

The Wild Hunt

by Naomi P. Cohen, ...

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Fog curled around Ciaran as he ran for his life. His legs ached and his lungs burned with the exertion, but he forced himself to move even faster. The baying of the Wild Hunt grew even closer behind him.

Ciaran's fear spiked, and he wheeled around abruptly and dashed across the road, directly in front of an approaching carriage.

The driver cursed and yanked hard on the reins. The horses screamed and tossed their heads while they plunged to the side.

The carriage missed Ciaran by scant inches. The force of its passing buffeted him, and the horses' hooves rang in his ears, but not nearly loud enough to drown out the howling. His tactic hadn't slowed the Hunt at all.

Ciaran sprinted into the nearest alleyway, desperate to find cover. The walls loomed over him on either side like a tomb, pressing in on him and making it more difficult to gasp in air. He squeezed his eyes closed, lowered his head, and charged onward.

A bark sounded directly behind him. Ciaran cursed and ducked. His form shrank instinctively. He darted forward in the guise of a black cat, a Cait Sidhe, the white markings at his throat and the tip of his tail nearly glowing in the darkness. His fur stood on end along his back, and his paws pounded the pavement urgently.

A fence blocked his way. Without hesitation, Ciaran surged up and over it, hissing as the iron burned his paws but sped onward by the jaws that snapped closed just short of his tail. He landed on all fours and continued fleeing.

The howls rose in volume as the Hunt came up to the fence, and then the sounds changed into jeers and barking laughter.

"Yeah, you just keep running, fur ball!" a voice shouted over the clamor. "Come in our territory again, and we'll tear you apart!"

Sophia stood under the eaves of a flower shop and lovingly drew her bow across the strings of the violin, playing harmony with the steady thrum of rain against the wood over her and the bustling New York street.

Over the years, she often wished for wings that she could fly away with. As a girl, her violin provided those wings. Now the music wasn't enough. That couldn't have been more apparent as she poured her soul into her violin for the indifferent pedestrians, simply hurrying by, their faces obscured with hats, and scarves, and pulled-up coats. The old fantasy came to mind and made her bow falter.

She lowered the instrument and for a time simply stood, watched them bustle by, and listened to the unfamiliar words flowing from their mouths. A few cast her odd looks, standing there with a violin held silently.

She didn't blame these people for their unfaltering steps. The storm made the day dreary and gray. Rain fell through the morning, and as the temperature dropped, it turned to sleet. It was relatively dry under the eaves, but it certainly made it unlikely anyone would stop. They continued to stroll by, all shades of brown and gray and black, blending in with the rain and clouds.

Even understanding this, bitterness choked Sophia. She used to play in the grand parlors of Venice. Her music, poetry, and wit entertained nobility. She couldn't believe she now stood on this sidewalk playing for her food day to day.

A man passed her and, like some of the other pedestrians, glanced curiously at her. They paid her more attention now when she wasn't playing. Sophia glared after the man and purposefully tapped her foot three times against the sidewalk as the creaking of carriage wheels grew louder. She flicked her fingers at the passing carriage then leaned slightly out into the rain, eager to see what would happen. The man and several other pedestrians were only a few feet away when the carriage rushed by and sent up a wave of water that doused them.

The sight gave Sophia vindictive pleasure as she raised her violin once more to her chin. This time, an Irish jig flowed from the strings: a fast tempoed and cheerful tune she bartered with an Irishman to teach her since coming to New York. She couldn't play it with the emotion of the classical music, but it might cheer her up.

The black cat with a lick of white fur at his throat that had been skulking by the trash bins for a little while darted across her feet while a knot of men walked by. Several coins clattered into her violin case, striking against something heavier.

Sophia hissed and jerked the violin away from her chin, outraged this piece attracted attention that her more passionate music failed to. Then she caught sight of the watch, and her anger faded. She needed to swallow her pride. It wouldn't keep her fed or pay her rent.

She pocketed the coins and stared at the silver watch, bright against the emerald green velvet lining her violin case. It was a fine piece, engraved with the American eagle on the front. She glanced at the retreating men and traced the silver etching. She popped the watch open and frowned. It was later than she had thought. She remembered the clocks of the Venetian parlors with longing. The coins would be enough for a meal and her overdue rent. The watch she would keep until she needed money badly enough to barter it.

