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The Last King of Faerie

CASSANDRA CLARE

THE WICKED POWERS BOOK ONE



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Prologue

"Are we lost?" Drusilla Blackthorn peered across the darkened field toward the horizon. "Tell me we're not lost."

Her roommate Thais frowned at the hand-scrawled map she held in her hand. "I'm not sure. Check your direction rune."

Dru sighed and looked at the inside of her wrist, where she'd applied a True North rune earlier that evening. In the late afternoon, really. Hours ago.

Neither she nor Thais had expected this particular activity to take as long as it had. The assignment had sounded simple enough. Usually Dru was delighted when the Shadowhunter Academy students got out of the classroom and did field exercises. She didn't mind studying, but she wasn't like her brothers and sisters—every single one of them excelled at memorizing facts: dates, languages,

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kinds of weapons. Dru liked to see and touch things, to hear stories about them. To understand how they worked. That was how she learned.

This year, her third at Shadowhunter Academy, they had Downworlder studies, which was split into quarters covering vampires, werewolves, warlocks, and faeries. They were on faeries now: their history—which Dru liked, as history was always stories—and the various kinds of faerie nobility and traditions, which she liked less. Faeries had both a lot of traditions and a lot of noble houses and ranks and there was no understanding them; they just had to be memorized.

She and Thais had both been pleasantly surprised to walk into class today and find Luke Garroway, the head of the Academy, there, carrying a stack of maps and instructing them all to get into fighting gear and meet him outside the farmhouse to find out what their assignment was. Luke may have been passing out gear, but he was in his usual uniform of jeans and a thick plaid shirt.

Dru always liked getting into gear. There was something about buttoning and zipping herself into the close-fitting black fabric and heavy boots that made her feel a part of all the Shadowhunters who had gone before her. It helped that she'd brought her mother's gear jacket to school with her—she and her mom had been shaped the same, curvier and rounder than most Nephilim—as wearing it made her feel closer to Eleanor.

Thais always looked glamorous in her gear. She was tall and rangy, with long russet-brown hair streaked with gold where the sun had lightened it. She had brown skin and freckles on her nose, and Dru often thought they looked like exact opposites—Dru kept her pale skin out of the sun, and her choppy hair (she'd cut it to her shoulders recently, with a pair of dull scissors) was dyed black as ink, with two deep blue streaks. Where Thais was slim, she was

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curved; where Thais was tall, Dru had resigned herself to being five foot three forever.

In the ways that mattered, though, they matched perfectly. They both loved horror movies, staying up late, sarcastic humor, inside jokes, and every part of learning to be a Shadowhunter. Even the brutal ones, like the bruising training: learning to take punches, to fall without breaking bones, to climb ropes using the strength of their arms until their bodies went nerveless and they slid to the ground only to do it again a second later.

For Dru, it was a way to forget everything that haunted her. For Thais, it was a way to prove herself. She hated failing anything—as did Dru, which was probably the reason she and Thais had started Shadowhunter Academy earlier than most. Thais was scowling hard right now as she glared around at the unchanging view, dark fields bordered by shadowy hedges, trees spreading black branches against the night sky, the faint moon hanging over the distant hills. Somehow they'd wandered far enough from the farmhouse that it was no longer visible; more worrying, Dru couldn't see—or hear—any of their classmates, either.

"Faeries tread lightly on the land," Luke had said when he'd explained their assignment. "They leave few signs behind, but training can help you spot them. You've been learning those signs these past weeks. Now you're going to go out and begin your search."

"And if we catch a faerie, then what?" It was Mason Hardcastle, generally considered to be the most popular of the third-year boys. He had fine features and always seemed to be wearing a cashmere sweater thrown casually over his shoulders. "Trap it, bring it back?"

"You're not hunting faeries," Luke said. "They've left clues for you to find. You're looking for signs of the Fair Folk, not faeries themselves."

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"What kind of signs?" demanded Paige Ashdown, looking as if she found the whole business tiresome.

"Faeries tend to work with things that already exist in the natural world," piped up Jane Cartwright. Dru shot her an encouraging smile—she'd always liked Jane, who was often shy. "So we want to look for things that seem like they belong in nature, but are unusually beautiful or delicately shaped. And we should handle them carefully."

"That's right," Luke said. He gave them all a measured look. "The local faeries are cooperating with this exercise. Don't make them sorry they agreed to help."

