

# WILL OF THE FAE

MODERN FAE BOOK 3

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Cover design by Elizabeth Mackey

Editing by The Artful Editor

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ISBN-10: 1-7326128-5-4

ISBN-13: 978-1-7326128-5-3

First Edition: January 2020

# 1

**M**Y finger throbbed beneath the freshly healed skin. Gwawr, our new guardian, had used some sort of earth magic to inflict the injury, making it look like the wound had been caused by a faulty teacup, instead. As though my cousin Fiona owned a faulty anything, let alone one of her treasured teacups.

Gwawr may have fooled Fiona, but she hadn't fooled me. I'd seen her pocket the blood-soaked handkerchief after she'd healed my cut. She was up to something. I just couldn't tell what. No matter, though. I had a spy keeping an eye on her in anticipation of this sort of odd behavior. If she was under the influence of that demon spawn Nigel, I would find out.

My preoccupation prevented me from noticing that Fiona had settled in the chair across from me in her study. She waited patiently for me to glance up from my hand. Only when I made my move to leave did I notice that my cousin had cornered me with her "it's time to talk business" stare. My distraction had left an opening for her, and I sighed as I

realized she had me right where she wanted me. I could delay the inevitable no longer.

“So,” she said. “The list I gave you...” Her voice trailed off as she reached for her teacup. When I didn’t take the bait, she took a sip and waited a bit longer. Her large brown eyes locked with mine as one perfect dark-brown eyebrow arched in silent question.

“What of it?” I asked, knowing what she wanted me to admit but unwilling to offer the information unless she asked a direct question. It was a Faeling’s game. But, as she was the Queen of the Fae and I’d Sworn to serve and protect her, it was the only rebellious act I’d allow myself.

She set her cup down and shot me a glance out of the corner of her eye, fully aware of my tactic and refusing to play into it, as usual. “I see Brianne chose to take her vow and serve the Guard.”

Of course Fiona hadn’t missed my most recent lover’s shaved head and the fact that I’d assigned her the less-than-appealing task of guarding the half demon claiming to be our ally. “She’ll make an excellent captain,” I said.

“Instead, you’ve gone and made her Nigel’s nanny.” Fiona rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Ari, I thought you cared for her.”

“She made her choice.” I shrugged.

That eyebrow arched again. “And I suppose you did nothing to try to stop her?”

“She knows my rules about mixing duty and pleasure.” I shifted back on my chair and looked away from my cousin’s piercing eyes. “It was a fling. Who am I to keep her from doing what she thought she must?”

“Oh, Ari.” Fiona sighed. “At some point, you’re going to have to let someone in.”

“Didn’t you hear the demon spawn? His mother is plan-

ning a war to wipe the Fae from the face of the earth. I don't have time for messing about with lovestruck Elementals."

"War isn't imminent. Nigel will hold them off until summer. Just enough time for you to get through the Settling phase, if you take a seed now." She wrapped her long brown fingers around the delicate porcelain teacup in her hand and held it beneath her chin.

And just like that, she'd steered us back to the topic of her list. I did the math. She was right. If I waited, I'd be useless should war come. Even though I had no intention of allowing the demons to destroy us, it was naive to assume we wouldn't lose more Fae in the conflict. Their threat made compliance with Fiona's decree that much more urgent.

"You shouldn't trust him," I said.

"Do you have a tangible reason for that? Or are you just stalling?"

I grimaced. I didn't need to answer. She could see right through me.

"Who will it be, then?" she asked.

She'd given me the list following the announcement of her decision that all Fae must make it a priority to reproduce. It included five names, all eligible males, but not for mating with. She wasn't that daft. This was transactional only. I needed a sire for the Faeling Fiona insisted I have. These males had the seed I needed to begin the fifteen-month process of producing a possible heir to take up Fiona's crown in the event of her untimely death.

"I approached them all, as you commanded," I said. I didn't know why I was bothering to stall. We both knew that I would do anything for her. Even this. I just wished it could have waited until after we'd settled things with the demons.

"Don't be dramatic." Fiona glared at me. "Who did you

choose?”

“How do you know that any agreed?” There was no guarantee I’d give birth to a female, just as there was no guarantee any of the Elemental males, who could only sire one Faeling in their lifetime, would want to spend their only chance at a Faeling on me. I’d told her as much when she’d given me the list, but she wouldn’t listen. The Elementals were proud of their bloodlines, and mine were unknown. Or, half of my bloodline was, at any rate. Arabella of Rionach, the only High Fae without a named sire.

