

# Praise for the novels of LJ Cohen

## THE BETWEEN

“... [A]moving tale of heroism and compassion ... Lydia is a young woman utterly unprepared for the world she’s about to enter - but she learns fast. She’s a character you’ll want to meet again, from a writer you’ll want to read again. Take good note: LJ Cohen is a new voice to follow.”

- *Jeffrey A. Carver, author of The Chaos Chronicles*

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- *Nathan Lowell, Creator of the Golden Age of the Solar Clipper and the Tanyth Fairport Adventures*



# **TIME AND TITHE**

**CHANGELING'S CHOICE: BOOK 2**

# **Books by LJ Cohen**

## ***Changeling's Choice***

*The Between (book 1)*

*Time and Tithe (book 2)*

*Future Tense*

*Derelict*

## ***Short Stories***

*Stranger Worlds than These*

# TIME AND TITHE

LJ Cohen

?! Interrobang Books

Newton, MA

Published by Interrobang Books  
Newton, MA

[www.interrobangbooks.com](http://www.interrobangbooks.com)

First print edition: February, 2015

ISBN-10: 1942851995

ISBN-13: 978-1-942851-99-8

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*To my family—my husband Neil, and my sons, Philip and Eric.*

For more than a decade, you have watched me retreat into my imaginary worlds. And you're always there when I return, eager to discover what stories have traveled back with me. I am grateful beyond words.





## Chapter 1

**I**T WASN'T SUPPOSED to end like this. Clive stood in the silence of the battlefield where so many of the Fae had fallen in the war between Oberon, the Bright Court King, and his former consort, Titania, the Shadow Queen. In the months since Lydia had glamoured the monarchs into trees that towered over the scarred ground, decay had come to Faerie.

Moss browned at Clive's feet. Day by day, color leached from the landscape everywhere except where Lydia chose to spend her power. The oak and elm that had once been the warring rulers glowed against the gloom of their surroundings. Except for them, there was no living green anywhere else in the grove: only winter-dormant trees, their presence a reminder of the ephemeral nature of Mortal existence. A reminder of what Lydia had lost when Clive had persuaded her to join him in Faerie.

The oak rustled in the absence of any breeze. Clive bowed to his former lord. "I tried to warn you. She was not

the biddable child you thought you'd hidden away for your convenience." Acorns thudded down at Clive's feet. He picked one up and crushed it in his hand. "Even you will not survive if she lets Faerie wither."

He had wasted enough time here. Lydia was elsewhere, and he needed to find her and make her understand. Unless she chose to rule or broke her compact with Faerie so another could take her place, the realm would fade. And without glamour to sustain the Fae, they, too, would learn what it meant to be ephemeral.

Turning his back on the trapped rulers, Clive stepped from the grove toward the maze once cared for by Aeon, Oberon's twisted gardener. Both the gardener and the garden at the heart of the maze were casualties of the war that had nearly killed Clive as well as so many others.

He had survived because of Lydia. And he had to repay her sacrifice with a harsh truth.

It should have been the work of a single stride to shift from one place to another. But the entrance to the maze wavered in Clive's mind. The image of thick walls twined with flowering vines kept slipping away. When he opened his eyes, there was only a featureless gray haze.

He struggled to draw a breath. Nothingness deadened his senses. His heart thudded in his chest, a dull, hollow sound he could feel more than hear. Was this how Mortals drowned? Was this death? "Lydia!" The shout emerged thin and frayed, like his connection to Faerie.

A thin tendril looped around his wrist. Clive tried to jerk away. It brightened into the green of a living vine, vivid and

lurid against the gray and as unbreakable as a vow thrice sworn. Something pulled, hard, and Clive hit the ground, rolling to a stop against a wall of bracken, the sound of cracking wood like breaking bones.

He stood, panting, pulling dead twigs and dried thorns from his hair and clothes. Where the vine had circled his wrist, a red welt faded into a thin, white scar.

“I heard you call,” Lydia said.

She appeared in front of him, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, as he had first seen her at her school in the Mortal world. But the clothes shimmered with Fae glamour. Each thread glowed with the magic that permeated all of Faerie. Like her clothes, Lydia was and wasn't the same as the changeling Oberon had tasked him to retrieve. Her outward looks hadn't transformed. She still wore her long, dark hair in a neat tail down the middle of her back and her hazel eyes still shone with the gold that betrayed her Bright Court bloodline. It was the expression in them that had changed.

Something of Titania's anguish and loss looked out from those eyes and Clive shivered, wondering if the Shadow Queen's madness had touched Lydia as well.

He no longer knew how to reach her. She was no longer the girl he'd befriended, sworn himself to aid, and nearly died for in the battle that deposed the monarchs. And Clive was no longer Oberon's errand boy. Rubbing the scar circling his wrist, he struggled to find the right words, a kind of glamour that would make her listen, make her understand.

A rustling in the maze startled him and he glanced up. A trail of fresh green ended at Lydia's feet. Dark moss thickened

the ground and large trumpet-shaped flowers bloomed in the brown hedge walls.

“Why do you waste your power so?” he asked. Faerie was dying, just as the maze had died. She had to know. Even had she merely been an unexceptional Mortal stumbling across a thin place in the barrier, Lydia had been in Faerie long enough to feel its anguish. But she was a Trueborn, and even though she’d been raised as an ephemeral, she was as Fae as Clive was.

“Aeon was my friend.”

More than once, Oberon’s mad gardener had risked his safety to protect her. Clive didn’t understand why, but he knew enough about Aeon to know he never planted a seed without knowing what would take root. Until his path tangled with Lydia’s. “Don’t spend glamour on a dead garden. Even he would chide you for it.”

