

Alice Nox



A Court of Frozen Hearts

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«Автор»

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Elise came to the Scottish wilderness chasing the perfect shot for her graduation project. Instead, she got lost in an ancient forest and bled on a tree that should have remained untouched. Now she's trapped in a deadly Fae game. Caelan Morphrost, Prince of the Winter Court, offers her a bargain: survive seven days of the Hunt in the Underhills, and she'll have her heart's deepest wish granted—along with her freedom. Fail, and she'll belong to him forever. But Elise can't even remember what she wished for at the cursed tree. And the Prince is no mere hunter—he's a sadist who finds mortal terror more intoxicating than any pleasure. The Underhills crawl with predators starving for human flesh, and surviving here is next to impossible. Next to. Because sometimes the darkest games end in the most unexpected ways. And a wish earned through pain and suffering might be exactly what they both needed all along.

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Chapter 1

I should have listened to old Eila.

That morning, when we'd stopped to buy supplies at the village's only shop, she'd caught my wrist with bony fingers. Her grip had been surprisingly strong for a woman well past seventy.

"Don't go into the Old Forest, girl," she'd hissed, staring directly into my eyes. "Especially when the mist is rising."

"Why?" Chloe had giggled, pawing through packages of biscuits. "Are there ghosts?"

The old woman hadn't taken her gaze off me.

"Worse," she'd said grimly. "Things that were here before ghosts. Before people. Before everything."

Chloe had rolled her eyes, and I'd smiled politely, easing my arm free. Local legends, of course. Every village had its "cursed forest" or "haunted house" to lure in tourists.

How wrong I'd been.

Now, standing at the edge of that very forest with my camera in hand, I could have given the old woman a medal for accuracy. The mist was indeed rising—thick and unnaturally white, creeping between the trees like something alive.

"Elise, are you coming or are you going to stare at that fog all day?" Chloe called from the top of the hill. Her bright pink jacket stood out against the gray-green landscape like a neon sign.

"Coming!" I called back, adjusting my camera bag's strap.

We'd arrived in this backwater last night. Chloe was here to escape London's madness and "find herself" after another painful breakup. I was here for shots for my graduation project. "Wild Scotland" was supposed to be my ticket into the world of serious photography.

Assuming I lived to graduate, of course.

The first warning signs came even before we reached the forest. The birds that had been cheerfully chirping in the bushes fell suddenly silent. Complete, dead silence. Even the wind died, as if nature itself had held its breath.

"Strange," I muttered, raising my camera.

Through the lens, the forest looked even more ominous. And when I checked the shot I'd just taken on the display, I nearly dropped the camera.

In the photo, between the trees, I could make out vague silhouettes. Tall figures, too thin to be human.

But when I looked up, there was nothing there.

"Camera's glitching," I told myself, but my voice shook.

Chloe had already disappeared around a bend in the path, and I stopped at the very edge of the forest. The air here was different—denser, saturated with the scent of moss and something sweetly cloying. Beneath the beauty of autumn colors lurked a barely perceptible smell of rot.

The temperature had dropped at least ten degrees. I shivered, pulling my jacket tighter, and checked my watch.

Half past two.

The mist thickened with every step deeper into the forest. At first it was just light wisps playfully coiling around my ankles, but soon it rose to my waist, transforming the world into a ghostly copy of itself. Trees loomed out of the milky veil like giants from nightmare tales.

"Chloe?" I called, but there was no answer.

The pink jacket had vanished into the white haze.

I stopped, listening. The usual forest sounds had dissolved into silence. My camera stopped its quiet hum—the autofocus thrashing frantically, unable to find a point to lock onto in this sea of white.

"Chloe!" I called louder.

My voice echoed back, but strangely distorted—as if my words were bouncing off invisible walls. And then... another voice.

"Elise..." Faint, distant. "Elise, where are you?"

Chloe! She was calling from the right. I bolted in that direction, pushing through the thickening fog.

"Elise!" Now the voice came from the left.

I stopped, feeling goosebumps crawl down my spine. Chloe couldn't be in two places at once.

"Elise..." Now the voice sounded directly behind me, soft and insinuating.

But it wasn't Chloe's voice. Similar, but... different. More melodious. Too perfect.

I pulled out my phone with trembling fingers. No signal, as expected. But worse—the time on the screen still showed half past two. The seconds weren't moving.

Time had stopped.

Panic began to creep in, but I forced myself to breathe steadily. Just fog. Just lost. Chloe was somewhere nearby—I needed to find her and get back to the car.

I moved at random, trying to keep a straight line. Each step fell dully on the soft earth carpeted with fallen leaves. Branches caught at my clothes with almost deliberate persistence.

Then the ground beneath my feet changed. Instead of moss and leaves—bare, black earth. And tracks.

Footprints in the mud. But not human—too long, too narrow, with marks from claws at the end of the toes.

The sensation of being watched became so strong that my skin prickled. I slowly raised my head. And saw the tree.

It towered before me like an ancient sentinel—a massive oak with a crown that disappeared into the mist. The trunk was so wide that six grown men couldn't have circled it with their arms. And the bark...

The bark was covered in scars. Deep grooves that were definitely not natural. They formed patterns—spirals, interlacing lines, symbols that hurt to look at, though I couldn't understand their meaning.

"You shouldn't be here."

I jumped, spinning around. A figure emerged from the mist—a boy about fourteen with dark hair and eyes the color of autumn sky. He wore simple brown clothing that looked as if it had been sewn several centuries ago.

"Who are you?" I breathed. "Where did you come from?"

"That doesn't matter." His voice sounded muffled, as if coming from underwater. "What matters is that you're standing at the Summoning Tree in the hour between worlds. Leave. Now."

"Summoning Tree?" I glanced back at the oak. "It's just a tree..."

"Nothing here is 'just' anything," the boy shook his head, and pity flickered in his eyes. "Especially in the Old Forest. Especially when hungry things wake."

"Listen, I'm just lost..."

But he was already dissolving into the mist, as if made of the same milky vapor.

"Don't touch the tree," his voice drifted from the emptiness. "If you value your human soul—don't touch it..."

And I was alone.

Alone with this cursed tree and the thickening fog.

In the silence, other sounds began to emerge. Rustling. Whispers in an unfamiliar language. Music—a wordless melody, beautiful and terrible at once, that made my blood move faster.

And laughter. Silver, melodious, inhuman.

I pulled out my camera, more to calm my nerves than anything. Aimed at the trunk with its mysterious scars, pressed the shutter.

On the display, I didn't see an empty forest.

Figures surrounded the tree—tall, graceful, with faces too beautiful and too alien. Their eyes glowed in the half-light like predators'.

They were looking directly into the lens. Directly at me.

My hands shook so badly the camera nearly slipped. I looked up—nothing. Looked at the display again—the figures were closer.

Animal fear struck like lightning.

I stumbled back from the tree, tripped over a protruding root, and fell. Instinctively I threw out my hands to break the fall, and my right palm slammed hard against the oak's rough bark.

The pain was sharp—I'd scraped skin on some particularly rough protrusion. Blood welled immediately, and several drops rolled down my palm, feeding one of those ancient scars on the bark.

The world exploded with sensation.

Not light, not sound—hunger. As if something vast, ancient, and unspeakably ravenous had suddenly awakened and caught the scent of fresh blood.

The tree beneath my palm became alive. The bark pulsed like skin, drinking in the blood with the greed of a parched sponge. The scar-symbols flared with a dull red light, and waves rippled through the trunk, as if a giant heart beat beneath the bark.

The mist erupted into motion. It spun into a vortex, and through its tatters they broke through. The Fae.

Even without knowing the word, I understood what they were. Tall, otherworldly beautiful, with sharp features and eyes where constellations swam. Their skin glowed with a pearlescent sheen, and their movements were so graceful that human locomotion would seem pathetic in comparison.

But their beauty was predatory. Too-sharp teeth flashed in their smiles, and their gazes promised things that could shatter a mind.

The music grew louder—wild melodies that made you want to dance until death. Someone laughed, someone sang in a language older than human speech.

And then one of them stepped forward.

He was taller and more beautiful than the rest. Platinum hair flowed over his shoulders, eyes blazed the color of winter sky, and his skin seemed carved from the finest marble. A crown of ice and thorns glittered on his head.

When he smiled, the temperature dropped so sharply my breath became visible.

"What an... unexpected gift," his voice was melody and menace at once. "A mortal daughter of blood has come to us of her own accord."

I couldn't move or speak. His gaze held me like a snare.

"Welcome home, Elise Thorne."

He knew my name.

His smile widened, baring sharp fangs.

"It's been so long since I hunted fresh prey. I do hope you'll run faster than the others."

Every cell in my body screamed: run. Run without looking back, run as if your life depends on it. And it probably did.

The spell of his gaze broke, and I bolted.

Branches whipped my face, roots caught at my feet, but I didn't stop. The mist parted before me and closed behind, and the music pursued me—now louder, now softer, but never silent.

Their laughter echoed in my ears, merging with the pounding of my wildly racing heart.

I ran without watching where I was going, crashing through bushes, stumbling over roots, scratching my face on branches. The forest seemed to come alive and try to stop me—the path disappeared beneath my feet, trees bent to block my way, and roots crawled from the earth like tentacles.

"Elise..." drifted from the mist behind me. "Don't run, child... We've waited so long..."

The Fae king's voice grew closer, then farther, as if he were playing cat and mouse with me. Perhaps he was.

Time flowed strangely. It seemed I'd been running for hours, but the sun hadn't moved. Or the opposite—I'd only run for a minute but had covered miles.

My lungs burned from lack of air, my side cramped, my legs buckled. But fear was stronger than exhaustion. Fear and the strange sensation that if I stopped, I would never be able to run again.

The mist began to thin. The music faded. And suddenly before me opened a familiar scene—a narrow road, a shoulder, our rented blue car.

Chloe stood beside it, leaning against the hood and concentrating on typing something into her phone. She looked completely calm—no trace of panic or searching.

"God, Chloe!" I burst from the forest, gasping and swaying. "Where were you? I looked everywhere for you! There was... there was something..."

"Elise?" She looked up, blinking in surprise. "What are you talking about? I've been waiting here for half an hour. Thought you'd decided to do a photoshoot until dark."

I stopped dead.

"Half an hour? Chloe, I was running around in there for over two hours!"

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind, then glanced at her watch.

"Elise, it's quarter to four. We split up at three twenty." Chloe frowned, looking me up and down. "And anyway, what 'there' are you talking about? You said you wanted to photograph that old oak at the edge, I went to the car. We were apart twenty minutes, tops."

"What old oak?" I whispered, turning toward the forest.

