a little bit amused at the reason behind her mistiness. “Not to sound presumptuous, Leanan, but I get the feeling you and I are anything but strangers.” The words hung in the air for a long moment and he could almost see the air thicken between them again.

Purpose, Aidan reminded himself forcefully, he had a purpose here, and it wasn’t bedding Leanan Murphy, as much as he would like to. He needed to expend his energy and attention on his mission.

He broke the building web with much less subtlety than he'd like. "So what happened when you went to visit your odd student?"

Leanan gaped for a moment, then regained herself, the mist in her eyes vanishing. She stiffened her spine, sitting up straight. Aidan wondered if he'd gone about shifting the subject in the wrong way, even if it was for the best.

"You're right."

Aidan wasn't sure if she was referring to his "strangers" comment, or to the change of subject. He wasn't sure he wanted to know at this point. The woman across the table puzzled and aroused him in equal measures. It wasn't a feeling he was accustomed to and he didn't like it.

"Ian's *home* was a burned out shell down in Hillcrest." She referred to the less-affluent neighborhood surrounding the university, where down-on-their-luck students lived. "That's what made the connection in my mind, made me think you needed to know."

Aidan mused over her revelation, anger at the rogue Fae building in him again. The pieces were certainly coincidental enough, and getting more "official" information on the mysterious, odd student shouldn't be difficult, given the fact the university had suffered such a heavy loss. What he did unofficially was another scenario altogether.

"Thank you. While I still object to how you got the information, you might have given me the lead I need to find this *bastun*."

*

The vehemence in Aidan's reply shouldn't have surprised Leanan, but it did. It was obvious to her now. His demeanor this morning hadn't hinted that finding this arsonist was personal to Aidan.

It made him all the more attractive and for the life of her, she couldn't think of one good reason to squelch her desire for him. She wondered what an affair with him would be like and flashed back to the *moment* in the living room. And it had been a moment ... one she'd been relieved to see end because it was so unexpected.

She considered him across the table.

No, it wasn't going to happen tonight, or maybe ever, simply because Aidan personified the unexpected, and she liked her affairs hot, discreet and fast. Everything about Aidan Hughes screamed of long, sultry kisses and damp sheets, and as intriguing as her body might find the concept, she couldn't and wouldn't let her mind wrap around it. Regaining control, of both her profession and her life, was something she'd fought long and hard for, and the man across the table had her reacting in ways far surpassing her comfort zone.

Never mind the fact she couldn't afford the distraction of having a man in her life right now, especially not a man as vital as Aidan. Not with the exhibit in ashes. As enjoyable as a brief fling might be, her professional life was on the rocks. She would need every bit of her time and attention focused on making the exhibit a success with the odds and ends she had kept in her office and home.

The thought was enough to depress her all over again. She needed to pull her head out of the clouds and go home.

With her decision made, she picked up her wineglass and took a last sip before standing.

"Give me a minute to make a call, please?"

Torn. She was seriously torn, but in the end, did what she knew to be best. “I really should be going. Thank you for the wine.” Turning, she walked through the living room to the front door, actually feeling Aidan behind her as he escorted her. While it certainly gave her a delicious shiver, Aidan Hughes--hell, any man--was off limits until she could stand triumphantly at the doors of the Corcoran on opening day.

She shot a glance at the fireplace as she passed, feeling a smile kick up at the corner of her mouth. Damned if her imagination wasn't fanciful tonight. It was Ireland all over again.

“What's so funny?” Aidan's voice came from directly behind her and rumbled through her body, stoking the fire that had been banked within.

Her physical response and wandering thoughts had her answering absentmindedly.

“Nothing, I was just being goofy earlier, seeing things in the fire.”

Aidan's presence behind her intensified as he drew in closer until he almost touched her. Almost. A brief flash of panic skittered through her, as titillating as it was frightening.

“And what did you see, Leanan Murphy?” His honeyed voice washed over her, making her knees weak and her body weep. Aidan Hughes should be declared a lethal weapon, with the way he was making her feel.

His warm breath feathered across her cheek as he leaned in still closer, bathing her in the scent of soap, sandalwood and good clean sweat. Her heart threatened to jump out of her chest.

Out, she had to get out before she made a total ass of herself. She did flings, not one-nighters, and being this close to Aidan had her ready to drag him to the floor. She surged to the door, opening it with more strength than necessary and stepped into the balmy San Diego night.

“Leanan.”

She turned, pivoting on her sneaker slowly, carefully. If he touched her right now, she wouldn't be able to resist him. She'd definitely been without a man too long.

Aidan stood in the doorway, framed by the flicker of the fire behind him, face unreadable in the wash of the porch light.

She understood what he wanted, and gave it, as a condition of her release.

As she spoke the words, she knew them to be true, even though they sounded ridiculous, too much like the child who had seen the magic of the Fae twenty years earlier and been ridiculed and humiliated by her staunchly academic father.

“A Fae, that's what I saw, all right?” A bit of anger drove her words as she braced for another round of the old hurt.

Instead of making fun of her, he did the one thing she least expected.

“Good night, Leanan,” he murmured, and leaned in, capturing her lips in a sweet kiss. The sweetness mushroomed immediately, eclipsing their moment in the living room, as sudden, complete desire enveloped her. She sagged into him, her body turning to fire wherever she touched him. All thought vanished but the absolute need to have this man, and have him right now.

Aidan growled, deep in his chest. The vibration rocketed through her, making her wet, wanton and ravenous.

She opened her mouth, meeting his tongue with her own, sparring and thrusting, until the only thing in her world was the pure heat shooting in a never-ending circle from her mouth to her breasts to her pussy.

When his hand snaked beneath her t-shirt to cup a breast, she almost screamed her delight. Mouth still feasting, Aidan anchored a hand in her hair and tortured her nipple, circling it with hard, demanding fingers, squeezing it with just the right amount of force to bring her to the brink of coming.

Reaching down, she palmed the hard length of his cock through his shorts, measuring it appreciatively as she dove into his mouth, moaning as his hands tightened in her hair, on her breast. Sliding her hand up, she dipped her fingers beneath the waistband of his shorts, needing to feel the length of him.

A wolf-whistle cut through the fog of desire. "Get a room, why dontcha?" The catcall was punctuated by the bleat of a car horn and laughter coming from the street. Young, juvenile laughter.

Leanan froze, fingers centimeters away from his cock, then whipped her hand out and twisted her head to the side, breaking their mating of the mouths.

Jesus, what in the hell was she thinking?

She pulled out of Aidan's arms, shivering with fear over her loss of control.

He let go of her reluctantly, shaking his head as if coming out of a daze. She understood exactly how he felt.

"Leanan..."

"I've got to go." She turned and did something she'd never done in her life. She fled.

Chapter Four

“She is not for you, Aidan.”

“I know, but it doesn’t stop me from wanting her.” Aidan sat in front of the fire, clothed in his human guise. Once the connection with the Realm had been made, the “line” had stayed open until he or Rhiannon chose to close it. Therefore, she’d heard and seen everything that had transpired with Leanan. Everything. Including the rather impetuous kiss that had led to something far more potent. He was still hard as a post.

“Wanting is one thing. Partaking is another. I saw the look on your face.”

“Don’t lecture me like a child. Even if you are Moira, you have no right to take that tone with me.” In truth, she had every right, but he wouldn’t give her an inch on this one. They’d known each other far too long for her to begin acting like a mother. “I’ve got it under control. Now, what are we going to do about her? She saw me.”

Rhiannon snorted. “You don’t have anything under control, but you will have to, if you are to complete this mission. Your fate has been presented to you. It is to find this rogue, not chase after a water sprite. As for her seeing you, give her time, a few days. She is human, and will begin to dismiss it with every passing hour until she imagines it as a trick of the light.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Be that as it may, she can do nothing about it. No one would ever believe her, and I doubt she would be willing to sacrifice her professional life to make such a claim. Simply stay away from her and all will be well.”

“There’s more. She opened my warded door.”

“Perhaps your warding wasn’t as strong as it might have been.”

Aidan mused over her words. She was probably right. With his mind on both the rogue and Leanan Murphy, it was a possibility he had been sloppy.

He had also forgone the joy of slipping into his Fae form for far too long. It was a necessity for their kind to flee the shackles of human guise regularly, something he had neglected through absentmindedness more than anything. Was he becoming too human? Perhaps the only way to find out was to reconnect with his tribe, physically.

“When will you be here?”

Rhiannon sighed, her voice muted against the crackle of the flames. When she spoke, it was as his playmate, not as Moira, and she sounded weary.

“Very soon, I hope. Things are not well here, old friend. Dissention grows. There are those who feel the time for isolationism has come to an end, who wish to experience the world as you and others have, but without your training. I have to wonder if your rogue is not a part of it all, a distraction to keep me from fulfilling my purpose here.” She sighed. “They do not understand that by leaving the clan without the proper training they endanger the very fabric binding us together, even with the absence of the last four runes.”

“They *dare* question you, the Council?” Aidan didn’t even try to hide the incredulity in his voice. No one, be they fire, earth, water or air, went against the Moira. It simply wasn’t done. The Moira, and by extension, the Council, was the one being holding their combined clans together, had saved them from sure extinction in the days when Fae were hunted for their power. Saved them all still. The Moira’s will simply *was*.

“Find our rogue, Aidan, and contain him. I will be there when the time of Sanctioning comes, and we can both return home. And stay away from the human. She will bring you only misery.”

With that, the fire went out, dead and cold as a stone.

Aidan stared at the empty grate, thoughts churning.

Home. As much as he'd longed to experience the Outer World as a boy, now he yearned to return home even more, to be among his people once again. To find a mate and frolic in the trees with the freedom denied him here.

When had things begun to go so wrong in the Realm? The Fae had lived there in harmony for centuries, building their population slowly, communing with Mother Earth, as was their way. They had branched out into the world slowly when the runes decreed, set forth to meet a fate even the Moira could not see.

Surely the dissention hadn't been underway when he was still in Ireland? He would have sensed it, somehow.

It couldn't be the earth elementals; they were too strongly tied to the soil itself and usually disgruntled, at the very least, when decreed to leave for the Outer World.

The undines only haunted rivers close to the Realm, since the sea, with the humans' legion of warships and pleasure craft, was out of the question.

And the air elementals were too closely tied to Rhiannon to ever go against her wishes.

No, it had to be a fire, from his own clan, who was fomenting a rebellion. A rebellion which could quite easily destroy more than two centuries of peace.

Aidan speared his fingers through his hair.

He had a feeling his rogue was the answer to all of this, and it was time for him to begin tracking him down in earnest.

Rhiannon was right. Leanan Murphy was off limits, no matter how good, how right, she'd felt in his arms, tasted on his tongue. He had a goal, a mission, and it continued tonight.

* * * *

Leanan stared up at the wood-beamed ceiling of her bedroom, sexually frustrated and angry as hell with herself.

She couldn't get Aidan's taste and touch out of her mind; it was driving her nuts. She should be asleep now, but the feel of his hands on her was seared into her memory. His scent haunted her, making her body itch and burn in a purely sexual way she'd never felt before.

Why couldn't he have been some old, balding guy with a paunch? It would have made her evening a whole lot less eventful.

Yeah, she was frustrated, but she could deal with it. But the anger, oh, that was a different story.

She'd run--actually run away. And from what? A hot, utterly delectable man who had obviously wanted her ... just as she'd wanted him. So why had she bailed? She could be lying in Aidan's bed right now, with a satisfied smile on her face. Instead, she was cold and lonely in her own.

Oh, to hell with this. She needed a good bitch session, and there was only one person who fit the bill, even if it was almost midnight on the East Coast.

She punched the phone number in by memory and heard her best friend's voice answer cheerfully.

"Speak, and you shall be heard!"

"Hey, Maggie-girl, you alone?"

"Disgustingly so. What's shakin', chica?"

Leanan threw her free arm over her eyes. "I met a guy today. An incredibly hot arson investigator."

"No shit?" Maggie paused, and Leanan could almost see her mulling the situation over in her amazingly agile mind. Whoever said blondes were dumb had never met her college roommate. "You didn't sleep with him, did you?"

"No," Leanan sighed, "but it was a close thing."

"Hmmm. Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know. He scares me a little bit." With the lights off and her best friend on the phone, she could admit to that much.

"What?" Maggie's voice raised in concern. "Scares you how?"

"He's ... intense."

"Good lovin' intense or stalker intense?"

Leanan laughed. "Good lovin' intense, for sure."

Maggie was quiet for a long moment. When she came back on the line, her voice was contemplative. "You probably don't want to hear this, but you need to let go of the past, girl. You're a different person now. Hell, you always were, just beaten down by your father and that prick James. It's a freakin' miracle you ever made it out of Boston."

"I know, and it's probably past time I heard it. Realizing it doesn't make life any easier, though." It helped, since Maggie knew all of her secrets, her fears, her insecurities. It had been Maggie who'd helped her pull it together in those first few months after she left James at the altar and started her new life three thousand miles away in Berkeley.

"Are you going to see him again?"

Leanan worried her bottom lip between her teeth for a moment before answering. "I don't think so. He makes me forget who I am, what I'm doing. I can't let someone have so much power over me again."

Maggie sighed. "What you're talking about is a different kind of power, and you know it. Think about it for a while first, all right?" She shifted tack with blinding speed. "So how did you meet Mr. Studmuffin?"

Leanan thumped her forehead with her palm. "Shit, I can't believe I told you about him first and not the fire. Shows you how fucked-up my priorities are right now."

"Fire, what fire? Are you okay?" Real worry laced Maggie's voice now.

"I'm fine, at least physically. The warehouse the collection was in was torched last night." The loss still echoed through her in resounding waves.

"Oh, shit. What are you going to do?"

"Start pulling together what I can, I suppose. We've already done all of the prelim stuff, and we're committed to the Corcoran."

"I wish I could tell you not to sweat it, dear, but I know you too well. Just take some time for yourself, 'K?"

Leanan snorted. "Yeah, right."

"I mean it."

"I know you do. Listen, I've got class in the morning, and you've probably got early rounds at the hospital. Thanks for listening to me whine."

"Hell, girl, you know I'm here for you anytime. Love you, sis."

"Love you too, Mags."

She disconnected and thought back to the day she'd become a new woman, her woman.

She'd learned a vital lesson six years ago and it was one she'd held close since. Enjoy your time with a man, but never let him hold sway over you. Her father and James had tried to force their version of the future on her. Her father, through years of nannies and indifference, until she would do almost anything to incite a response, including graduating from Harvard by the time she was twenty-one. James had stepped right into his shoes, but instead of ignoring her, he had lavished her with the attention she was starved for, and in doing so, began to enslave her.

The criticisms had begun early, and with great subtlety. But when she began to dress as he wanted and take the graduate courses he said would be most beneficial to his career, she'd felt like she was being smothered.

Two weeks before her wedding, a society event to be sure, she'd begun packing her treasures, wishing for the thousandth time since she was ten that her mother was there to help her, to lend advice on how to be a good wife. It was while she was spreading paper to wrap her favorite painting when it really hit her.

