

## The Screaming Silence

It was a dark and stormy night... somewhere in the world. Here, though, the night was clear enough that it felt like all the stars in the sky could be seen, not even the full moon's brightness could dim them. But at the moment the sky was of little importance to me as I currently begged my parents not to leave me by myself, not to leave me with the suffocating silence. My parents know I hate being alone and the silence it leaves behind but this is punishment for something the voices did. It doesn't seem to matter to anyone that what happened was not my fault... mostly.

"Please, don't leave me. I promise I'll stay out of trouble," I try one more time before my parents leave for the weekend. "At least let me have a friend over," *Not that I actually have any to invite.*

My dad looks back at me from the doorway with an annoyed look. "No, you messed up. Maybe next time you'll think before you do something you shouldn't, Cath. You knew we were going on this trip and we warned you that if you messed up, you wouldn't be going with us," With that, my parents leave.

In a fit of rage, I throw all the pillows on the couch in all different directions, not having to worry about breaking anything since everything that can be broken already has been. Cringing, I instantly regret my tantrum when I hear the sound of glass breaking followed by a cackle. Any time I let my emotions get the best of me, especially anger, it inspires the *things*, the *voices* to cause more havoc than they already do, hurting people in the process. I shiver as a chill runs down my spine.

After spending a few minutes rushing around the house looking for whatever was broken, I collapsed, slightly relieved when I couldn't find anything, on the worn black

leather couch in the living room. My relief is short-lived when it dawns on me that in my haste I forgot to turn on music to drown out the silence. Hands trembling with worry, I pull my phone out of her pocket but it won't turn on. *Is it dead? It can't be, I always make sure it's charged.*

"It's too late for that. Your little noise box won't be making any more sounds for a long time," A voice says from over my shoulder, so close I can feel his breath on my cheek, but when I whip around there's no one behind me. Even though I expected this it still makes my pulse pound in my ears. I start to sing to myself- since talking to myself is too close to talking to the voices. It doesn't sound pretty but it does the job. Usually. "Oh, you won't be getting rid of us that easily, not this time."

The lights violently go out, sending sparks flying everywhere, causing me to scream. I duck my head to avoid the pieces of glass that rain down from the lightbulbs. In the short moment that everything is lit up from the sparks, silhouettes are visible. Silhouettes that don't look quite human. I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could convince myself that this isn't real. Then everything plunges into darkness so thick it's almost tangible. Not even the bright stars are of any help. There's a high-pitched giggle to my right and then a yank of my hair before I feel whatever it is dart away. The voice comes again, sounding lazy, "No one touches her until I get to mess with her first, and I've got a lot of ideas."

"Go away," I try to say, but it comes out as a whisper which causes the things to laugh. I try again, louder. "Go away!" The voices are silent for a relief-filled minute until the male responds by brushing past me and whispering with a velvety voice "I don't think so," in my ear. This time I violently flinch away, bumping my hip into the back of my

couch. *How did I get so turned around in my own home?* But I know how. Besides it's never really been home, the voices have made sure of that.

From the corner of my eye, I see what looks like small glowing creatures, but when I turn to look they disappear. A distraction. Something wraps around my wrists and yanks me down so that I fall on the floor. But not my floor. The ground is hard and dusty and when I try to feel around my palms slide against the charred dusty grass. The darkness clears enough to see the black, decaying ground and a dark blue fire that doesn't give off light or heat. The place is freezing. Out of the darkness, a figure appears. Hair so dark it looks blue, porcelain skin, and inky black wings that expand out behind him, keeping him hovering off the ground. He glares at me and twirls his finger in the air. I'm lifted off the ground and flown toward him. I stifle my gasp, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. He moves closer and leans down. "Welcome home, in your absence the world got ruined, but it's nothing you can't fix." The smile he gives me is dark and full of the promise that I'm not going to like what happens next and that he's going to like it a little too much.

He drops me unceremoniously on the ground, laughing again. I scramble to stand as I rub my bruised hip. "Better get to work, the Fae may be immortal, but I'm sure you want to spend as little time as possible cleaning up this mess."

