

HUNTER OF THE FAE

MODERN FAE BOOK 4

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MY ex-boyfriend is a wizard. We were together for almost two years, and I never suspected a thing. In the four years since we broke up, we've kept in touch and even hooked up a few times. Still, I never guessed he was part of some secret wizard community. I thought I knew him, but he'd been keeping this secret from me the whole time. It wasn't like I knew magic existed until a few months ago, but that didn't stop me from revisiting every memory of our time together, searching for something I'd missed.

"Listen, Angie." Evie leaned across my open suitcase and intercepted my hand as I reached for the next shirt. "Willow is going to be here any minute. Before she gets here, I just want to make sure you're okay with all this. It's been...a lot."

That was the understatement of the century. "I'm fine. It's fine." I patted her arm with my free hand, then twisted out of her grip so I could shake out my favorite sweater, roll it, and stuff it into a packing cube.

"You don't sound fine." Evie shifted position so that she

could lay on her stomach, crosswise on the bed. She rested her chin on her hands as she stared up at me. “You know, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. I’ll talk to Fiona for you. I can explain—”

I cut her off. “It’s okay. I can do this.” The doorbell rang, distracting Evie from pursuing the topic further.

Evie started to get up, but stopped when her aunt Vivian’s cheery voice called up from somewhere on the first floor of the manor. “I’ll get it!”

Evie flopped back onto her belly. “It’s late for visitors... Could be one of Aunt Viv’s friends or that nosy neighbor, MaryAnn. You don’t think Willow would use the front door, do you?”

I rolled my eyes. Evie’s boyfriend’s inability to use the front door and pretend he was a human had been what had gotten me into this mess in the first place. I snatched my wrinkled skinny jeans from the heap of clothing on the bed. My fingers dug into the fabric and squeezed extra tight as I rolled them up.

Liam messed up, and I ended up swearing an Oath to serve the Faerie Queen and keep all their secrets, just like Evie.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” Evie asked.

“Liam?” I knew that wasn’t who she meant, but it was who I’d been thinking about. Easier to talk about Evie’s boyfriend than confront my feelings about being sent to spy on my ex for the Fae.

“No. Not Liam. Max.” Evie shook her head. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

A yipping bark from downstairs distracted me from the question. “Did your aunt get a dog?”

Evie sat up and faced the open door to the guest room. “No... And I don’t think MaryAnn has a dog...” She scooted to

the edge of the bed and started to stand.

“You don’t think that demon lady is trying to infiltrate Lydbury Manor with one of her hellhounds, do you?” I was kidding, but the look Evie gave me over her shoulder made it clear that joking about demon attacks was not okay.

Luckily, the definitely-not-a-hellhound in question chose that moment to bound into the room, followed by the petite and athletic form of Willow, the most recent addition to our Humans Who’ve Sworn to Serve the Fae Club. Current membership: three. No. Five, if you counted Evie’s aunt and uncle.

“Phew.” Willow exhaled, interlacing her fingers on top of her head as she caught her breath. “This house is enormous, and that dog may have short legs, but she’s fast.”

The little bundle of fur accompanying Willow had bounced up on the bed and was turning around in happy circles, tail wagging madly. She bounced over to Evie, but when Evie reached out to pet her, she twisted and pranced back toward me. Then she jumped and landed directly in the middle of my clean clothes, scattering them everywhere as she stared up at me, clueless and adoring.

“Oh, good,” Willow said. “She likes you.”

My grumpy mood melted in the face of what appeared to be the most adorable corgi I’d ever seen. “Hello there, little ball of fuzz.”

“Her name’s Salty,” Willow explained. “And she’s yours. Gift from the pixies, via Arabella.”

I paused scratching Salty’s head and looked across the room at Willow. “Um...I’m leaving. Remember? Your girlfriend knows that. What am I going to do with a dog?”

Salty butted my hand with her wet nose, demanding I continue with the scratches.

Willow shut the door, then sat down on the end of the bed,

opposite Evie. “So, about that... You’re meant to take her with you. For protection.”

I glanced down at the wagging tan-and-white dog shedding on my black leggings and my best cashmere sweater. “Protection? Is this a joke?”

Evie sat up straight, tucking her legs underneath her. “Oh. I’ve read about this. Corgis are thought to be companion dogs for the faeries. Is that true, then?”

Willow shrugged. “Something like that, I think. Ari didn’t explain much. She just handed me the dog and said I needed to give her to Angie and tell her that she should keep the dog with her at all times.”

“I suppose this is Ari’s way of sending one of the Queen’s Guard with you to protect you.” Evie smiled at me like this was some sort of honor.