Behind me stretched an ordinary Scottish forest—young birches, rowans, shrubbery. No giant oaks. No mist. Not even traces of my mad flight visible on the flattened grass.

"That one right..." Chloe waved toward the forest but didn't finish. "Huh, strange. Where is it, actually?"

I looked at my hands. My right palm was clean—no scratches, no dried blood, no dirt. My clothes also looked as if I hadn't pushed through underbrush. Even my breathing had already recovered.

"Chloe," I began carefully, "did you see anything strange? Hear anything?"

"Like what?" She put her phone in her pocket. "If you mean that stupid fog, then yes, I saw it. Rolled in about ten minutes ago, then cleared. Probably rose from the lake."

I pulled out my camera, barely controlling the trembling in my hands. The last photos...

On the display were ordinary landscapes. Trees, grass, autumn colors. No mysterious figures, no ancient oaks with symbols on the bark. As if nothing had happened.

But when I scrolled further, my heart skipped a beat.

One frame was different. Blurred, dark, but in the very center—the silhouette of a man with platinum hair. He stood between the trees and looked directly into the lens. Directly at me.

And in his eyes, constellations swam.

"What's that?" Chloe peered over my shoulder.

"Don't know," I lied, quickly scrolling past. "Accidental shot."

"Looks like that actor from Game of Thrones," she snorted. "Let's go. It's getting dark, and I don't want to drive mountain roads after sunset."

I nodded but couldn't tear my gaze from the photograph. As the car pulled away, I looked back at the forest one last time.

And for a second—just a moment—I thought I saw a tall figure with platinum hair flash
between the trees again.
But it was my imagination.
Of course.

Chapter 2

Mrs. McGill froze halfway to the sitting room, holding a tray of teacups.

I'd tossed aside the travel blanket and risen from the armchair, stretching after the long drive, when her face contorted with an expression of genuine horror. The tray slipped from her hands and crashed onto the stone floor. Porcelain shattered into fragments, and hot tea spread in dark stains.

"Merciful God," she whispered, backing toward the wall. "What... what is that?"

Chloe jumped from the sofa.

"Mrs. McGill! What's wrong?"

But the old woman couldn't take her eyes off me. Her face had paled to a deathly white, and her lips trembled.

"You... on you..." She extended a shaking hand in my direction but didn't dare come closer.

"On me what?" I looked down at myself in confusion. Ordinary clothes, slightly rumpled from the road, nothing special.

"Shadow," Mrs. McGill breathed. "Their shadow lies upon you. How... how is this possible?"

Chloe frowned.

"What shadow? What are you talking about?" She circled me, examining me closely. "I don't see anything."

"Because you don't have the Sight," the old woman pressed a hand to her heart. "But I do. And I see... Lord, what have you done, girl?"

Cold crept down my spine.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You've been with Them," her voice dropped lower, but that only made it sound more terrifying. "Touched the world of the Elder Folk. Their mark is on you, like a brand."

"Mrs. McGill," Chloe approached the old woman and carefully took her shoulders, "you need to calm down. Elise hasn't met anyone, we've been together all day."

But the old woman continued to stare at me in horror.

"The shadow is silvery, cold. It wraps around you like a shroud." Her voice shook. "It's the mark of the Winter Court."

"What does that mean?" I whispered.

Mrs. McGill silently walked to the cupboard, pulled out a bottle of whisky, and took a long drink straight from the bottle.

"It means they're interested in you," she said finally. "And they'll come for you."

The rest of the evening passed in tense silence. Mrs. McGill cleaned up the shards, prepared dinner, but barely spoke at the table. Only occasionally casting frightened glances my way.

Chloe tried to lighten the mood with jokes, but even her usual optimism showed cracks.

"Maybe we should go to the pub?" she suggested when we went up to our room. "Meet some locals?"

"No," I answered, pulling my camera from my bag. "I'm tired."

But that wasn't the only reason. Something pulled me to look at those photos again. To understand what I'd really seen in the forest.

Chloe went to take a bath, and I sat on the bed and turned on the camera.

The first shots were ordinary—landscapes, hills, autumn colors. Then came the forest. Mist between trees, play of light and shadow. Everything normal, everything explainable.

And then...

Cold.

That was the first thing I felt. Not ordinary cold, but something alive, penetrating to the bone. The stone floor beneath my bare feet was covered with a thin layer of frost that crunched with each step.

I stood in a long corridor lit by torches with blue flames. Walls of black marble rose to a vaulted ceiling, disappearing into darkness. The air smelled of winter—snow, pine, and something else I couldn't identify.

I looked down at myself and gasped.

A white silk dress barely covered my knees. The fabric was thin, almost transparent, and offered absolutely no protection from the cold. My feet were bare. Dark hair fell in heavy waves over my shoulders and chest—I usually kept it tied back, but now it was loose, creating a stark contrast with the snow-white fabric of the dress and the paleness of my bare shoulders.

But worst of all was the wreath on my head.

I raised trembling hands and carefully touched the adornment. Flowers... but not ordinary ones. White roses with petals cold as ice. Silvery twigs with blood-colored berries. And thorns. Countless sharp thorns that pricked the skin.

"What the hell?" I whispered, trying to remove the wreath.

But the moment my fingers touched the thorns, sparks of pain shot through them. The wreath seemed to have grown into my skin. Every attempt to remove it caused unbearable agony.

Tears welled in my eyes. What was happening to me? Where was I? How did I get to this place?

I tried to remember. The inn. Chloe. Photographs. I'd been looking at photos and... fallen asleep?

"This is a dream," I said aloud, and my voice echoed off the marble walls. "Just a very vivid dream."

But the cold felt too real. The pain from the thorns—too sharp. And the smell of winter and danger made every instinct scream to flee.

The corridor stretched in both directions, disappearing into darkness. I chose a direction at random and walked along the icy floor, shivering from the cold.

My footsteps echoed hollowly. Torches with blue flames followed one after another, but between them gaped pits of absolute darkness. Sometimes I thought something moved in that darkness, but every time I turned around, there was nothing there.

The corridor forked, tripled, became a labyrinth. I walked randomly, obeying some inner compass. My feet had already gone numb from the cold, and the wreath's thorns dug into my skin with every movement.

When I tried to tilt my head, the sharp ends scratched my forehead, and a thin trickle of blood ran toward my eyebrow. I froze, wiped the blood away with trembling fingers. The wreath seemed to be warning me—attempts to remove it would end in pain.

And suddenly I heard a sound.

Music. Laughter. Voices.

I quickened my pace, almost running along the icy floor toward the source of the sounds. The corridor ended at enormous double doors of black wood, decorated with silver carvings. They were slightly ajar, and warm golden light streamed from within.

And also—sounds of merriment.

I crept to the gap between the doors and peered inside.

And forgot how to breathe.

The throne room stretched to infinity. Pillars of black ice rose to a dome where unfamiliar constellations glimmered. Between the pillars burned thousands of candles, but their flames were cold, blue.

And in the center of the hall, madness reigned.

Fae danced to music that sounded like a mixture of harp and howling wind. Their movements were too fast, too fluid for the human eye. Dresses and cloaks billowed as if woven from mist and moonlight.

But the dancers themselves were nightmares.

A woman with the lower body of a snake slithered between couples, her scales shimmering in the candlelight. A man with a deer's head whirled a lady whose face was half human, half wolf. A creature that looked like a tree with eyes danced with itself, and its branch-arms left trails of green fire in the air.

By the other walls, they feasted. At long tables sat Fae of all kinds and sizes. They ate things that moved on their plates. Drank from goblets that smoked and sparked. Their laughter was like cracking ice and tinkling bells.

And on a dais at the far end of the hall stood a throne.

A throne of black ice and... bones. Human bones, polished to a shine. And on the throne sat him.

The king with platinum hair and eyes the color of winter sky.

Even at a distance, his beauty was stunning. He sat casually, one leg thrown over the armrest, watching the revelry of his subjects. He wore a cloak of black velvet with silver embroidery, and a crown of ice and thorns shone in the candlelight.

I backed away from the door, but it was too late.

The heavy doors swung open on their own with a loud creak.

The music cut off. The dancing stopped. Every head turned toward me.

Hundreds of eyes looked at me. Human, animal, utterly inhuman. Some held curiosity, others hunger. And in some—open hostility.

I stood in the doorway in my thin dress, barefoot and shivering from cold, and felt like a mouse that had wandered into a nest of serpents.

The crowd of Fae began to part, forming a corridor from the door to the throne. Some hissed and pointed fingers at me. Others whispered in their melodious language.

"Come," someone whispered near my ear, though no one was nearby. "Come to him."

My legs moved on their own, as if someone controlled them. I walked down the corridor between the Fae, feeling their gazes like physical touches. The floor beneath my bare feet was covered with frost that crunched with each step.

Someone reached out and touched my shoulder. The fingers were icy and left a burning mark on my skin.

"Pretty," hissed a woman with cat eyes. "Can I have her bones when you're finished?"

"After me," growled a wolf-man. "My cubs need meat."

I quickened my pace, but the corridor seemed endless. And the Fae grew more curious.

"Bow!" someone shouted from the crowd. "Disrespect to the king!"

Someone's hands roughly shoved me in the back. I stumbled but at the last moment stayed on my feet, throwing out my arms for balance. Instinctive fear made me straighten and lift my chin.

A displeased hiss rippled through the Fae.

"Insolent mortal!"

"How dare she!"

"Teach her manners!"

Hands reached for me from all sides. Claws, icy fingers, tentacles—everything merged in a nightmarish dance. I cringed, bracing for pain.

"ENOUGH."

The voice rolled through the hall like thunder. All the Fae froze instantly, as if turned to statues.

The king rose from his throne.

He moved with that fluid grace that was too perfect for a human. Each step echoed in the silence of the hall. His cloak billowed though the air was still, and his crown shone with cold light.

"Don't touch her," his voice was quieter, but that only made it more menacing. "She's new. Doesn't yet understand where she is."

The Fae parted, clearing a path for him. Some bowed low, others averted their eyes. But I saw how their hands trembled with restrained fury.

The king stopped a few steps from me. Now that he was so close, I could make out the details of his inhuman beauty.

His skin was pale as first snow and seemed to glow from within with a soft silvery radiance. Cheekbones sharp as a statue's, lips perfectly defined. But his eyes... his eyes were the color of winter sky before a storm, and in them swam constellations that didn't exist in the world of humans.

"Elise," he spoke my name, and it sounded like music. "At last you've come to my house."

I opened my mouth to answer, but my voice caught in my throat. The cold of his presence filled my lungs, making each breath painful.

"Where... where am I?" I forced out.

"In the Winter Court," he extended his hand, as if inviting me to dance. "In my domain."