Her silence and that damned eyebrow told me that she already knew who I’d selected. After all, it wasn’t as though I’d been completely wrong. All but one had initially hesitated before finally agreeing. I hadn’t accounted for the fact that they would be fools to refuse the commander of the Queen’s Guard and a chance their Faeling might inherit the crown. Still, only one was downright eager for the opportunity. And he already had a mate. One who couldn’t bear his Faeling. Of course, Fiona had anticipated this and put him first on the list.

“If you already know, why are you asking?”

“I want to hear it from you.” She smiled, knowing she’d won. She’d never managed to best me in a fight, but what she lacked in physical combat skill, she made up for with her strategic maneuvering.

“Ioryn.” He wasn’t so bad, really. I’d caught a bit of one of his matches during the Conclave. He would have made a decent guard if he hadn’t been so valuable to the Elementals as one of their Hands.

Fiona nodded. “When?”

I scowled. “As you say, it should be done quickly or not at all.” I watched her face for any sign of a reaction.

She took another sip of tea and waited.

“I’ll ask him to meet me tonight,” I said.

“Good.” She set down her cup and folded her hands in her lap. “Sorcha is nearly through the Settling phase and should be ready to help you with your duties for the next few months.”

“Is it really that bad?” Fifteen months mattered little in the eyes of an immortal, but those first three were said to be the most dangerous and unpredictable.

Fiona grimaced. “Worse if both parents have strong magic. Sorcha has been practically human for the past three months. When she’s not, she’s barely able to control her surges of magic.” Her eyes strayed to the crystal that sat on the shelf in her study. “I’ve seen it in the memory crystal. It was like that for Flida and for our mothers as well.”

“May their force strengthen us all.” The idea of being unable to control my magic for three months didn’t rest well with me. But if I had to go through with this, better to get it over with before Liliun and her demon army could manage to organize an attack. If Liliun’s son Nigel, who claimed to be our spy, could be trusted, that attack wouldn’t come until the summer solstice when the Wild Hunt would return to help. I’d be through the Settling and ready to fight by then.

“Have you made a list for yourself yet?” I asked.

Her nose wrinkled. “Why do you think I started with one for you? I can’t risk playing favorites by choosing an Elemental, and there are no High Fae males left. At least not any that Sorcha has been able to locate. The only ones unaccounted for would be cousins of ours, in any case. That leaves the foreign Fae. Our grandmother paved the way for that when she chose sires for our mothers.” She paused and glanced down at her hands, then turned her head toward a carved mask propped up on one of the shelves before returning her attention to me.

“I’ve been considering letting my sire choose someone for me, but it’s too early in my reign for me to leave the country.”

The thought of having to split the Guard between protecting the queen and protecting our lands made my head hurt. We’d barely managed to recruit enough guards to support our current rotations and continue to spy on the demons’ activities. I’d had to resort to enlisting help from unconventional sources. Not that the number of elements an Elemental could control mattered to me. All Elementals were Fae as far as I was concerned.

“What happens if Sorcha is carrying a female?” I asked. Our sole surviving aunt had surprised us all by claiming a Rogue Fae mate shortly after returning from Edric’s dungeons.

“Technically, her Faeling would be a cousin of ours and ineligible to inherit the crown. But if Sorcha’s Faeling grew up and gave birth to a daughter before you or I do, Sorcha’s granddaughter would be queen.” Fiona shrugged. “I hope it doesn’t come to that, but I suppose we’ll deal with it if we have to.”

“One more thing to manage.”

“Yes. One more thing.”

We sighed at the same time, even though Fiona was probably thinking of the disgruntled Fae factions, while I was concerned about the brewing war with the demons. Our Aunt Godda’s abduction and her human husband’s quest for revenge had ravaged our kin and diminished our numbers to near extinction. I was determined to help Fiona rebuild, even if it meant playing host to any number of future High Fae. So long as I didn’t have to raise them.

“I suppose I should get this over with.” I rubbed my palms against the soft leather that covered my thighs.

“Thank you.” Fiona turned her doe-like eyes on me. Deceptive when you’d seen her on the rare occasions she opted for her animal form.

“You needn’t thank me for doing my duty.” My fist clenched as a thought of Liam and his human mate flashed through my mind. How he could turn his back on his family at a time like this, I would never understand.

Fiona’s eyes narrowed, this time resembling more the eagle that hunted on silent wings. “Everyone who isn’t Fae isn’t automatically an enemy.”

“It’s my job to be suspicious of everyone.”

“Just remember, they will eventually live up to your expectations.” She reached for her teacup and lifted it to her lips.

“You’d rather I trust them with my life? With your life? Only to feel the knife in my back after I do?”

She shook her head, and her tight curls brushed against the peaks of the twisted iron crown. “Trust is earned. But if you show them trust, they will be more loyal than if you assume they are just waiting to stab you in the dark.”