Something about her smile combined with the adoring fur ball insisting on my attention made me snap. I shoved my suitcase toward the center of the bed and sat down in its place. “I’m not fine.” I sighed. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Salty plopped down right on top of my favorite blouse and rested her head on my lap. This was going to be one expensive dry-cleaning bill.

Evie scooted closer to me so she could rub her hand up and down my back. “Aw, sweetie. It’s going to be okay. Do you want me to go with you? I could—”

“No.” I shook my head. “I should be able to face my ex-boyfriend. It’s just...” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “It’s easier to forget that it’s over when I don’t have to see him.”

“I’m sorry,” Willow said. “I should never have suggested that we involve you. I didn’t know.”

“It’s not your fault.” Evie frowned. “I’m the one who knew. I should have said no. We can still find another way.”

I shifted Salty off my lap and stood, pointing to the floor. “Off.”

Salty looked up at me with sad eyes, then hopped down from the bed. “You both did the right thing. I swore my Oath, just like you two did. If this is what Fiona needs from me, I can do this. It’s not like she’s asking me to go toe to toe with a demon.”

Evie shivered. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“Sorry.” I pulled my suitcase toward me. “It’s just Max. And I just need to get some information from him. I can do this.” I started gathering up my clothes. “I’ll go. I’ll get him to tell me what he knows about those magic traps that the demons want to use against the Fae, and that will be it.”

“I almost forgot.” Willow reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a coin about the size of a quarter. “Arabella also gave me a few of these to send with you.”

I took the coin from her and studied it as she fished two more out of her pocket. “It’s blank.”

“Are these the blood coins?” Evie asked.

“Blood coins?” I winced at the awful name.

“Yeah.” Willow held one up. “Nigel and Gwawr made a batch for Arabella to test. They’re pretty sure they got all the kinks out.”

“How do they work?” I asked.

“They’re all coded to return to Ari, wherever she happens to be when they’re sent,” Willow explained, handing me two more coins.

“You probably also need to tell her how you send them.” Evie grimaced.

I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like this part. “And maybe why you decided to call them ‘blood coins’?”

“Oh. Right.” Willow slid a small knife out of a pocket on

the outside thigh of her brown canvas pants. She unfolded the blade. “Don’t worry, I won’t waste one of your coins just to demonstrate.”

My face must have paled at the sight of her knifepoint, but she’d drawn the wrong conclusion from my reaction. She could have all the coins she gave me back if she was about to do what I thought she was about to do.

Willow dug another coin out of her pocket, then pricked her finger with the tip of her knife. A drop of blood dripped onto the face of the coin.

I pinched my eyes shut. “Nope.”

“Come on, Angie. Open your eyes,” Evie said.

I peeked through my eyelashes as Willow whispered to the coin. All I heard was the last bit: “Love you.” Then the coin disappeared.

My eyes popped open. “Where did it go? How did you do that?”

Willow was human, like me and Evie, but a little bit of Fae blood from somewhere way back in her ancestry had trickled down through her family tree to both her parents, and ultimately to her. She had what the Fae called earth magic, which I’d come to learn was characteristic of the Elemental Fae. But as far as I knew, having earth magic didn’t mean you could make things disappear.

“I told you. They’re all coded to return to Ari once you’ve imprinted them with your message.”

I cringed. “And imprinting them involves bleeding on them and whispering sweet nothings in their ear?”

Willow blushed. “The first part, yes. But, Ari means for you to whisper—or shout—a cry for help should you need backup.”

“And why would I find myself in a situation where I would

need to A, voluntarily bleed myself, and B, call for backup?” I glanced down at the dog curled up on the carpet near the bedpost. She thumped her tail against the floor and opened her mouth to grin up at me.

Evie and Willow exchanged a look. I knew that look. I did not like that look.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Fighting demons was not part of the deal.”

Evie scooted toward me. “It’s just a precaution. No one expects anything bad to happen to you. That’s why we’re sending you. No one knows that you’re Sworn. You’ll be fine.”

“Look.” Willow pulled out her phone. “How about we start a group text. No blood involved.”

Evie nodded. “Perfect. You can keep us updated, and we can cheer you on. I love it.”

Willow passed her phone to Evie. “Go ahead and put your number in.”

Evie’s thumbs danced across the screen. Then she handed the device to me.

I shook my head as I added my contact info. “You promised me this wasn’t going to be dangerous.” Unlike my best friend and her soon-to-be cousin-in-law—or whatever the Fae called it when your mate’s cousin chose a mate—no one was going to describe me as athletic. I liked to swim. You didn’t get sweaty when you swam. But running, Evie’s favorite sport, was torture, and I wasn’t in a hurry to test that whole “I’ll run if a demon is chasing me” theory.