I didn't take his hand. Self-preservation instinct screamed that touching him would mean the end.

The king didn't insist, but something like approval flickered in his eyes.

"Smart girl," he murmured. "Already learning to survive."

Quiet laughter sounded from the Fae around us.

"This is a dream," I said, more to myself than to him. "All of this is just a dream."

"Dream and reality—for beings like me, the boundary is conditional." He began to circle me, never taking his eyes from my face. His gaze slid over me slowly, studying—lingered on the dark hair falling over my shoulders, on the brown eyes wide with fear, on the pale skin that seemed even whiter in the cold light of his court. Something flickered in his inhuman gaze—curiosity? Surprise?

"Dark eyes," he murmured, as if to himself. "Like night amidst winter. Unusual for a mortal in my domain."

With each of his steps, the temperature dropped. My breath became visible, and the thorn wreath on my head frosted over.

"What do you want from me?" My voice shook, but not only from cold.

"Want?" He stopped before me, tilting his head with the curiosity of a predator studying prey. "Interesting choice of words."

Someone in the crowd tittered.

"You spilled blood on the Cursed Tree, child," his hand rose toward my cheek but stopped an inch from my skin. "Now there's a bond between us."

"What bond?" I tried to step back but bumped into someone from the Fae with my back. Icy hands gently but insistently pushed me back.

"The tree sensed your wish," his eyes gleamed with inhuman interest. "Your heart's most secret desire. What you hide even from yourself."

Excited whispers ran through the Fae. They moved closer, forming a tight circle. Their scent—winter, danger, something sweetly cloying—filled my nostrils.

"I didn't wish for anything!" Panic gave my voice strength.

"Liar," his hand finally touched my cheek, and my skin burned with cold. "The tree doesn't make mistakes, dear. It senses what we fear to acknowledge."

Ice from his touch spread across my face in a pattern of frost crystals. It hurt, but at the same time... strangely compelling.

"And created a contract," he continued, not removing his hand. "Unbreakable, eternal contract."

"I didn't agree to anything!" Tears welled in my eyes but instantly turned to ice crystals.

"Blood is consent," he answered coldly. "The ancient laws of magic know nothing of human concepts of fairness."

Approving exclamations in their melodious language rang through the crowd.

"And now we play," he removed his hand, and a pattern of frost remained on my cheek. "If you win—you get your wish and freedom."

"And if I lose?"

His smile bared perfectly white teeth.

"You stay with us forever. Become part of the Court."

The Fae around stirred in anticipation. Some licked their lips, others rubbed their hands.

"As what?" I whispered, though from their faces I already guessed the answer.

"We don't favor humans," he shrugged with feigned regret. "Usually they become slaves, toys, food. Depends on their luck."

Horror gripped my throat like a vise.

"And if I refuse to play?"

The temperature in the hall dropped several more degrees. The Fae froze, holding their breath.

"Then you die right here," his voice became softer, but more terrible for it. "The contract can't be broken, only fulfilled."

"Kill her!" someone from the crowd shouted gleefully. "Kill her right now!"

"Humans don't deserve chances!" the snake-woman picked up, her forked tongue flicking in the air.

"Blood! Blood for the Tree!" howled Fae children, clapping their hands.

The crowd stirred, bloodlust sparking in their eyes. They began to approach, and I felt their thirst for violence like a physical wave.

"Yes, king!" the wolf-man snarled. "End this quickly! We want to see her die!"

"Let her scream!" giggled a lady in a dress of spider silk. "Haven't heard human screams in so long!"

Hands reached for me from all sides. Claws, icy fingers, tentacles—a nightmarish tangle ready to tear me apart.

"SILENCE!"

The king's voice rolled through the hall with such force that several Fae fell to their knees. The rest instantly stepped back, lowering their heads.

"She is MY prey," his words held deadly menace. "And I decide what to do with her."

The Fae cringed under his gaze, but disappointment still swam in their eyes.

"Forgive us, king," the snake-woman mumbled. "It's just been so long since we had fresh meat..."

"There will be," his lips curved in a cruel smile. "If she loses. But for now..."

He turned to me, and the temperature dropped several more degrees.

"For now we'll play my favorite game," his eyes gleamed with anticipation. "The Hunt."

The word sounded like a sentence. Approving exclamations rang through the crowd of Fae.

"The Hunt?" I whispered.

"Why a hunt?" I clung to details, trying to push away panic. "Why not something else? Why are you playing with me?"

The king laughed—a sound like cracking ice.

"Because it's winter now. My time," he circled me, not taking his gaze away. "Each season one of the Courts gets the right to amuse itself with humans. And I choose trials to my... taste."

"And your taste is hunting?"

"My taste is fear," he whispered, leaning toward my ear. "I live for the sound of a heart pounding with terror. The sight of eyes wide when the prey realizes it's caught."

His breath burned the skin behind my ear, and I shuddered involuntarily.

Admiring sighs sounded among the Fae.

"Seven days in our world," he continued. "If you can avoid all dangers, not get caught by anyone—you've won."

"All?" My heart plummeted.

"Our world is full of predators, dear," his hand landed on my shoulder, fingers squeezing like an icy vice. "Wild Fae, forest spirits, creatures from your worst nightmares. Most aren't bound by the game's rules."

"So they can kill me?"

"If they catch you," he smiled wider. "But I'll give you a head start. I promise to hunt fairly—no ancient magic, no summoning helpers."

Someone in the crowd sighed disappointedly.

"How... noble," I whispered bitterly.

"Not noble," his hand slid to my throat. "Just not interesting. Prey that's too easy quickly bores me."

His fingers closed on my neck—not squeezing, but making it clear how easily he could.

"And if I don't run? If I just surrender?"

His eyes darkened, becoming the color of lead clouds.

"Then you'll bore me very quickly," the fingers on my throat squeezed slightly harder. "And boring toys I break. Slowly."

Admiring sighs sounded among the Fae.

"You see, child, I'm tired of routine and boredom," his voice became almost dreamy. "Centuries of the same thing. Balls, intrigues, politics. I need... entertainment. And you..."

He leaned closer, and his breath burned my cheek.

"With you, it will be fun."

"Don't disappoint me, Elise," he whispered. "I want you to run as long as possible."

The hall began to dissolve at the edges, like watercolor in rain.

"When..." I began, but he pressed an icy finger to my lips.

"Tomorrow night," his figure became increasingly ghostly. "Prepare yourself, study our weaknesses. You'll need every advantage."

The last thing I saw—his eyes, burning with cold fire in the dissolving world.

And then darkness swallowed me, and I woke in my bed, covered in sweat but with the sensation of arctic cold beneath my skin.

On my cheek, a pattern of frost still burned.

Chapter 3

I didn't sleep all night.

I lay in the darkness with eyes wide open, feeling the patterns on my cheek pulse in time with my heartbeat. The cold wouldn't let go—it sat deep in my bones, making me shiver even under two blankets. And when I closed my eyes, I saw his face. Ice-blue eyes, predatory smile, heard the voice promising a hunt.

Chloe slept in the next bed, snuffling into her pillow. I envied her—her sleep, her normal, ordinary life without fae, without cursed trees, without survival games.

By morning I'd made my decision.

As soon as dawn broke through the window, I jumped out of bed and began feverishly gathering my things. I stuffed clothes into my backpack without looking, without sorting. Grabbed my camera, phone charger, makeup bag.

"What... what's happening?" Chloe mumbled, propping herself up on her elbow.

I darted to her bed, grabbed her shoulders.

"Pack. Right now. We're leaving."

"Elise, it's six in the morning..."

"I don't care!" My voice came out hysterical, but I didn't care. "Pack your things. Right now. We don't have time."

Something in my tone sobered Chloe. She saw the panic in my eyes and nodded.

"Okay. Okay, I'm packing."

We tore around the room like madwomen, shoving things into bags. I didn't even change—stayed in my pajama pants and hoodie. Pulled on sneakers over bare feet, grabbed my jacket.

"Elise, maybe we could at least have breakfast?" Chloe tried.

"In the car! We need to go!"

I ran out of the room, Chloe hurrying after me. We descended the stairs, trying not to make noise. I didn't want to explain to Mrs. McGill why we were fleeing like thieves.

But the old woman was already waiting downstairs.

She stood by the front door in an old robe, gray hair braided. In her hands she held something, pressing it to her chest.

"Girls," she said quietly.

"Mrs. McGill, we... we need to leave urgently," I began, but she raised her hand.

The old woman was silent for several seconds, looking into my eyes. Then she slowly descended to the door and opened it.

"Go."

We rushed out onto the porch. The morning air was cold and damp, smelling of peat and mist. Chloe ran to the car, opened the trunk, began stuffing in bags.

I got in the car and had already closed the door when I heard knuckles rapping on the glass.

Mrs. McGill stood by the passenger window. In her hands she held a book.

I lowered the window.

"Take this," the old woman extended the book through the window. "It might help."

I took the book with both hands. It was heavy, bound in worn leather that smelled of old paper and dust. The gold lettering on the cover was almost worn away, but I could make out:

Tales and Legends of the People of the Hills

"What is this?" I whispered.

"Everything you need to know about Them," Mrs. McGill answered. "Their weaknesses. Their rules. Ways to survive in their world."

Her hand landed on mine, squeezed.

"Read carefully, girl. Every word could save your life."

"Thank you."

The old woman smiled sadly and stepped back from the car.

"Go. And remember—in their world, nothing is what it seems. Trust your instincts, not your eyes."

Chloe started the engine, and the car lurched forward. I turned around—Mrs. McGill stood on the threshold of her cottage, a small and fragile figure against the stone walls. She raised her hand in a farewell gesture.

And for some reason I felt I was seeing her for the last time.

The first half hour we drove in silence. Chloe gripped the wheel with whitened fingers, casting short glances at me. I stared out the window at the passing landscape, pressing the book to my chest.

Finally Chloe couldn't take it:

"Elise, what the hell is going on? Why did we run like thieves? And what's that book?"

"I'll explain later."

"No, not later! Now!" Chloe hit the wheel. "You dragged me out of bed at six in the morning, made me pack in five minutes, and we're racing somewhere, I don't even know where!"

I stayed silent.

"Elise!"

"Fine," I sighed. "Just don't yell."

"I promise."

I took the book Mrs. McGill had given me and opened to a random page, showed Chloe an illustration—an engraving depicting tall, graceful beings with sharp facial features.

"Fae," I said quietly. "They're real. And one of them... is hunting me."

Chloe was silent for several seconds. Then she laughed—nervously, hysterically.

"You're joking, right?"

"No."

"Elise, this is insane! Fae? Seriously?"

"I know how it sounds..."

"Like the ravings of a lunatic!" Chloe shook her head. "Look, I get it, yesterday you were stressed, that weird old woman with her tales, fog in the forest..."

