



# The Seelie Seven

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ALL RIGHT, YOU MISERABLE CHANGELING-SPAWN CHUCKLEHEADS,” the Sergeant-Major barked, “you all know why you’re here. You’re each facing eternal fire—condemned to pay the Teind because of crimes you’ve committed against the Court.

“You’ve got one chance to save your worthless hides: Serve with distinction on this mission, and Her Majesty might just see fit to pardon you.”

Robin leaned over to Spike, standing next to her. She muttered through tight lips, “Didn’t you rent this movie a couple years ago?”

“Something you wanna share, Marshmallow?” the Sergeant-Major hovered in front of her face. He was typical military pixie scum: almost blue skin and translucent dragonfly wings, and fatigues crisp with starch.

“No,” she drawled.

The Sergeant-Major pointed a blue-tinged finger menacingly. He held the pose a moment, wings buzzing, then his hand retreated to pull the gingerroot he habitually chewed out of his mouth. He waved the root for emphasis as he talked. “You of all Seelie should pay attention, you depraved, over-privileged, white-wing crook. And you a direct descendent of one of the Royal family’s best servants.” He shifted his gaze to Spike. “And you! What are you, her lap-dog?”

Under normal circumstances, Spike would have turned invisible and high-cottontailed it. But expert guards staffed the compound and each prisoner wore a collar that kept him from using magic. Spike wasn’t used to close scrutiny, Robin knew, and his six-foot-two frame shuddered. Although the Sergeant-Major was a jumped-up garden faerie and about ten times smaller than Spike, Spike paled. His ears laid back.

“Wassamatta?” the sergeant taunted. “Not used to Fae being able to look you in the eye? Are you a pooka or a pussy? Eh?”

Spike bared his teeth. Robin understood: he didn't retreat from observation because he feared it; he avoided notice because a pooka backed into a corner found it difficult to suppress his feral side. It was part of his attraction, as far as she was concerned.

Sure enough, Spike in his agitation brought up paws to swipe at the Sergeant-Major. But the faerie beat his wings hard to fly out of reach easily.

"Nice try, but you telegraph like mad," the Sergeant-Major told him. The pride in the faerie's voice surprised Robin. He addressed them all again.

"I'm Sergeant-Major Milkweed. I've been given the task of transforming you sorry bunch of faerie-dust specks into a crack unit. There will be no screwing around, no attempts to escape. Any one of you tries to go back to your thieving, darn-near Unseelie ways will scupper the chances for all of you—you'll all go straight down to the pit. Got that?"



The motley group to Robin's left all grumbled half-heartedly.

"What?" Milkweed demanded. For a little pixie, he could sure make noise.

"Yes, Sergeant-Major!" Spike shouted along with the others.

Milkweed flitted back into Robin's face. "That goes for you too, Sidhe-devil."

"Jealous?" Robin's lip curled.

Milkweed snorted. "All right, Bonnie, Clyde," he continued, bringing in Spike, "and the rest of you. Across the compound, there's a well. In the well, there's—"

"An egg, and in the egg is the heart of a giant," one of the Fae on the end drawled, sounding bored. "Sergeant-Major, do you think the Unseelie are still so unimaginative? After all these years?"

Milkweed chewed on his gingerroot. Robin could have sworn a faint smile crossed his face as he flew down the line and dropped to the speaker's eye level.

"Well, well, Doc Halloween: the Summerlands' most infamous dwarf?"

"We prefer Svartalfheimrs or Dvergar."

"Like I give a plague rat's ass," Milkweed told him. "You have an objection to the exercise, Doc?"

The dwarf—Dvergr—sniffed haughtily. "Aside from the fact that it's trite, overdone, cliché, and useless, being completely inapplicable to our situation and, I strongly suspect, our mission, none whatsoever, Sergeant-Major."

"That's where you're wrong, Halloween," Milkweed returned. "I'll decide what's related to your mission and what ain't." He backed wind to give himself a better view of the seven of them. "It so happens that the Unseelie don't seem to have learned many new tricks when it counts, even if they've changed their...their MO's in the last two or three centuries. We have between this new moon and the next one to train for our objective. That objective is to infiltrate an Unseelie waystation and retrieve an item that was stolen from the Queen recently."

"And the item holds her heart?" the Sidhe on Spike's left spoke for the first time. She wasn't as tall as Robin or Spike, and her coloring was closer to a ripe peach than the white of Robin's skin. "Sweet. I've always wanted to be Queen."