Lydia shook off Clive’s warning and gestured to the parched ground. In the hedges that ringed them, new shoots of tender green pushed out from dry branches. Faerie drank her in eagerly.

“This isn’t what the realm needs. Let the dead rest, Lydia. Please.”

She plucked a ruffled pink rose from a blooming bush, wincing as the thorn bit into her finger. “I don’t know how.”

As Clive watched, the rose withered, petals curling and drifting to the ground. He pulled the brittle stem from her hand and snapped it in half. “You’d better figure it out before all of Faerie crumbles at your feet.”

“Maybe it should,” Lydia whispered.

“Is that what you wish, oh queen?” A vision of thick gray

fog filled his mind. “Do nothing, and watch death come to this immortal place. Or use your power to banish us all to the Mortal lands. There, we will wither, just like this rose. Just like Aeon’s garden.”

He closed the distance between them. His frustration and anger transformed into a cold breeze that whipped dry leaves from even drier branches. Brittle twigs snapped beneath his feet. “Neither can Faerie survive without her Fae,” he continued, in a voice as icy as deep winter. “And when all is silent and still, you will have vengeance at last for all the injustices done to you.”

She shook her head. The green at her feet faded back to brown.

“I only beg of you, send me away first. I’ve seen enough destruction to last a lifetime.”

Memories of what had been the home of the outcast community of Unbound Fae, before Oberon and Titania chose it for their battleground, flashed through his mind. Callie, their leader, had died there, her proud defiance in the defense of the Unbound crushed by the might of the monarchs. Her face colorless in death, her white hair fanned out across the moss and pine needles, she was more than a victim of the war Lydia’s presence had triggered. She had been a friend.

“And when the magic drains out of this land forever, it will be gone from all the worlds.”

“No,” Lydia whispered, her voice hoarse.

“Is that not what you desire? And yet you continue to lick your wounds and do nothing.”

“That’s not ... I’m not ... I never asked for this.”

“The power is yours. You have no choice.”

“Haven’t you taken enough from me?”

Fury brought the blood to her cheeks. Clive took a step away, unsure how her anger would manifest. If his had been a stiff breeze, hers could be a tornado.

“I did everything you asked. I gave up my life, my family. Followed you here and stepped into a war that had started generations before I was even born. You gave me no choice. And when Oberon and Titania threatened my world, took my baby sister, I fought them. And I won. Now you expect me to care about what happens to this place?”

A slow clapping filled the corner of the maze. “You have become a Fae in truth, milady.” The deeply resonant voice of the Seneschal was thick with amusement. Even after the Bright King’s defeat, he remained clothed in Oberon’s red and gold, his glamourous features as difficult to read as ever. His long years of service as the monarch’s mouthpiece had blurred him as if he had given up far more than his name to serve his king.

Deirdre joined him. When she stepped into a shaft of sunlight, her bronzed skin and brown eyes glowed with the vitality of Bright magic that turned the blighted maze even more drab by comparison.

“What do you want?” Lydia asked.

Clive shifted his gaze between Lydia and the two former Bright courtiers.

“We only wish to bring our concerns to our new ruler,” Deirdre said.

“Of course you do,” Lydia said, her tight smile more of a

grimace.

Oberon had been the one to use her sister, Taylor, as a pawn, but Deirdre had been the messenger. Clive would never forget the look of pain and horror on Lydia's face when Deirdre had brought the girl to the grove of the Unbound and into the middle of the conflict.

Lydia trailed her fingers along the edge of the twisted brown vines that had once both trapped and nourished Aeon. Fae magic answered her need. Green blossomed at her touch. Shoots of new grass sprang up at her feet as she sent a wave of power along the barren ground. It spread out toward the two waiting Fae. Deirdre took a step back before it reached her.

*Round one: Lydia.*

"Good day, cousin." Deirdre bowed her head. Her Fae grace and beauty concealed what Clive knew was a seething hatred.

"Is it?" Lydia answered.

"Is it not?" Sunlight filtered through the silent maze creating its own glamour. The angular planes of Deirdre's face shifted between elegance and desperation. The Seneschal stood watching from the shadows.

Dried leaves crackled as Clive shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Lydia threw him a quick glance and he stilled.

"I ask a second time. What do you want?"

This time, the Seneschal answered. "I only wish to serve Faerie's ruler. That is what I was created for."

Clive knew the Seneschal's words were true, but of all the Fae, he was the most skilled in twisting the truth to suit his needs. It was how he had managed to serve Oberon for so long and so well.

“You don’t have the power to crack my wards,” Lydia said. “I’ve let you play at insurrection, but it’s not fun anymore.”

Deirdre folded her arms across her chest and leaned forward. “You think this is a game?”

“Is it not?” Lydia said, throwing Deirdre’s words right back at her.

Everything in Faerie was a game of power, but they had suffered too much loss, too many deaths, to let these two try to recreate what had nearly destroyed the Fae in the first place.

“This is not over, child.” The Seneschal’s indistinct eyes stared into hers.

“I am no longer a child. And yes, it is,” Lydia said.

She had plenty of reasons to loathe the Fae, and Deirdre was on the top of that list. But at the very least, these were Aeon’s kin; something of his wild beauty lived in them and in all the Fae. Could Lydia destroy that? Would she?

“You can’t hope to challenge me,” Lydia said. “Besides, I keep the monarchs trapped. I didn’t think there had been any love lost between you and your former lord.”

The Seneschal cracked the briefest smile and Clive knew. They weren’t trying to break her rule, such as it was; instead, they sought to annoy and distract her. But why? What were they planning that they needed her attention and energies occupied?