She'd stood, staring down at the unbridled, free spirit of Leanan Sidhe and seen the future as it would be with James. The conservative dresses, the downcast eyes, the continued verbal abuse which would almost certainly escalate when she was finally "his". In that moment she hated herself, hated what she had allowed her father to mold her into.

She'd continued packing, but instead of putting the things she valued most into storage as James had insisted, she loaded up her ultra-conservative Volvo and started driving until she hit the West coast, and Berkeley.

On the long journey she'd made peace with herself, of a sort. She would be the woman her mother had named her for, and damn any man who stood in her way.

Never mind the fact that since then, her relationships consisted of short, brief affairs, which ended when her partner became too stifling.

Silent, angry tears leaked down her face as she realized, really realized, why she'd fled from Aidan. She'd been scared to death of the way he made her feel. Of the way she'd lost her head, been caught up in the moment.

She was scared of losing not only herself, but the carefully constructed, albeit, empty life she'd created along the way.

* * * *

Aidan slipped through the quiet night, scenting the air as he went. Older homes surrounded him, some run down, some vainly holding on to their fading glory.

He breathed in the heavy fragrance of jasmine and the tang of salt air from the nearby Pacific, barely tasting the taint of sulfur hidden cunningly beneath.

Aye, his Fae had been here, but in the past, perhaps when the home had originally been destroyed.

He'd thought the burned-out home might draw the Salamander back, but it was not to be, at least not this night.

Returning to his truck, he sat in the driver's seat, thrumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Leanan's warehouse should be his next destination, but it didn't feel right. In truth, nothing had felt right after he'd digested Rhiannon's disturbing message.

Were he a Fae bent on changing destiny, where might he go next? From where would he draw his greatest strength? Where would he hide?

In plain sight, perhaps?

If only he had another Fae to turn to besides Rhiannon. Someone who lived here and understood the Outer World as he had come to understand it these past ten years.

But he only had one being to gain counsel with tonight, and he was human. Mikey.

With a short nod of his head, Aidan pulled out of the convenience store lot he'd parked at and headed for Old Town. Finding Mikey should be no problem.

* * * *

And it wasn't. Alvarez was propped on the same barstool he occupied every night he was off-shift, in a tiny hole-in-the-wall frequented by cops and firefighters.

Aidan slipped onto the stool next to him and signaled the bartender for his usual, Jamison's, straight up, with a Guinness draft on the side. When he'd first come to Callahan's he'd found it interesting an Irish pub could peacefully exist in the heart of San Diego's Mexican-inspired Old Town, but it not only existed, it thrived.

"Didn't think I'd see you tonight, my man." Mikey toasted him with a dip of his longneck Miller.

"Couldn't stop thinking about last night," Aidan admitted, nodding to the bartender as he took a sip of the whiskey.

"There's always another fire, amigo. That's the way of our world. What's got you so bothered about this one?"

"Besides the obvious connection to the other torches?" Aidan quirked an eyebrow at his friend and took another sip.

"Hell, Aidan. There's firebugs all around us, you know that better than anyone. So what's the problem?"

"The signature is strange." He paused, then continued. "This feels almost personal. Like he's laughing at me. You know damned well every one of these has been in my jurisdiction."

Mikey shot him an odd look. "Personal, huh? You need to get out more, Hughes, maybe even get laid with one of those honeys I always see you around."

Aidan replied with a short laugh. There was only one woman he wanted in his bed, and until Mikey brought the subject up, he'd been avoiding the thought quite admirably.

"What, the mighty Aidan Hughes is striking out? I don't believe it."

Aidan finished his Scotch and turned to face his only friend. "Not quite."

"Humph. Not quite ain't scoring, my man."

"I've had my mind on other things." Aidan launched into their oft-argued discussion. Anything was better than thinking about Leanan again. "Speaking of other things, did you take the exam today?"

"Shit. Why'd you have to bring it up?" Mikey stared at his beer, peeling the label off with one stubby finger. "Yeah, I took it, for all the good it'll do. I'm not like you,

Hughes. I ain't cut out to be an investigator, and I don't know why in the hell I let you talk me into taking the damned test every time it comes around."

"Because you're good, that's why. You're destined to do more than pretty up your rig and cook shitty chili every week." Aidan grinned as he said it. Mikey was obsessively proud of his chili.

For once, his friend didn't rise to the bait. "Destined, huh?"

"Yeah. Mikey, I want you to come in on this with me. I need a clear set of eyes and ears. He's only killed once, but what will happen the next time? What if he pulls an Orr and starts torching someplace with someone other than vagrants living there?"

If nothing else, his reference to John Orr snapped Mikey's head around. John Orr had been a legendary arson investigator--and an even more notorious arsonist, setting hundreds, maybe thousands of fires up and down the state before he was finally caught.

"You think it's one of us?"

"I don't know, but the similarities are starting to grate on me." The possibility did exist the rogue had blended in where he would be the least noticeable ... in a firehouse. And Mikey knew more about the crews than Aidan, as an outsider, ever would.

Mikey heaved a big sigh, pushing his bottle around the table aimlessly as Aidan took a pull on his Guinness.

"Well, what do you think? Are you in?"

"Yeah," Mikey replied, sounding tired. "I'm in."

* * * *

The alarm chirped obscenely in Leanan's ear for at least a minute before she flung an arm out and silenced the wretched thing.

What day was it? Friday, thank God. She only hoped her week ended better than it had begun.

She lay in bed for a few moments, gathering her thoughts. Her mind latched onto Aidan almost immediately, but she pushed it away forcefully, grabbing the next thing that swam into focus.

The fire fairy. She snorted, snuggling underneath the covers. She'd begun her career of studying mythology to spite her father more than anything, but found herself falling in love with the concept all over again, especially in the first year after James, when she needed a giant heap of magic. Having a free spirit like Maggie in her life had only boosted what would have been a totally irrational career path just six months before.

The study of mythos had rekindled her fascination, but as much as she tried to grasp the magic of what she'd seen when she was ten, nothing had even come close.

She remembered standing, all alone, in front of a giant ancient oak, the moon high above her. Her parents had been involved in an academic argument about the standing stones they'd camped next to, and not even noticed when she wandered off.

The night had been full of magic. It sparkled on the moon-touched trees and long grasses and rode the sigh of the wind as it slipped through the leaf-laden branches.

And on the soft sough of the breeze, she could hear singing, so beautiful it made her heart ache and brought tears to her eyes. Then she'd seen the first one, flitting around the branches of the great tree, delicately silver and dancing with the wind. A rainbow of color streaked through the sky, and coalesced into tiny fairies, hovering,

dancing and swooping in a swirl of joy around and around and around until Leanan was dizzy and sat down hard on the ground.

She watched for what seemed like hours, transfixed at the pixie play. Taking the carved stone her mother had given her earlier in the day from her pocket, she tumbled it through her small fingers.

Suddenly, her father's voice, stern and unbending, broke the ballet apart into disjointed pieces. "Leanan Murphy," he'd yelled, "come down off the hill this instant and into bed."

She'd gone, but not before shooting one last wondering glance at the tree. They were all gone now, scattered into the night like they'd never been.

Her father had, of course, spent the next eleven years reminding her of her flight of fancy, and how serious academics should never actually believe in what they were studying, because it took their objectivity out of focus. In time, she'd been browbeaten into accepting his truth.

Leanan sighed. She'd thought too much about the past in the last twelve hours. It was time to worry about the future, about what she'd have to do to make the exhibit at the Corcoran the success she so richly deserved.

Pushing out of bed, she poured a cup of coffee and slouched to the shower, taking the brew with her.

As she stood with her back to the deliciously hot spray, she sipped the equally warming caffeine and let her mind roam. Of course, it went exactly where she didn't want it to go. Aidan Hughes. She should be thinking about how she was going to raise her exhibit from the ashes with the few pieces she had secured here at home and in her office. She should be thinking about insurance forms and meetings with the dean and Ian O'Shea, her peculiar student. Not about Aidan Hughes.

But the image of his face swam from the back of her mind no matter how she tried to push it back. The picture of him in those low-slung shorts that left so very little to the imagination. The feel of him behind her in the living room; standing in front of her at the kitchen table. The gentle grip of his hand on her shoulders, her arms, her hands, and oh God, her breasts. The velvety slip of his tongue as it plunged into her mouth again and again.

Those images ran through her mind, her body, and suddenly she was hotter than the water pummeling her back.

With a muttered oath, she slammed the coffee mug down on the back of the toilet tank and leaned back into the spray. Aidan Hughes was a fantasy come to life, but one she would never realize, no matter how much her body protested.

And right now, her body was protesting mightily. As she massaged shampoo into her hair, she imagined it was his hands caressing her scalp, following the soapy trail down her body to her breasts. Cupping them so gently with his work-roughened fingers, then tweaking her nipples until she thought she'd combust.

Her hands followed the imaginary path his would take, smoothing over her hips, brushing the silky hair of her mound, then dipping in, teasing her clit with fairy-light touches as he pressed against her, the rock-hard length of his erection pressing against her ass. He'd go further, lifting one leg and propping it against the side of the shower, slipping inside her with one finger, then two, thumbing her clit as he moved slickly against her back.

Pure sensation washed over Leanan as she pleased herself, lost in the moment. White light exploded behind her closed eyes as she came, sagging against the cool tile of the shower, barely able to hold herself up on trembling legs.

The cooling water brought her out of her pleasure-induced fog.

God, how long had it been since she'd come so hard by her own hand?

She pushed away from the shower wall and leaned back, rinsing her hair with shaky fingers. If nothing else, Aidan Hughes was damned good, as far as fantasies went.

Chapter Five

Aidan stood in front of Sophie Kincaid's desk, barely containing his impatience. "I requested the ownership information on these warehouses the day after each fire. Why has it taken over three weeks to get them?"

"Budget cuts, Hughes. No clerks to hunt down the histories. Until your homeless guy died, we were probably on the bottom of the priority list. Now, with the fire a few days ago, someone finally decided to push it to the top. We only found out about the ownership of the last one because of the security guard." Sophie held out a thick yellow envelope.

Aidan shook his head in disgust and took the proffered paperwork. "Sorry, Sophie, you know I'm not mad at you."

She responded with a cheeky smile, her teeth blindingly white against her ebony skin. "It's okay, sugar. You can get pissed with me any ol' time you want."

That had Aidan chuckling. Sophie was happily married to a linebacker for the San Diego Chargers. While she was gorgeous and had a wonderful personality, there was no way Aidan was going to go head-to-head with a professional athlete who could break him in half, Fae power notwithstanding.

"Very funny. I'm quite attached to my head, thank you very much. Any chance Mikey and I can use the conference room?"

"Go right ahead," she said, consulting her computerized calendar. "There's nothing in there all day. Give a shout if you need anything."

"Thanks, Sophie." Aidan poked his head into the hallway, pulling Mikey away from his conversation with a beautiful patrol officer.

"Quit drooling on her, Alvarez. You'll get her uniform all slobbery."

"Piss off, Hughes," Mikey retorted, turning his back to Aidan.

"I'll be in the conference room when you decide to get to work, you piker. Don't believe a word he says, Officer. He's all smoke, no fire." Chuckling, Aidan walked into the conference room and began laying the background paperwork of the three fires on the table.

It only took twenty minutes for the connection between the three fires to become clear. When it did, it shook Aidan to his core.

"Mount up, Mikey, we're going to the university."

* * * *

This time Leanan didn't miss him, or the Hispanic man waiting by his side.

Her stomach muscles clenched as her mind flashed to last night and her shower scene just an hour ago. She **so** did not need this, not this early in the morning, not with her equilibrium shot to hell. It was a damned good thing she had her keys in hand already, or she'd be digging for them for five minutes while Aidan watched. "Aidan. I didn't expect to see you so soon."

"Me either. We need to talk." He turned to his friend. "Leanan Murphy, Mike Alvarez."

Alvarez stuck out his hand. "**Very** nice to meet you, Doctor Murphy."

Leanan absentmindedly shook the man's hand, but her eyes were locked on Aidan. Damn, he looked good, even better than she remembered. Her nipples tightened

in anticipation of a touch she would never feel again. Tonight, however, when she was all alone, was a completely different story.

She tore her eyes from Aidan to see Alvarez watching them both with a sardonic smile on his face.

“Nice to meet you, too. And please, it’s just Leanan. Hang on a sec and I’ll get us some java.”

When the three of them were comfortable, sipping their coffee, Aidan began speaking.

“Did you realize, Leanan, all three of the torched warehouses belonged to SDSU?”

“Huh? That can’t be right. As far as I know we only had the one. That’s why so much stuff was stored there.”

“Maybe it’s the only one you were aware of, but all three were held by the university. The warehouse holding your exhibit just happened to be the one most deeply buried in paperwork. Probably because of the value of the contents. Mike and I are working on a hypothesis the arsonist might have gotten what he wanted this time around. Your exhibit.”

Leanan reached out blindly, grasping her worry stone and rubbing the stylized rune engraved on it with her thumb.

“Why would my exhibit be of any interest? Especially to an arsonist. What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense.”

Aidan leaned forward in his chair and met her eyes. “Think about it, Leanan. You have a student who’s expressed specific interest in your courses. A student you were so concerned about you actually went to where he lived to check up on him. Are you sure you’d never seen him before he started attending your classes?”

Shaken, Leanan sat back, continuing to caress the rune stone as she racked her memory.

“No. He was a complete stranger to me when he showed up the first day. I can’t believe this is happening. He’s just a kid, almost a boy.” She pushed out of her chair. “C’mon, let’s go see what the Admissions Office has on him.”

* * * *

It wasn’t much. The student’s name, Ian O’Shea; his address; his transfer paperwork from a university in Dublin, which hadn’t been confirmed yet. Budget cuts, again. Aidan would bet his last dollar the transcripts were fake.

Dean Harris hadn’t been much help either. He’d known the first two warehouses belonged to the university, but hadn’t given it a moment of thought until something of value, namely Leanan’s exhibit, was destroyed. While Harris’ response to the whole situation struck Aidan as false, over the next few minutes, the man’s utter prissiness and self-importance came through. It was simple. He was just a dickhead.

Apparently, the vagrant who’d died in the second fire wasn’t something the academic considered “valuable.” Aidan’s already poor opinion of the man had gone even further south when he started haranguing Leanan about what she was planning to do to resurrect the opening at the Corcoran.

It had taken everything Aidan had not to give the man a serious case of hot-foot, just as payback. Mikey’s reaction to the little man’s attitude hadn’t been any better, if the stiffening of his wiry frame was any indication.

Now they were back in Leanan's office.

"I'm sorry I have to bail, but I have a class I'll be late for in about two minutes. I'd let an aide take it, but it's a graduate course, so it's definitely something I need to be there for."

"That's fine, Doctor Murphy. I think we're done here, at least for now. Right, Aidan?"

Mikey poked Aidan in the ribs. He would have winced, but didn't want to give Alvarez the pleasure of seeing such a response.