"They're not tales."

"They're legends for tourists!" Chloe pulled over to the shoulder and turned to me. "Elise, look at yourself. You didn't sleep all night, you have dark circles under your eyes, you're shaking. Maybe you really caught a cold and have a fever? Delirium?"

I ran my hand over my cheek—where this morning I'd seen patterns of frost. Now they weren't visible, but the skin remained cold, as if I'd really touched ice.

"It's not a cold, Chloe. And not delirium."

My friend looked at me with a long gaze.

"Let's say," she said slowly, "let's say something strange is happening to you. But fae? Elise, you're an atheist! You don't even believe in God, and now suddenly mythical creatures!"

"Yes, I didn't believe," I admitted. "Until yesterday."

"Fine. What exactly are you running from?! From your dream?!"

"It wasn't a dream!"

"THEN WHAT?!" Chloe shouted, and desperation broke through in her voice. "Elise, I don't understand! Explain to me, PLEASE!"

We stared at each other. In her eyes I read worry, fear for me, confusion. She thought I was losing my mind.

Maybe I was.

"Chloe," I said more quietly, "I understand how this sounds. I understand you don't believe me. But I'm asking... just trust me. Let's leave here. As far away as possible. Okay?"

Chloe looked at me for a long time, then sighed.

"Fine. Let's go." She started the engine and pulled onto the road. "But you're going to tell me. Everything. Right now."

"Okay," I nodded, pressing the book to my chest.

We drove for several hours, stopping only at gas stations. Chloe periodically cast worried glances at me, but asked no more questions—apparently deciding I really had caught a cold and was delirious from fever.

And I read the book.

The pages were yellowed, covered in small, cramped text. Illustrations—black and white engravings depicting fae, forests, ancient stones. Some pages were marked with bookmarks, others scribbled with pencil notes in the margins.

"The People of the Hills, also known as the Good Folk, the Good Neighbors, the Elder Folk, live in a world parallel to ours. They are beautiful and cruel as nature itself. They know no pity or mercy, but are bound by ancient laws they cannot break..."

Further came a list—what repels fae, how to protect yourself, how to behave in their world.

Iron. Salt. Rowan. Running water. Consecrated ground.

Don't give your name. Don't eat their food. Don't accept gifts. Don't thank. Don't apologize.

I absorbed the information like a sponge, turning page after page.

And then I came across a chapter that made my heart stop:

"On the Hunt of the Unseelie Court"

I began reading aloud, almost in a whisper, and with each word the cold in my chest grew stronger.

"Once a century, the lords of the Unseelie Court choose a mortal for the Great Hunt. This is an ancient ritual, a game in which a human becomes prey and the fae become hunters. The rules are simple: for seven days and seven nights the mortal must survive in the fae world, avoiding all dangers. If they survive—they receive a reward and freedom. If not..."

Further came a description of what happens to those who lose. I flipped past that part—didn't want to know the details.

But the next page caught my attention:

"Only three cases are known when mortals won the Hunt. The first—in 1534, when a girl named Eileen used an iron knife to wound the Winter King himself and force him to back down. The second—in 1702, when a youth managed to cross a river seven times in a row, and the fae lost his trail..."

"What nonsense?" Chloe couldn't help rolling her eyes, hearing my mutterings.

I didn't answer, continuing to read to myself:

"...The third case occurred in 1847, but the circumstances of the victory remained unknown. The only thing the survivor said—that she found a way to outplay the king at his own game. But what way exactly, she took to her grave."

I flipped a few more pages and froze.

On the spread was an engraving—a portrait of a man with platinum hair and a crown of ice. Under the portrait was a caption:

"Caelan Morfraust, King of the Winter Court, Lord of Night Thorns. Age unknown (estimated over a thousand years). Character: cruel, sadistic, loves mind games. Weaknesses: unknown. Warning: do not enter negotiations, do not look in the eyes too long, do not..."

The list of warnings took up half the page.

"Wonderful," I muttered. "Just wonderful."

By noon we stopped at a large gas station off the highway. Chloe went to fill the car, and I went to the convenience store.

Inside smelled of coffee and fresh pastries. I grabbed a basket and began methodically gathering everything that might be useful.

First, food. Lots of food.

I remembered the rule from the book clearly: "Don't eat their food. Not a crumb, not a sip. Whoever tastes fae food remains in their world forever."

So I needed supplies. For seven days. Seven days I had to hold out without their food.

I began sweeping everything off the shelves:

Jerky—five packages. Beef, pork, some venison. Didn't matter, as long as it kept.

Nuts—almonds, cashews, peanuts. Caloric, nutritious, doesn't spoil.

Dried fruit—apricots, raisins, prunes. Energy in concentrated form.

Crackers—three large boxes. Dry, bland, but filling.

Energy bars—ten of them. In case there's absolutely no time to eat properly.

Canned goods—stew, pâté, fish. Heavy, but reliable.

Chocolate—dark, no additives. For maintaining strength and morale.

I hauled food to the register in three trips, loading it into two large bags. The attendant watched me with curiosity.

"Going hiking?"

"Something like that," I muttered.

Then water. Water was the hardest part.

I took six liter-and-a-half bottles of ordinary mineral water. That's twelve liters—about two liters a day for a week. Not enough. Very little. But I physically couldn't carry more.

And then I remembered another rule: "Running water protects against fae. They cannot cross it without losing strength."

So any water wasn't just drinking water, it was also a weapon.

I added three more smaller bottles to the basket—liter bottles I could carry with me.

Next—protection.

Salt. Three large packages of table salt. *"Salt repels fae and breaks their enchantments."*

Matches. Two boxes. Fire is always good.

And finally—the souvenir rack.

A small iron horseshoe on a string. *"Iron burns them like acid."*

An amulet in the form of a Celtic cross—also metal, cold to the touch.

A bunch of dried herbs in transparent packaging—lavender, rowan, thistle. *"Rowan protects against charms and illusions."*

I swept all of this into the basket.

"Interesting selection," came a voice behind me.

I turned around. The attendant—a man about fifty with a gray beard and penetrating eyes—was looking at my pile of purchases.

"Tourist?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"Heading to the mountains?"

"Possibly."

He looked at me more closely, and his face became serious.

"Don't go into the Old Forest. Especially if there's fog."

Frost ran down my spine.

"How do you..."

"Shadow," he nodded in my direction, though he was looking not at me but as if through me. "I feel it. Old magic. Cold."

He leaned closer, lowering his voice:

"You need protection stronger than these toys."

The attendant reached under the counter and pulled out a small leather pouch.

"Take this. Iron nails, consecrated at an old church. And this," he set down a small vial of water.

"Holy water from Saint Brigid's well. It's stronger than ordinary. Even a drop can drive Them away."

I stared at him, not understanding.

"Why are you..."

"Because I've seen people like you. Marked. Doomed." His eyes became sad. "My sister was one of them. Forty years ago. She didn't come back."

He looked at my purchases—at the pile of food, at the water, at the salt.

"Smart girl. Preparing not to eat their food. Right." He nodded. "But that's not enough. Take this too."

He pulled several packages of freeze-dried food from under the counter—the kind people take on long hikes.

"Light but filling. Three of these packages will replace a full meal. And they don't take much space."

He also handed me several packets of powdered isotonic drink.

"Mix with water—you'll get a drink with electrolytes. Will sustain your strength better than plain water."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," he shook his head. "This isn't for sale. This is a gift."

I remembered the rule: *"Don't accept gifts. Every gift creates a debt."*

"I can't just take this."

The attendant smirked:

"Smart girl. Already know the rules." He thought. "Then let's trade. Give me something in return. Something that has value to you."

I rummaged in my pocket and pulled out a photograph—one I always carried with me. Me with my parents, I'm about ten, we're at the sea. One of the few happy family photos I had left.

"This," I held it out to him.

He took the photograph, looked at it, and nodded.

"Fair exchange. Your memory for my protection."

I took the pouch, the vial, the freeze-dried food and powders, put everything in bags with the rest.

"Good luck, girl," the attendant said as I paid. "And remember—they lie. Always. Even when they tell the truth. Don't believe anything you see or hear in their world."

I nodded and dragged the heavy bags to the exit.

When I returned to the car, Chloe was already waiting, leaning against the hood. Seeing two huge bags packed with food, water bottles, canned goods and other purchases, her eyes widened.

"Elise... did you rob the store?"

I struggled to load the bags into the trunk.

"Got food supplies."

"Supplies?" Chloe peered into one of the bags. "This is supplies for a month! Jerky, canned goods, crackers... Elise, are we going to a deserted island?"

"Maybe," I muttered, settling into the passenger seat.

Chloe got behind the wheel, shaking her head. Then she saw the rest of the purchases on the back seat—the horseshoe, amulets, herbs, pouch of nails, vial of holy water.

"Seriously?" Skepticism sounded in her voice. "Elise, we're running from your dream, and you bought out the whole store—from canned goods to amulets?"

"These aren't souvenirs," I answered tiredly. "This is survival."

"From what? From mythical fae?"

"Yes."

Chloe started the engine and smirked:

"Didn't know you were so impressionable. One night with a scary dream, and you're already preparing for the apocalypse."

I said nothing, pressing the book to my chest. It was written clearly: seven days without their food, without their water, without their gifts. Seven days, relying only on what I brought from the human world.

"Think what you want," I said finally. "But when it gets dark... you'll see for yourself."

Chloe snorted:

"Yeah. I'll see you have a picnic in the middle of your nightmare."

But I noticed how her gaze lingered on my face—on the pallor of my skin, on the dark circles under my eyes, on how I was trembling despite the warm jacket.

And I knew that somewhere deep inside she was also beginning to doubt.

By evening we reached a small town on the border of Scotland and England. Chloe rented a room at a roadside motel—cheap, with peeling walls and creaky beds.

"We'll spend the night here," she said, tossing her bag on the bed. "And in the morning we'll decide what to do next."

I nodded, but was already thinking about something else.

While Chloe went to shower, I pulled all the purchases from the trunk and dumped them on my bed. The pile of food, bottles, amulets and other junk took up half the mattress.

Now I had to decide what to take with me.

I pulled out my hiking backpack—the very one I took on photo expeditions. Sturdy, roomy, with many pockets.

I began methodically packing.

Food:

- Jerky—three packages (light and caloric)
- Nuts—two large packages
- Dried fruit—one bag
- Crackers—one box (the rest too bulky)
- Energy bars—all ten
- Freeze-dried food—three packages from the attendant
- Chocolate—two bars
- Canned goods... no, too heavy. Would have to do without.