She called the darklings into being from the ambient magic in Faerie. They answered her summons in a cloud that shadowed the sky over the dead maze. Clive took a nervous step away from her.



He remembered the terror in her eyes when the cloud of vibrating darkness had swarmed her school bus and attacked her. It had taken all his power to escape with her into the Between. It had not been the way he wanted to introduce her to Faerie, but it had helped her understand the consequences her refusal would bring. Darklings were mindless trackers, but once called, they would only stop searching when they had drained a Fae of power. The Unbound had failed, trying to use them against her. They hadn't been strong enough.

But Lydia was. The darklings answered to her now.

The Seneschal swallowed hard.

"Don't worry," she said. "They're not here for you."

Lydia raised her hands and traced a rectangle in the air. A breeze stirred her hair and shredded the seething cloud, scattering the darklings against the doorway's glamoured frame. They glowed for a moment, a pulsing black outline, before they faded. The door smudged like smoke in a steady wind. "I've bound them by my name to the ways within and between the realms. If you push against my will again, they'll protect me."

Deirdre glowered at her. "Oberon taught you too well."

Clive knew Lydia could peel back Deirdre's surface glamour with barely a thought, tracing the subtle connections between the Fae and Faerie. It would be simple for her to sever those connections or forge her own. That's what Oberon had done, in his brief and violent battle with Titania, when he had nearly torn Lydia apart as he tried to rip the magic from her.

"You have no idea what he taught me, Deirdre," Lydia said, "and you don't want to know."

The Seneschal bowed. "As you will, milady." The two of them faded from the maze as if they'd never been there.

Lydia sagged with the sudden release of tension and would have fallen to her knees if Clive hadn't steadied her. "Well, that didn't go too badly," she said, pulling away from his support.

"The darklings. Would you have—?"

"I'm not like Oberon," she snapped, interrupting him. "I haven't demanded anyone's tithe. I'm not like Oberon or Titania."

Clive watched in silence as her face flushed with anger.

"It's not like I had much of a choice," Lydia said, forcing the words through a clenched jaw. "You saw what happened after."

"What are you afraid of, Lydia?" Clive said softly. She cringed. "Are you keeping the magic in, or walling someone out?"

The blood drained from her face. "That's not fair. I did what I had to do."

"What you thought you had to do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Clive took a deep breath and ran his hands through his long hair. "When's the last time you saw your sister?"

"What the hell does Taylor have to do with anything?"

"She misses you." As Clive watched, the lush grass carpet Lydia had conjured was dying, crumbling back into dust. It would take more power than she could spare to bring life back to this maze permanently.

"It's for the best."

"Whose best?"

Lydia shook her head.

“You made a promise to her.”

“It’s for the best,” Lydia repeated, her voice tight.

In the months since she had deposed Oberon and Titania, Lydia had visited Taylor only a few times. In her stead, she had sent Clive. It couldn’t have been easy for either of the Hawthorne girls. What had been only days and weeks for Lydia had been months and years for her baby sister.

“You don’t know what it’s like. Every time, it’s like I’m losing them. Losing her. All over again.”

\* \* \*

Taylor shivered as the first drops of rain spattered across her bare arms. At least she’d be able to sleep tonight. The early summer heat wave had taken everyone by surprise. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Dark clouds rushed in, turning the afternoon into premature dusk.

“Nick!” she called as the children in the park around her squealed; their mothers quickly packed strollers and backpacks. In a matter of minutes, Taylor stood alone in the middle of an empty playground. Rain soaked her shorts and tank top.

“I give up! You win! Come out. We need to get home.” She turned in a slow circle from slides to monkey bars to swings. Her nephew wasn’t anywhere in sight. Taylor put her hands on her hips and squinted through the rain. He was probably somewhere dry, laughing at her.

“Come on, Nick, it’s miserable out here!”

The creaking of swings in the breeze was her only answer.

“Fine. But you get to explain to your mother when we both get sick.” She wiped the rain from her face and plunged through the trees where she used to play as a kid. There were all sorts of hiding places where one small boy could curl up and disappear.

Under the cover of dense greenery, the rain slowed to a light patter of drops on leaves. The scant light glowed an odd emerald and the silence raised goose bumps along Taylor’s arms. The trees hadn’t seemed so thick or so threatening when she was small. She stopped, frowning. Wasn’t it supposed to work the other way around?

“Nicolas! We have to go home!”

A high-pitched squeal of laughter echoed beneath the canopy and died away. She held her breath, waiting. A chill breeze rustled through the leaves, sending a fresh shower of cold rain cascading over her head.

“Here I am!” Nick’s voice seemed so close, but Taylor saw nothing in the shadow of the trees. She folded her arms across her chest to try to keep from shaking.

Just calling his name wasn’t working. She was just going to have to play the game Nicolas so loved. “Ready or not, here I come,” she called out, trying to keep her voice light and cheerful.

A fresh peal of laughter burst out of the trees from behind her. Taylor whirled. Her nephew stood ten feet away, illuminated in a bright ray of impossible sunshine. Everywhere around him water dripped through the leaves to soak the spongy ground, but Nick was utterly dry. The light spun gold

highlights from his messy brown hair.

“I win! I win!” he called, smiling at her before turning away. “You’re right,” he said. “That was a great hiding place!”

Taylor’s heart raced. The unexpected sun dazzled her eyes and she couldn’t see who he was talking to. “Nick? Nick, we need to go home, honey.” She wasn’t sure how she kept the fear from her voice, but she was somehow certain that if he didn’t turn back to her right away, he’d disappear and she’d never see him again.

Time seemed to pause. Seconds passed between raindrops. The thudding of her heart was like the deep boom of a kettle drum. The light beneath the trees drained away until the only illumination was the sun shining on her five-year-old nephew.