"One more thing, if you please." He'd worked hard at keeping his professional demeanor all morning, but Mikey had seen through it from the start and was giving him grief. It was discreet, but definitely goading.

Leanan looked at her watch, nodded, and bent to pick up a stack of papers, her slacks drawing tight against a perfect, heart-shaped ass.

Aidan dragged his eyes away and focused on the painting of Leanan Sidhe over her desk. He knew, without looking, that Mikey had a shit-eating grin on his face. "Do you have any of O'Shea's papers? Something we could look at and read over?"

Leanan straightened, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Not here. They're all at home. I didn't even think to bring them along this morning. If you like, I can have them here tomorrow." She walked to the door and ushered them out.

"Actually, if it's all right with you, I'd be happy to pick them up tonight." Aidan fought to keep the strain out of his voice. He was going against Rhiannon's strict orders, but he hadn't been able to get Leanan out of his head. He could tell it was mutual, and that it was something Leanan fought as strenuously as he. Perhaps what they both needed was time alone to talk it out, to acknowledge their attraction for the other, to clear the air.

Even as he thought it, he understood he was attempting to justify a chance to get to know her better. A chance to taste her again. A chance to do so much more.

He watched Leanan gulp, then force a smile. "That's just fine. You've got my contact information from yesterday, right? Just give me a call before you head over. I'll be leaving about six."

With that she closed and locked the door behind them. "Mikey, it was nice to meet you, even under these circumstances. Aidan." She acknowledged him with a short dip of her head, turned and walked down the long hallway.

"Oh, my man, you are so hooked." Mikey singsonged in Aidan's ear. "This is going to be more fun than I'd imagined."

"Shut up, Alvarez," Aidan growled, and stalked to the exit.

* * * *

How in the hell are you going to handle this? Leanan asked herself for the hundredth time as she looked around her tiny house. It was much too small for both her and Aidan to mingle in, too close for comfort. And he'd be here any minute.

She'd spent the afternoon thinking of little else, finally coming to the conclusion that being around Aidan Hughes was nothing but bad news. He consumed her thoughts when she should be thinking about her career. Especially after the tongue-lashing the dean had given her ... in front of Aidan and Alvarez no less. It had been an utterly humiliating moment. She'd already known Dean Harris was an asshole, but this morning's events had made that fact even more clear.

She'd done as Maggie had asked, and thought about what might happen if she got together with Aidan. Even knowing him as briefly as she had, she couldn't deny she wanted more than a brief affair with him. He'd shown a passion she'd never experienced before, and such passion shook her to her very foundation. It was a distraction she couldn't afford, not in her career, and not with her still-shaky psyche.

After tonight, she decided, she and Aidan would stay as far away from each other as possible.

She settled into her rocking chair, restlessly pushing it into motion as she scanned Ian O'Shea's homework. The boy was a talented writer, and obviously knew the subject matter. But there was nothing about fire anywhere to be found in his work. Instead, he'd presented fascinating conjecture on the day-to-day lives of the Fae.

That made her think about Aidan and what her mind was now insisting had been a trick of her eye. The Fae were not real, they were simply a colorful legend, an immensely entertaining mythology. She had to keep thinking that, or begin to slide into a land better inhabited by minds like Tolkein.

The doorbell interrupted her thoughts before they went too far into the bizarre. She answered the door, struck again by the pure, wholly sexual aura Aidan carried with him. His sky-blue gaze danced over her face, her breasts, her hips, before coming even with her eyes. Each place he lingered over burned with sensual heat.

His scent surrounded her, making her dizzy. But it also held a certain comfort, a feeling of coming home.

She was right. Her house would be much too small for the two of them. They should have met at a neutral place, over drinks. But it would have seemed too much like a date.

Leanan shut down the babble in her brain and the edgy fire in her body and invited him in without a word.

"Would you like some iced tea?" She would have offered wine, but she'd need every single one of her faculties tonight.

"That would be fine." Aidan's answer was just as stilted as her offer had been.

"Please, have a seat," she continued as she walked into the kitchen. "I have to tell you I went over Ian's assignments this evening, and I don't see how it could have anything to do with your investigation. Or with me."

"While I certainly trust your guidance on academia and your specialty, let me be the judge of what is relevant to my case." Aidan's amused answer didn't come from the living room, as she'd expected, but instead from directly behind her.

She barely stifled a purely defensive leap away and steeled her nerves.

Turning, she found herself staring at his chest for the second time in two days. At least it was clothed this time.

The deep breath she took didn't help. Instead of calming her, it gave her a lungful of Aidan and started the dizzy sensation again. Shoving the glass into his hand, she darted around him and into the other room.

Space, she needed space.

She dropped into her rocker as Aidan settled onto the sofa.

"We need to talk about this."

"About what?" Leanan knew exactly what he was referring to, but wasn't ready to discuss it while her head still swam.

“The chemistry between us. It makes us both edgy, and to be honest, it shakes my concentration all to hell when I should be working on this case.”

Well, it didn't get much more out-in-the-open than that.

“I don't know what to say. You're right, there is something between us, but it's not something I'm comfortable talking about now. You and I are like fire and water; there's a lot of steam, but we're just not compatible.”

Aidan visibly started at her analogy, then relaxed.

“I don't know,” he murmured softly. “It might be a test worth taking.” He stood, placing his tea on the side table before walking the few short steps to her.

Leanan's heart stuttered in her chest. This was not happening. Especially after the little heart-to-heart with herself this afternoon. She should say something, anything to stop this, but no words came.

“What do you say we give it a try? It'll stop the wondering, at least.” He leaned down, gripping the arms of the rocking chair, stopping a hair's-breath away from her.

“Just say the word, and I'll stop.” His eyes were locked on hers, and if her life depended on it, Leanan couldn't say no.

He waited a moment that seemed to stretch into infinity before lowering his head, brushing his lips against hers gently. Sparks mushroomed inside her from that simple contact, setting her already overheated body aflame. Any reservations she might have had were incinerated.

She didn't even try to stifle a moan, immediately gratified when Aidan groaned himself and delved into her mouth, his tongue hot against hers as he thrust in, claiming her. She rose up, putting her own demands into the kiss as she twined her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer, so much closer.

Aidan stood, bringing her with him and into full contact with his body. Her sensitized nipples brushed against his chest, shooting sensation straight to her core, flooding her with scalding, wet heat. His erection pressed against her belly through the denim of his jeans, making her impossibly hotter.

She wanted him here, now, on the floor, anywhere, it didn't matter.

“Bed, Leanan. Where is it?” Aidan rasped against her lips.

“First door to the right. Hurry.”

Keeping her in his arms, Aidan walked backward, resuming their kiss as he did, stumbling over the threshold of her lamplit bedroom.

Leanan pulled away, ready to strip off her t-shirt. Damn the consequences, she wanted this with Aidan, even if it was only a one-time deal. She'd never really, truly been wanton before, but that was exactly how Aidan made her feel. Wanton and needy and powerful, all at the same time.

“Ach, Leanan, stop.” Tension threaded his voice and etched itself into the chiseled planes of his face.

She did, confused. He wanted her to stop, now? Was this some kind of game to him?

“Slowly, please. I want to see every inch of you.”

Oh. He wanted a striptease, did he? That she could handle.

She inched the cotton up, and up and up, oh-so slowly. Pulling it off, she shook her head, reveling in the sensuous feel of her hair against her bare back and at the blue fire in Aidan's eyes. Reaching back, she unhooked her bra and let the straps fall off her

shoulders, caressing her breasts and pinching her nipples as she peeled the cups away.

Aidan's harsh, indrawn breath made the delay worth the torture.

She flung the bra away and unbuttoned her shorts, sliding them down her legs, bending as she did so, bringing herself face-to-face with Aidan's crotch. Impressive.

With a smile, she stood back up, clad only in red lace panties.

"Your turn."

His only response was a low growl as he began to tear away his clothes with barely restrained ferocity. Apparently going slowly when it came to him wasn't an option. That was perfectly fine with Leanan.

Oh my.

She'd seen enough last night to know his body was perfect, but now, totally naked, she saw what she'd been missing. His cock was long and thick, and had her licking her lips in anticipation. She sat on the edge of her bed, refusing to move when Aidan stood between her legs.

"Lie back, Leanan."

"Hmmm. I don't think so." Control ... she would keep control. She leaned in, licking away the drop of pre-cum glistening on the purplish head of his shaft, and took him deep into her mouth.

His hands fisted in her hair as she began to move, ever so slowly, learning the taste and texture of him with her lips and tongue. He tasted as good as he smelled ... warm and salty and all man. His taste and obvious desire for her had her spiking even higher with each long suck and pull until she thought she might come just from the act of giving him head.

Aidan pulled on her hair, tilting her head up so she was looking in his eyes. Oh, those eyes. They were so blue they glowed.

With one last stroke inside her mouth, Aidan pulled free. "My turn, indeed," he grated, dropping to his knees in front of her.

With leisurely, tantalizing strokes, he traced the band of her panties, touching her everywhere but where she really wanted to be touched. Leanan leaned back on her elbows as he dipped a finger beneath the lace, tracing her slit, making her arch her back for more.

"Mine," he whispered softly, dipping his head and blowing a scalding breath on her pussy. A sensuous thrill, instead of pure panic, ran through her at his possessive word. Pushing the crotch of the panties to the side, he tasted what he'd just touched, tongue dipping and swirling, fingers stroking and plunging into her.

Leanan threw her head back and moaned as the first tremors shook her, collapsing as the tidal wave hit. She barely registered Aidan's heavy weight next to her until his hand began coasting over her body, igniting her all over again. Feather-light touches against her collarbone, her navel, under her breasts, tracing the arch of her eyebrows; they were tender and reverent and made her want to cry.

She opened her eyes to find him propped up on an elbow beside her.

"Definitely a test worth taking," he murmured, then lowered his mouth to hers.

*

Leanan's lips parted beneath his again and Aidan was lost in a swirling maelstrom of desire and emotion he'd never experienced before.

He plundered her mouth with bold, hot strokes, fondled her breasts until her nipples stood up in tight, hard peaks.

Levering over her, he stared down into her whiskey-colored eyes, half-lidded with a combination of satisfaction and lust, and felt something kick deep inside him. It wasn't, *couldn't* be what he thought it was. His fate was not here.

With something akin to panic, he leaned in and kissed her. Anything to erase the feeling of ownership, of complete *rightness*, that kick implied.

Leanan's hand on his cock had the desired effect, spinning him past his thoughts and into pure sensation. He mimicked the motions of her hand with his mouth, thrusting again and again until they were both trembling, sweaty and hot with anticipation.

"Now, Aidan," Leanan ordered, a sultry smile tipping her pouty, kiss-bruised lips. "But first..." She pointed to the nightstand, and he understood immediately what she meant.

He found the box of condoms and ripped one open, sheathing himself with trembling fingers, knowing she watched him with tacit approval as she shimmied out of her panties.

He rolled back to her, and letting her guide him, feasted on her neck as she positioned him at the entry to her scalding entrance. Rising up, he thrust into her in one long, smooth stroke, almost coming from the sense of completion he felt in joining with her.

"Oh, God," Leanan breathed, clamping her legs around his body, urging him in further.

Exquisite sensation ripped through him as he began to move, slowly at first, then picking up speed until flesh slapped against flesh in a tempo as old as time. Leanan's heels dug into his ass, her nails clawing at his back and shoulders.

Dropping down, he took her mouth with his, reveling as her tongue dove into his mouth, exactly mirroring the possession he was taking of her body.

Suddenly her hands were twined in his hair, pulling his head back. She stared into his eyes as she began to come undone, each miraculous second stretching elastically as he felt himself join her, swirling deeper into an abyss he had no hope of escaping, until they came together, bodies pulsing as one.

Chapter Six

An hour later, Aidan stirred in Leanan's arms. Had he ever been so drawn to a woman? So totally and utterly fascinated by one?

"I'm supposed to meet Mikey down in Old Town to see if he's found anything. Come with me," he added on impulse.

Leanan pulled away, sitting up on the edge of the bed. "I can't," she whispered, so low Aidan could barely hear her. "This was fabulous, Aidan," she continued in a stronger voice, "but we both understand it was just for tonight. You and I can't be, at least not right now. I won't split my concentration between you and my career. I won't." She stood, her back to him, pale body shining in the lamplight.

Aidan's body tightened, and he wanted her again. And again and again.

The worst part was, he did understand what she was saying. They both had things to do, important things, and right now an affair was the worst possible thing either could embark on.

Wrong time, right woman. He could feel it deep in his bones. But there was no way he was leaving here tonight without telling her he understood her choice.

"Leanan," he growled, "turn around. Please."

She pivoted, and when she fully faced him, his breath caught in his throat. She was everything he'd ever wanted, ever needed. Rhiannon had been right. He should have stayed away.

"You're right." He rubbed the back of his neck. "We're both knee-deep in our jobs right now, but I have to tell you, if it weren't for that, there's no way you could get me out the door."

She hitched in a shaky breath. "That's very nice of you to say, Aidan, but not necessary."

Aidan frowned at the difference between her earlier, cool words, and the confused, almost hurt look on her face now.

She shrugged into a short, silky robe that covered her, but left very little to the imagination. She cinched the belt in tight, a defensive measure, pulling his eyes to her full, firm breasts and made him forget the contrast.

"Go on; see Mike and take O'Shea's papers with you." A smile graced her lips, trembling for a moment before it firmed up. "You know how to get in touch with me if you have any other questions ... about the fire."

She exited the room, leaving him to clean up and dress in silence. The silence grated on him until he fumed. Job be damned! He didn't have any claim on her, but it rankled that she'd so easily dismissed what had been a monumental bout of lovemaking for him. That she could so easily dismiss *him*, despite the look on her face.

He was in rare form when he walked into the living room. Leanan sat in her rocking chair, feet tucked up beneath her, a glass of wine sitting on the side table.

Night had fully descended and the room was lit by a series of small lamps, casting the room in a homey, soft glow that fit Leanan perfectly.

The feeling of rightness, of coming home, rushed over him again, banishing his fit of pique.

"This isn't over, Leanan," he said, still standing in the doorway of her bedroom. The scent of their joining teased him, making him hard again.

She sighed, looking up at him with something like sorrow in her eyes. "Yes, Aidan, it is. You admitted it yourself. We're both too committed to our work right now. You've got an arsonist to catch, and I've got a career to rebuild. We were fantastic together," a wry smile quirked at her lips, "and I guess you proved me wrong. Fire, water and steam, indeed." She picked up her wineglass and took a sip, shooing him toward the front door with a wave of her other hand. "Go on, meet up with your friend. If you need anything, give me a call."

Aidan strode into the living room, stopping to pick up the sheaf of papers still sitting on the coffee table. She was right, but why did it feel so wrong?

"Oh, I'll be giving you a call," he promised, forcing the silk, the charm into his voice.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"Maybe," he answered, walking to the door, before stopping with his hand on the knob. "But it's how I'm choosing to see it. Sweet dreams, Leanan Sidhe."