Water:

I looked at the six liter-and-a-half bottles and realized—they wouldn't fit. Even one weighed a fair amount, and six... with such a load I wouldn't get far.

I opened the book again, flipped to the section on water:

"Running water protects against fae enchantments. Water from streams and rivers in their world is drinkable if it's moving. Still water—lakes, ponds—can be enchanted. Never drink from a stagnant source."

So in the fae world there was water I could drink. Running water. From streams.

I exhaled with relief and took only two liter bottles—for the first period. The rest would have to stay.

But the vial of holy water from the attendant—definitely. This wasn't for drinking, this was a weapon.

Protection:

- Salt—one package (the rest too heavy)
- Iron nails from the pouch
- Iron horseshoe
- Bunch of rowan
- Celtic amulet
- Vial of holy water

Other:

- Matches—two boxes
- Flashlight (found in the car)
- Spare batteries
- Isotonic powders
- My camera—with a full memory card

I took the camera not from sentimentality. This was part of me, my work, my life. And if I was fated to end up in the fae world, I would document everything I saw.

If, of course, I survived.

And last—a tourist knife with a fixed blade that I took on hikes. Not the most fearsome weapon, but better than nothing.

I pulled it from the luggage, tested the sharpness of the blade on my nail. Sharp. Good.

The knife went into the side pocket of the backpack—where I could quickly reach it.

The backpack came out heavy but manageable. I tightened the straps, lifted it—about twenty pounds, no more. I could handle it.

Chloe came out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, with wet hair.

"What are you doing?" She stopped, looking at me and the backpack.

"Packing."

"Where to?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "But I need to be ready."

Chloe shook her head but said nothing. Went to get dressed.

I looked at my watch. Half past six. Sunset in an hour.

I quickly changed: jeans, warm t-shirt, fleece sweater, jacket on top. On my feet—trekking boots I'd brought for mountain hikes. Sturdy, comfortable, with good soles.

Gathered my hair in a tight ponytail and hid it under a cap.

Chloe came out of the bathroom and stopped, staring at me.

"Elise... are you serious?"

I stood in the middle of the room in full hiking gear, backpack in hand.

"Serious."

"You're going to sleep in boots and a jacket?"

"Yes."

"With a backpack?"

"Yes."

Chloe snorted, then laughed—not meanly, but with some hysterical note.

"God, Elise, you're definitely sick. You have a fever, delirium, paranoia... Tomorrow morning we're going to the nearest hospital, and that's that."

I didn't answer. I lay on the bed on top of the blanket, pressing the backpack to my chest. Wrapped the straps around my arm—if I had to run, it wouldn't slip off.

Put the camera next to me on the nightstand—within reach.

The knife in the backpack pocket pressed slightly into my side, but it was a comforting sensation. Weapon. Protection.

Chloe lay on her bed, pulled the blanket over herself, and turned off the light.

"Good night, Elise. I hope your nightmares end."

"Good night," I whispered into the darkness.

But I wasn't going to sleep. I lay with open eyes, listening to every sound.

The ticking of the clock on the wall. The noise of cars outside the window. Chloe's breathing, which gradually became more even—she was falling asleep.

And I waited.

Minutes dragged slowly. The cold inside me intensified, spreading through my veins like an icy river.

Seven o'clock. Seven fifteen. Seven thirty.

Outside the window it grew dark. The last rays of sun painted the sky blood-red.

Seven forty-five.

I squeezed the backpack straps tighter. My heart pounded so loudly it seemed audible throughout the motel.

And suddenly the temperature in the room dropped sharply.

My breath became visible. Frost instantly appeared on the windows, turning the glass into a matte pattern. The nightlight bulb on the nightstand flickered and went out.

Chloe muttered something in her sleep and pulled the blanket higher but didn't wake.

And then I heard a sound.

Distant, barely distinguishable. Like an echo coming from somewhere infinitely far away.

The sound of a horn.

Prolonged, low, primeval. It rolled through the world, making the air vibrate. The motel walls trembled, the glass in the windows rang with a thin crystalline sound.

Chloe jerked in her sleep but didn't open her eyes. As if the magic of the sound kept her in oblivion.

The horn sounded again—louder, closer.

This time it passed through me, resonating in my bones, in my heart, in my very soul. The cold in my chest flared in response, and I understood—it was calling me. Me specifically.

I sat up in bed, clutching the backpack. My hands were shaking.

A third time the horn sounded even closer—now it seemed the sound came from somewhere beyond the walls, from the space between worlds.

And then fog began seeping into the corner of the room.

Not ordinary fog, but that very one—milky white, thick, alive. It oozed through the walls, as if the fabric of the world had thinned and could no longer contain it.

Wisps of fog spread across the floor, rose upward, filling the space. With each second there was more of it.

The temperature continued to drop. Frost covered the walls, floor, furniture. My breath turned into thick clouds of vapor.

"Chloe!" I called. "Chloe, wake up!"

But my friend didn't even stir. She slept a deep, unnatural sleep, as if her consciousness had been sealed by magic.

A fourth sound of the horn—louder, more commanding, more inevitable.

The fog filled the room to the ceiling. I stopped seeing the walls, windows, door. Only white, impenetrable haze around. And somewhere in it—ghostly shadows, moving silhouettes.

I stood from the bed, pulling the backpack onto my shoulders. Grabbed the camera. Felt for the knife handle in the backpack pocket.

A fifth time the horn sounded so close I squeezed my eyes shut from the pain in my ears. The sound filled the world entirely, leaving no room for anything else.

And the fog began to move.

It swirled in a vortex, sucking me inside. The floor disappeared beneath my feet. The walls dissolved. Reality broke at the edges, turning into a kaleidoscope of light and darkness.

I tried to scream, but there was no voice. Tried to grab onto something, but there was nothing to grab.

The world was collapsing.

A sixth sound of the horn—and the fog compressed around me like a cocoon.

I fell through space, through time, through the boundary between worlds. My body became weightless, as if I were turning to smoke.

The last thing I saw before the fog completely swallowed me—Chloe's sleeping face, peaceful and calm against the backdrop of collapsing reality.

And then darkness closed over me.

Chapter 4

The fall ended suddenly.

I crashed to my knees, and the impact knocked all the air from my lungs. For a second the world turned into a white veil of pain—the backpack slammed into my spine, the camera hit my ribs, my palms scraped against something sharp and slippery.

I gasped, trying to breathe, but the air wouldn't come. My lungs burned. My heart pounded so frantically it felt like it would burst from my chest.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Finally a convulsive inhale—and air rushed into my lungs.

But it wasn't the same air.

It was different. Denser, heavier, saturated to the limit. As if I'd inhaled not oxygen but something alive, almost viscous. It seared my throat, settled in my lungs with leaden heaviness.

And cold. Searingly cold.

I coughed, doubling over. Each breath came with difficulty, freezing me from within. My breath emerged in thick clouds of vapor.

What's wrong with me? Why is it so cold? Why can't I breathe?

Panic began rising in a wave, but I forced myself to calm down. Slowly. Inhale. Exhale. Again.

Gradually my lungs adjusted. The air stopped burning, but the cold remained. Icy, piercing, reminding me with each breath—you're not home anymore. You're in another world.

I slowly raised my head.

And forgot how to breathe again.

The sky.

My God, the sky.

Three moons hung above the horizon, enormous and impossible. Silver, gold, blood-red. They illuminated the world with shimmering, cold light, casting triple shadows from every object.

Between the moons—stars. But not the stars I'd seen all my life. These were too bright, too close, as if I could reach out and touch them. Some moved slowly across the sky, tracing luminous arcs.

This is impossible. This isn't real.

But it was real. Too real.

I lowered my gaze to the ground—and understood why my palms stung so badly.

Beneath my hands wasn't soft earth but moss. Thick, dark green moss covered with a layer of frost. Slippery, icy, numbing my fingers instantly.

I tried to stand—my feet slipped on the frozen surface. I fell back to my knees, hitting them painfully.

Everything's covered in ice.

I looked around, trying to understand where I was.

Forest.

But not the forest where I'd spilled blood on the tree. And not the green, warm forest I'd somehow expected to see.

This was a late autumn forest, dying under winter's advance.

The trees were gigantic—trunks three or four times the width of a human embrace, rising so high their crowns were lost in darkness. But they were almost bare. Black branches reached toward the sky like skeletons, covered with frost and thin icicles that clinked in the icy wind.

Only some trees still clung to their last leaves—crimson, golden, blackened by frost. They trembled and fell, landing on the ground with a quiet rustle.

The bark glowed with a faint greenish or silver radiance—the only reminder that this wasn't an ordinary forest. That magic lived here.

Roots protruded from beneath the moss, thick and gnarled, covered with a layer of ice. They formed arches and tunnels, but stepping on them was impossible—too slippery.

Cold. So damn cold.

I stood up, carefully, holding onto a tree trunk. The bark was icy under my palm, rough with frozen lichen.

The smell.

The frosty air smelled sharp and cutting. Cold pine needles somewhere in the distance. Rotting leaves under a layer of frost. Earth locked in frost. And a barely perceptible sweetness—cloying, strange, hiding beneath all the other scents.

It all mixed together, creating the aroma of a dying world that made my insides clench with melancholy.

Sounds.

The rustle of bare branches—harsh, like bones scraping against each other. The tinkling of icicles. The crack of ice somewhere in the distance. The howling of wind that pierced through my jacket to my very skin.

And silence. Dead, oppressive silence between sounds.

I tried to take a step—my foot slipped on the moss. I barely kept my balance, grabbing the tree.

This is too much. Too much.

The world around me was too cold, too alien, too wrong. Every sensation struck my nerves.

I can't handle this. I won't make it.

Panic came in waves, filling my chest with icy terror.

Chloe. Mom. Home.

But there was no more home. There was only this freezing forest, these three moons, this icy air cutting my lungs.

I pressed my hand over my mouth, holding back a sob.

No. I can't. I can't break down now.

My hands fumbled for the backpack. I frantically unzipped it, rummaged inside with trembling fingers. Water. Food. Salt. Knife.

And a pack of cigarettes.

I didn't even remember when I'd put it there. A month ago? Two? I'd confiscated it from my father, who'd promised to quit but secretly smoked on the balcony. Shoved it in the backpack pocket and forgot about it.

Cigarettes. Foolishness. I didn't smoke. Never had. Hated the smell of tobacco.

But now...

I pulled out the pack with numb fingers. Crumpled but intact. Pulled out one cigarette, tried to light it with a match.

The first match went out in the wind. The second too.

"Damn it!" I hissed through my teeth, shielding the flame with my palm.

The third one caught. I brought it to the cigarette, inhaled.

And coughed so hard I nearly vomited.

The smoke burned my throat, my lungs protested, my eyes watered. But I forced myself to take another drag. And another.