Mason muttered something under his breath, and Paige sniggered. Dru gestured rudely at Mason as Luke explained that they were going to split up into groups of two or three and comb the grounds—the Academy was located on Luke's farm in upstate New York, and it was more than sixty acres, so it wasn't a small area—until seven p.m., when they'd have to return to the farmhouse. Any sign of faeries they saw was supposed to be collected if possible, or noted down on their group's map if not.

Dru and Thais didn't need to ask each other; they knew already they'd be a team. Thais turned around so Dru could shove the map into her backpack, holding the mass of her wavy hair up and out of the way so it wouldn't get caught in the zipper.

Mason Hardcastle sauntered up just as Dru had finished with the pack and was giving Thais's shoulder a pat to let her know she was all set.

"Maybe you two should change it up a little," he said. He lowered his voice. "The three of us are the best here. If we team up, we'll win."

"What, you don't think your friends are the best?" Dru inquired

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archly, shooting a dark look toward Paige, who was glaring in their direction. She'd known Paige back in Los Angeles—the Ashdowns had been friendly with the Blackthorns, though Paige herself had always been unpleasant. She'd mocked Dru for her clothes, her weight, and her enthusiasm for horror movies, and been even crueler toward Dru's brother Ty. She'd never apologized for any of it. No, Dru didn't have a lot of time for Paige Ashdown.

"They're fine," Mason drawled. "But you're better."

"It's an exercise, Mason, not a contest," said Thais, turning around. "There's no winning."

"There's always winning," Mason said, but he wasn't looking at Thais. He was looking at Dru. "Come on. Let me help you."

Dru zipped her gear jacket up. "Go away, Mason."

He grinned. "Drusilla," he said. "Don't pretend you're impervious to my charms."

Dru shrugged. "But it's true. I'm impervious. I cannot be perved." She looked at Thais, ignoring Mason's narrow glare. "Should we get going?"

Thais winked. "*Vamos.*"

Dru hurried to join the crowd of students on the dirt road that curved through the fields. Thais, beside her, was silent until they'd clambered over a fence and were heading away from the others through waist-high grass.

"Mason wants you to be his girlfriend so bad," Thais said, looking amused.

"No. He doesn't." Dru had taken out her stele and was using the tip of the instrument to apply runes—True North, Awareness, Clarity, Knowledge. "I made out with him at the end-of-term party last year and the next time I saw him, the first thing he said was that it hadn't meant anything."

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"I know," Thais said, because of course she did. "But just because he said that doesn't mean—"

"Yes, it does." Dru snorted. "Guys like that—they want to make out with a girl who looks like me, but they'd never admit to their friends they actually liked her. So he just lurks around, hoping he can drag me off into a closet somewhere for a furtive groping session. Lurk, lurk, lurk. He's like a . . . a sex crocodile."

"A what?" Thais laughed.

Dru couldn't keep her mouth from twitching into a smile. "Crocodiles lurk underwater, waiting until their prey gets close enough for them to strike. Haven't you seen *Rogue Crocodile?*"

"No one but you has seen *Rogue Crocodile.*" Thais did draw the line at some horror movies, especially the bloodier ones. As far as Dru was concerned, there were no lines to draw. Nothing scared her. Nothing in a movie, anyway.

That had all been hours ago, before sunset. Now the moon was a sliver in the sky, and the spring fields that spread out around them were so dark that even Dru's Night Vision rune wasn't totally dispelling the shadows.

The trees whispered eerily in the breeze, making Dru shiver. Not that she was scared, she reminded herself. She was—worried. Where was everyone else? Why couldn't she hear them? Surely the other students were also blundering around the countryside, searching for signs of the Fair Folk? Cairns of stones, circular rings of mushrooms, moss growing in unusual patterns, the odd behavior of animals, especially birds . . .

Luke had said there would be evidence for them to find, but so far they hadn't seen even a single mushroom growing in a suspect way, or a blown dandelion clock. In fact, they'd found sweet fuck-all, as Dru's friend Kit liked to say. He'd been living in England for

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the past four years and had developed a whole new set of idioms, which Dru enjoyed teasing him about.

She glanced down. The True North rune stood out stark on her wrist. She turned her body, rotating until the rune emitted a tiny spark that hovered in the air for a moment before vanishing. "That way." Dru pointed. "That's north."