He frowned and stamped a sneakered foot into the leaf litter. “But I want to come with you! You promised!”

“Nick,” she whispered, afraid of the sound of her own voice. Some deep memory urged her to run to him, to run past him into the sunlight where something familiar waited. Something from her childhood. There was a hollow emptiness in the center of Taylor’s chest. Tears mingled with the rain on her face. Her whole body trembled from cold, from fear, and from eagerness, rendering her helpless to move as Nicolas took one step closer to the sunlight.

“No!” she cried.

A clap of thunder made her ears ring. Taylor blinked and the sunlight was gone, leaving Nicolas crying in the rain.

Taylor shook off her strange paralysis and ran toward him, bending down to catch him in a tight hug. He clung to her, sobbing.

“It’s okay, sweetie. I found you. You’re safe now.” Hoisting him on her hip, Taylor stood up, swaying a moment under his forty-odd-pound weight.

“It’s not fair. He promised. He said we could play. He promised me.”

Nick’s words triggered her own voice from a long lost memory. “*She said we could play in a magic place. You and me, Lyds.*”

When had she said that? Who was the ‘she’?

“Who? Who promised you?” She clutched Nick to her chest and stared into his former hiding place. The strange light was gone. If there had been someone behind the tree, no one was there now. Her heart still raced. Someone had been there. Someone who’d tried to lure Nicolas to follow him. She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned to walk out of the woods, certain they were being watched. “Nicolas,” she said, whispering into his wet hair. “You know you only go with me or Mommy or Daddy, right?”

He wiped his running nose across the sodden strap of her tank top. “And Gramma and Grampa and sometimes Uncle Marco.”

She let her breath out in a rush. Whatever she’d thought she saw, it had only been a trick of the storm’s light. She was safe. Nick was safe. They had reached the edge of the wooded area bordering her old elementary school playground. “That’s right. You don’t go anywhere with strangers.”

Nick lifted his head from her shoulder and Taylor had to grip him tighter to keep him from falling. “But he said he was your friend. And Mommy’s too. That he was like family.”

Her body stiffened. The falling rain beat a steady rhythm on the sidewalk. The trees behind them rustled as if they were whispering to themselves. She refused to look back. Struggling to carry her nephew, Taylor put as much distance between them and the park as she could.

“You’re squishing me, Auntie Taylor.”

He squirmed from her hold and slithered to the ground. She grabbed his hand, pulling him along the route home.

“Nicky,” she said softly, “who said he was my friend?”

“Aeon,” he said, slipping his hand from hers. “Race you!”

Taylor stood, her trapped breath burning in her chest. Nick tore down the sidewalk and up the porch stairs to the house. Aeon. She didn’t know anyone ... Aeon. The scent of crushed summer grass and peaches teased her mind. She curled her fist over her heart, grasping for something that should have been there. The front door banged shut. The memories slid away, leaving emptiness behind.

## Chapter 2

**H**ER BODY TREMBLING in the aftermath of her confrontation with Deirdre and the Seneschal, Lydia turned to Clive. His hair gleamed in a stray beam of sunlight that pierced the twisted hedges. She had watched it turn from black to silver in an instant when Oberon had nearly killed him in a perversion of the promised tithe between ruler and Fae.

And he wondered why she refused to take anyone's tithe. The temptation and the risk were too great.

She shivered at the memory of Oberon's hand cupping Clive's chin with an eerie gentleness, of Clive's stillness and resignation as Bright magic streamed out of him in a wide ribbon, pain bringing tears to his eyes. And instead of using the boon Clive had given her to safeguard Taylor, she had saved him.

Lydia had gone over that moment a thousand times or more in her mind. And she knew she wouldn't choose



otherwise, even knowing the outcome. She couldn't have let Clive die, not like that. Not while Taylor was an unwilling witness. Not when Lydia had the power to save him.

But it didn't erase the bitterness of losing Taylor anyway, even after Lydia had overcome the combined might of Oberon and Titania.

Clive had let his hair stay silvered instead of using the simplest of glamours to restore his appearance. And it kept the memory of that day and Lydia's loss as sharp as it had been when she'd taken her sister home and left her there with an empty promise.

"You cannot keep running."

"I know." Lydia had tried to run away before, to take herself out of the equation, but it only unbalanced the forces in Faerie even further. She turned back to face the tall, silent Fae. "I tried to hate you for your part in this."

"I know."

Lydia's choices had led her here, and she had made them on her own. Clive had only been the catalyst for the changes that had detonated in her life. He didn't deserve her anger. "Will you help me?"

Clive bowed, a full formal court obeisance, down on one knee, his head dipped low. "My life, my tithe, is yours to command, milady."

She crouched before him, shuddering at the memory of the Faerie monarchs stripping the land and its people of power to fuel their own hatreds. "I don't need your tithe." He lifted his face to hers and she tried to find a smile for him. "I need your friendship."

“That,” Clive said, “you have always had.” He brushed his hands on the soft material of his blue and silver tunic and stood.

Without Lydia’s constant trickle of glamour, the green faded once more from the ground and the maze. It was like losing Aeon all over again. Blinking back tears, she scooped a handful of dry soil and let it spill from her hand.

“Milady, come, we must leave.” Clive held out his hand to her. “This doesn’t honor his memory or that of any of the fallen. You have been lost in the maze for too long.”

She shook the dirt from her hand and let him help her up. He guided her forward with a glamoured step into the perfumed air of what had been Oberon’s court. The once fluttering pennants now hung limp from the sagging white pavilion. It looked more like an abandoned camp site than the seat of Fae power it once had been. “I can’t stay here. This was his place. Not mine.”

