

# ROGUE ASSASSINS

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MODERN FAE NOVELLA

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MODERN FAE SERIES

## ROGUE ASSASSINS

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*To all the little sisters, especially mine.*



I WAITED UNTIL DUSK TO TRANSPORT MYSELF FROM THE coastal Roman village I'd chosen to call home to the Faerie Queen's cottage deep in the forests in Northumbria. The sun had already dropped below the treetops, creating long shadows that stretched across the clearing, striping the wide expanse of mossy ground and the patch of garden in front of the tiny four room structure where I'd grown up. It was almost mid-summer, and ripe plums weighed down the gnarly limbs of the short trees. Stalks of lavender bowed to me on the breeze as bright red roses bobbed on the bushes and the leaves rustled their welcome. The calm in the clearing gave no hint that the new moon gathering of the Faerie Queen's Court was about to begin.

Shadows moving across the windows of the cottage caught my eye. Some of my sisters had already arrived. I hurried to join them, nearly reaching the edge of the garden when a panther prowled out of the woods, padding along on silent paws to intercept me. I paused, recognizing the creature. In a blink, the animal shifted form, replaced by a tall female with short curly hair that accentuated her delicate pointed ears.

"Sorcha! How does it feel to finally be of age?" My sister

Maera pulled me into a hug, then held me at arms length to study my face.

As the youngest of seven High Fae sisters, I was always the last to do everything. Our mother walked the earth for over a thousand years before departing to rest with the Ancients. After completing only twenty-five turns around the sun, I was barely considered a full adult.

“No different,” I said.

Her lighthearted laugh filled the clearing. “That’s what we all said when we were in your place.” She winked at me. “Just wait. You’ll see tonight.”

My heart sped at the thought I’d finally have a title and a responsibility that fit my status as the High Fae sister of the queen. I’d taken my Oath to serve my eldest sister at her coronation. When she inherited our mother’s crown, I was still a Faeling. So, despite my Oath, I’d never been given any official position on the Court. Perhaps that would change tonight.

I followed Meara through the garden and through the already open front door. Inside, the space had been transformed. Chains of lilies hung from the ceiling. Thick candles had been set in all the windows, ready to be lit at sunset. A garland of lilac had been draped across the mantle. Every surface was covered in rose petals, and tiny glowing orbs hovered in the air.

My eldest sisters, the Faerie Queen Godda and her Commander of the Guard, Flida, shared this cottage now. They’d moved in with me to take our mother’s place after Godda’s coronation. Both had survived over fifty circles of the sun by the time they took responsibility for raising me. I loved them with all my heart, but that hadn’t stopped me from moving out on my own soon after my tenth circle. Fae aged quickly for the first ten years, then almost imperceptibly after that. I’d been in my adult form for nearly fifteen years, waiting for the moment the others would finally stop treating me like a Faeling.

My sister Isleen welcomed Meara and I as we entered the cottage. She wrapped an arm around me and tugged me close. "Our baby's all grown. Just look at you." She smoothed my hair back from my face and placed a kiss on my forehead before releasing me. There was no way I could have changed significantly since she'd last seen me, even though she'd been around less frequently since our mother faded.

Niamh wandered into the front room next. "Indeed. Just now I almost mistook our little hawk for Godda. They could be twins."

My heart warmed with her praise. Godda was known for her beauty. Each of my sisters had a different sire because male Fae could only sire one Faeling. Our mother had chosen her pairings with an eye to building alliances between the various Fae factions, instead of choosing only one to take as a mate. Godda's sire and mine were twins, so it made sense that I resembled her more than I did my other sisters, but I didn't dare to hope I'd be half as beautiful as our queen.

"Is she here, yet?" I asked.

Niamh and Isleen exchanged a look. Isleen pursed her lips and shook her head, causing her springy coils to bounce.

Before she could answer more fully, Rionach burst in through the cottage door. "Am I late?" She twirled the stem of a garden rose between her fingers, using her magic to shed the thorns before sliding it behind the point of her ear. I admired the barely unfurled flower, now resting against her temple, noting that the color matched the red of her lips almost exactly.

"You're right on time," Meara said, crossing to the window to peek outside. "It appears we're waiting for Godda." She turned and leaned against the wall next to the window with her arms crossed. "And, it looks like Issie and Nia know something about why she's late."

"Oh good. Just in time for the gossip, then." Rionach danced

through the room, planting kisses on cheeks, and saving me for last.

“Perhaps we should wait.” Isleen shot another look across the room to Niamh. “Sorcha—”

I cut her off. “I’m an adult and a member of Godda’s Court just like the rest of you.”

“She has a point.” Rionach grinned. “And I don’t want to wait. I want to hear the gossip.”

Flida entered through the door to the kitchen. “Oh, good. You’re all here.”