* * * *

Stupid. That's what she'd been. She could have said no, and Aidan would have accepted it. Their timing was all wrong, something both of them admitted to.

Shaking her head, Leanan took a sip of wine. The recriminations and self-doubt had reared their ugly heads in the afterglow, but the fact still remained--she'd enjoyed the hell out of Aidan Hughes and would keep their night together as a cherished memory of what might be.

She'd broken her own rule about one-night stands, but couldn't bring herself to regret it. She might have second thoughts about involving herself with Aidan Hughes, but she'd never feel regret.

If only he hadn't begun to creep into her heart, scaring the hell out of her in the process. She'd never lost control like this before, never wanted a man so much she forgot her own self-preservation. Now all she wanted was to be wrapped in his arms again, and damn the consequences.

"Oh, hell." Leanan wrapped her robe more tightly around her and stared sightlessly into the night. It was going to be a long weekend.

* * * *

Aidan stalked into Callahan's, tossing Ian O'Shea's work down on the table in front of Mikey.

"Struck out, did you?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Aidan snarled. His anger and aggression was back, and right now the most convenient target was Alvarez.

His best friend studied him in the murky light of the bar, cocking his head. "No, you didn't strike out, did you?"

"So what did you find out?" Aidan's shift of subject was less than subtle, but he didn't give a damn.

Mikey let the question hang for a moment, then gave in. "No new smoke-eaters by the name of Ian O'Shea, for sure. I've got some of my buds in the other houses keeping an eye on the newbies. Didn't tell 'em why, but they're not dumb. They'll figure it out," he warned.

"I don't care if they figure it out, as long as the rogue is identified."

"Rogue? Hmmm, a new name for a firebug. I kinda like it."

Oh damn. Aidan bit back a reply, letting Mikey think what he wanted. This was what happened when he lost control of his temper. He wouldn't be doing it again.

"So whatcha got there? O'Shea's homework?" Alvarez gestured to the papers.

"Yeah. I didn't get a chance to look at them yet, so let's dive in." He motioned to Kevin for his usual and turned back to meet Mikey's smirking grin.

"You were gone an awful long time. I was getting ready to send out a search party."

Aidan sighed. "Look, I really don't want to talk about it, all right?"

"Fine, hold out on me. It's just not fair," he mock-whined, letting Aidan off the hook, but not without one last jibe. "I do all the hoofing, and you get to make out with the hot professor. Not fair at all."

"Shut up and help me look through these papers."

* * * *

"This is some funky shit, man," Mikey commented as he turned a page.

"Hmmm?" Aidan asked, poring over an offering on the mythology of the modern-day Yeti. Somehow this wasn't what he'd imagined Leanan teaching.

"I dunno, it's all about fairies and rune stones. And these Fae don't sound anything like the ones I've ever heard about."

Aidan's head snapped up. "Different how?"

"No sprinkling of fairy dust, to start. These guys sound just like us, but more insular. And they're segmented out into different clans. Lemme see ... fire, water, earth and air. And there's some big head who tells them what their 'destiny' is. I'm telling you, funky shit." Alvarez shook his head.

Aidan forced his hands to unclench the page he was holding.

O'Shea's paper spelled out the way things actually were in the Realm.

"Sounds like a bunch of fantasy crap to me," Aidan forced out through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, but it's really well-detailed crap. This guy's got a vivid imagination. Should be writing screenplays up in LA, he'd make a mint."

"Maybe, but I don't see how it concerns our arsonist. Keep looking."

Two beers later, they called it a night.

Mikey might have thought it a wash, but Aidan had exactly what he was looking for--proof a Fae was indeed attending Leanan Murphy's class. *Nothing* was that coincidental.

Chapter Seven

Saturday dawned clear and bright, too bright, in Leanan's estimation. She groaned and threw an arm over her eyes.

She'd drunk too much wine the night before, trying and not succeeding to get Aidan out of her head.

Now it felt like a thousand elves were running riot through her skull.

Her body ached deliciously in places she'd forgotten about since her last affair, and that hadn't been much to write home about. Aidan, on the other hand, was.

Stop, she had to stop. She'd been the one to end it after just one interlude, and she'd been right to do it. While she'd said she wasn't willing to split her attention between him and her career, she'd lied. He'd scared her, pure and simple. Frightened her with the intensity of what she felt when she was with him.

Part of her kicked herself--wasn't he exactly what she'd been looking for, all these years? Someone who obviously accepted her for what she was? Who respected the fact she'd made a career for herself out of something so unconventional? Another part of her, the loud, scared part, reminded her exactly what happened when you let a man get close enough to take control of your life.

It was that part she listened to, because it was what had kept her sane in the past.

Focus, that's what she needed. She needed to drag her ass into the shower, spend the day cataloging what personal items she had in her home and office, and try to put something together which would dazzle the Corcoran.

But she'd allow herself just a few moments to relive those heavenly moments in Aidan's arms, and the absolute sense of carnal homecoming she'd felt.

Just the remembrance brought her nipples to peak and had moist heat pooling at her core. Tossing off the sheet, she dipped her fingers into her wetness and brought them up to caress her clit with feathery circles, imagining it was Aidan's hand, his tongue, his cock, teasing her so mercilessly. She ran her free hand across her breast, cupping the heavy weight before pinching a nipple. Sensation shot straight to her clit and in seconds she was coming, heaving against her own hand.

As her heartbeat rocketed, then slowed, she felt completion, but it had never been so empty.

* * * *

Leanan pushed open the door to her office, box propped against her hip, glad for the echoing silence of the hallways. Weekend labs were held in an adjacent building, so she was one of the few people in the administration building right now.

Setting the box down, she looked at her office for the first time since entering the space.

Oh God.

It had been destroyed. Chairs lay on their sides and term papers littered the floor like snowy confetti. Her own overstuffed chair had been shredded, stuffing gaping between the tears in the burgundy leather. And worst of all, her painting of Leanan Sidhe, her namesake, was slashed beyond repair, tattered pieces hanging from the ornate wooden frame.

Cursing, she dug in her purse for her cell phone and phone book, dialing Security. When she disconnected, she tapped in the numbers for the one person she needed to see beyond all reason.

* * * *

Aidan pushed through the double doors of the university's administration building, scowling as he strode down the long hallway.

The message on his answering machine had been short and terse. She needed him at her office as soon as possible. He'd been in the shower, washing away the night sweats that had drenched him as he tossed and turned in his lonely bed, engaged in hauntingly erotic dreams of Leanan.

His scowl turned dangerous when he saw the uniformed security officers hovering around Leanan's office and Mikey's familiar form leaning against the wall by the door.

"What the hell?" His voice caromed off the walls, turning Alvarez' head.

He met him halfway, laying a hand on his arm, which Aidan shrugged off as he stepped up his pace to a near run. "She's fine. Someone fucked up her office, and but good."

Aidan growled in reply and pushed past the rent-a-cops.

Leanan stood in the center of the carnage, calmly answering the questions of the uniformed patrol officer taking her statement.

"Leanan?"

She threw him a tight smile. "Can you give me just a moment, officer?"

"Sure thing, ma'am. We're almost done here, anyway." He motioned to his partner, who was in the corner, taking pictures of the ruined painting.

She took a few steps toward Aidan and stopped, banding her arms around her stomach. "I'm sorry I called you. The police think it's a random act of violence. I thought it might have something to do with your case." Her words were just as clipped as they'd been on the answering machine, telling him how much it was costing her to maintain control.

Aidan closed the space between them with long strides and pulled her into his arms, breathing her scent in deep. He'd never been so damned scared in his life as when he'd seen the security detail and thought the worst.

She stood there, stiff for a moment, then started to shudder.

Aidan made eye contact with the cop, who gave him a short nod. He pulled Leanan out into the hallway.

"It's all right, Leanan. Shhh, Sidhe, I've got you."

Her hands crept around his waist, holding him tight, and he gave her what she needed, solace from the violation. Inside, he shook with a fury he'd never felt before. Power boiled through him, demanding release. He held it at bay, promising the raging beast an outlet at the nearest opportunity.

After a few moments, Leanan leaned back, bracing her palms on his chest. They burned through the thin t-shirt he'd thrown on as he raced out of the house.

"Thank you," she whispered. No tears yet, but white arcs of shock swept beneath her eyes and he figured they wouldn't be long in coming. Probably when she least expected it.

“Doctor Murphy,” the officer cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, but I have just a few more questions and then we’re finished.

Leanan drew a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and stepped out of his arms. “Let’s get this over with.”

The cop led her back into the office, Aidan trailing behind.

“Can you tell if anything is missing?”

Leanan cast a hand out. “In this mess? I can’t tell now--it’ll take some serious clean-up to be sure.”

Aidan really looked around the room for the first time. While paper littered the floor and Leanan’s chair had been shredded almost beyond recognition, the figurines and statues on her sideboard, desk and windowsill were undisturbed. Only the painting of Leanan Sidhe had been desecrated.

Brow furrowed, Aidan stepped over to the credenza, running a finger over the graceful arc of a mermaid’s tail. Something was wrong, and it was more than the obvious destruction of the office.

Drawing in a deep breath, he scented the air. Nothing. No sulfur, no hint of the Fae. Even without the use of fire, Aidan should have been able to scent him at the very least.

Yes, something was *very* wrong here.

He swung his eyes to Leanan, who was shaking the officer’s hand.

“Thank you for your help, Doctor. We’ll be in touch if we find anything.” Leanan nodded and slipped a hand inside the pocket of her shorts. Aidan could see her bunching that hand into a fist.

Both cops walked out of the office, where Mikey joined them, leaving Aidan and Leanan alone.

“Who did this, Leanan?”

She swung his way, posture still stiff as a board. “I don’t know. I can’t think who would do something like this.”

“I think you do. This was personal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your painting. It’s the only artifact destroyed. The rest wasn’t touched, only the painting, your chairs and papers. This was personal,” he repeated.

Leanan turned slowly, eyes lighting on the credenza. “You’re right. I still can’t imagine who would do such a thing.”

Aidan could see she was being truthful, and let it go. They’d explore it more later. “C’mon, I’ll help you straighten up.”

* * * *

In the end, both the painting and Leanan’s chair were beyond repair. Leanan stared at the slashed portrait, mourning its loss. What had she done to deserve not only this, but the loss of the exhibit? She had tried her best to be a good teacher, a good human being. Look what it had gotten her. Yet another dressing down by Dean Harris, who’d been called in from his golf game in La Jolla, less than pleased by the interruption. Never mind that her life had been torn apart as surely as her office.

Her credenza was bare now, the pieces carefully wrapped and placed in the box she’d brought with her this morning. After this, the only place she would felt safe in

leaving them was her little house, and how safe was that? She'd thought her office was secure. That brought a real shiver.

"Aidan, can you follow me home? I want to make sure my house is in one piece."

"Of course." He stood behind her and laid a warm hand on the small of her back in comfort. His simple touch grounded her as nothing else had, except when she'd stood in his arms several hours ago.

How could she feel this way after knowing the man only a few days? Yes, he made her hot as hell, but there was more to it. She'd never experienced this combination of heat and comfort before, and as disconcerting as it was, she couldn't help but want more. Jitters over her feelings be damned.

He'd come to her after no more than a simple phone call, and stuck with her for the boring task of clean up. Now he was following her home to make sure she was safe. Was it any wonder she'd begun to fall for the sexy firefighter?

And the heat he generated within her. She remembered yesterday's analogy to fire and water making steam, and couldn't help but smile a little, even given the circumstances. They didn't make steam, they set the pot to boiling.

They left the office, locking up behind them. Leanan couldn't help but feel the action was futile.

As they walked down the long hallway, she thought back to Aidan's words. He was right. This had been personal. She searched her mind for who could hate her so much to destroy the one thing she'd treasured.

Yes, there was James, but he was a lifetime ago and a full continent away. When it came to anyone in San Diego, she came up blank.

* * * *

The house was empty and undisturbed. Aidan put the box of artifacts in the spare bedroom, then joined her in the kitchen.

Leanan poured two glasses of wine and settled into one of the dinette's chairs. It was reminiscent of just two nights ago, when she'd visited Aidan's home.

"Before you ask," she began, "I still can't think of anyone here in San Diego who would do this to me. I've racked my brain all afternoon and I still can't come up with anything."

"What about O'Shea?" Aidan asked the obvious question.

"No, I can't see him acting with so much malice. He was quiet, not a nutjob. I would have seen it, either in the way he watched me, or in his papers."

"All right," Aidan replied slowly, taking a sip of wine. "Tell me about the portrait. It was obviously important to you, and whoever did this knew it."

Leanan smiled wistfully. "It was a sixteenth birthday gift from my Aunt Clara. Pissed my father off to no end."

"How so?"

His innocent question brought her reminiscent mood to an abrupt end. "He wasn't much into fancy. Thought she was encouraging me with non-academic thoughts when I should be trying to get into Harvard or MIT."

"And did you?"

Leanan laughed a bit harshly. "Oh yeah, full ride to Harvard Business School. It didn't hurt that both Mom and Dad were alumni."

"So how'd you end up teaching mythology at San Diego State, of all places?"

"It called to me," she answered simply. "Listen, I really don't want to talk about my past, or my parents." Pausing, she took a sip of wine, savoring the fruity smoothness as it slid past her lips. Then something occurred to her.

"Oh God. It's Saturday night. Surely I'm keeping you from something."

Aidan smiled one of those slow, smoky smiles that curled her toes. "Nothing else I'd rather be doing, although I wish the reason you called me had been different."

How to answer? That she wished the same? That she'd been thinking of him when she brought herself to orgasm this morning?

"Don't think it to death, Leanan. I understand what you said last night. I don't like it, but I understand it." He settled back in his chair and stared moodily into his glass of wine before lifting it to his lips.

She didn't know what she expected him to say, but it was not to start talking about himself. She found herself leaning forward, sucked in by his words.

"I've been drawn to fire since I was but a child." The hint of a brogue was back in his voice. "I left the clan at twenty-one and found my way in the world, but some day, some time, they will call me back." There was pride in his voice now, pride for his family, his clan.

For the life of her, Leanan wished she could feel the same way about her father. Her mother, yes, but she'd known her such a short amount of time.

"Those of us who leave are free to do as they wish, as long as they remember to heed the call home. And while I've enjoyed my time in the States, I yearn for the emerald hills of my youth."

Leanan propped her chin on her hand. "I visited Ireland once, long ago. It was beautiful."

"Not so beautiful as you, Leanan Murphy."

Leanan started in surprise. Aidan's statement had been honest, true, and God help her, she wanted to believe it. Wanted to lose herself in the unabashed interest this man had shown her since the first moment they'd met.

It went against every promise she'd made to herself, but right now, at this moment, she really didn't give a damn. Too much had happened over the last few days and it had shot her equilibrium all to hell. She knew what she needed, no matter how bad it was for her.

"Would you think less of me if I told you I wanted you to hold me? Especially after everything I said last night."

Aidan's answer was to stand and hold out his hand.