“Then make your own. Only do it soon, before the Seneschal decides rekindling the war is a better path to power than standing on the sidelines waiting for you to act.”

“If he wants to rule that badly, maybe he should.”

“If you truly believed that, you would have ceded your power to him instead of threatening him with the darklings.”

Lydia twisted her lips into a half-smile. “Point taken.”

“But you must act. Faerie reflects your ambivalence. As do the actions of your people.”

“I don’t have a people.”

He arched his eyebrows, staring at her until she looked away.

“Fine.”

“Lydia, if you can’t see that you are part of Faerie and Faerie is part of you, then even if you do nothing to destroy this place, it will die.” He walked across what had once been a parquet dance floor, now a ruin of weeds and warped wood. “Listen. Can’t you hear it? The land itself is in pain.”

She walked blindly into a stone bench and bruised her shin against the edge. The new hurt throbbed a counterpoint to the constant whine that had filled her senses since the day she overthrew Oberon and Titania. “I hear it.” She collapsed onto the crumbling bench, her head in her hands. “I thought it was inside me.”

“It is.” Clive sat beside her. “Look around you. This is the desolation you feel.”

Both monarchs, both courts had burned with a kind of beauty that had moved her soul. Something in her craved its return, even as she struggled with the pain of her missing life. “I didn’t—I’m sorry.” It wasn’t the war that had brought death to Faerie, it was war’s aftermath—her loss made manifest.

He shrugged. “I told you. We shape reality to our desires. That is the very nature of glamour. Faerie cannot help but reflect and amplify what’s in your heart. You were forged from the strength of both courts, and Faerie will bend to your will. This is why Oberon feared you so and hid you for so long. It’s why he and Titania fought to control you.”

“All I wanted was to find peace. To make my sacrifice worth something.”

Clive’s laugh rang through the silent pavilion. “Peace? In the land of the Fae?”

She jerked her head up and stared at him, her eyes narrowing.

“Oh, Lydia, this is the place where the monsters beneath the beds of Mortal children come from. For every magical garden, there is a creeping vine to strangle the unwary.”

A vision rose in her mind: of Aeon at the end, stripped of all glamour, cruel vines cutting a path of blood across his skin.

“It’s your task to balance the elemental forces that shape the Fae. You freed us from the petty hatreds that have defined us since the courts were split asunder, but we are more than what Oberon and Titania forged us to be. Yes, we are cruelty, but also tenderness. Creation and destruction.”

“Bright and shadow,” Lydia whispered.

“Just so.” Clive nodded. “For so long, they trapped us in a weave of their making. Now we have the chance to be otherwise. Until now, Faerie has held its breath, waiting upon your power. But the Fae, especially those who follow the Seneschal, are not so patient.”

“I wish Aeon were here.”

“I am not so sure you would wish his counsel, were he alive.”

She studied Clive as if seeing him for the first time. “Why do you say that?”

“Oberon never did anything without a reason, Lydia. If he leashed Aeon to the maze, it was because he feared him. And a force that Oberon feared, loosed from his control? We would all be wise to be wary of such a power.”

“He was my friend.”

Clive nodded. “Among other things.”

Lydia pushed away from the bench and paced the pavilion floor. “It doesn’t matter anymore. So many are dead.” So much of Faerie lay in waste. She could taste it like stale wood-smoke at the back of her throat.

“But not all. They need you. You must create a true court. Make something of beauty for the Fae to love. There’s still a way back for all of us.”

There was no way back for her. She understood that. Her chest ached with a loss that nothing, not even the restoration of Aeon’s maze or the creation of a true court, would erase, but Clive was right: Lydia had no choice but to push forward. Too much had been destroyed by her hand and her will already.

She stood and felt her spine crack. “Call a council. Have Isidore bring the remnants of the Unbound. Send word for Deirdre and the Seneschal. I want representation from all the Fae houses including whoever is left from Shadow.” In a smooth shift, her jeans transformed into running shorts, her T-shirt into a tank top. Sneakers firmed up around her feet.

“Wait. Where are you going?” Clive called out.

Lydia she strode across the pavilion, feeling strength flow into her legs. “Running. It’s time for me to see my kingdom.” She glanced back at him, still sitting on the stone bench, his mouth falling open. “Set the council for dusk. At the heart of the maze.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure? No. But I’m done hiding.” Feeling more like herself than she had since Clive had disrupted her life the day the darklings came, she turned her attention outward, bounced

up and down on the balls of her feet, and let her restless body run.

\* \* \*

Even after a hot shower and a change of clothes, Taylor still shivered. The sudden downpour dropped the temperature by a good twenty degrees, but that couldn't explain the chill that lodged in her heart. She turned a full circle, examining the contents of her childhood room, unchanged in the year since Mom and Dad had retired to Florida and Lyds and her husband, Greg, moved into their house. Nothing changed and everything had.

Books and stuffed animals tucked away on sturdy shelves her father had built suddenly looked unfamiliar. She tugged the comforter from her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Tails?"

Her sister's voice calling out her old nickname sent a tremor down her spine. It brought back memories of when Lyds had gotten sick her senior year in high school. There was the girl who used to tell her stories and bake cookies with her. Then there was the sister who spent weeks mute, not recognizing Taylor, Marco, or their parents, before she returned from wherever her mind had gotten snarled.

It didn't make any sense, but she remembered two different Lydias. One never changed or aged like she herself did, and sometimes met her in the playground woods. That Lydia had promised to always come when she called.

There was a day when Lydia hadn't kept that promise. Taylor shivered. It had been a hot and hazy summer day—a day that had started out like this one. Lyds had taken her to the park to play, but all she wanted to do was talk to her friends on her phone. Taylor had gotten mad. She remembered grabbing the phone from her sister's hand and throwing it on the ground, yelling, "I hate you. Go away. I want the other Lydia."