“Except Godda,” Rionach said. “And Issie was about to tell us why that is...” She raised an eyebrow at Isleen.

“Godda will be here soon.” Flida set a tray of fresh fruit on the table. “She’s hunting.”

Niamh snorted. “I suppose that’s one way to say it.” She conjured two goblets and handed one to Rionach and one to Flida. Then she conjured two more as she made her way over to Meara, who waved a hand and filled the empty vessels with wine. Her sire had been an Elemental, and she’d inherited some water and earth magic in addition to her High Fae gifts.

I searched each of my sister’s faces in turn. Their eyes danced with mischief and some shared amusement as they sipped their drinks. “Has Godda chosen a mate, then?” I asked.

Meara giggled. “Hardly.”

My cheeks burned and my fingers curled into fists at my sides. “Someone better tell me what’s going on, or I’m leaving.”

Niamh scoffed. “Oh don’t pout. If you want Issie and Flee to treat you like an adult, then you’d better stop acting like a spoiled Faeling.” She took a long sip and savored her wine.

I glared at her, hating that she was right, and forced my hands and face to adopt a more mature demeanor. Then I responded in a calm and careful tone. “If I’m an adult, then I want what you’re having, and I want to know what Meara finds so amusing.”

“Oh, me too! I’ll take a drink and a laugh,” said a voice from behind me. I turned and found our eldest sister framed by the doorway. The last rays of sunlight lit her golden hair as it tumbled over her shoulders and down to her waist. Tiny flowers nestled in the waves as though she’d walked through a rain of blooms.

“See?” Flida pushed a goblet into my hand. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Were you worried about me, little hawk?” Godda cupped my face in her hands and kissed my cheeks. “You’re so sweet.”

“Flida said you were hunting, but she’s Commander of the Queen’s Guard. I thought that was her job.” I tried to keep my voice from shifting to a whine as I explained my concern.

“Oh, I see.” Godda’s lips curled up into a grin. “Not that sort of hunting, pet.” She wound one arm around my waist as her other hand received a goblet from Flida. The attention from Godda, the closest thing I had to a mother, reassured me and made the tingle of suspicion that something was wasn’t quite right easier to ignore.

“My queen,” Flida dipped her head. “Shall we begin?”

“You needn’t call me that here.” Godda’s pink lips twisted into a brief scowl. “Here we’re just sisters.”

“You’re always our queen.” Flida’s eyes fixed with Godda’s conveying some additional meaning that I longed to understand.

Godda waved Flida’s intensity away. “Yes, yes. All right. Just perhaps we can do without the formalities for the evening. It’s Sorcha’s night tonight.” She smiled at me. “Are you ready little hawk?”

“I wish someone would tell me what all the fuss is about.” Her question rekindled the hope that she was ready to finally give me a title and an official position on her Court.

“Then let us begin.” Godda led me into the center of the group as the others formed a ring around us.

When I glanced at the faces surrounding me, I realized they’d assembled in order of age. Flida next to Isleen, then Meara,

Nianh, and Rionach. They'd left a space for Godda to stand between Flida and Rionach, completing the circle.

"I call this meeting of the High Court to order." A crown of twisted golden vines appeared in Godda's hand, and she set it on her head. "Tonight we welcome our sister, Sorcha, into the ranks of the High Fae and celebrate her coming of age as she accepts new responsibilities, befitting the beloved sister of the Faerie Queen."

My heart pounded with excitement. Meara had been right. This was it.

Flida took a half step forward. "Sorcha of Maeve, are you prepared to take your place on Godda's Court?"

I calmed my excited nerves and nodded.

"Then, I will bestow you with a title suiting your nature." Godda glanced around the circle before revealing her choice. "As my only sibling who shares my Rogue blood, I have decided to make you my Master of Illusions."

My breath caught in my throat. The only thing I valued about my Rogue blood was that I shared it with Godda. Other than that, I wanted nothing to do with that faction. If I had, then I would have begun training with my sire and my kin, learning how to use my Rogue abilities. But, I'd avoided the Rogues and shunned them, and now Godda wanted me to be her Master of Illusions, responsible for maintaining the mirages that kept humans from wandering into the Fae Forest.

I reminded myself to breathe. Six pairs of eyes watched me as I dropped to one knee before my queen. I told myself the important part was that she was finally granting me an official position on her court. I bowed my head over her extended hand. "I vow to serve you loyally so long as I walk the earth."

As I kissed her knuckles, I said a silent prayer to the Ancients that she'd change her mind about my title.

“Rise, Sorcha of Maeve, Sworn Master of Illusions.” Her fingers gripped mine, and she pulled me to my feet.

