

Hollow Hill
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A curtain of passionflower vines barricades the entrance, so thick no light seeps through. I can hear them though; the melody of flutes and fiddles escapes their hollow hill, giving away their secrets. The cloying aroma of faerie wine fails to hide the coppery tang of blood.

‘Can I help you?’ a soft voice asks from behind me.

Gasping, I turn. My gaze rises to meet a paper-thin face. A breeze would knock him over. His slitted eyes hold me in place.

‘I’ve come to live among the faeries,’ I tell him, provoking laughter.

Circling me like a cat, he asks, ‘Do tell me, why would any sane being, human or other, wish to acquaint themselves with such vile creatures? With their trickery and half-truths, mischief and mayhem, bargains and bindings, one would think you’ve gone mad.’

‘Perhaps, but all the best people are.’

Cocking his head, he assesses me. Seeming to find what he wants, he flicks his hand, opening the passionflower vines, and stalks through them.

Without looking back, he waves his hand and asks, ‘Are you coming?’

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Darkness fills the tunnel, limiting my ability to see. It’s damp, and the smell of mildew permeates the air. I stumble into his back, not noticing he’s stopped. Steadying myself, I’m confused at the lump I feel at the base of his spine—a tail?

‘It would be in your best interest to not speak of your discovery.’

I mumble an agreeance.

I can hear the scrape of skin against dirt, then light explodes into the tunnel. Stepping through the door, I enter Hollow Hill.

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Music crafts a tale more hauntingly beautiful than any I’ve ever heard, and in the centre of the hall, a crowd of faeries dance around a bonfire that reaches the underside of the hill. The ground beneath their feet is worn smooth. Buffet tables line the walls, piled high with rich delicacies, from roasted vegetables to tea cakes, with casks of faerie wine at the ends of each table. It’s a revel.

He watches my face, a grin pulling at the corner of his mouth. ‘You may call me Killian.’

‘Oleander.’

Killian takes my hand. It’s cold despite the fire’s warmth. He leads me into the throng of revellers. Goblins, sprites, gentry, elves, and pixies move in time to the erratic beat. A compulsion to keep the beat with the closest Fae takes over me. My hand in Killian’s, we dance around the flames.

‘Why are you in Hollow Hill, Oleander?’

The question hits me hard. I’ve told no one of my plans. There’s no one who’d care, certainly not my foster parents.

‘To be lost in dreams and nightmares, to recite poetry under an apple tree, and to solve riddles with goblins. Humans have brought me nothing but despair, and I crave the endless nights of nothing.’ I sigh and continue. ‘When I was young, my mother would oft speak of the Fae and her time here, about the gentry who ensnared her heart.’ I glance up at him. ‘I wish to find my father.’

He’s stiller than a cat before it pounces on its prey. Only his eyes move. I know he’s taking in my silver eyes, platinum hair, and ears, delicately tipped with fur. A mirror of my sire, or so my mother used to say, yet never a mention of his name. There were stories though, of nights spent running through the woods and revels that would last for weeks, but when she found she was with child, she was exiled to the human world once more.

‘You’ll find nothing but trouble asking if any Fae sired a half-breed. They’ll find it insulting and likely punish you in ways worse than you can imagine.’ A waiter weaves past, and he takes a glass of faerie wine from the tray. ‘Drink,’ he commands.

Not wanting to disappoint, I do, swishing the sweet liquid around my mouth. It’s heady. Killian’s face stretches, distorting his expression, and his words slur. The fire turns poison green. Faeries jump into it and laugh. What were once delicious tea cakes are piles of mud, and the tables are walking. Everything’s mad.

Searching, I can no longer see Killian. The ground tilts and cracks open, lifting the Fae into the air. I giggle at their faces popping in and out of my vision, pulling faces back at them. Dizzily, I stumble over to the table, wine sloshing over the edges of the goblet and pour myself another glass. I drink, loving the way the serious voice in my head recedes to the edges, not scared of the beast that’s ready to come out and play. The beast is awash in silver flame, stalking back and forth in its cage, vibrating with energy.

My body buzzes. A crackle of energy fires along my arms, zapping down my fingers. The silver flame is a living thing inside me, and the beast is pushing against the bars in my head, wanting to escape. Fingers burning, a cold flame shoots out of them as the beast breaks free. Fae scream, rushing away from my fire, sobering me.

‘That was quite the show,’ Killian says, appearing beside me.

‘I wasn’t aware I had any power,’ I reply.

‘The silver flame is a rare gift. Indeed, only a select few possess it, and not much of it at that.’

A crowd gathers around us, watching, as if waiting for Killian’s reaction, willing it to be dramatic.

‘Un-ladies and un-gentlemen, please welcome Princess Oleander Whiteburn, my sister,’ he says, with a cutting smile.

Murmurs spread through Hollow Hill like the plague. *Did the Old King sire an illegitimate daughter? A half-breed?*

‘Pardon?’ I ask, jaw slack.

He looks down at me with a mocking grin. ‘That’s right, you’re my dear little sister, Princess of the Unseelie Court of Faerie. You’re the little indiscretion dear old Dad tried to keep secret, and it worked for a while. When your mother returned all those years ago, I killed her before she could announce your identity to the entire Court, and then I killed our father for his adultery. Now, I suggest that, unless you desire to end up the same way they did, you should leave.’

With his words, another piece of my heart dies. He killed her, not a car accident. ‘I challenge you to the throne,’ I say. It’s a rash thing to do, but I won’t back down, not knowing what he’s done to my mother.

Silence fills Hollow Hill; no one breathes. Shock flickers across his face, before he conceals it with boredom.

‘You challenge me? A prince of faerie, who is older than dirt. That’s idiocy, and no fool is fit to rule a court of Faerie.’

‘It seems fair, or are you frightened you may lose?’

Anger blooms on his face.

‘Fine. It shall be a battle of power, for any Court should have a powerful ruler. These are the rules: no outside involvement of any kind, and it is a battle to the death.’

Death seems better than humiliation and loneliness, so I accept his terms.

‘Then we begin.’

He catches me by surprise, throwing an orb of golden flame at me. I drop to the ground as the orb whooshes past, missing me by inches. Fae scream, the violence exciting them. Using a table to heave myself from the ground, I watch as he readies himself again, collecting energy to him. The ease with which he does it frustrates me.

I imitate his motions, clasping my hands together and will the energy into my palms. The beast is ready, waiting at the door to its cage. How do I let it out though? Too late, he's throwing again. I move, but his orb hits my shoulder. I scream at the pain, and the beast roars in outrage, shattering its cage.

Shoulder throbbing, a silver orb the size of an acorn grows in my palms. Looking up, I see him aiming again. He won't miss this time. I only have one chance. I stabilise the orb and throw. It hits him square in the chest. Dropping like a bag of stones, his head hits the ground, cracking.

The crowd cheers, not at all disappointed their prince is dead. Wicked glee spreads through me.

Me, the Queen of Hollow Hill.