The bitterness of tobacco overpowered the cloying sweetness of the air. The sharp smell of smoke drowned out the dead smell of the frozen forest.

My head spun—but differently. Familiarly. Humanly.

I exhaled smoke, watching it mix with the vapor from my breath and drift in the still air.

And for the first time since falling, I could think clearly.

Okay. Fine. I'm in the fae world. That's a fact.
Another drag. Another exhale.
Panicking is useless. I need to survive.
I smoked the cigarette down to the filter, stubbed it out on an icy stone protruding from the moss. Put the pack back in my backpack—might need it later.
I stood up carefully, testing each step on the slippery moss.
Looked around again, trying to understand where I was.
Late autumn forest. Bare trees. Frost. Cold.
But not true winter. Not a snowy wasteland, not an icy kingdom.
This is... this is a border. The edge of his power.
Here autumn still resisted winter. Nature clung to life, fought against his frost.
Between the bare trees, lights flickered. Small glowing points the size of coins circled in the air, leaving sparkling trails behind them. They moved too deliberately—approaching then retreating, as if studying me.
One of the lights flew very close, hovering before my face.
I made out a tiny figure inside the glow—humanoid, with transparent icy wings. Fae. A real fae, the size of my thumb.
She smiled at me, baring teeth sharp as needles.
And I suddenly remembered a line from the book: "Lesser fae are as dangerous as greater. Their bites are poisonous."
I swatted sharply. The light flew away with an indignant squeak and dissolved into the darkness.
Everything here is dangerous. Absolutely everything.
In the distance a howl rang out—prolonged, eerie, making my blood freeze in my veins.
Then another howl answered the first. And another. And another.
Hunters.
I adjusted the backpack on my shoulders, checked the camera—intact. Felt for the knife in the pocket.
And heard his voice.
Not nearby. Not from the forest. The voice sounded everywhere—in the rustle of bare branches, in the howling wind, in the crack of ice.
"Welcome to my world, Elise Thorne."
Each word echoed between the trees, cold and commanding.
"You stand in the Dark Forest, on the edge of my domain. Ahead lie seven days and seven nights."
The howling grew closer.
"Run, child. Run fast. Run far."
Laughter rolled through the forest—cold, cruel, savoring my fear.
"Because the hunt has begun. NOW."
Somewhere very close, a couple dozen meters away, a branch cracked.
Then—a low growl that made the earth tremble.
Something was moving between the trees. Something big.
And in that moment, from the darkness between bare trunks, two yellow eyes flashed, burning with inhuman fire.
The creature stepped into the moonlight.
Huge. With the body of a wolf but the size of a bear. Fur black as night, covered with frost that sparkled in the light of the moons. From its maw dripped not saliva but something like liquid silver, which smoked in the frosty air.
It looked at me.
And growled—a sound so low I felt it not with my ears but with my whole body.

I didn't think. Didn't analyze.

I just turned and ran.

Away from the creature. Away from the howling. Away from the laughter that still echoed between the trees.

Behind me a howl rang out—close, triumphant.

And then—the sound of pursuit.

The hunt had begun.

I ran without choosing a path.

Bare branches whipped my face, leaving burning scratches. Roots covered with frost caught at my feet. I stumbled, fell on slippery moss, jumped up with scraped hands and knees, and ran on.

The backpack hit my back painfully with each jump. The camera pressed against my ribs. My breathing became ragged, my side stabbed with pain, my lungs burned from the icy air.

Run. Just run.

Flashback—Chloe, sleeping in the motel. Her peaceful face in the warm room.

Mom, waving goodbye. "Be careful, sunshine."

Tears blurred my vision, but I blinked, shaking them off. They instantly froze on my cheeks in a thin icy crust.

No. Not now. Later. If I live to see "later."

Behind me sounded trampling—not one beast, several. Growling, barking, the crack of breaking branches.

I glanced over my shoulder—and saw them.

Shadows between the trees. Huge, fast, with burning yellow eyes. Clouds of vapor burst from their maws in the frosty air.

They were driving me like a wolf pack drives a deer.

Fear was a living thing in my chest, demanding I surrender control and just lie down, give up.

No. No. No.

I ran faster, faster, until my muscles began burning with pain.

And suddenly the trees parted.

I burst into a clearing and nearly fell—the ground here was even more slippery.

The clearing was covered with a thin layer of first snow mixed with frost. Beneath it showed dead, blackened grass. The air was even colder, burning my face.

And in the center of the clearing ran a stream.

Not narrow—four or five meters wide. Fast, noisy. The water hadn't frozen despite the cold, running between stones, shimmering silver in the moonlight.

Running water.

The rule from the book flashed in my head: "Running water protects against fae. They cannot cross it."

I need to get to the other side!

I didn't think. I rushed toward the stream, ran up and jumped with all my strength.

The flight seemed eternal.

Icy water splashed on my feet—I barely reached the opposite bank. My hands clutched the edge, the slippery moss, my fingers slipping.

I pulled myself up, rolled over the edge.

Fell into the snow, slipped, hit my knee painfully on a stone. Jumped up and turned around.

From the forest they burst forth.

Three beasts.

Bodies like wolves but the size of bears. Fur black, covered with frost that wouldn't melt. Yellow eyes burning like hellfire. Maws open, full of fangs.

From their mouths dripped something silvery—not saliva but liquid metal. Drops fell on the snow and hissed, burning through it to the black earth.

God. What kind of creatures are these?

The largest beast—with a long scar across its muzzle—saw me and growled.

Then it charged.

I squeezed my eyes shut, expecting it to leap across.

But a screech rang out—piercing, full of pain.

I opened my eyes.

The beast had frozen in midair over the water. For a moment, as if time had stopped. Its body jerked, distorted, hitting something invisible.

Then it was thrown back—with such force it flew several meters and crashed into a tree.

The trunk cracked under the impact. The beast fell into the snow, howling and whimpering. The fur on its muzzle and front paws smoked, as if scalded with boiling water.

Water. The magic of running water. They can't cross it.

The relief was so strong I nearly burst into tears.

The two other beasts stopped at the bank, not approaching the water. One lowered its muzzle, sniffed. Vapor burst from its nostrils. It growled and retreated.

It works. The rule works!

But the beasts didn't leave.

The injured one rose, shook itself. The fur on its muzzle was burned, the skin beneath red, blistered. But it still looked at me with burning eyes.

They began slowly spreading out along the bank—one right, another left. The injured one remained in place, not taking its eyes off me.

They're looking for a ford. A place where the stream is narrower or shallower.

I have time. A little.

I rose on trembling legs. My whole body ached. My hands and knees stung from the falls. The cold pierced to my bones despite my jacket.

But I forced myself to move.

Along the stream. Downstream. Staying as close to the water as possible—my only protection.

Seven days. I need to last seven days.

It's impossible.

But there's no choice.

I walked, stumbling on the slippery bank, clinging to frost-covered roots.

And with each step I understood:

This is only the beginning.

The first night of seven.

And if I want to survive, I need to become stronger. Faster. Harder.

Because the fae world doesn't forgive the weak.

The stream was widening.

I trudged along the bank, feeling each step grow heavier. My legs filled with lead, my thigh muscles burned, my knees buckled. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving only exhaustion and pain.

The cold ate into my bones. I trembled, my teeth chattered. My fingers were almost numb—frozen from the cold.

How long have I been walking?

The moons barely moved across the sky. Maybe ten minutes had passed, maybe an hour. Impossible to tell.

Howling sounded somewhere in the distance, echoing between the trees. The beasts hadn't abandoned the chase.

I stopped, leaning against a tree trunk. The bark was icy, but I pressed against it anyway—my legs wouldn't hold me anymore.

I need to eat. Drink. Restore my strength.

I pulled out a water bottle from my backpack with numb fingers. Unscrewed the cap—it barely gave way. Took several gulps.

The water was cold, almost icy, but seemed like a blessing.

Human water. From the human world.

I pressed the bottle to my chest.

This is all that's left of home.

The memory hit suddenly, sharp and painful.

Chloe, laughing behind the wheel: "I'll see you have a picnic in the middle of your nightmare!"

Mom, kissing the top of my head: "Call when you arrive."

Father, handing me the camera: "Show me when you get back."

If I get back.

A lump stuck in my throat. I swallowed, forcing myself to breathe evenly.

I can't think about home. I need to survive.

I put the bottle back and looked around.

The stream continued flowing onward, and the sound of water grew louder. It was flowing into something larger.

Maybe it's safer there? More water—better protection.

I forced my legs to move.

Another step. Another one. Carefully, checking each step on the slippery surface.

Just don't stop.

The forest was changing. The trees grew taller, more ancient. Their trunks were covered with strange patterns—spirals, symbols, runes glowing with faint green light.

Some trees whispered.

Not wind in bare branches. Real whispers—words in an unfamiliar language. They penetrated my mind, trying to say something.

Or lure.

I quickened my pace, not listening.

Don't pay attention. It's a trap.

The sound of water grew louder, turned into a roar.

The stream was widening. No longer four meters but six. Then eight. Ten.

A river.

The stream was becoming a river.

I walked along the bank, staying close to the water. Slipped on moss, clung to roots, but didn't stray far.

Water protects. As long as I'm near water, they won't approach.

But then I heard new howling.

Not from behind. Ahead.

I froze.

No.

More howling—now from another direction, from the forest to the left.

My heart dropped.

They've circled around. Found a place where the stream was narrower and crossed.

Panic struck my head.

I looked back—the howling was approaching from there too.

Ahead—howling.

Left—forest from which growling came.

Right—the river.

I'm trapped.

The howling grew closer. From all sides.

They're driving me to the river. Deliberately.

I ran forward along the bank, hoping to find an exit, but the trees parted and I found myself on the open bank of a wide river.

The river was enormous—twenty meters, maybe more. Dark water churned between sharp stones, foamed, roared. Moonlight turned its surface into a stream of liquid silver with black veins of shadow.

Beautiful. Frighteningly beautiful.

And absolutely impassable.

I dropped to my knees by the water, lowered my hand into the current.

Icy. So cold my fingers instantly went numb, turned into lifeless stumps. I jerked my hand back, shook it, but sensation didn't return.

Can't swim across. The current will drag me away, the cold will kill me in seconds.

The howling became very close.

I turned around—shadows moved between the trees. Many shadows. Not three beasts but more. Five? Seven?

A pack.

They approached slowly, savoring the moment. Knew I was trapped.

Cold sweat covered my back.

What do I do? Where do I run?

Downstream I could see stones protruding from the water. Maybe I can cross on them?

I took a step toward the stones.

"I wouldn't advise it."

The voice sounded so close I yelped and jumped, simultaneously pulling the knife from my backpack pocket.