Leanan joined him, stepping into the circle of his arms for the second time that day. She breathed in the good, right scent of him, and for the first time in forever, everything clicked into place. She was home. No matter how irrational or unlikely or doomed it made her, she was home.

Chapter Eight

The moment he closed his arms around Leanan, Aidan knew Rhiannon was wrong. This *was* the woman for him, and damn the Moira for claiming her off limits.

He held her securely, resting his chin on the top of her head as he rocked her. His body responded to her proximity, just as it had since they'd first met, but the need was not overwhelming. Instead, he saw the promise of what was to come, should Leanan want it.

As if attuned to his thoughts, she lifted her head, lips slightly parted in invitation. Aidan took advantage, softly, gently, loving her with his mouth as he'd never loved another.

Sliding his hand through her silky hair, he tilted her head and delved into her mouth, reveling in the sensual swipe of her tongue against his, in the tentative, learning strokes they both took. Nothing would be done in haste this night.

Aidan broke away and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in the luxuriant strands of her hair. "Mmmm, you taste like heaven itself, Leanan Sidhe."

She laughed, a short, broken chuckle which ended on a sigh. "Oh, Aidan, you do say the nicest things."

He could feel her smile against his collarbone, then caught his breath as she lifted her lips and nipped lightly at his neck.

"Turnabout is fair play." She nipped again, and laved away the petit pain with her tongue. "You make me burn, Aidan."

Her simple declaration blew all of his good intentions away, and in that moment he wanted nothing more than to spread her out on the kitchen table and feast.

He crushed her in his arms, and gentled his hold, afraid of hurting her.

"What you do to me, Leanan." He let her go and cradled her face in his hands, tracing her eyebrows with his fingers. "I want to love you slow tonight, all night, until the sun comes up."

Her breath caught, and he could easily read the tumult of emotion swirling through her whiskey-brown eyes. Confusion, lust, need ... and more.

"Lie with me, Sidhe. Let me love you."

"Oh, yes, Aidan."

He leaned forward until his forehead touched hers, until their breath mingled. Her arms circled his neck as she tucked her body in close to his.

In a few steps they were in her bedroom. The setting sun cast the room in brilliant crimson and gold, highlighting the figurines and statuettes mirroring the display now sitting in her spare bedroom. It gave the room a sensual, mystical feel, making him feel more at home than any time since he'd left Ireland.

Aidan set Leanan on her feet, savoring the feel of her as she slid against his body. He lifted up her tank top, letting his palms drift and linger over the silken roundness of her shoulders, down the length of her arms, until he caught her hands in his.

Looking into her eyes, he raised their joined hands to his lips and drew her index finger deep into his mouth, sucking delicately, then with more strength.

Primal satisfaction coursed through his veins as he watched her eyes glaze in passion, felt her pulse speed up until it was thrumming beneath the delicate skin of her

wrist. Her other hand grasped his convulsively as she drowned him in the depths of her eyes.

Oh yes, this was what he wanted, needed from his Sidhe. Wanted, needed, from himself.

He slid her finger out of his mouth, nipping at the tip as he released her. The sigh she uttered made him harder than he'd ever thought possible. Each beat of his heart thundered in his ears and pulsed in his cock.

He disengaged their clasped fingers, and with shaking hands released the front hook of her lacy bra, letting her fabulous breasts free. Her nipples, already peaked, hardened even more, until they stood at attention, begging for his hands, his mouth.

"Lie down, Leanan." His voice shook almost as much as his hands.

With deliberate, sensual movements she reached out, pulled the comforter down, and reclined against the cool sheets, a clear look of invitation on her face, in her eyes.

It was an invitation Aidan was only too happy to respond to. He lay on the bed, running questing fingers under her breasts, around her nipples, teasing and tempting until both were heaving harsh, choppy breaths, until Aidan couldn't stand another second without a taste.

His lips closed around her nipple as his hand continued to torture her other breast. Leanan rose to meet him, her hands twining in his hair, holding him willing prisoner. Her moans seethed in the air, fueling his desire until he was panting at her breast, ready to rip away their clothes and join with her in the most elemental way of all.

Somehow he maintained his control--barely. He eased off her with care, afraid he would break his cock in half if he moved too quickly. Unsnapping her shorts, he ran the pads of his fingers across the graceful swell of her stomach, making her giggle breathlessly.

That playful, gleeful sound tickled his funny bone, and suddenly they were laughing together, tangled in a flurry of silken sheets and twining limbs.

They lay there for a moment, each regaining their breath.

"Ach, Leanan, I don't think I've laughed so hard in a long time." In truth, he hadn't since he was a child, flitting amongst the branches, playing hide-and-seek with Rhiannon. Until today, he hadn't found a companion worthy of sharing glee with. It made his heart ache that he should find it now, with a woman who could never understand his true nature.

She grinned at him. "Me either."

Aidan rolled onto his side. The clan be damned, he would enjoy his time with Leanan, take her memory home to be hoarded and cherished. "Now where were we?"

Liquid fire smoldered in her eyes as she reached out and ran her fingers along his cheekbone.

"Take off your clothes, Aidan." With her command, the playfulness was gone, swallowed by pure, molten desire that coursed through his veins like lava.

He stood, stripping down with jerky movements until he stood beside her with a hard-on like a steel rod.

Leanan lay before him, still clad in her shorts. He removed them, and the lace panties she wore, with as much efficiency as he had his own, then simply stood there, drinking in the sight of her in the dying light.

She took his breath away. Hair, black as sin, spread out wildly on the pillow, generous breasts tapering down to a perfectly proportioned waist, hips that begged a man to grab on and enjoy the hell out of the ride. Her pubic hair was neatly trimmed and as dark as her tresses.

Her arousal perfumed the air, and he drew the scent in deeply as he looked his fill. His cock swelled even more and for a moment he thought he would come just from looking at her.

Then she moved, spreading her legs, and the invitation of her pink, aroused flesh called to him in a Siren's song.

He leaned over her, more than ready to taste her, to sip the honey seeping from her pussy, but she caught his shoulders with insistent hands and pulled him up to cover her.

"I don't think we need that, at least not now. I want you inside me, Aidan." She kissed him, a light, fleeting brush of her lips.

Aidan groped blindly for the nightstand, pulled out a condom and dressed himself, then covered her again in a full-body embrace, sinking deep and seamlessly into her, into the complete and utter *rightness* of her.

Tamping down the overwhelming urge to pound into her, to utterly claim her as his own, he moved at a snail's pace instead, sliding in and out with delicious torment until she quivered beneath him.

With a quick flip, he rolled so she rode him. She reared up, gloriously female, spearing fingers through her hair, taking obvious pleasure in her dominant position.

Aidan's heart tumbled in his chest as she rode him, her hands sliding from her hair to cup her breasts and tweak her nipples. His balls crept in close to his body as he felt the first tremors of climax licking at his spine.

He reached out and teased her clit, felt the muscles of her pussy clamp down on him, and then they were coming together in an orgasm so pure, so powerful, it wiped away everything. The unused energy from earlier in the afternoon roiled through him, at last finding an outlet.

Aidan felt himself begin to rise as his uncontrolled magic levitated both of them until they were flying, floating above the bed in a tangle of limbs and souls ... two hearts beating as one as his Fae energy looped back on itself, sending them over the edge again and again.

* * * *

Leanan pried her eyes open to a dark room. Aidan lay beside her snoring lightly, and she stifled a small, satisfied smile. This session had been more than extraordinary, it had been earth shattering. For a minute there, she'd actually thought they were flying before settling back to the bed softly, Aidan whispering Gaelic words into her ear as he tucked her against his body. She'd dropped into the arms of Morpheus, sleeping more soundly than she ever had in her life.

She stretched like a cat, wincing as her body prodded her. She needed to pee, and with a vengeance. The thought made her smile. As utterly amazing as she felt, she still needed to take care of business.

Sliding out of bed, she padded to the bathroom, closing the door so she wouldn't wake Aidan.

When she stepped back into the bedroom, she was surprised by the soft glow of candles illuminating the room. Aidan lounged against the pillows, sheets crumpled at his feet, a satisfied look on his face.

“How in the world did you get them all lit so quickly?”

He grinned as candlelight flickered and waned, making him appear more devilishly handsome than she’d ever thought possible. She felt her body respond to him with just his look.

“Oh, I have my ways.”

Leanan laughed, but it was a shaky thing. “I’m sure you do.”

How could she want him again so soon, so badly? To hell with it, she’d listen to her body. She was ready to fly again.

As if tuned to her thoughts, Aidan smiled wickedly as his cock began to harden before her eyes.

“Like that, is it?”

“Hmmm, c’mere, Leanan.”

She stalked toward him, mouth curved in a grin. He reached out a hand and pulled her onto the bed, capturing her lips in a soul-stealing kiss that had her seeing stars.

God, how in the world could it get any better?

Aidan answered her unspoken question by flipping her over so she lay on her stomach. A thrill ran through her as she realized his intent. He’d allowed her to dominate earlier, and now it was his turn.

She heard the soft tear of the condom packet, and then he looped an arm beneath her stomach, drawing her to her knees, hips tight against him.

She propped herself on her elbows, his shaft pressed between her cheeks as he toyed with her clit, making her impossibly wetter, hotter, hornier.

He leaned over, covering her body with his own, nipping at the nape of her neck, her shoulder, sending delicious shivers through her, echoing in nipples, her clit, quivering down her spine. And still he played her like a violin, bowing her body against his so she was branded by his heat, his scent, his very presence. She inhaled his essence, saturating every cell of her being with him until she would swear they breathed as one, their hearts beat as one.

Then he was pushing into her, further and further until she could feel him against her womb. He stayed there for a long moment, not moving, one hand still playing with her nub, the other caressing her ass with gentle strokes. When he began to finally, *finally* move, she thought she’d scream with relief.

He slid in and out slowly, then with more force, abandoning her clit as he grasped her hips in both hands. Each thrust went impossibly deeper, until Leanan grasped the sheets, writhing against him, begging for sweet release.

One of Aidan’s hands returned to her clit, the other sliding between her cheeks, feathering light little flicks against her anus and she came undone, screaming her release into the pillow as she spasmed against him, around him, and felt him throbbing deep within her as he came, shouting his completion.

Chapter Nine

Aidan fought his way out of sleep at the insistent trill of his cell phone. He grasped blindly on the nightstand and brought it to his ear without opening his eyes.

“Hughes.”

“I thought I might find you out and about.” Mikey’s voice was smug.

“Alvarez, it’s Sunday morning.”

“No rest for the wicked. The techies couldn’t get you at your place, so they called me. They’ve finally got the chem analysis on all three fires.”

Aidan barely suppressed a snort as he draped an arm over Leanan’s waist. He knew what had caused those torches, and there was no way a lab rat was going to analyze nothing. At least nothing humans would ever detect.

“You were right about the mystery accelerant, bud. It took them this long to trace it because of a backlog at the lab.”

Aidan shot up in bed as Leanan stirred sleepily next to him and forced his voice to sound casual. “So, what was it?”

Mikey laughed. “Something so obvious we should have seen it from the start, especially with the homeless guy. Freakin’ ethyl alcohol. Booze, man.”

“And they found it at all three sites?”

“Yeah, after they figured out what they were looking for, they shot the other two batches through the gas chromatograph, and boom, there it was.”

Aidan’s mind spun. How was this possible? He’d *smelled* the Fae, sensed him.

“Anyway,” Mikey continued, “I thought you’d want to eyeball the results as soon as I heard about ‘em.”

“Yeah,” Aidan answered absently, thoughts still tumbling. “Who’s at the lab today?”

“Montero. You know how much he hates to be backed up, so he spent the weekend working on older stuff and came up with our hit.”

Leanan lifted herself up on an elbow and looked at him questioningly.

“I’ll meet you at the lab in an hour.”

“See ya, and say hi to Doctor Murphy for me.”

Aidan answered without thinking, “Will do,” and got Mikey’s laughter in his ear. Damn, he’d been had. But it didn’t rankle half as much as the thought he might have been wrong about the real cause of the warehouse fires.

“What’s up?”

“Looks like the lab found the accelerant in your fire and the other two.”

“Really? That’s good news, right?”

“Yeah.” Aidan leaned in, gave her a quick, unsatisfying kiss and stood. “Listen, I’ve got to meet Mikey at the lab. I’ll let you know what I find.”

Aidan was already pulling on his pants.

“I guess I’ll do what I’d originally planned for today ... trying to put my exhibit back together again.” Her voice was muted.

Aidan scooted across the bed and wrapped her in his arms. “I will call you; you know that, don’t you?”

She raised her head enough to smile at him, a quick, confident, womanly smile. “After last night, I certainly hope so. I was just being selfish and looking forward to a lazy

Sunday with you, that's all. And just so you don't forget..." She leaned in and nibbled on his lips, swiping her tongue across them, then pulled back as he opened his mouth to devour her.

Her smirk was belied by the hard pebbles of her nipples beneath the silky sheet.

"Tease," Aidan growled. "Now I'm going to walk around all day with a hard-on."

"That *was* the point. Now get going. The sooner you're finished there, the sooner we can finish *this*."

* * * *

Leanan watched Aidan close the front door behind him.

She was glad Mike had called, not only because she needed to work on the exhibit, but because she needed some time alone to wrap her mind around not only Aidan, but her over-the-top response to him.

Their bodies were certainly in synch, but what about the rest? Oh, she could claim to be entrenched in her career, but hell, whenever Aidan even looked at her, she forgot her own name, let alone her careful years of study and her love of the job. She even forgot the lessons the past had so painfully wrought.

When it came to Aidan Hughes, she decided, she would have to tread carefully around her own heart.

* * * *

She spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon gathering her personal treasures. When push came to shove, she had more than she'd ever dreamed of, and probably just enough to save her academic career, at least as far as Dean Harris was concerned.

It had been too long since she'd simply immersed herself in the joy of handling beautiful things. The acquisition for the original exhibit had been wonderful, but knowing these artifacts were hers and hers alone was so much better. And now she'd be able to share the pieces which had caught her eye over the years with the public.

Her mother would have loved the relics bought with the trust fund she'd inherited when she turned twenty-one. Her father had ridiculed her first purchases, as had James.

Sitting on the floor, legs tucked under Indian-style, she pulled her worry stone, the rune-carved rock she'd been gifted with all those years ago, from her pocket and set it in front of her. Even as simple as it was, it was the most authentically Celtic piece she owned, and for some reason, she was loath to put it on display. It was too personal, too much a piece of her past. It had been one of the last things she and her mother had discovered together. Leanan remembered her mother teaching her how special the stone was.

After her mother's death, she'd almost worshipped the little stone, until she became a young woman and realized that instead of being incredibly valuable in monetary value, it was instead precious because of the memories it held.

She ran her fingers over the stylized engraving and marveled at the course her life had taken since she'd been given the stone, marveled at the woman she'd become even though her father and James had tried to figuratively beat her into submission. Well, it hadn't worked, and she had her mother to thank for it, in a roundabout way.