My sisters closed in around me, crushing me in their embrace. Meara broke away to open a window, and called to the pixies hiding in the surrounding forest. At her command, they began to play. The sweet trill of their flutes drifting in on the breeze. Meara waved a hand and our goblets splashed full of liquid once again. Then, with Godda in the lead, we pranced out into the moonlight to dance among the flowers in the garden. The tiny glowing orbs followed us out onto the lawn, dangling in the sky like low hanging stars.

I edged closer to Godda, hoping I might whisper my words of concern into her ear so the others wouldn't overhear. But, Isleen spun her out of reach, and Rionach grabbed my hand, twisting me in the opposite direction. As the gnomes joined in with their drums, the tempo increased. We drained our goblets and started to spin. Starlight swirled above my head. My braid tapped a rhythm against my back in response to the one my bare feet beat into the warm earth.

Then the music stopped suddenly, and I froze. When I regained my balance, I realized we were surrounded by men on horseback. Humans. Their mounts huffed and tossed their heads as they stomped through the delicate garden blooms. One with dark eyes and an angular jaw kicked his horse into motion, scattering Meara and Niamh who stood closest to him. He rode straight for Godda, who stared at him from the center of the garden.

Flida rushed to Godda's side, only just missing her as the human lifted our queen off her feet and up onto the saddle with him. In a flurry of hoofbeats, they were gone. All of them. My heart lurched as my world shifted. Humans in the Fae forest. Impossible.

We stared after them, until Meara broke the silence with her laughter.

“Is that him?” Niamh asked.

“Must be,” Meara said before bursting into another fit of giggles.

“We need to go after her.” I closed the short distance between me and Flida. I’d nearly reached her before Godda had been scooped up and carried away. I set a hand on Flida’s shoulder when she didn’t respond.

She shook her head. “She’ll be back.”

“But—”

“You’ll see, little hawk. Someday, you’ll meet someone and your brain will go straight to your loins like our dear sister’s apparently has done.” Isleen exhaled an annoyed sigh as she plopped down on the garden bench, just outside the cottage.

Niamh and Meara danced, holding hands and spinning toward the hedges, singing. “Hunter or hunted, which will it be?” They laughed and skipped as though nothing at all was the matter.

“Flida?” I asked. My fingers pressed harder, forcing her to turn and face me. “Are you sure?”

Rionach laid her arm across my shoulders. “He’s just a plaything. You’ll see. She’ll set him in his place and be back by sunrise.”

Flida scowled. “Perhaps Rio’s right, and she’ll be back with the dawn.” She bent to retrieve a discarded goblet from the ground and used her elemental magic to fill it with water pulled from the air, but didn’t drink.

If Rionach was right, why had the human come here with a band of hunters? Something wasn’t right about this, and I didn’t plan to wait when Godda might be in danger.

Niamh and Meara raced past us. They’d changed to their animal forms. Meara’s panther chased Niamh’s fox around the

garden, swatting at her until Niamh doubled back, darting around Meara's legs causing the panther to tumble to the ground. Niamh scurried to grab hold of the fur on the back of Meara's neck, tugging at the scruff as though she planned to drag Meara off like a misbehaving cub.

"I can't believe you're all acting as though this is normal." I stalked off in the direction the human had ridden, but I didn't get far before a panther and a fox blocked my path, fur standing on end and teeth bared.

"If you won't go after her, at least let me," I said, staring them down.

Niamh transformed first. "You should wait until morning. Really. Have you never had a lover?" Her lips twisted into a scolding frown.

The fact that I hadn't was no business of theirs. "Why are you so sure he's her lover?"

"I've seen them," Niamh said.

"Seen them where?" Perhaps this was what she'd told the others and why she'd been exchanging those odd looks with Isleen when I arrived.

"In the forest." She plucked a broken sprig of lavender from a nearby bush and twisted it between her long fingers. "I stumbled on Godda 'hunting' one day. I've heard that Rogues need humans to feed their magic, but I'm fairly certain there was nothing magical about what those two were doing."

"Did she see you?" Meara asked after transforming back into her Fae form.

"A herd of angry gnomes could have stomped through that glade and those two wouldn't have noticed." Niamh's words set Meara on another fit of bubbly laughter.

"That's enough." Isleen's sharp voice cut off Meara's giggles. "Come help me prepare the feast."

One by one, my sisters returned to the cottage until only Flida

remained. “Come, little hawk. The evening’s not over, yet. You’ll need to transform for this next ritual.”

My desire to trust in their confidence warred with the feeling in my gut that told me Godda needed our help. I wanted to believe she’d be back in the morning, but my intuition warned me that this wasn’t some lovers’ quarrel. These humans were dangerous.

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Elizabeth Menozzi is an award-winning writer of science fiction and fantasy with romance. A former Midwestern girl, she currently resides on Orcas Island with her husband. In her spare time she is a competitive swimmer, reluctant runner, and devourer of books.