I don't know if it's shock at being suddenly transported to a strange place or something that this place has awakened in me but I narrow my eyes at him. "If you think I'm going to do anything for you, you're going to have to explain," My spine tingles and I fight the urge to reach back.

He steps close enough for his loose pants to brush mine and stares down at me with solid black eyes and in a slow, condescending voice he says, "You're sister stole something from me and I want it back."

"I don't have a sister and I certainly don't have any magical items that belong to you."

"But you do have magical items?" He steps back, giving me space. I suck in a deep breath of choking air, taking advantage of the small reprieve.

"No, that's not what I-" I shake my head at his nonsense. "And what does any of that have to do with your claim of me messing up this world?"

He looks me over with appraising eyes and freezes on something over my shoulder. I glance back to find some sort of clear distorted image behind me. Reaching my fingers back, I try to run it through the mystery only to find that it's solid. And a part of me. "What is that?" There's wonder in my voice.

"That would be your wings," He tilts his head to the side. "Your sisters looked very similar."

"But...how?"

The guy shrugs, "Genetics would be my guess."

I glare at him for the stupid comment but he just looks confused by my annoyance. "Not that. I'm human. How could I possibly have wings?"

He laughs so hard that he finally stops hovering over the ground to keep from falling. "You're not human, you're a Fae changeling," He says after he's composed himself enough. "When you were born your sister sent you to replace a human child. She gave you the stolen object with the intent to come back for it but I got to her first."

Right before I managed to destroy her she cursed me so I wouldn't be able to steal it from you, but I can get you to give it to me," Maybe I should feel something at the loss of a sister I never knew and will never be able to know but all I feel is confusion and an overwhelming sense of what I assume is magic pulsing in my mind. But amid all that craziness is a feeling of rightness that the human part of me longs to reject but the rest of me embraces.

"So what does that have to do with the wasteland?" I look around at the barren land wishing there was more to see than death. There aren't even any other Fae.

*Where is everyone?*

"That object she stole was the thing that gives this place life. It provides magic and immortality. Why do you think there are no other Fae here? They had to escape to the places that hadn't been touched by death."

"Why doesn't it affect you?"

"It does," He says shortly without any indication that he might explain. The cold expression that he gives me has me snapping my mouth shut against the question.

"Okay, what's the object look like? I'll give it back, but you'll have to take me back home to get it," In the back of my mind a voice screams that I should be missing my parents right now. But how can I miss the people who accused me of constantly lying and being crazy?

"That won't be necessary, you have the object with you," His eyes go to the ring on my thumb. A ring that I hardly notice anymore because I've had it for as long as I can remember.

I finger the ring, hesitating to take it off. It's the only thing that I've really cared about. I don't want to give it up. Sensing my hesitancy, he steps slowly forward. "Don't be the cause of all this death."

I straighten my spine and with a deep breath of release, I pull at the ring. But it doesn't budge. I look up at him to find him glaring at the ring as if he can control it with the force of his anger.

"Looks like we'll have to have a little chat with your sister," He says darkly, already turning around to go to who knows where.

"Wait! I thought you said you killed my sister," I trot to keep up with him as he stalks off toward what could be the start of a sunrise. A small glow of ominous red has started to appear on the horizon.

"I said nothing of the sort. I said I *destroyed* her, that's very different."

"Okay, so how is she going to help?"

"She's going to break her curse on the ring."

"How?"

He pierces me with his gaze and I stumble over one of the unidentifiable dead things littering the ground. The guy doesn't bother reaching out to steady me but he finally slows his pace slightly. *I guess he doesn't want to lose the thing the ring is stuck to.*

"You'll see," He says ominously and refuses to say anything else to my endless questions.



I shield my eyes against the bright red light that seems to be the sun in this strange place. I'm not sure what I was expecting to find when we finally reached our mysterious destination, but a small cottage wasn't it. The building sits small and unassuming beside a small creek that's surprisingly not dried up. Not that it actually seems to be doing any good, the grass that managed to grow beside it is tiny and gray and when I brush my hand across it my hand gets sliced.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you," My companion says blithely. "Get too close to the water at your own risk."