Crying, Taylor had run into the shelter of the trees, gripping the peach pit and calling her sister's name. That Lydia hadn't come. But a boy full of laughter and mischief had shown up and created a ring of clear sunshine and cooler air around them both to play in until Lyds found her and took her home.

His name was Aeon, and he had been there through her whole childhood. She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. Aeon. How could she have forgotten?

A knock on the door startled her. Lyds stuck her head inside the room. "Tails? Will you keep an eye on the baby? Nick has a swimming lesson."

She studied her sister's face as if it belonged to a stranger.

"You okay?" Lyds walked in, frowning. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Not a ghost exactly, but an image of her nephew limned with sunlight in the middle of a rainstorm was close enough. "Lyds?"

"Hmm?" Lyds glanced down at her cell phone. "Nicky, time to go!"

Taylor noted how faint lines radiated out from her brown

eyes and the skin beneath them was pouched and darkened, courtesy of a teething baby and lots of sleepless nights. Her sister's wavy brown hair gleamed with a few strands of silver. When had she turned into their mother? "Do you remember when we used to bake cookies?"

Lyds looked up and laughed. "Of course I do. Do you remember how much of a mess you always made?"

Taylor shrugged, struggling to sort out memories from imagination. "Do you ever think about when you got sick?"

"That was a long time ago, Taylor. I'm surprised you even remember. You were right around Nicky's age." She tucked a strand of hair back behind her ears. "Speaking of Nicky ... We're going to be late if we don't leave now. Ana's in her crib. I just nursed her, so she should stay asleep until I get back. Okay?"

"I'm good."

After Lyds and Nicky left, the house was utterly silent. The rain had stopped its incessant rattle on the roof tiles, but a strong breeze set the trees outside the house swaying. She studied her room, blinking at the pale lavender walls and green trim, seeing flickers of light and dark out of the corner of her eye that disappeared as she turned. The sugar maple in the front yard loomed over the house, casting long shadows through her window. Something was reaching for her, something that was familiar. Something about the trees.

A hurricane of memory roared through her and Taylor collapsed to her knees, her chest heaving. Her life fractured into two jagged segments: before she'd walked out of the



world to a place where magic breathed, and after. She was drowning in confusion, lungs burning for air as images of an impossible wood where two enormous trees radiated their impotent fury filled her vision. There was Lydia—her Lydia—slipping a pendant over her head before pushing her away.

A familiar warmth spread out across her chest, easing the terrible pressure. She reached her hand up and palmed the small oval shape that hung in the space above her collarbone.

It hadn't been there before.

It had always been there.

Her sister's voice echoed in the back of her mind. *"It's magic. If you hold it and whisper my name, I'll hear you."*

"Lydia," she said, softly, picturing a younger, anguished version of her sister.

Taylor's fingers traced the grooved surface of the gilded peach pit. If she looked down at it, the pendant would glow with the warmth of a languid summer day.

How could she have forgotten?

## Chapter 3

**S**OFT, GOLDEN LIGHT illuminated the blush of a handful of peaches hanging from the only living tree at the center of the maze. The last time Lydia had been in this garden, she had watched Oberon kill Aeon, and had mourned as his twisted body sank into the loam at the base of his beloved tree. His garden had taken him home.

No matter the reality of her parentage, Faerie would never be Lydia's true home, but maybe she could find comfort in the place her tortured friend had treasured. The rest of Aeon's lush orchard existed only in her memory, now. She remembered when the meadow had been a carpet of brightest green, and boughs had been heavy with apples, cherries, and pears.

"You wanted to know what I would do to Faerie," she whispered, laying her cheek against the peach tree's roughened bark and circling it with her arms. "I think I've made a mess of things."

A chill shook through her as someone called her name.

Lydia looked around, but it was only the wind, sighing through the leaves. Aeon was dead. And no one else had set foot in this place since the start of the battle that left Lydia ruler by default. What would he think of her making this the seat of her power?

It was simple to conjure up his laughter and the crinkle of his eyes when he smiled, his face upturned to the sun, his skin as dark and weathered as tree bark.

“Well, my loyal subjects will be here soon. I’d better get this place ready.”

Twining threads of Bright and Shadow magic, Lydia transformed the blighted meadow into an open amphitheater, with the peach tree at her back. She wove dead branches from the orchard into a throne. Benches faced her in a half-circle, their even rows disrupted by gnarled and lifeless fruit trees. She kindled lights in their branches so the Fae couldn’t help but notice what she hadn’t glamoured away.

With a thought, she shifted her running clothes back into jeans and a T-shirt, a deliberate connection to the life she’d lost, but woven through with iridescence; green and gold from Bright, silver and blue from Shadow.

“Are you certain, Lydia?”

Clive stood at the edge of the dais that surrounded the peach tree and her throne in a half-circle mosaic of polished river stones.

“Are you?” she asked, studying him closely. He was dressed in a black tunic and tapered trousers. The only contrast existed in his silvered hair and bright green eyes. “And who do you mourn, Clive Barrow? Bright or Shadow?”

He turned away from her scrutiny. “Both.”

The sun was sinking behind the dead trees, their last rays striking gold from a single peach. The Fae—her Fae—would be here soon. “Will you stand with me?”

His head jerked up, his eyes wide and frightened like those of a cornered animal. “Have I not always?” he said, his lips twisting into a wry smile as he stepped up beside her. “Regardless of my original intentions.”