“I’ll never trust the demons. And look what trusting a human has done to Liam.” I rolled my eyes.

“Someday you’ll fall in love, Ari, and when you do...gods help us.” Fiona covered her mouth to hide her laugh.

My shoulders squared, and my spine straightened in response to her words. “There’s a world of flesh for the sampling, and I don’t have time for messy emotions. I have a war to prepare for.”

“About that...” Fiona shifted in her chair. “My offer still stands. Once you’ve given birth...”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten. My Faeling is yours for the raising. Ioryn agrees. He’d suggested sending it to the crèche before he knew you’d offered.”

“Good. Then it’s agreed. Now get on with the Settling, already. If I can’t have one of my own yet, I’m anxious to spoil yours.”

I groaned. “I’m going to have to assign one of the guards to train it to fight, aren’t I?”

“I thought you didn’t care?” The amused arch returned to Fiona’s eyebrow.

“Never mind. I don’t.” I started to walk toward the door, then stopped. “It’s just—”

“Careful, Ari. I’m beginning to think you might be showing signs of being positively maternal.”

“You’re impossible.” With that settled, I left her cozy study in search of Ioryn.

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The drive into Cold Creek took twice as long this time of year. Slick slush covered the rolling dirt roads, and the pavement wasn’t much better. But I didn’t have the heart to kick the old man out after I’d found him squatting in cabin four. Then I’d burned through my food supply faster than I’d planned by feeding us both. If I’d been alone out there, I might have made it all the way until the spring thaw when my mother’s pick for the new caretaker arrived. As it stood, thanks to my unexpected guest, I was down to my last can of beans, and that just wouldn’t do if another storm rolled in, as it inevitably would.

The upside of braving the treacherous drive was my coffee date with Jessica. I was thinking of her as I guided my truck into the almost-empty parking lot outside Skyes Hardware and almost didn’t notice her husband’s truck parked in the back. *Damn.*

I braced myself for the blast of cold air and the possibility

of a run-in with my least favorite local. Then I opened the truck door and slid down into the wet gray muck. Ten steps to slosh across the lot, and I was inside. The bell above the door announced my arrival.

Wrinkled brown eyes met mine from behind the front counter. “Morning, Willow. Didn’t expect to see you in town before the thaw. Everything all right out there at the lodge?”

“All good, Mr. Skyes.” I hid my relief and hoped his son had stepped out or was busy in the back office. If Austin realized I was here, he’d worm his way into my coffee date and ruin it. “Just running a bit low on supplies. Thought I’d use the break in the weather to restock.”

“Good thinkin’, girl. Your mama raised you right. I was just telling Austin that they’re saying there’s another storm rolling in. Could be a big one, from the looks of it.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep an ear out for the latest.”

“You planning on joining the net tomorrow night?” He was referring to the social event of the week for anyone in the area with an amateur radio license who could hit the repeater. Not much else to do around here in the dead of winter.

Luckily, Jessica and I had been the first in our troop to earn our Moose Scout badge for ham radio, becoming the youngest in our state to pass our license tests. If it weren’t for her, I’d have been stuck chatting it up with my parents’ friends all winter. Most of them were sweet, well-meaning guys, and a few ladies, but they all had at least thirty years on me. The weekly check-ins kept me sane, but other than that, I didn’t have much in common with them.

“As long as I can make it out to the shack. I had to shovel it out and repair the antenna after the last storm blew through.” I tugged off my gloves so I could dig my shopping list out of my pocket. “About that... I’ve got a few things on my list that

I need in order to finish the repairs.”

“Lemme see,” he said.

I handed him the list, hoping he’d be able to decipher my handwriting.

He waved me to the back of the store. “Electrical tape’s over there on aisle three. And the wrench you need should be on that display, right against the wall there. I’ll get the rest and meet you back here.”

“Thanks, Mr. Skyes.” I tucked my gloves into my pocket so I wouldn’t lose them and started off toward aisle three.

“I keep tellin’ you to call me Bob. You’re no stranger. Heck, I knew your mama when you were just a twinkle in her eye.” His voice faded as he made his way toward the opposite side of the store.

I grinned as I scanned the shelf for the electrical tape. There was a large empty spot between the duct tape and the masking tape. *Shit*. I ducked my head down to check. The card on the shelf claimed I was in the right place, but it appeared to be out of stock. If there wasn’t any on display, they might have some in the back, but that would mean involving Austin and alerting him to my presence in town. *Double shit*.

I closed my eyes and stretched my arm into the gap, feeling around for any rolls of tape that may be lingering in the dark recesses. My fingers closed around something that felt like the right shape and size. *Please be electrical tape*.