I handed the phone back to Willow. She glanced at Evie, then bent her head to study the screen.

“You’re going to be fine,” Evie said. “Just keep Salty with you, and if you need help, don’t hesitate to call.”

On cue, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and

cleared the message alert. Right below the text from Willow was the last one I'd received from Max. His dark eyes stared up at me from his profile picture, and something inside my chest ached. The next week was going to be torture.

I tapped his face and typed a lighthearted message, letting him know I was coming to town "for work." Then I set the phone to do not disturb, switched off the screen, and shoved it back into my pocket. I refused to obsess about how long it took for him to respond. This trip was strictly business.

My life had become a series of never-ending meetings. I shut the door to block the chatter from the employees seated in the open floor plan and took refuge in my office. If I had realized that agreeing to run Silicon Moon would require me to attend so many damn meetings, I might not have been so quick to accept the promotion. Everyone was so needy. The minute I left the privacy of the hundred-odd square feet of space that I was allowed to call "mine," they started in on me with requests and questions. I didn't dare open my e-mail unless I wanted to face more of the same.

Rolling my neck to release some tension, I crossed over to the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the wall behind my desk and pressed my forehead against the glass so I could stare down at the damp concrete grid below. If anyone in the office caught me doing this, they'd probably worry that I wanted to jump, but that was the furthest thing from my mind. I used the change in perspective to reset my equilibrium and clear my head.

From this angle, pedestrians appeared like inkblots moving across a game board. They flowed in both directions, pausing at street corners as cars streamed past. One bright-pink um-

rella with green dots wove through the flow of pedestrians on the sidewalk. I followed it until it disappeared around a corner. The splash of color reminded me of Angie and made the corners of my mouth twitch up into a grin.

As soon as I realized where my brain was going, I refocused my thoughts and peeled myself away from the window. Then I flopped into my ridiculously expensive office chair. I only had a half hour break. I could spend all of it daydreaming about my off-limits ex-girlfriend, or I could put the time to good use and research my current pet project.

Pit of despair temporarily avoided, I shoved a hand into my jacket pocket and extracted a small black clothbound notebook. Tugging on the string marking my place, I opened the book and laid it on my desk next to the keyboard. In the process, I jostled the mouse and woke my screen. I gritted my teeth as I typed in my password. Nothing says love like a lick on the nose.

We'd been broken up for four years, but I still couldn't bring myself to change my password to a series of numbers, letters, and symbols that wasn't based on one of our inside jokes. Every time I typed my password, I was reminded of the vacation we took to Italy the summer before our final year at college. Angie was about to finish undergrad. I was about to finish my MBA. I'd planned to propose until I'd been reminded that I had a company to run, a sister to protect, and secrets that I could never, ever share with the woman I loved.

The memories hurt, but they served as a useful reminder. My family, the Wizard Society, and the Society's governing Council were the three most important things in my life. There was no room for love, at least not with someone who didn't have even a drop of magic in their blood.

I opened the browser and entered the set of keywords I'd

scribbled into the margin of my notebook during the last soul-numbing meeting. A few clicks led me to a site featuring a picture of a shop. The interior was cloaked in shadow, but a man stood behind the counter, facing the shelves lining the walls. His long gray hair was pulled back in a low ponytail and secured with a clip.

I zoomed in on the picture, trying to get a closer look. It had to be the same wizard. The one who had told me he could help my sister. He'd pressed a mysterious key into my hand, then disappeared down a dark alley with no explanation. I was so absorbed in my research that I didn't even notice Jayden standing in the doorway until he spoke.

"Max? Earth to Max? Hello?" Jayden tapped on the door-jamb to get my attention.

I glanced up from the screen. "Oh. Hey. What's up?"

Jayden's eyebrows shot up. He looked pointedly at the clock. "What's up? Your two o'clock appointment is waiting. That's what's up."

"All right, man. No need to be sassy about it." I flicked the mouse to lock the computer screen, not bothering to close my browser window first. Jayden knew about the key and the wizard. I didn't need to hide my sleuthing from him. "I think I found something."

Jayden studied me with narrowed eyes. "Was it perhaps the papers I left on your desk?"

"Papers?" I glanced down at the scattered scraps of paper that littered the area around my keyboard.

Jayden shook his head and stalked toward me. He stopped at the other side of the desk and tapped a stack of papers positioned on the far corner. The pages had been marked with colorful sticky flags. "Papers."