“Then you’d better look the part.” She twisted all the colors of the Fae into the fabric of his tunic and nodded as his collar and left sleeve shimmered in the fading light. The rest, she left black. He was right to mourn. They had all lost so much. She glanced down at her shirt and wove a ribbon of black through the brighter colors. Let them see that too, and remember.

The slight breeze that whispered through the dead trees stilled. In small groups, Fae emerged from shadows into the half-light of dusk. To her left, with Oberon’s sunburst sigil embroidered across their garments, stood Deirdre and the Seneschal. The woman stared, her perfect features expressionless. The Seneschal’s face was, as always, unreadable. Behind them, a dozen former courtiers from Bright sprawled across benches, their bored expressions covering a deep unease that thrummed through the grove.

To her right, a group of Fae wearing midnight blue shot through with silver stood as silent as the dead trees whose branches spread over them. Shadow magic rippled outward from them in an icy stream beneath the dead ground, frosting everything it touched. The Shadow court had lost far more than the Bright. Even before the war, Shadow had suffered

through the years of Titania's grief and madness. Now they waited to see if Lydia would finish what their queen had started.

"Milady Lydia." The voice, though quiet, broke the hold of Shadow's subtle chill. Lydia would have to remember to guard against that. Turning, she met Isidore's gray eyes and nodded her thanks to the leader of the Unbound Fae. The last survivors stood in a semi-circle around the tall, silver-haired man, their clothing a riot of colors and styles, their faces a mix of young and old. Victims of Fae glamour, they had once been Mortal children lured into Faerie, then discarded when they no longer amused either monarch. They were too Fae to return, and too Mortal to be accepted in the courts. And they, like Lydia, had paid a heavy price in the stand against Oberon and Titania.

So this represented her kingdom: Bright Fae, overtly hostile, testing her rule; Shadow Fae, seeking to mire her in their own hopelessness; and the Unbound, wondering where their destruction lay.

Clive leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "They look to you for balance, Lydia."

She smoothed a wrinkle in her shirt, wondering where she could find balance. The rustle of green leaves above her reminded her of the time she had tried to escape through Aeon's maze. It seemed like a lifetime ago when she had run away from Deirdre and the strangeness of a world whose rules didn't make any sense to her. And yet, even then she had begun to fear that it did. She had run as fast and as far as she could, getting thoroughly lost in the twists of the maze

before she stopped, giving voice to her confusion. The memory broke over her.

*“Who am I?” she had whispered.*

*“That is an excellent question.”*

There had been nothing but that answering voice and the silence of the hedge walls. And then Aeon had emerged, his skin the color of old parchment and wrinkled like a shar-pei puppy. Brown eyes shining in a round face. His twisted spine hadn't slowed him down as he danced around her, swept off an imaginary hat, and bowed, introducing himself.

*“Aeon, at your service.”*

He had died defending her. And Lydia felt as trapped between realms as the Unbound. But in Faerie, appearances mattered. Belief mattered. Straightening her spine, she faced her people.

“Be at ease,” she said, the timbre of command in her voice. It was a hint of the power she could draw from Faerie, as the last trueborn Fae, daughter of both Bright and Shadow. Suppressing a shiver, Lydia waited as the Shadow and Unbound Fae took their seats. The Bright Fae lounging in their casual disregard sat up, glaring at her.

Using her Fae birthright filled her with unease, but without power, she had no authority here. And running away from her responsibilities had only brought fresh chaos to Faerie. Clive squeezed her shoulder before stepping back to stand beside the throne she had woven from the remnants of Aeon's dead garden. When the assembled representatives from the former courts stilled, Lydia sat.

“Even with the dissolution of the courts, you still align

yourselves to Oberon's and Titania's design." Anger and disgust rang through her voice. Clive stiffened beside her. It wasn't what she had intended to say, but it was true and for a people who didn't overtly lie, they were spectacularly uncomfortable with such direct confrontation. "Do you think they're going to stride through Faerie on their great roots and be your rulers again? Remember who holds them transformed and powerless." A ripple moved through the group and she softened her attack. "You fought against them and against each other for so long, you probably can't even remember a time where you were something more."

Leaning forward, Lydia looked hard at Deirdre. The Bright Court Fae had lost her brother to the conflict. Stripped of everything in Oberon's final assault, Galvin's gray and lifeless husk had been abandoned along with too many other Bright Court Fae, in the ruins of Oberon's court. Surely Deirdre didn't want to go back to that.

Lydia didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't the naked hatred in Deirdre's eyes. Or the hunger in the Seneschal's.

"You have closed the borders between our world and the Mortal realm once again." The Fae woman who spoke hid in shadows behind the contingent of the Unbound. Her voice raised the tiny hairs along Lydia's arms. "How does that make you any different from Oberon? How does that help us survive?"

"I saw you fall," Clive whispered.

Lydia stood, clasping her arms together to keep them from shaking. She knew that voice. "Show yourself," she said, the words empty of any power to command, but the woman

stepped forward to the edge of the dais anyway.

A cascade of black hair fell around bare white shoulders and Lydia backed up into the throne, shaking her head. Titania. It couldn't be. She reached out into the heart of Faerie to feel for the slow pulse of tree sap rising from root to crown. Both former monarchs slept, their power banked to the barest flicker by her wards.

The woman lifted her face to the lights Lydia had kindled in the dead trees and violet eyes studied her with silent intensity.

Lydia's heart stuttered. "Aileen. You're dead."

"No." She smiled, and in that smile Lydia saw an echo of the disdain the Shadow emissary had once shown for all things ephemeral. Then it vanished, replaced by a fierce sadness.

"You defied Titania for me," Lydia said. And then the Shadow Queen had struck Aileen down for her actions.

"No," Aileen said. "Not for you."