But in small part, didn't she also have Aidan to thank for this new freedom of thought? The antiseptic, conditional love her father had given her had paved the way for

the domination of spirit James had wreaked, and now she could see her past for what it really was.

Yes, she had Aidan to thank for that, and even though her heart ached with the thought of their inevitable parting, she would treasure the fact he'd made her see herself as she really was ... a strong, independent woman who made her own choices.

* * * *

Aidan parked in front of the San Diego crime lab next to Mikey's Camero. His mind whirled with the possibilities of what Alvarez had said, but it was Leanan's scent that haunted him. Distracted him. How had she wound her way into his soul so quickly, so totally?

He was torn between the love of his homeland and, improbable as it might be, his love for a woman he'd only known a few days.

More than anything, he needed another Fae to talk to. He hoped like hell Rhiannon would be here soon.

"Hey, Hughes." Robert Montero pushed away from the lab's door and ground out his cigarette with the toe of his sneaker.

Aidan pulled himself out of his self-destructive thoughts and focused on what really needed his attention--the job at hand. "Montero. I hear you've got something for me."

"Yeah. Who'd've figured it'd be something as simple as fucking booze? Hell, the place must have been doused in the stuff." Montero fell into step beside him as they entered the building. "No broken glass at all?"

"Just the fragments from the windows. Not enough for what you're thinking, and no glass slicks on the floor in any of the torches."

"Waste of booze, if you ask me."

"More like a waste of human life and priceless antiquities."

"Huh? Which scene are you talking about?"

"Dead guy in the second, warehouse full of museum artifacts in the third. Why?"

"Because I didn't find a trace of anything but ethyl alcohol and wood at any of the scenes, that's why. Those places were empty, man. I'll give you the dead guy, since he'd have a small signature, and might not have been in the area you pulled my sample from, but a warehouse full of stuff would've shown up as anomalies in the GC." He eyed Aidan carefully.

Aidan knew what he was thinking without the analyst even saying it. Insurance fraud. "I don't know, Montero, this one seems to be on the level." Even as he said the words he wondered if he was right in such an assumption. What better way to run a scam than to cozy up to the arson investigator in charge?

No. He shook his head. It wasn't Leanan's style. He'd seen how torn up she was by the loss of her exhibit, and how much it meant to her, both on a personal level and a professional one. But the dean, that was a whole different story altogether.

The dean, for instance, had only seemed concerned about the loss of prestige the exhibit would have brought. What if that was exactly the impression he wanted to give? The thought brought Leanan's office front and center in his mind. *That* had been an act of vengeance, of pure spite and ire. Yeah, after witnessing the dean's haranguing of Leanan, he could see it, but why pick on her? And what did any of this have to do with his Fae?

Questions whirled through his mind as he hooked up with Mikey and the three of them scoured the lab results. Those questions remained long after he and Alvarez left the crime lab and returned to the site of the third warehouse for one more look at the scene.

“This bugs the hell out of me, Mikey.” Frustrated, Aidan ran a hand through his hair. “There was a security guard on site who only left to take a leak. All of the stuff was there that afternoon when Leanan and her crew were working on it, we’ve got that much nailed down. So where in the hell did all the stuff go and how did they get it out so fast?”

Alvarez looked at him with something resembling pity. “Are you sure they’re not all in on it?”

Aidan nodded with certainty. “No way that many kids can lie so convincingly.” He paused and looked Mikey in the eye. “And I’m not saying that because I slept with Leanan. None of it adds up. Hell, I even suspected the dean for a few minutes there, but the money from the insurance goes back to the university, so he’s got nothing to gain, even if he was able to kite some of the stuff. There’s no way in hell he got it all out while the security guard was taking a leak.”

He crouched down on his heels, running his fingers over the charred concrete foundation and tested the air. The scent of the Fae was still there, but weaker now, just like at the burned out house in Hillcrest.

Alvarez squatted next to him. “I know, man, but I wanted you to say it out loud so you’d really believe it.”

Aidan shot him a half-glare.

“Hey, I can’t help it if I know how you think. Fraud was probably the first thing that crossed your mind. Hell, it crossed mine too, but I don’t see Doc Murphy or any of her students pulling this crap. They had too much time and effort and pride invested in it to see it all go up in smoke.” He paused for a moment, staring at Aidan with a searching gaze. “You think there’s something else involved here, or someone. Namely, Ian O’Shea. Spill, Aidan.”

Aidan held his shock in check--barely. When had Alvarez become so adept at reading him? Sure, they were friends and Aidan knew Mikey was sharp as a tack, but he’d never ascribed such a level of sensitivity to him.

He knew how he had to handle it, and the truth, or at least the highly-sanitized truth, was all that would do with the way Mikey was looking at him.

“I think I may have been wrong about O’Shea. Of all the pieces, he’s the one that fits the least. Hell, at this point, I don’t know who to suspect anymore. All I know is we’ve got a dead guy, an empty fucking warehouse and a big-assed mystery on our hands.”

* * * *

“Hello, Father, how are you?” Leanan felt her hand clench around the receiver of her cordless phone and forced herself to relax. She was thirty years old, for God’s sake, and could handle talking to the man who had raised her.

“Very well, Leanan.” As always, Charles Murphy’s voice was dispassionate. The only time she’d ever seen him display anything remotely resembling emotion was when her mother had died and when he was lecturing ... certainly not when doing something so mundane as speaking to his only child.

There was no way in hell she was telling him about the fire and loss of the exhibit. Not that he’d ever ask. For a brief, insane moment, she thought about just

spouting off and saying “Pretty damned good, Pop, I met this really hot arson investigator and I’m having a torrid affair with him.” She stifled a small laugh, picturing the expression of distaste that would cross his face. For an Irishman, her father’s single attempt at whimsy had been allowing her mother to name her Leanan.

Leanan sighed soundlessly. She’d never understood her father, and should have stopped trying years ago.

“So, Dad,” she said, now the pleasantries were over, “what’s up?” She knew her casual speech would drive him nuts, but couldn’t work up the ambition to care. It had been an eventful few days and dealing with dear old dad wasn’t exactly high on her wish list right now. Hell, it never was.

“James is flying into San Diego this afternoon for a bar association meeting. I told him you would be happy to show him around this evening.”

Her hand convulsively clutched the receiver again in a death grip. *James?* Could this week get any fucking worse?

“You seem to forget I have a career, a life of my own. Escorting my ex-fiancé around is not my idea of a good way to spend my Sunday night.” James was an insufferable, cold prig, and the thought of even being in the same state turned her stomach.

“Regardless of your career...” Her father’s voice was colder than she had ever heard it, and she would have sworn she heard a sneer. “James is a friend of the family; it’s only right you should be hospitable. He will be coming by your house tonight and you will be pleasant.”

Leanan cringed as she felt the old helpless feeling well up inside. She’d been strong enough to pursue her own vision of her career, moved three thousand miles away, done everything she could think of to divorce herself from the person her father had molded her into, and she still caved whenever he used his stern voice, the one which had so cowed her as a girl.

She tried to will some strength into her backbone, tried to find the voice to tell him she wouldn’t be home tonight, but instead, the words she spoke were the same old tune.

“Fine. I’ll be hospitable, but that’s all, Father. James and I are over. We have been for years.” She realized what her father was doing, and there was no way in hell it was going to work. She’d accede to his demand because he was her father. She’d never figured out how to say no to him without feeling like a petulant, whiny child, but she’d be damned if she was going to play into his “he is the perfect match for you, for our family” schtick.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Leanan.”

“Father, I’m three thousand miles away and an adult with my own life. You need to keep that in mind. Oh, and by the way, I’m doing just fine, thank you so much for asking.” She disconnected the call as the minor victory coursed through her. She hadn’t been able to say no, but at least she’d stood up for herself for once, and that small measure of independence suited her to no end.

Chapter Ten

Aidan felt the call come to him, whispering through his mind with a sibilant hiss. His hands tightened on the steering wheel in protest.

It wasn't Rhiannon--she knew better than to contact him. That wasn't the way they worked, simply because of the speed at which the mortal world ran. Instead, he contacted her, or she gave him a quick mental message telling him to be ready in an hour, giving him time to prepare.

No, this was the constant hum of a stranger who wanted to talk. Now. He didn't know who in the hell it was, but they were starting to piss him off, and they were powerful. Powerful enough not only to connect with his mind, but to begin with a call to his Fae side.

He was stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the freeway, the nearest exit over a mile down the road.

He wheeled the SUV into the right lane, cutting in front of a mini-van loaded with screaming soccer players and one very harried-looking mom, clamping down on the calling until he could find a safe place to transform.

He inched toward the exit, the whisper of the Fae slowly eroding his control.

Finally! He swung onto the Balboa Park offramp, whizzing through half-empty parking lots before skidding to a stop in a deserted turnout. He left the truck at a half-run, energy building and flaring until he could feel the red glow of flame surround his fingertips. He glanced around wildly as the change overtook him. Felt his human guise begin to contract and contort. Felt the wild surge of power that always accompanied a Fae change ... and then he was "true" for the second time in less than a week.

He winged his way into a copse of eucalyptus and settled on the lowest branch, sending his own call out to the summoning Fae. "You who have summoned me, make yourself known."

His answer was whispered on the wind. The reply came from a female and thrummed with a power he'd thought only Rhiannon possessed.

"Salamander," the husky voice whispered in his ear, "I wish to parlay."

"For what purpose?" Aidan grunted in response. "If you wished safe passage or a grove to replenish yourself in, all you had to do was ask. There was no need to summon me with such force."

"It is not for myself I wish to parlay, but for another. The Fae you seek."

Aidan stiffened in shock, having to force himself to answer. "It is not my place to parlay with a rogue Fae. Such a decision is for the Moira, and only the Moira."

"And that is as it should be. However, you have a unique understanding of this Fae's circumstance and I ask that you meet with him before a Sanction takes place."

Aidan was quiet for a moment, weighing her request. "Very well. Now who are you?"

Her silence matched his for just as long. She answered, her reply a whisper on the souging wind. "You know me as Chloe. Be here tonight on the witching hour and all will be explained." With that, her voice was gone, leaving only the sound of wind in the trees.

Chloe? He'd thought her to be nothing more than a myth, a story passed down through the generations to dissuade young Fae from venturing into the world unprepared.

This situation just got more and more interesting.

* * * *

"Hello, James." Leanan answered the door politely, studying the man standing imperiously in her doorway. Tall, blonde, with almost arctic good looks, James Calloway still appeared the same, like a corporate shark scenting the water for blood.

"It's good to see you again, Leanan. I've missed you."

Leanan had promised herself she'd be cordial, but biting back a sarcastic retort was harder than she'd imagined.

"Can't say I share the same sentiment. C'mon, let's go. I promised my father I'd take you to dinner." She stepped out onto the stoop, taping a note for Aidan to the door.

"Leanan..."

She whirled, letting her emotions swing to the surface for a moment. "Don't start with me, James. I've got class in the morning and I can certainly think of better ways to spend my night than reliving the old days with you."

He stepped back, raising his hands in surrender. His voice held unmistakable laughter. "Your father was wrong. You have changed."

"You have *no* idea," Leanan mumbled as she turned on her heel and headed to the car.

* * * *

Aidan, had to go out with an old acquaintance ... we'll be at The Beachcomber. Swing by ... I'll probably need the rescue.

L

Aidan read Leanan's note, a smile on his lips. Need rescuing, eh? He could take care of that, as long as he got his just reward.

His smile faded. Yeah, he could rescue Leanan, but then he would have to leave and meet with Chloe and the rogue. Once Rhiannon came, he'd be called home. Where the thought had once brought such pleasure, now it tore him in half. As much as he wanted to return, he wanted to explore what he and Leanan had begun even more.

The soul-deep kinship he felt with her had to have a deeper meaning, and finding out what it was almost overpowered his desire to live on his native soil again.

Something had to give.

* * * *

It actually surprised Leanan that she was enjoying James' company. He was still as slick and charming as she remembered, but the sly little digs were gone.

She wasn't the only one who had changed and it didn't take long to find out why. He was getting married and she sounded like the perfect match, a WASP from an old New England family. The pairing had mellowed him, seemed to make him happy, and Leanan wondered if perhaps the missus-to-be hadn't exerted her own control over James.

They sat at an outside table of The Beachcomber, enjoying appetizers and a glass of wine, laughing as they talked about shared acquaintances.

If Leanan hadn't lived through an engagement with James, she'd actually find him fun, refreshing. Instead, she could only think of Aidan and the fact she would be with him tonight.

James interrupted her musings by asking her about her job, her new friends, all the things an interested friend would ask. And she found herself answering, telling him about her exhibit, the fire, and even a bit about Aidan.

It felt amazingly good to talk to someone in person who'd known her for years, even if it was James. It would have been even better if Maggie were here, but at this point, she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. If James was going to be human, she could certainly hack it.

She was laughing over a particularly amusing anecdote about a stuffy professor they'd both known at Harvard when she felt a wash of heat across her back. It was a physical sensation, and for a moment, she wondered if one of the tiki torches had fallen over behind her chair.

She turned, and saw Aidan standing a few feet away. The betrayal on his face was so clear she felt an instant wash of guilt. It didn't matter that there was nothing between James and her anymore. What mattered was Aidan thought there might be.

"Aidan." Her voice was strangled.

"Leanan, aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?" Aidan's voice was cold now. So cold, it chased away the heat, giving her chill bumps instead.

James took that moment to say exactly the wrong thing. "James Calloway. And you must be Aidan. It appears we have the same taste in women."

Oh shit.

"Aidan, I can..."

He interrupted her. "Really? And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"Why, because Leanan and I were engaged, of course."

"Isn't that interesting? You didn't mention that in your note, Leanan."

She'd been wrong before--this week *could* get worse. And exponentially so. "It ... didn't seem important."

"I suppose that's a matter of opinion, now isn't it?" Aidan's voice was positively glacial now. "I guess I'll be going. Calloway, it was ... educational meeting you." He turned and disappeared into the night.

Leanan shot a quick look at James, who was looking at her with undisguised dismay.

"God, Leanan, I'm sorry."

"Stow it, James. I hate to cut and run but..."

"Go, don't worry about me."

So she did.

* * * *

Aidan felt power surging within him again, amplified by his brush with Chloe earlier.

He knew he held no rights over Leanan, but he'd thought the integral connection he'd felt had been more than one-sided. He'd obviously been wrong. And even if he wasn't and she and Calloway were over, it didn't really matter in the long run, he rationalized. He'd be called home soon enough, so this was for the best.

The thought didn't stop the sting of betrayal coursing through him.

He walked blindly down the crushed shell path winding from the restaurant to the beach. Perhaps communing with another element would soothe his wounded heart.

* * * *

Leanan caught Aidan's arm. "Wait, Aidan, I can explain. I ... my father..." She stuttered to a halt, realizing Aidan had no idea about her family dynamics or why she would do almost anything her father asked her to, even if it went against the grain.

"There's nothing to explain, Leanan. I came to your rescue, but apparently one wasn't needed. Now I have work to do."