"What are they for?" I stood, slipped my notebook back

into my pocket, and buttoned my jacket.

“Honestly. What do you even do in here all day?” Jayden spread his hands and stared up at the ceiling like some avenging angel was going to drop down and save him from my thickheadedness. He sounded like my father.

“For starters, I’m not in here all day. You control my schedule. You know I barely have time to piss, let alone lounge about doing nothing in my office.” I stepped around the side of the desk and picked up the stack of papers. “I was trying to dig up information about the key, if you must know.”

“My, aren’t we grumpy today?”

I sighed after reading the first few lines. “Sorry. It’s not your fault that this was the first time my ass touched that seat since seven this morning.” My eyes narrowed as I looked up at him. “No. Wait. It is your fault.”

“If you think this is bad, you should see the number of people I have to turn away.” He set his hands on his hips. “Are you going to sign that, or what? Jeffries is waiting in Gates.”

“This is a release for Cortez’s personal effects.”

“Yes.”

“Has anyone looked through those boxes?”

“No. Jelly was going to do it, but she called in sick, and I just got a manicure, so I’m not doing it.”

I set the stack of papers back onto the corner of my desk. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

Jayden sighed. “Or you could just sign the papers and be done with it. The guy was an engineer for our parent company. He disappeared more than twenty years ago, before Silicon Moon even existed. Whatever he kept in his desk is going to be obsolete at this point. Let the widow have what she wants.”

I flipped through the pages at the top of the stack. “What

is her name, again?”

“Something flowerlike. I can’t remember.”

It was right there on the first page. Liliun Cortez. I frowned. Liliun. I’d heard that name somewhere before. It wasn’t a very common name. If she was in the Society, Morgan would know. I pulled out my phone to text her and saw that I had a message. Angie’s face smiled up at me, all big brown eyes and luscious pink lips. I swiped it away, ignoring the temptation to open the message, and sent a quick note to my sister instead.

Why do I know the name Liliun?

Then I slid my phone back into my pocket, much too aware of the warm hardware pressing against the thin fabric next to my skin. I’d read Angie’s message later. At home. Not here, under the harsh fluorescent lighting and the all-too-knowing gaze of my executive assistant.

“Stall,” I said. “Give me the weekend to look through the boxes. If something gets out that shouldn’t, I’ll never hear the end of it from Marcella.”

Jayden shuddered at the sound of my mother’s name. “I think you’re being overly cautious, but I agree, best not to incur the wrath of she-who-shall-not-be-named.”

“Your loyalty is heartwarming, truly.” At least one person in this place was on my side. Maybe. “Gates, you said?”

“Gates.” He pointed in the direction of our main conference room.

“Marketing?” I tried to remember who he said I was supposed to be meeting with.

Jayden sighed. “Public relations. The Italians are using our tech in their rocket launch next week. Remember?” He pointed through the office door to the countdown clock that hung on the far wall of the open-floor office. Four days, twelve

hours, and forty-nine minutes. The seconds ticked down as I watched.

“To infinimoon...” I grinned, letting my voice trail off.

“And beyond.” Jayden pointed to the ceiling.

I chuckled as I squared my shoulders and rolled my neck, preparing for another gauntlet of meetings. “You’ll come rescue me at two thirty?”

Jayden shook his head. “Jeffries has you until two fifty, then you have ten minutes to ‘piss,’ as you put it, before the daily check-in with the engineering leads.”

“I hate you.” I grimaced and headed for the door.

“You would be nothing without me,” Jayden scolded as he followed.

“Tell that to Marcella,” I shot back over my shoulder.

“Tell her yourself, you big baby. I deserve a raise,” he whispered. Jayden knew that was out of my control. He was my assistant, but we both reported to my mother, who ran the technology division of Hunter Works, my father’s corporate empire.

“Go whine about it to Kyle. And while you’re at it, remind everyone that we’re meeting tomorrow. Eight o’clock, my place. Make sure someone brings food. I’ll pay for it, but I’m going straight to the gym after work and won’t have time to order anything or pick it up.” I turned down the hall toward the conference room and increased my pace.

My fingers brushed against the phone in my pocket as I walked. Brown eyes and unread words lurked there. My heart pounded against the wall of secrets I’d built between us that were screaming to be let out. Since that was impossible, I attempted to center myself by concentrating on the magic pulsing through my veins. The effort it took to channel my power and direct it into my palms forced all other thoughts

from my head and erased all lingering emotions.

Pausing outside the conference room door, I fixed a welcoming smile on my face. Then I entered the room and focused on the team sitting around the table. “Sorry I’m late.”

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