I can't stumble back fast enough. *Why would anyone choose to live in this place?* Maybe I should've put a little more thought into following the one person who seems unbothered by this weirdness. At the very least I should've bothered to ask for his name.

I keep an eye on him as I follow up the steps that groan with our weight but holds steady. He lets the door smack against the wall as we walk through and waves me off when I start to pull it closed.

The inside is shockingly nice. It's an unassuming living room with a small brown couch sitting on a soft blue rug facing a window. The space isn't very big but it's cute. *Is this where he lives?* I wonder idly.

He leads me to a small door that opens to a steep set of stairs that lead down for who knows how long.

"Lady's first," He waves his hand out to the darkness, giving me a smile to match.

I suck in a sharp breath, preparing myself for what lies ahead, and take the first step into the suffocating darkness. In the blackness, the only indication that he didn't

close the door and lock me in here is the brush of his hand against my back as he follows me down.

There's a speck of light as I reach the bottom of the stairs. I reach out to it gratefully. I can't even be annoyed by how it burns my eyes after being in the dark for so long. Once my eyes adjust I look around and freeze. Chained in the center of the floor is a female Fae.

She looks up at us and snarls revealing sharp teeth that could probably bite my whole hand off. The translucent wings on her back twitch, wishing to fly away.

"Now, now. Is that any way to greet your sister?" The guy clenches his fists as he stands in front of her. A shadowy mix of emotion swirls in his eyes. *He used to love her, I think suddenly, and now all that's left is hate.*

"Callum, what is she doing here?" My sister growls.

"She's returning what you stole from me, but we seem to have run into some problems."

My sister tilts her head back, trying to look bored. "That sounds like a problem, but I don't see how it's one of mine."

"Remove it."

She narrows her eyes and looks between the two of us. I'm suddenly thankful that she's chained up, I don't think either of us would be alive if she wasn't. "No."

"Why?" I wince as soon as the word leaves my mouth.

"Ask him," She nods toward Callum.



Callum rolls his eyes. "Dusk is mad because I put my duty above her. She stole the lifeforce in hopes that it would leave more time for her." He turns back toward her and yells, "Because she's an unstable crazy person."

"You loved it."

"Yeah, because I was an idiot."

I start to say something to try to calm them down before this gets out of hand but what do you say to a pair of psychotic immortals?

"Okay," I say soothingly. It's the same voice everyone used on me when I would freak out about the voices. "We can fix this. Release the curse and he'll release you. Then you never have to see each other again. That sounds reasonable doesn't it?"

"No!" They both shout at the same time.

"Okay, how about this?" My voice starts to rise to match theirs. "Release her so she can take the ring off my finger or I'll go to someone else with powers stronger than yours and minds more stable than yours. And I'll leave you both down here to kill each other."

I can tell Callum wants to argue but his mind is also spinning, trying to think of a way to use this to one-up Dusk. "Okay," He finally says, calmer than he was before.

With a wave of his hand, the chains release Dusk. A part of me expects her to dart towards the stairs but all she does is stand and stretch. She snatches my hand and pulls the ring off, her fingers hot with magic as she does it. With a flick of her fingers, the ring flies into Callum's hand.

He stares at it for a second and then his hands start to glow. The ring hovers in the air before exploding into a solid ball of warm pink light that bursts straight through

the house and up into the sky beyond. I stare up after it as it shatters into thousands of small sparks that fill the world with color and life. The small amount of magic I felt before is nothing compared to the surge I feel now. My body feels on fire as it finishes shifting from my human form to my Fae form.

Callum glows in the new life but Dusk seems to grow darker, more shadowy. She lunges for Callum who sidesteps her easily. He twists his hand and a funnel of magic shoots toward Dusk. Her magic isn't enough, she's thrown back, smacking into the wall. A glow descends from where the ball of light went and dances around her as she screams then... nothing. Her voice is cut off as she disappears, replaced with a small patch of glowing mushrooms.

I gape at Callum, "What just happened?"

"Magic doesn't like to be locked up. It had to restore the balance."