"At this time of night? Good try. I'm not buying it."

Aidan turned to fully face her, his face set in stone. "We don't have regular hours, you know that." He paused for a moment. "I spoke with my maithar tonight. I've been called home. I leave in the morning."

Leanan let her hand drop. "The morning?" she whispered, hating herself for feeling so bereft.

Aidan's expression softened. He reached up to cup her cheek. "I'll never forget you, Leanan Sidhe." Something like regret flashed through his eyes as he dropped his hand.

Leanan stood frozen for a second, then shook herself out of it. It might be goodbye, but it sure as hell wasn't going to end like this.

"Oh, I don't think we're going to part on such a 'friendly' basis, Aidan." She curved her arms around his neck, bringing his mouth down to hers. "I'd very much prefer it if you left remembering this."

Her lips touched his, teasing him with nibbles and licks until he groaned and opened for her, capturing her mouth with such unabashed hunger and need it took her breath away.

She rose onto her toes, bringing her body into contact with his for the last time, reveling in the fire burning between them, tucking it deep into her memory, along with the smell and taste and feel of him.

Her breasts ached for his hands, her pussy wept with the thought she'd never feel him inside her again. And her heart, well, it was just breaking in two.

With one last nibble and swipe of her tongue she pushed away, standing before him, heaving for breath, tears glittering in her eyes.

"Go home, Aidan. Go home to the clan that means so damned much to you. It's what you've always wanted."

She turned, not willing to watch him walk away. His labored breath echoed in her ears long after she heard his feet crunching on the crushed seashell path. When she raised her eyes, James was standing a careful four feet away.

"Don't, James. Just go back to Boston, all right? Tell my father whatever you want, because at this point I really don't give a damn."

"You've become a remarkable woman, Leanan." His voice was quiet, reflective. "Why is it I can't see that woman letting her man go?"

Leanan gaped at him. "Pardon?"

"Christ, Leanan, you obviously love him, and he loves you if the expression on his face was *any* indication. Go after him. Change his mind."

Moonlight chased across her ex-fiancé's face and she could see he meant every word.

With a look of thanks, she turned on her heel and ran down the silvery-white path, hoping like hell she could catch the man who had captured her heart.

Chapter Eleven

“Salamander,” thundered Aidan, menace coating his voice, “step forward and show yourself. Perhaps the Moira will have mercy upon your soul.”

Leanan stopped short, fading back into the shadows beneath the grove of trees. Salamander? What in God’s name was Aidan talking about, and why was he standing alone in Balboa Park, bellowing into the night? She’d had to drive like hell to even catch up to him on the freeway, and it had been pure luck to see his SUV taking the Park’s exit.

She started to step forward, but pulled herself up short as she realized she’d understood what he was saying, even though it was in a different tongue. Her conscious mind rebelled against the notion that Aidan was speaking anything other than English, but her subconscious insisted she knew the language he was using, the language of the Fae. A language she understood, against all reason, just as she had twenty years ago.

A flash of red blinked against the Eucalyptus, arrowing toward Aidan in a burst of speed.

Leanan rationalized, almost frantically, that it was simply a trick of the eye, even as she knew exactly what she was seeing.

Her rationalizations were shot to hell when Aidan simply disappeared, reappearing as the cerulean blue fairy she’d seen just a few nights ago.

True, it was all true. She blinked back tears of joy. She was seeing something that, in all likelihood, no one but her had seen in centuries. The academic in her rejoiced, even as her heart broke. Now she understood Aidan’s statement about having to return home. He was Fae.

The red fairy hovered in front of Aidan, wings dancing delicately.

“On my honor, none of Doctor Murphy’s items were harmed. I removed them with magick. I would not destroy artifacts! I was only in search of the rune.”

Her display was still intact! She recognized that voice; it was none other than her student, Ian O’Shea.

It took her a moment to comprehend what he’d said he was seeking, and when she did, her hand shot into the pocket of her sundress. She looked at the simple, carved stone in her palm, awed by the heat and combination of blue and scarlet swirling within as it was exposed to the night air.

“You have no honor. You have dealt death and destruction in the Outer World,” snarled Aidan. “You will face the Moira and the Sanction she brings.”

Ian hung his head, a dip of scarlet against the night. “I had no wish of these things. I was ill-prepared for this world and the fragility of its beings. The error of our ways is obvious, although the quest itself is not.”

A quiet voice sliced through the night like a sword. “And what is this quest, Salamander? I would hear it.”

Both Aidan and Ian swung around together, washed in the almost-blinding silver light emanating from a hovering orb. Both dipped their heads in acquiescence. Leanan snapped her mouth shut and clenched her fist tight around the rune stone.

“Moira,” Ian whispered. “I have no excuses to offer, only apologies. I have consorted with those I should not have, and taken a human life, even if it was through inaction rather than malice.”

“That remains to be seen, Salamander.” The disembodied voice of the orb answered. “But we have another matter to take care of first. Step forward, Leanan Murphy.”

Leanan stayed in her hiding position within the trees, not believing her ears until the orb bobbed her way.

“You have nothing to fear, human. Please, show yourself.”

Mouth dry, Leanan stepped forward and was immediately illuminated.

Aidan cursed and moved behind Ian, as if to cut off an escape.

Personally, Leanan didn't think they were going anywhere, not with the eerie power surrounding the totally silent grove of trees.

“And you as well, Miguel Alvarez. Step forth and be recognized.”

Mike materialized opposite Leanan, the shell-shocked look on his face so priceless Leanan started to laugh. At least she had the background and history to deal with this. Alvarez was so far out of his element he'd probably never recover.

The thought stifled her laughter. What had they gotten themselves into?

“I do believe Doctor Murphy and Inspector Alvarez will be more comfortable speaking with us in human guise.”

With that, the three Fae were “human” again. Aidan stared at Leanan and Mike with angry disgruntlement. Ian stood cowed in front of him.

Leanan didn't even know how to categorize the woman who had been the silvery orb. Her white-blond hair shone with a light of its own, highlighting delicate, but undoubtedly strong features.

A shiver shot through Leanan. This woman held a power she could feel dancing across her arms.

“Come in closer,” the Moira demanded, her tone brooking no argument. “We will parley and discuss what we are to do with the humans.”

“You ain't doing nothing with me, honey.” Mikey had regained his voice, and glared across the clearing at the threesome and Leanan.

“Mikey, please.” Aidan's request was quiet, but carried the same commanding power as the Moira. “As one of my only friends.”

Leanan had already stepped forward again without thought and watched with interest as the Moira winced at Aidan's statement. It struck her then--this beautiful creature might very well be someone special to Aidan, someone he might want to return home to--and her heart lodged in her throat.

Alvarez hesitated for a moment before walking into the clearing, face still cut in hard lines.

“I am Rhiannon, Moira to the Realm.” The fairy's voice lilted over the clearing, chasing away Leanan's chill and replacing it with wonder. “We do not often walk the way of the Outer World, but fate works in mysterious ways as is shown by your presence here tonight, humans.”

Leanan glanced at Aidan, and instead of watching Rhiannon with the awe she deserved, he was looking at her with something close to heartbreak in his eyes.

“Doctor Murphy, the rune stone, if you please.” Rhiannon's polite request froze Leanan in her tracks. The rune stone?

She slowly uncurled her fingers and stared at the swirl of colors dancing across the face of the stone. In it, she saw the moment it had been given. Saw how it had

become the last remaining touchstone she had to her mother except for cherished memory.

When she raised her gaze, all eyes were on her.

She hesitated, torn between keeping the last thing linking her to a happy past and doing what was right. In the end, right won out.

She extended her hand, palm up, toward Rhiannon.

The silvery beauty looked her directly in the eye. "Be sure of this, Leanan Murphy. The rune benefits no one if it belongs to another's heart."

Leanan took a deep breath. "This stone will always hold a place in my heart, for it reminds me of my mother. But I see, and know, deep inside, where this rune really belongs."

Rhiannon stepped forward gracefully and plucked the treasure from Leanan's hand. The stone flared quicksilver, blue and red for a blinding, kaleidoscopic second, then was once again a gray, engraved rock.

The moment the Moira took the stone, Leanan felt bereft, empty. But then the spectacular color show began and she felt the light ease into her, a balm to her soul.

Rhiannon leaned forward in a deep bow. "My clan thanks you, Leanan Sidhe. But I must know, how is it that you are here this night?"

Leanan returned her bow and stood, back straight. "I came for Aidan." She turned to face him. "I couldn't let you go back to Ireland without letting you know how I feel." She took a shaky breath. "Oh hell, I don't know what I feel, but I do know it hurts, really hurts to think I'll never see you again unless I go to Ireland. And now, seeing all this, I'm guessing finding you would have been a wild goose chase anyway. Thank you for letting me be part of your life, no matter how briefly, and thank you for letting me see all this." She threw her arms wide to encompass the three Fae. "You'll never know how much it means to me."

Leanan met Aidan's eyes, and the heartbreak she thought she had seen earlier was even more intense, and true, oh-so-true. It was then she knew he didn't want to leave her or San Diego any more than she wanted him to go. It made the whole damned situation that much harder, since she was aware of his secret.

"Fate has decreed this, Leanan," Rhiannon said quietly, mysteriously, for her ears only. "Hold fast a few moments more."

The Moira drew up regally. "Step forward, Ian Sidhe, and accept your destiny."

Ian lurched, stumbling to a halt in front of her, his face drawn in lines of fear.

Rhiannon reached out and laid a hand on his forehead.

Leanan held her breath, waiting for a decree from a woman, no, Fae, she couldn't even begin to comprehend.

The rune glowed red in Rhiannon's hand as she began to speak in a soft, lullaby voice. "Keeper of the Weave, careful spinner, I implore you; I am Moira, keeper of the fates, Guardian of the Fae; Unfurl the tapestry that would show me the fate of Ian Sidhe."

The eucalyptus around them began to glow in an unearthly, bloody light as Rhiannon murmured.

Leanan felt fingers entwine with hers, and when she looked up, Aidan was standing beside her, his face so full of love she could happily die right now knowing

what he felt. He leaned in, his lips a whisper away from hers when she felt the earth move under her feet.

What she thought was a trick of her mind quickly became more, as an honest-to-God tremor shifted the ground.

“Earthquake.”

“No, Doctor Murphy, this is no earthquake,” Rhiannon stated matter-of-factly as she removed her hand from Ian. “Chloe, must you always be so melodramatic?”

“The theatre has always suited me, Moira,” responded a disembodied, cultured voice. The voice materialized into a woman wearing chocolate-brown robes. Her face was hidden for a moment by a mass of chestnut curls before being revealed.

Leanan drew in a breath. Chloe, yet *another* Fae, was stunningly beautiful ... until she turned to face the group fully. One side of her face was a mass of scars, the other untouched and pure.

“Jesus H. Christ. I’ve had enough of this. Enjoy your games, Aidan. When I wake up tomorrow, this will all be a fucking nightmare, because it can’t be real.” Mike started to walk away.

When Rhiannon would have stopped him, Chloe held up a hand. “It is as he says, Moira. He will believe all of this to be a bad dream in the morning. His mundane mind does not accept the fact the Realm may be true.” Alvarez was half-hidden in the trees even as she spoke.

“Please, Rhiannon, let him go.” Aidan implored. “He is the only human besides Leanan I care for. Please.”

Rhiannon sighed. “Very well.” And Mike was gone.

Leanan let out the breath she’d been holding for what seemed like forever. She’d had years to believe in and then reject, the magic of the Fae. Mike had only had a few minutes to accept what should have been impossible.

“Now, Chloe. I assume you’ve come out of hiding for a reason.”

“I have. This child came to my attention after the first fire. A fire he set accidentally, I might add. His training is incomplete,” she chided.

“His training is not incomplete, it never began. He left the clan without permission.” Rhiannon’s voice was ice-cold.

“Ah. You did not tell me of this, Ian. What was your real purpose?”

“I do believe that is my question to ask, Chloe.”

Leanan watched the interplay between the women, feeling as if she was watching a deadly tennis match. While the two weren’t adversarial, there was certainly no love lost between them. Leanan squeezed Aidan’s hand with trepidation.

Chloe acceded with a dip of her head.

“Answer the question again, since Chloe Sidhe has deigned to grace us with her presence.”

Ian gulped. “I came seeking the rune stone. The Jionagh said we could start our own clan with the stone, a clan where the Moira’s word is not law.”

Rhiannon snorted. “Jionagh. Free Will. What an original name for a misbegotten gaggle of pseudo-revolutionaries. As if it would be that easy. Continue.”

“I did not start the first fire, although I was there. I was following someone whom I thought could take me to the rune stone. He set the second as well and I was too late to

save the mortal inside. When I saw what he was planning to do with the third, I took action and saved Doctor Murphy's artifacts."

"Who did it?" Aidan demanded, sounding less like the Fae he was, and more like the arson investigator he'd become over the last ten years.

"Dean Harris. He's why I enrolled in the college, to see what was so important to him. I could have watched him in my true form, but it seemed too dangerous."

Leanan grasped Aidan's hand in a death grip.

"Dean Harris?" she repeated. "But why in the world would he torch his own warehouses?"

"Insurance fraud," Aidan answered wearily. "He used an accelerant which was easily available and almost impossible to find unless you're looking for it--booze." He addressed Ian directly. "Did he take anything from the last warehouse?"

"Yes, Aidan Sidhe. Several pieces, and then he started the fire."

"So, Moira," Chloe interjected, obviously bored with the talk of mortal business. "What is young Ian's fate to be? You hold the rune which will foretell it."

"Ian will return with me. His actions here, if he is telling the truth, are not deserving of a full Sanction. He will however, assist me in ferreting out the Jionagh or face a complete Sanction.. Do you understand me, Ian? You are no longer accorded the title of Sidhe until your punishment is complete, if ever."

Ian nodded, misery etched in his face.

Chloe nodded, the ruined side of her face cast in shadow now. "I will take my leave of you." In the blink of an eye, she was gone, with a final, gentle tremor to mark her exit.

Leanan caught the look on Rhiannon's face and barely restrained a laugh. She would swear the Moira had rolled her eyes at the departing Fae.

"Moira," Aidan bowed his head in deference and tightened his hold on Leanan's hand. "As a believer in destiny, I ask that you allow me to remain in the Outer World. My future lies here with this woman, if she will have me."

"Make your choice wisely, Aidan. You well know the consequences of failing to heed the Realm's call home." The Moira's oh-so-serious glance encompassed them both.

"What consequences? What's she talking about, Aidan?"

He turned to face her, cupping her cheek in his palm. "I will be forever denied entry to the Realm if I refuse the call."

When she began to protest, he cut her off by smoothing a thumb over her lips.

"Don't fret, my love. It is my decision to make and I make it freely. I would stay with the woman I love." He lifted his gaze to Rhiannon. "I wish it could be otherwise, but my heart tells me this is the right choice. I'm sorry if that disappoints, Moira."