On a large boulder three meters from me sat a figure.

A teenager, about sixteen in appearance, with dark tousled hair and mischievous amber-colored eyes. He was dressed strangely—a leather jacket decorated with feathers and bone amulets, pants of rough material, high boots.

And he had ears.

Not human ones. Pointed, protruding from his hair.

Fae.

I stepped back, gripping the knife with both hands.

"Who are you?!"

"Me?" He smiled, and the smile was too wide, baring sharp teeth. "Just a traveler. Like you, actually."

He jumped from the boulder—the movement was too smooth, too graceful for a human. Landed soundlessly on the snow, not leaving even a footprint.

"You're... one of them," I breathed, not lowering the knife.

"Technically yes. I'm fae." He tilted his head, studying me with curiosity. "But I'm not one of Morphrost's hunters, if that's what you're worried about."

"Then who are you?"

"Call me Fox," he shrugged. "Not my real name, but I don't want to know yours either. Dangerous thing, knowing real names."

He nodded at the stones in the river:

"Don't try to cross on them. They're slippery, and you'll fall. And in the water live river spirits." His amber eyes gleamed. "They're hungry. And angry. They'll drag you to the bottom before you can scream."

I stayed silent, not knowing whether to believe him.

Fox smirked:

"Don't believe me? Good. We fae, we always lie. Even when we tell the truth."

Behind my back a growl sounded—close, threatening.

Fox turned his head, his ears twitching.

"The Wild Pack." He clicked his tongue. "Stubborn hounds. They've cornered you."

I turned around.

From the forest emerged beasts. One. Two. Three. Five. Seven.

A whole pack surrounding the clearing in a semicircle. Their yellow eyes glowed in the darkness, vapor bursting from their maws.

They approached slowly, savoring my fear.

"You have thirty seconds," Fox noted calmly. "Then they'll attack all at once."

"Then what do I do?!" My voice broke into a scream.

He thoughtfully scratched his chin:

"Well... I could help. Transport you to the other bank. Magic, all that."

The book had stated clearly: "Don't accept help from fae. Every service creates a debt."

"What price do you want?"

His eyes gleamed—pleased, predatory.

"Oh! Smart girl. Knows the rules." He smiled wider. "Fine, honestly. You'll owe me a favor. One. Someday I'll ask, and you won't be able to refuse."

"What favor?"

"Don't know," he shrugged. "I'll think of something when I need it. Maybe steal something. Maybe kill someone. We'll see."

Cold crept down my spine.

"I'm not a killer."

"Not a killer yet," he corrected. "Seven days here change a lot."

The beasts took a step closer. Synchronously, as if on command.

"Clock's ticking, dear," Fox tilted his head. "Debt to me or death in their teeth? What do you choose?"

I gripped the knife, feeling my palm sweat.

Debt or death. Wonderful choice.

The beasts moved closer. I could see their fangs, hear their growling.

The largest one, with the scar, prepared to pounce.

"FINE!" I shouted. "Help!"

Fox smiled—triumphantly.

"Now we have a deal."

He stepped toward me, extending his hand.

I placed my palm in his—and the world exploded.

The warmth of his hand burned after the cold. His fingers closed firmly, commandingly.

"Hold tight."

The ground disappeared beneath my feet.

The sensation of flight, weightlessness. My stomach leaped to my throat, my ears rang. Wind roared, though we weren't moving—or were moving too fast.

The world turned into blurred streaks of light and darkness.

And then solid ground under my feet again.

I fell to my knees, gasping. My head spun, spots danced in my eyes. My stomach twisted—I vomited right into the snow.

Teleportation. He'd teleported me.

When my vision cleared, I raised my head.

We stood on the other bank of the river. About fifty meters downstream from where the beasts had been.

Fox released my hand and stepped back, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets.

"Service rendered. Debt recorded." He tapped his temple with a finger. "Here. Won't forget."

I breathed heavily, wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

"Why... why did you help?"

He turned and began to leave, tossing over his shoulder:

"I like spoiling Morphrost's games. He's too overconfident."

"Wait!"

He turned, raising an eyebrow.

"What?"

"How do I survive?" Desperation broke through in my voice. "I don't know this world, don't know the rules..."

Fox thought, then smirked:

"Want advice? Free?"

I nodded.

"Don't trust anyone. Anyone at all. Not even me." His eyes gleamed. "We all lie. Always."

"That doesn't help!"

"It's not supposed to." He shrugged. "But if you want to try to survive—go south. There are the Borderlands. Morphrost doesn't hunt there."

"How do I find south?"

Fox pointed at the sky:

"See the red moon? It's always above the south. Follow it."

He turned and dissolved into the shadows—instantly, as if he'd never been there.

I was left alone on the riverbank.

On the other side, in the distance, I could see the silhouettes of beasts. They looked in my direction but didn't cross the river.

One howled—prolonged, calling.

Others answered.

They called more. They'll look for a crossing.

I need to leave. Fast.

I looked at the sky, found the red moon. Small, blood-crimson, low on the horizon.

South.

I adjusted my backpack and walked in that direction, staying far from the river.

Chapter 5

I walked, stumbling from exhaustion. My body demanded rest. My eyes were closing. But I couldn't stop.

A little more. Just a bit more. Find shelter, then you can rest.

The forest on this side of the river was different. The trees stood farther apart, with bushes of silvery leaves growing between them. The air was slightly warmer, not as dense.

I walked, counting steps to keep from going mad from the monotony.

One hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred.

Suddenly rocks appeared ahead—a group of enormous boulders piled on top of each other. Between them gaped a crevice, wide enough to squeeze through.

A cave? Shelter?

I approached closer, stopped at the entrance.

The darkness inside was absolute. It smelled of dampness and earth, but nothing living could be sensed.

I pulled out my flashlight, turned it on and shone it inside.

A narrow fissure extended inward about three meters, then ended at a solid stone wall. The floor was covered with small pebbles. Empty.

This'll do.

I squeezed inside, dragged my backpack in after me. There wasn't much space—I could sit leaning against the wall, but not lie down. But the entrance was narrow—if someone tried to get in, I'd see them.

I turned off the flashlight, conserving the battery, and leaned my back against the cold wall.

Silence.

Only the distant sound of the river and my own pulse in my ears.

I closed my eyes.

And then it hit me.

Everything at once.

The fear I'd been holding back all this time. The terror of where I'd ended up. The despair from realizing the way home was closed.

Tears poured out in a torrent, hot and salty. I pressed my hand over my mouth, holding back sobs, but my body shook with convulsive gasps.

Mom. Chloe. Dad.

I'll never see them again.

I'll die here. In this alien, terrifying world.

I cried until the tears ran out, until my throat was parched, until I had no strength even to sob.

And then I just sat there, empty and hollowed out.

And from somewhere deep inside another feeling rose.

Anger.

Quiet, cold, steely anger.

I didn't want this. Didn't ask for it. Didn't deserve it.

I just wanted to take beautiful photographs. Just ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And now I'm here. In this cursed world. Playing this cursed game.

But I won't give up just like that.

I wiped my face with my sleeve, swallowed with my parched throat.

Seven days. I need to last seven days.

And then... then I'll get my wish. And go home.

I have to. I must.

Because if I die here, Mom will go crazy not knowing what happened to me. Chloe will blame herself. Dad...

No. I won't die. Won't let them have that.

I pulled the water bottle from my backpack, took several small sips. Then a package of jerky, bit off a piece.

Chewing was difficult, swallowing even harder. But I forced myself to eat. And another piece. And another.

Food from the human world. My protection from their enchantments.

When I'd eaten, I took out the knife, placed it nearby—within arm's reach.

I leaned against the stone and closed my eyes.

Sleeping was frightening. But without sleep I wouldn't last long.

An hour. I'll just doze for an hour.

I closed my eyes. My breathing slowed. My body went limp, relaxing.

And I fell.

I woke to warmth.

Not the cold of the stone cave, but soft, enveloping warmth. Beneath my back something incredibly tender, smelling of lavender and something else—expensive, indefinable.

What?

I slowly opened my eyes—and saw a ceiling.

Not the stone vault of the fissure. A high ceiling of black marble with silver veins, illuminated by hundreds of candles in crystal chandeliers.

And a mirror.

An enormous mirror, embedded right in the ceiling above the bed.

In it I saw my reflection.

But not the me who had fallen asleep in the fissure.

I lay on an enormous bed. Sheets of white silk enveloped my body. And I wore a dress.

A dress of material resembling liquid silver, shimmering from deep blue to black. The bodice hugged my chest tightly, the skirt flowed in waves. Long sleeves, transparent, embroidered with silver. Deep décolletage, revealing collarbones and the hollow between my breasts.

Hair loose, spilled across the pillows like a dark waterfall. Hands folded on my chest.

I looked like... a dead princess from a fairy tale. Beautiful, cold, lifeless.

What the...

I sat up abruptly, and the reflection in the mirror repeated the movement.

I looked around.

A bedroom. An enormous, luxurious bedroom with black marble walls and tall windows, beyond which three moons shimmered. A fireplace with blue flames. Candles everywhere.

No. This is impossible.

Panic began rising in a wave.

Where am I? How did I get here?

Last memory—the fissure. Cold stone. The knife nearby, within reach. I closed my eyes...

He caught me. While I slept, he found me and took me.

Terror struck my head.

The game is over. I lost.

"It suits you."

The voice sounded from the corner of the room, and I jumped up, tangling in the sheets, nearly falling off the bed.

Caelan stood by the window, leaning his shoulder against the frame. Without a cloak, without a crown—only a black shirt with the top buttons undone and dark trousers. Hair loose, falling on his shoulders.

He looked at me with a satisfied smile.

"Especially the hair," he continued, surveying my reflection in the ceiling mirror. "Loose, they make you look like a sleeping beauty. Or a dead bride. Which, in essence, isn't far from the truth."

Something inside me exploded.

Not fear. Not panic.

Rage.

Pure, white, incinerating rage.

All the pain of the first night. All the terror of the chase. All the exhaustion from fleeing. And he—the cause of all this—stands here, smiling and making comments about my appearance.

I threw myself from the bed, not feeling how the skirt tangled in my legs.

"YOU!" I screamed, and my voice broke into a shriek. "YOU DID THIS!"

I grabbed the first thing within reach—a heavy vase with flowers on the bedside table.

"ALL OF THIS IS BECAUSE OF YOU!"

I swung with all my strength, aiming for his head.

The vase flew from my hands—and halfway to his face disintegrated into snowflakes.

Didn't break. Didn't fall.

Simply turned into thousands of tiny silvery snowflakes that swirled in the air and melted.

I froze, not believing my eyes.

"What..."