I extracted my hand and opened my eyes. *Yes*. I hoped this was a sign that today was going to be my lucky day. I tossed the roll of tape into the air and caught it. Then I made my way over to the wrenches.

After paying for my hardware, I bundled up and headed across the street to the grocery store. I had about a half hour to shop before I was scheduled to meet with Jessica at the

coffee shop. It would be the first time I'd seen her face-to-face since the start of winter.

She'd been avoiding giving me an answer about joining me for all or part of my upcoming travel adventure. I'd chalked it up to the nature of communicating over the radio in a public forum. Cell service was a joke unless you were standing on Main Street, and at that point, you'd probably just run into whomever you wanted to call, anyway. My mother wasn't about to allow a cell tower anywhere near the lodge. "Disconnecting from the Internet" was supposed to be part of the appeal of a place like that. Not that it mattered, because I didn't plan on sticking around after the winter.

Beans. Rice. Chips. Salty nuts. And more chocolate than I had any right to. The fresh vegetable section had seen better days. Spring and summer days, specifically. Either the store hadn't restocked recently or the truck hadn't made it this far north. Regardless, it looked like I'd be resorting to frozen veggies until spring. I stocked up on my favorites and checked my list to make sure I wasn't missing anything.

On the way to the checkout, I resisted the urge to throw in a few more impulse buys, sparing a lingering glance at the cover of a glossy women's fitness magazine. Those models were cut. Steering my cart toward the register, a mystery novel featuring a vampire hunter on the cover caught my eye. I paused and flipped it over to skim the summary on the back. Not bad, but I could save money if I used the Wi-Fi at the coffee shop and downloaded some new books from the library instead. The novel wasn't expensive, but every penny I saved this winter would go toward the epic adventure I had planned.

My heart raced at the thought of it. Just me and a backpack, traveling the world. If I couldn't land a job in my

not-very-employable chosen field of anthropology, I could at least go out and experience the cultures and countries I'd studied in college. Finding my passion, and maybe love, along the way. Not getting stuck ringing up groceries like Jacob, who I discovered was the only one working the registers at this time of day.

"Hi, Will!" Jacob pulled my cart closer so he could scan my groceries.

"Hi, Jake." I caught him judging my chocolate stash.

"How is it up there at River Pines?" He didn't bother to wait for me to answer before continuing. "I can't believe you're staying out there by yourself. Don't you get lonely?"

Small-town living meant you could never be sure if your old high school classmate was probing for gossip or genuinely interested in your mental state. I decided to play it safe. "Sure. But I've decided to use the alone time to work on my beach body." I gestured to the magazine rack, guessing he wouldn't detect my sarcasm. *Every* body is a beach body—no fitness magazine required.

"You should come to Dale's Gym this spring. He's got a killer spin class."

"Uh. Yeah. If I'm around, I'll check it out." I had no intention of staying past the end of April. One more month, max, and I was out of here. I slid my card into the reader and entered my pin.

"Well, you're all set." He handed me the receipt.

"Thanks." I slung the canvas bag straps over my shoulders, trying to manage all of it in one load.

"See you around!" he called after me as I made my way toward the door.

The cold, dry air hit me as soon as I stepped outside. I hurried through the slush, loaded my bags into the back of my

truck, and hopped up into the cab. The clock on the dash said I had five minutes to drive the two blocks to Roasty Beans coffee hut. Plenty of time.

I arrived before Jessica, so I snagged us a table and pulled out my tablet to check my e-mail and download some new books and movies. Every time the door opened, I glanced up, expecting her to walk in. Then I spotted an e-mail from my mother and got lost in the drama of her caretaker selection process. I'd nearly reached the part where I expected she'd tell me she'd finally hired someone and give me the date they'd be arriving when Jessica pulled out the chair opposite me and sat down.

"Hey." I glanced up, prepared to ask her to hang on a second while I finished reading. But the words shriveled on my tongue at the sight of her face. "What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing." She pulled off her hat and shook out her straight brown hair so the shoulder-length strands fell forward across her cheeks.

I'd already seen what she was trying to hide. Her lip was swollen. A yellow bruise, caked with foundation and concealer, discolored the pale skin along her jaw. That lousy bastard. "Did he do this?"

"I'm fine. Really."

"That's not an answer." My fingers dug into the imitation pebbled leather of my tablet case. I put it down on the table before I damaged something I couldn't afford to replace. "I'll kill him if he set a hand on you."

She reached across the table and grasped my wrist. "Shh." Her eyes darted right and left, trying to determine who might have overheard. Small towns.

I lowered my voice. "Tell me the truth."

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