"All right." Thais squinted at her map. "I think that's this. Powell's Field. After that, we leave Luke's property." She sighed. "I say we check this area out, and if we find nothing, we head back. If we fail this assignment, we fail it."

"All right." Dru glanced up at the sky. "I'll take the west half of the field. You take the east. We can meet in the middle."

Thais looked dubious. "Is it a good idea to separate?"

"There's no danger. We're on Academy grounds," Dru said. "I'll see you in five."

She tugged gently at a dangling lock of her friend's hair, and headed off into the shadows.

She hadn't gone far before she started to regret leaving Thais behind. The field wasn't cleared—it was rocky and pitted, and the low heels of her boots caught on the uneven ground. She paused to apply a Surefooted rune, but that didn't help with the brambles that scraped at her as she reached the field's edge, where overgrown hedges ran wild under gnarled oak trees.

Dru moved farther into the shadows, keeping an eye out for clusters of four-leaf clovers or signs of faerie circles. The wind had risen, and rattled the leaves overhead in a way that sounded uncomfortably like bones clacking together. She was about to throw up her hands and trek back to find Thais when she glimpsed a strange shadow—a wide opening in the trunk of an oak tree.

She moved closer. It was an arch-shaped hollow at the tree's

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base, surely too symmetrical to be natural. Dru dropped to her knees and peered at it. She could see nothing but darkness, but it was an odd sort of darkness—a darkness that shifted, almost wriggled a bit . . .

Julian would definitely tell me not to do this, she thought, and stuck her head into the hole in the tree.

It turned out the darkness was peculiarly shallow. Perhaps an inch of blackness, which gave way to an illuminated tunnel inside. A tunnel that sloped gently downward, its walls veined with tree roots, a soft light pulsing from a torch set into the wall. The torchlight had a pale, darting quality, like a will-o'-the-wisp dancing through branches.

Faerie light, Dru thought. Her heart was beating rapidly. All she had to do was crawl into the tunnel and retrieve the torch—it was incontrovertible proof of faerie presence. With her hand on the seraph blade at her waist, she inched forward, the dry crunch of meadow grass giving way to packed earth.

The hole in the tree was narrow, but with a wiggle, she was through, and standing up inside the tunnel. A leaf had caught in her hair; she shook her head impatiently and made her way over to the torch.

It was clearly of faerie workmanship, delicately carved of pale gray stone, burning with a smokeless flame. As she reached for it, the lick of fire flared up, illuminating the tunnel with a momentary daylight glare.

The light only lasted for a moment—the flame sputtered low to a dull red glow. Dru found herself standing in near darkness, though her Night Vision rune allowed her to see—not as well as if there were light, but enough to make out that the tunnel was suddenly full of movement. Then she heard a sound. An eerie, high-pitched repetitive sound, like mirthless giggling.

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The hair rose on the back of her neck. She wrenched the torch free of the wall and began to retreat toward the tunnel entrance.

But there didn't seem to be a tunnel entrance anymore. The underground corridor stretched away behind her, the walls bulging with roots and vines. There was no sign of an archway leading out into the night. She was trapped.

She wondered if this was what had happened to her friend (and sometimes crush) Jaime Rosales. He'd been sent on a mission to Faerie two years ago and had never come back. Dru suspected that he was still alive—she knew Faerie had many ways of tricking and trapping a person.

You know better than to do this. Dru couldn't help but hear Julian's voice in her head, a little scolding. *The problem, Dru, isn't that you don't recognize when something you want to do is a bad idea. The problem is that you go ahead and do it anyway.*

She cursed silently, imagining every bad word she could think of and some she was pretty sure she'd just made up. Then she sighed, pressed her back against the wall, and began to make her way slowly down the tunnel. It had to go somewhere, though she knew it might simply lead her deeper into Faerie.

Because she was definitely in Faerie now. She recognized it from Julian's and Emma's descriptions of the Land Under the Hill. She could feel the change in atmosphere they had spoken of. Similar to how air in old cathedrals tasted of cold stone and age, the air here suddenly smelled different, sharp and edged and green, not like a garden but like the cut stems of plants. There was something strangely familiar about it.

Familiar, but also ominous. *Things* seemed to move in the shadows, and she heard again that strange, childlike giggling. She pushed off the dirt wall and began to move as quietly as she could, away from the laughter.