Clive held his breath. They all did. It was as if the rest of the Fae were statues, waiting for either Lydia or Aileen to say something that would bring them back to life.

"Then why?" Her memory replayed those final moments in the grove of the Unbound, with Oberon and Titania united in their hatred and the Shadow Queen's terrible fog winding around Lydia's body like a translucent snake, its venom poisoning her will and clouding her mind. Then Aileen had shouted and confronted her mistress, freeing Lydia from Shadow's power.

"I saw what we had become." Aileen glanced at the weary group of Unbound Fae. "What I had become."

Did they know how Aileen had nearly betrayed them for



her queen at the beginning of the battle? She had lost none of her stark beauty or her elegance, but pain and remorse looked out of Aileen's eyes now. Lydia had to force herself not to look away.

"I should have defied Titania from the start. But as much as we chafed against the Courts' rule, we are primed to obey power. Look around you. Look at all of us, sitting here, waiting for you to save us or damn us. And you want us to be something more."

"I didn't want this."

"But here you are." Aileen gestured at the throne. "All power and reluctance. A dangerous combination, Lydia Hawthorne."

Frustration roiled inside her like her own personal swarm of darklings. A vibration sang through her body, moving from her head to her toes, shocks rippling the ground at her feet. Aileen stood as rooted as any tree.

"Deirdre challenges me in Bright's name. Have you taken up the mantle for Shadow?" Lydia asked.

Aileen raised her hand to her cheek and for a moment, her glamour wavered and Lydia saw the outline of a livid scar that ran from cheekbone to jaw along the left side of her face. "No. Titania broke the covenant between ruler and Fae when she gave me this. I belong to no court." She lifted her chin. Power flared, hiding the scar under beauty as if it had never been.

"What do you want from me?"

Aileen's perfect silence mocked her.

"I have given up everything for you." In the echo of her words to Clive, Lydia heard the voice of a whining child and hated herself for it. She couldn't hold back the anger. It was

like a storm breaching a seawall holding back the tide. But instead of the ocean, overlapping waves of Bright and Shadow magic surged through her, drowning whatever control she thought she had.

Her fury scoured the grove. The assembled Fae scattered, Bright, Shadow, and Unbound all, swept away like flotsam in a flood. Only Aileen and Clive remained with her in the empty garden. She lowered her voice to a whisper, the anger spent, glamour sinking back into the ground. "What do you want from me?"

"Use the power granted you. Use it before your petulance destroys everything of beauty left in the world."

"That's not fair."

Aileen smiled and there was something of Titania's terrible resignation in it. "No, it is not."

"Do you know what will happen if I lift the barriers?" Lydia asked.

"We will survive," Aileen answered.

"By seducing Mortal children with Fae glamour? Or replacing them with a construct of twigs and heartache?"

"We are more than that," Aileen said. "And can be more, still. You said it yourself."

"Even Oberon understood the need to open our worlds to one another," Clive said. "There was a time when the Fae thrived and Mortals were honored guests in our courts. Before the feud between Lord and Lady splintered us."

"And you want me to start that quaint custom again. The custom that led to the Unbound." As it had led to her ephemeral namesake being snatched into Faerie so Oberon

could hide the Fae Lydia among a Mortal family. There had to be another way for them to live.

“If there were commerce between the worlds, we would all thrive,” Aileen said.

“Fae dealings are based on dreams, cobwebs, and stolen children,” Lydia said. Even in a world that had stopped believing in magic, the stories were there for everyone to hear, cautionary tales for unwary Mortals. Lydia had spent too many years as one to turn her back on them. Not even for the sake of her own life and whatever beauty existed in Faerie.

Arms crossed, the three of them stood at the points of an imaginary triangle. Frustrated power flared and sputtered out beneath their feet.

“Can you truly believe a Mortal realm bereft of all magic to be a good thing?” Clive asked gently.

“There’s magic and then there’s madness,” Lydia said. Titania’s was the most evident, but it had captured Oberon, too, not to mention Aeon, trapped and tortured in the maze for a time beyond memory.

“The power you claim as your birthright is not yours to do with as you wish,” Aileen said. “In their arrogance and pride, our king and queen forgot that. And we all paid the price.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Lydia said. If she did nothing, Faerie would fade. If she acted, she risked turning into what she had so effectively destroyed. And the urge to use Fae power was a growing temptation.

“You have very little time.”

Nothing changed in Aileen’s angular face, but fear laced her words. Lydia stepped closer and placed a hand on Aileen’s

sleeve. "What do you mean?"

"In the chaos after the battle, after I lost my place in Shadow, Isidore let me take shelter with the Unbound. While I healed, I listened. Deirdre and the Seneschal paid a visit. Can you guess why?"

Lydia stared past Clive and Aileen, to where Deirdre and the Seneschal had been sitting before her temper tantrum scattered the rest of the Fae from the grove. Their hatred and hunger had been palpable. The Unbound had found a way to pool their magics and control the darklings. Could the Seneschal do the same with the remnants of the Bright Court? Would they? "What about Shadow?"

Aileen shrugged. "It's likely the two seek allies across both courts. If you had taken our tithes when they were offered, you would have known this."

Her hand let go of Aileen's arm and she backed away. "I couldn't. I can't."

"And so your enemies profit by your reluctance and all of Faerie suffers."

Clive placed his warm hands on her shoulders. "At least open the way between the worlds, Lydia. They are expecting to push against your resistance. Don't give them anything to fight. Let them stumble."

"And what will that do to the Mortal world?"

"How much worse can it be than what you did to us?" He smiled and the fine lines that radiated out from the corners of his eyes looked like stars.

Lydia shivered as Aileen frowned. It could get a lot worse.

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