Rhiannon returned his look, her mien serious. "The rune stone Doctor Murphy so selflessly returned, the Rune of Fate, decrees it so. Remember your clan and the Realm, Aidan Sidhe." Her face softened from its regal bearing and Leanan could see she spoke to Aidan as a friend now, rather than as Moira. "I have missed you, Aidan." A wry grin pursed her lips. "And you should know, there is no such thing as being banished from the Realm. It is spoken of as a deterrent, nothing more. If nothing else, such a myth has made your choice that much more meaningful, though."

“But...” Aidan’s denial trailed off as he looked into the Moira’s face. Leanan could see he was working her pronouncement over in his mind.

“Remember what I said a few nights ago, old friend. Things are not as they seem. They never have been. Bring Leanan to the Realm again. She has seen its magic once and we would like to acquaint ourselves with the woman you have chosen to bind yourself to. We will speak more on what is reality and what is myth then.”

Rhiannon shifted her attention from Aidan to Leanan’s bemused expression.

“Yes, my child,” Rhiannon said gently, “we knew you were there, those many years ago. The magic in your soul and in your bloodline allowed you to see us in our true form. Use that magic well. We will explore the differences between the Fae and the mundane when you venture home.”

With that, the Moira to the clan disappeared in an incandescent flash, becoming the silvery orb once more and she and Ian were gone.

“Wow.”

Aidan laughed with joy and whirled Leanan around in his arms. “Yeah, she’s always liked making a statement.”

Chapter Twelve

Aidan helped Leanan into the cab of his truck, unwilling to leave her side now that she was all his. They could return for her car tomorrow.

As he walked around the front of the vehicle he was struck for a moment by the turn his life had taken. In one fell swoop he had cemented his destiny. He had finally realized his feelings for Leanan were the stuff of dreams, but never imagined there would be a way for him to have both her love and the acceptance of his clan.

When he climbed into the cab, Leanan was looking at him with undisguised love in her eyes.

"I can't believe you did that." Wonder coated her words. "You wanted to return home so badly."

"And I will, with you. If it's what you want, of course." Aidan leaned across the bench seat and captured her lips in a searing kiss.

"I can't think of anything better," Leanan breathed when their lips parted. "Well, on second thought, maybe I can." A decidedly wicked smile graced her lips.

"Yeah, me too."

"Hmmm. Tell me, Aidan, does the back seat on this monster fold forward?" She arched one brow.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it does. Why, Doctor Murphy? Did you have something in mind?" Aidan glanced out the window and found the parking lot as empty as when he'd arrived, with the exception of Leanan's car.

"I might."

Aidan got out of the SUV and made short work of enlarging the cargo area. Second thoughts began to assail him as he spread the comforter he kept in the emergency pack across the nubby carpet.

Leanan joined him at the open back door.

"Are you sure about this? I can think of a lot more romantic places. The beach, maybe?"

Leanan laughed. "Aidan, you chose me over your clan here. How could any place be more romantic?"

Aidan considered her words. "You may be right." He sat down and drew her between his thighs. "I meant it, sweetheart. I love you more than I ever thought possible. Seeing you with Calloway tonight made me realize it."

Leanan brushed a hand over his face. "You do know it's been over between us for years, right?" She sighed. "There's a lot you need to understand about my family, about my father."

"Nothing you could say would ever change the way I feel, Sidhe. Know that to be true."

Leanan surged forward, toppling Aidan onto his back. "I do. I love you, Aidan."

Aidan caught her mouth with his, tongue thrusting and dueling with hers as she snuggled her pelvis against his rapidly hardening cock. He reached down and grabbed her ass in both hands, pulling her against him even more.

"Clothes," she murmured against his mouth and rose up in an effort to disrobe. "We've gotta ditch the clothes."

Instead of answering her, he moved his hands to the front of her body, grasped the thin fabric of her dress in both hands and ripped the flimsy gown down the front, buttons flying.

“Oh shit,” she gasped on a half-laugh. “I guess that worked.” She tore the ruined dress away and settled on her palms, looking down at him with passion smoldering in her eyes. “I liked it. Show me more.”

“I intend to,” he promised as he freed her breasts from the lacy sky-blue bra. He lunged up and captured a perfect nipple in his mouth. He sucked deep and hard, wringing another satisfied gasp from Leanan. She was his now, his forever. His hands moved back down to her ass as he suckled, sliding beneath her panties. With a quick snap of his hands, the material disintegrated along the sides.

Leanan moaned. She never thought she'd like the caveman approach, but with Aidan it was more than hot, it was downright erotic. His mouth moved against her nipple as his hands cupped her ass, moving her higher on his body. He squeezed her ass before sliding lower, spreading her thighs. Night air washed against her bare butt and she realized anyone could be watching. The knowledge they were doing something forbidden coursed through her, drenching her pussy. Aidan's clever fingers spread her labia apart and plunged into her core, plucking and teasing and tormenting until she writhed against him.

“God, Aidan, you're killing me...” she moaned, not even recognizing her own voice.

He responded by sliding his wet fingers to her clit, replacing the sudden emptiness in her with the fingers of his other hand. His thumb caressed her no man's land as he plunged into her with three fingers, massaging her clit and tonguing her nipple. The simultaneous sensations flooded her, bringing her perilously close to climax ... yet so agonizingly far away.

“Please, Aidan, please...”

He released her nipple with an audible pop and chuckled. “As you wish.” He latched back onto her breast, biting down as his thumb cruised up, pressing against her backdoor, and his fingers plunged into her, finding her g-spot with unerring accuracy.

She screamed. Imploding, she bucked against his hands, his mouth, then collapsed against him, breathing in great, hoarse gasps.

Aidan rolled her gently to her side, stepped out of the truck and tore off his clothes.

He slid back into the cargo area and pulled her into his arms. He could feel the rapid thump of her heart against his, feel the fine sheen of sweat covering her body. The knowledge he had brought her such pleasure hardened his cock even more.

He waited patiently until her eyes fluttered open, then kissed her softly. Her mouth opened beneath his as she returned his kiss dreamily, her tongue stroking his in urgent swipes until he thought he might come just from her kisses and the feel of her body against his.

When he could take no more, he spun her beneath him and slid into her tight, grasping pussy. Unprotected, the sensation was more exquisite than he had ever imagined. He moved languidly, taking his time as he mated with her mouth. His hands threaded through her hair, holding her beautiful face still as their bodies settled into ancient rhythm.

Her hands grabbed his ass, pulling him in deeper with each thrust until sliding out of her was sweet torture. The return trip was the paradise he'd come to expect and anticipate. As Leanan's body moved with his, her hard nipples poking into his chest, he felt himself begin to tip toward orgasm, and let the power he had leashed pour through him, let it wash over her.

He captured her sharp, indrawn breath with his mouth as he felt her clench around his cock, then poured his seed and his soul into her with jackhammer thrusts that shattered his very being.

Time slowed and became elastic around them as they climaxed together, everything forgotten but the beat of their hearts and the power ebbing and flowing around them.

When he finally regained his senses, Aidan rolled off Leanan, ignoring her moan of protest, and gathered her to him.

"Love you, Aidan," she mumbled.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I love you too, Sidhe."

* * * *

The sharp rap of metal on metal brought him out of dreamland, and a very pleasant dream it had been ... one that had him hot and horny for Leanan all over again.

His hard-on died a quick death as he got a look at the uniformed cop standing next to the rear panel of the SUV with a flashlight in hand and a shit-eating look on his face.

He groaned as he realized he knew the man. He fumbled to cover Leanan with the loose end of the comforter and turned to face Majors.

"It's a good thing I actually like you, Hughes, otherwise this'd be a serious story over beers at Callahan's." Majors smirked, amusement plain on his weathered face.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm going to be ponying up those suds for years?"

"You always were smart, Hughes. Now get the hell out of here and go somewhere private, all right?"

Leanan woke as Majors walked away. Aidan grinned as she looked up at him with sleepy eyes.

"C'mon honey, we've just been busted."

"Huh?"

"Cops. Luckily I know the guy, otherwise we'd be looking at a ticket for public indecency and I'd be catching serious crap whenever I had to play with them on a case."

"Oh shit." Leanan scrambled beneath the comforter to don her ruined dress. When she resurfaced, she was clutching the loose sides together. She smiled ruefully. "I guess that's what we get for spontaneity, huh?"

Aidan roared with laughter and kissed her. "Personally, I'm looking forward to a lifetime of spontaneity from you, my love. Now let's go home. I've got an arsonist to catch and you've got young minds to warp."

* * * *

"Hey man, we've got a hell of a lead to follow up today." Aidan was purposefully jovial in an attempt to deflect the strange look in Mikey's eyes.

Alvarez was wiping down the chrome bumper of his rig, uniform more disheveled than Aidan had ever seen it.

“You okay, man?”

“Yeah,” answered Mikey, dropping his gaze from Aidan’s. “I had a humdinger of a dream last night, that’s all.”

“Wet dreams don’t usually leave you looking this bad,” joked Aidan as he realized that Alvarez had relegated last night’s experience to something he could relate to.

“Wasn’t a wet dream, asshole. You and Leanan were in it.”

“Hey man, as much as I love you, we aren’t into threesomes.”

“Shit.” Alvarez laughed, his good humor returning. “Sharing the delectable doctor with you isn’t my idea of a good time. It just seemed so real. I was at the Beachcomber, saw you tear out of the parking lot and followed to see if you were all right. Hey,” he said, brightening, “I know what it was; it was O’Shea’s damned papers. They got me thinking about ... oh hell, never mind. So what’s this hot lead?”

“O’Shea’s out of it, so forget about him. Get this. I got an anonymous call to look into Dean Harris, of all people.”

“Really?” Alvarez’ expression turned calculating. “Seems almost too easy.”

“Huh?”

“Well, you never want to bust nice people, and after the way he treated Leanan, it’d do my heart good to see the asshole go down.”

Aidan laughed. “Agreed. I’ve got an appointment at the courthouse in an hour to get a warrant. Want to go with me?”

“Hell yes, I wouldn’t miss this for the world. Lemme talk to the chief and see if he can cut me loose.”

Two hours later, they were on their way to the dean’s Mount Helix home with a uniformed officer and a warrant.

* * * *

“...and that is why the fairy tales of the past were so violent. Simple scare tactics on the part of parents and elders of the era.” Leanan’s aide appeared in the back of her classroom holding up a slip of paper. It had to be important for Amy to interrupt her during a lecture.

She waved the senior down. “Excuse me for just a moment.”

“What’s up, Amy?”

“There’s a wicked-hot guy outside; he said it was very important I get this note to you.” Amy’s eyes sparked with undisguised interest and she hadn’t made any attempt to keep her voice low. Leanan’s students were now watching her with the same intensity.

The door snicked open and of course, it was Aidan. Behind him, Mike Alvarez. Female heads swiveled as appreciative eyes locked on her man and his best friend.

Oh hell. Leanan grinned anyway and opened the note.

Wanna see the dean get arrested?

“No shit?” she exclaimed, not caring her freshmen students were now looking between her and Aidan with open smiles. Several of them were sniggering.

“No shit. C’mon, Leanan, you deserve this.” Aidan’s voice held a note of triumph.

“Amy, can you take over the class for a few minutes?”

“Sure thing, Doc Murphy. You *will* tell us what’s going on, right?”

“Oh,” answered Leanan enigmatically, “I’m sure everyone will hear about it in the next hour or so.” She walked up the aisle and out the door, smiling.

Two uniformed officers and an ATF agent waited in the hallway outside her office and she happily led them down the hall to the Administration office.

“Hi Madge. The dean in?”

“Well,” the secretary hedged, looking at the group of very large men crowded into the reception area with wary eyes. “He’s working on some important grant paperwork right now. Should I interrupt him?”

The ATF agent shouldered past Leanan. “Yes, ma’am, you should.”

Madge stood, uncertainty chasing across her features before she stepped to the dean’s door and knocked.

“Dean Harris, you have someone here to see you.”

“Not now, Madge.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I must insist,” said the uniformed officer who had now taken station behind the ATF agent.

“Edward Cameron Harris, you are under arrest for three counts of arson and one count of first-degree murder.”

Harris spluttered. “There must be some kind of misunderstanding.”

“There is no misunderstanding. Hands behind your back, please,” the uniform intoned dispassionately as he began to Mirandize the dean.

Leanan, Aidan and Mikey watched it all with satisfaction.

“How did you get enough for the arrest?” Leanan whispered to Aidan as they led the dean away.

“Ian was right,” he whispered back so Alvarez couldn’t hear. There was no need to traumatize Mikey any further. “We found several of your pieces hidden in a closet. Guess he hadn’t had time to get rid of them yet.”

“But why’d he set the first two fires?” Leanan raised her voice to a normal conversational level.

Aidan shrugged. “Who knows, maybe he’s just a firebug. I’m sure it’ll come out in the trial. Maybe the shrink who interviews him will figure it out. At this point, I don’t care ... it’s done.”

“What about my office? Did he do that too?”

“Best guess, yes. Maybe he thought it would distract us. Maybe he just doesn’t like you. Hell, maybe he’s just a nutcase.”

Leanan considered it for a moment, then nodded. “I guess I can live with that--for now. And the artifacts?”

“No worries, love, I’ll ask Rhiannon tonight. I’m sure they’re someplace safe. You’ll be able to open your exhibit, just like you planned.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Agent Hughes.”

“You do that, Doctor Murphy.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, will you two get a room?” Mikey walked away, shaking his head disgustedly as they laughed at his back.

* * * *

Aidan and Leanan walked up the stairs to his house, holding hands like teenagers.

In truth, that’s exactly how Leanan felt ... like a lovesick teen. It was definitely a feeling she could get used to.

It more than made up for the betrayal she'd felt when the dean cracked like an egg. Aidan had been right ... he was a firebug, but there'd been more. It was all about tenure and the fact her father couldn't handle his daughter being tenured in something so distasteful. He'd promised the dean that if Leanan was stopped from making the Corcoran exhibit a success, effectively torpedoing her career, he would have a place in the Ivy League college her father had spent decades cultivating.

Knowing how slick Charles Murphy was, she doubted the police would ever be able to charge him, but she knew, deep in her heart, that every word Harris had spoken had been the truth. It galled her to know she had Charles' blood in her veins. Thankfully, her mother's genes had won out. She knew she should feel something more, some stronger emotion than betrayal. Perhaps her father's years of indifference and button-pushing had been for the best, because all she felt now was relief she knew the truth. She'd never have to deal with him again, unless she chose to. Right now, she was content three thousand miles separated them and that she could hang up the phone if he called. That concept was liberating.

It had been easier with Aidan by her side and it was his voice which brought her out of her musings.

"There is one thing we haven't done, Sidhe." Playful, sexy and hot as hell, his voice cruised through her nerve endings, setting them on fire. She couldn't wait to fly again since he'd told her they really had.

"And what's that, Aidan?" The laughter ringing through her question was stifled as he flipped her over one shoulder and walked across the threshold.

She could *hear* his grin. "A fireman's carry."

The End



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