Caelan didn't even flinch. Just stood there, watching me with a slight smirk.

"Didn't work?" he asked softly. "Try again."

Rage still boiled in my chest. I grabbed a candlestick—heavy, made of something like silver.

"I HATE YOU!"

I hurled it at him with all my strength.

The candlestick flew half the distance—and turned into a shower of snow, which settled on the floor in a soft drift.

"What the hell?!"

I grabbed everything in sight—a book from the shelf, a statuette, a pillow from the bed. Threw them at him again and again.

And every time—the same thing.

Halfway there the objects turned to snow. To snowflakes. To silvery dust.

"WHY?!" I screamed, breathing heavily. "Why doesn't anything work?!"

Caelan pushed off from the window and slowly walked toward me.

"Because, darling," his voice was calm, almost tender, "none of this is real."

He stopped a couple steps away, gesturing to the room around us.

"This bedroom. This bed. The vases, candlesticks, even the dress you're wearing." His eyes met mine. "All of it—illusion. A dream."

The world tilted.

A dream?

"You're still sleeping in your little fissure, clutching your backpack to your chest," he continued. "Your body is there, in the cold and darkness. But your mind..."

He tapped his temple.

"Your mind is here. In my dream domain."

Reality slowly began assembling into a picture.

A dream. This is a dream. I didn't lose. He didn't catch me.

Relief mixed with new horror.

But if this is his dream... that means he controls everything.

I backed away, but my back hit the bed.

"You're beginning to understand," he smiled, taking a step closer. "Here, in dreams, I am god. I control every detail. Can create and destroy reality at will."

He snapped his fingers, and the room changed.

The walls expanded, transforming into an endless ballroom. The floor beneath my feet became mirrored, reflecting thousands of candles. Music filled the air—a waltz, slow and hypnotic.

Another snap—and we were back in the bedroom, but now it was snowing. Real snow, falling from the ceiling, settling on furniture, melting at the touch.

Another snap—the bedroom disappeared. We stood on the edge of a cliff above a bottomless abyss. Wind roared, tearing at clothes, but I didn't fall.

"See?" his voice sounded right at my ear, though he stood several steps away. "There are no rules here. No laws of physics. Only my will."

Another snap—and we were back in the bedroom.

I breathed heavily, trying to cope with the dizziness.

"Why?" I exhaled. "Why did you drag me here?"

"Drag?" He tilted his head. "Darling, I didn't drag you anywhere. You came yourself when you fell asleep."

He took another step, and now only a couple inches separated us.

"Every time you close your eyes, I can enter. Into your mind, into your dreams." His hand rose to my face but didn't touch—froze a millimeter from my cheek. "It's part of the game. In the real world I'm bound by rules. But here..."

His smile became predatory.

"Here you're completely in my power."

"What do you want from me?" My voice trembled.

"Just to talk," he lowered his hand. "Get to know you better. Understand what makes you run so desperately."

He stepped back, giving space.

"And yes, to have a little fun." Something dark flashed in his eyes. "Seven nights is a long time. It would be boring to just chase you through the forest."

He turned and walked to the window, gesturing for me to follow.

"Come, let's take a walk. I promise to behave... relatively decently."

"And if I refuse?"

He turned, and the expression on his face became harder.

"Then I'll stop being so courteous."

The threat rang clear.

I clenched my fists, feeling nails dig into palms. There was no choice.

Slowly, on trembling legs, I walked toward him.

And with each step I understood—this is only the beginning.

The first night in dreams.

And six more ahead.

The door opened by itself when we approached.

Beyond it stretched a corridor—the same one I'd seen in the first dream. Endless perspective of black marble, columns of ice, torches with blue flames.

But now, knowing this was a dream, I saw the details differently.

The walls breathed. Barely noticeably, but they moved, pulsed, as if they were alive. Shadows between columns shifted on their own, independent of light. And in the torches the blue flames sometimes formed faces—distorted, screaming, disappearing after a moment.

"Welcome to my consciousness," Caelan said, walking beside me. "Or rather, to that part of it I allow you to see."

I remained silent, trying not to look at the moving shadows.

"I've lived here for thousands of years," he continued. "Here are stored all my memories, all desires, everything I hide from the world."

Between the columns images began appearing. Flashes, like paintings on walls, but alive, moving.

Battles. Blood on snow. Armies of fae fighting under three moons.

Balls. Hundreds of fae in luxurious clothing, dancing in this very hall.

And humans. Many humans. Some fled in terror, others knelt, still others lay motionless.

"These are... your victims?" I whispered.

"Victims. Toys. Prey." He shrugged. "Call them what you want. In a thousand years there have been... many."

One of the images stopped, became clearer.

A girl. Young, with red hair and freckles. She stood in this same corridor, in a similar dress. Looked at Caelan with an expression of... adoration.

"This was Eileen," his voice became softer. "Three hundred years ago. She lasted six days."

"What happened to her?"

"On the seventh day she surrendered. Asked to stay with me herself." He looked at the frozen image. "I turned her into one of us. She served me for half a century, and then... became boring."

"And you killed her?"

"No." He shook his head. "Released her. She's still somewhere here, in my domain. Wanders through the forests, feeds on small animals, having lost her mind centuries ago."

Cold crept down my spine.

"You're a monster."

"I'm fae," he corrected calmly. "We don't know your morality. To us humans are toys. Beautiful, fragile, temporary."

The image disappeared, replaced by another.

A man. Tall, strong, with a sword in his hands. He fought something enormous and dark.

"This was Thomas," Caelan said. "A hundred years ago. He lasted four days."

"What happened to him?"

"The Wild Pack caught him on the fourth night." His voice was indifferent. "He tried to hide in a tree hollow. Didn't help."

The image faded, dissolved.

"The Wild Pack?"

"The Pack is the lesser of evils," his eyes darkened. "In my forests live creatures more dangerous than any nightmare. Spirits that devour flesh. Plants that suck blood. Fae exiles who don't obey me and hunt anyone who crosses their path."

He traced a finger along my cheek—an icy touch that sent shivers across my skin.

"And then there's me. And I don't need monsters to break you." His voice became quieter, more intimate. "I'll do it slowly. Every night, in dreams."

His hand slid to my chin, lifting it, forcing me to look into his eyes.

"I'll touch you. Kiss you. Study every reaction." Something dark and promising swirled in his gaze. "And gradually you'll begin to wait for it. Dream of it."

"Never," I hissed.

"We'll see," he leaned closer, his lips an inch from mine. "By the way, I have a question."

"What?"

"What did you wish for at the Tree?" His breath touched my lips. "What wish?"

"I didn't wish for anything!"

"The Tree doesn't activate without a wish," his hand settled on my waist. "Even a subconscious one. Something deep in your heart responded to its magic."

He pulled me closer, so our bodies touched.

"I very much want to know what it was. What does Elise Thorne secretly desire?" His lips touched the corner of my mouth. "Love? Wealth? Power?"

"Let me go," my voice trembled.

"Or maybe adventure?" He ignored my request. "Were you tired of boring life? Wanted to break free, feel alive?"

His words hit too accurately.

"Then congratulations, darling." His smile became predatory. "You got what you wanted. A life full of danger and thrills. Isn't that what you dreamed of?"

"Not like this!" it burst from me. "Not this!"

"Then how?" He pulled back, looking into my eyes. "Tell me. What did you really want?"

The words stuck in my throat. Because deep inside I knew—he was right. I'd dreamed of something more than ordinary life. Of adventure, of passion, of feeling alive.

But not like this. Not in a nightmare.

"See?" he whispered triumphantly. "You can't answer. Because you don't know yourself."

He circled me, not breaking eye contact.

"The Tree showed me flashes of your life. I saw you sitting in your room, looking out the window and dreaming of escape. Saw you photographing beautiful landscapes, hoping that through the lens your life would become more interesting."

Every word struck like a blow.

"Saw your loneliness. Your friend Chloe, who lives a vibrant life while you remain in the shadows. Your parents, who love you but don't understand."

He stopped in front of me, his hand on my cheek.

"And I saw your secret dream. The one you hide even from yourself."

"What?" I whispered, though I feared the answer.

His eyes gleamed.

"You dream of someone who will see the real you. Not the mask you wear for everyone." His thumb traced my lower lip. "Of someone who will accept you wholly. With all your fears, with all the darkness inside."

Tears welled in my eyes, but I blinked, throwing them off.

"You know nothing about me."

"I know more than you think," he leaned to my ear. "And you know what's funniest? I see you. All of you. Without masks. With all your fears and desires."

His lips touched the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

"That's why it frightens you so much. Not because I'm a monster. But because I see what you hide from everyone else."

"Shut up," I hissed, but my voice broke.

"Make me," he smirked against my neck.

His arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me back against his chest. I felt the cold of his body through the thin silk of the dress, his breath on my neck, the scent of winter and danger.

"Want to know what else I saw?" he whispered.

"No."

"Saw your curiosity." His lips moved to my shoulder. "You fear me, but simultaneously... you're intrigued. Part of you wants to know what it's like—to be with someone like me."

"You're lying."

"I never lie in dreams," his hand slid across my stomach. "There's no point here. Your subconscious knows the truth."

He turned me to face him, and his eyes pierced through.

"Admit it, Elise. Aren't you curious?" His hand tangled in my hair. "What it's like—to kiss a monster? To be desired by someone who could kill you with one movement?"

"You're insane."

"Maybe," he smiled. "But you're still standing here. Not running. Not screaming."

He was right. I wasn't running away. Because... because...

Because this is a dream. Here I can't escape.

Only for that reason.

His lips covered mine—softly, surprisingly tender for someone who'd threatened me with death.

The kiss was icy, but not burning. Slow. Exploratory. His tongue touched mine, and a wave of sensations ran through my body—cold and heat, fear and something else I didn't want to name.

I tasted winter on his lips. Snow, pine, something wild and ancient.

And I hated myself because part of me... responded to the kiss.

It's magic. Only magic. Not me.

Caelan pulled back, looking into my eyes. Triumph swirled in his gaze.

"See?" he whispered. "You're beginning to feel."

"It's your damned sorcery!"

"Perhaps," he traced his thumb across my lower lip, wet from the kiss. "Or perhaps you're just more honest with yourself in dreams than when awake."

He stepped back, giving me space.

"But we'll end here for today." He turned to the window. "Dawn is near. You'll wake soon."

"How do I... how do I wake up?" Desperation broke through in my voice.

"You don't," he tossed over his shoulder. "You'll wake when I allow it. Or when your body pulls you from the dream itself."

He turned, and the expression on his face became serious.

"But remember, Elise. Every night I'll come." His voice became colder. "And every night I'll go further. Touch more boldly. Learn more."

He

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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