Ciaran watched the violinist disappear into the mass of people on her way to somewhere warm and dry. In his human form, the Cait Sidhe would've grinned. His paws still itched with the desire to dance to the jig. Instead, he crouched down and fluffed his dark fur up against the chill of the wind.

"What are you doing?" The rough voice that spoke suddenly behind him made Ciaran leap several feet in the air. He landed facing the man, his fur standing on end along his spine, his claws out, and his mouth opened in a spitting hiss. His tail lashed once, and then he sat back on his haunches, regarding the man with disdainful green eyes.

The man was fair-skinned, with ginger hair under his hat and freckles spotting his nose and around his eyes. Ciaran recognized him instantly, both by his face and the magic that wrapped the fey like an invisible coat.

The Cait Sidhe turned and stalked stiff-legged down the alleyway.

"You are going to get yourself into trouble, Ciaran," he said conversationally, following a few feet behind. "I heard you picked some pockets in the Wild Hunt's territory last night. Please don't tell me that is what you just dropped in that musician's violin case."

"It is none of your business, Enda," Ciaran hissed and jumped up on a metal bin. "I will not get in over my head. I am going to avoid their streets for a few months. The Wild Hunt will find someone else to bark about and lose interest."

Enda crossed his arms. "And if they come to our court because of this? Your affiliation is not a secret, Ciaran. Our Queen might turn you out for provoking them."

A shiver went down Ciaran's spine at the very suggestion, and he glared balefully at the man.

"Or they might go after the woman. The coins and watch you gave her have your scent on them," Enda added, an amused smile forming. "Is that your game?"

Ciaran leapt from the trash bin, changed his form mid-leap, and landed on two feet. He stood almost a foot taller than Enda, and he glared down at the other man. "I am not playing a game with this mortal. Fly away, Enda," he said, sticking his hands in the pockets of his pants. "You are irritating. Tell the Queen I am going to lay low until the Hunt loses interest."

Enda sighed. "I am not your messenger. The Queen will be less inclined to turn you out if you tell her yourself. She might even let you stay with her until it blows over. Triona has always been fond of the Cait Sidhe in the city."

"I am not going to the court," Ciaran said shortly and strolled away, wiping mud off the sides of his shoes against the trash bins he passed. "Goodbye, Enda."

"Do not be a fool! I do not want to see you get killed!" Enda called after him. Ciaran didn't look back but left the alleyway and sauntered down the street. He paused at a tenement building and looked up.

Ciaran took a deep breath, and a smile touched his lips. He could smell the violinist. A pleasant, foreign scent: something spicy and sweet, like a flower; quite refreshing among the unpleasant odors of the city. His eyes lingered on the window on the third floor, and then he strolled on, a smile on his lips and Enda's warnings forgotten.

Sophia felt wonderful for the first time in several weeks as she ascended the stairs of the tenement building. A loaf of bread, so fresh that it warmed her hand, enticed her with its scent, and coins jangled in her skirt's pocket as she walked. She hopped over the third step from the top of the rickety staircase so that it didn't creak and give her away. She reached the landing at the top of the stairs, knocked on the building owner's door, and smiled with the satisfaction of seeing him surprised by her presence.

The landlord had been tall once, but now he stooped and leaned heavily on his cane. His face was withered and lined with a permanent scowl that made him look like a bulldog. "Sophia," he greeted gruffly with a heavy English accent. "Do you have the rent?"

"Yes." Sophia eagerly dug the coins out of her pocket. She extended her hand, but the landlord didn't remove his hands from his cane. His eyes wandered to the silver watch and chain wrapped around her violin case.

"Ah, good." He nodded his approval and unclamped his gnarled fingers from the cane, turning his hand palm upward so that Sophia could drop the coins into his palm. "This is late, you know," he said, half turning to go back into his room. "Start entertaining more men so that you can pay on time next month. You didn't bring one man up those stairs this month. I don't care if you want to entertain them elsewhere, but get the rent on time."

Sophia's lips compressed. "I'm not a..." Her voice faltered as she struggled to think of the words in English to explain. She didn't know of any American equivalent to Venetian courtesans. Anger burned in her at the suggestion that she was anything like the garishly painted women she saw on street corners in the evenings.

Her face reddened with that fury, and the old man huffed. "No reason to be modest, girl," he said. "I have plenty of your like living here. If you're late again and I don't hear the stairs creak with you bringing guests up to your room, I might have to reconsider our contract."

He closed the door before she could reply. She kicked the wood spitefully, and before she lowered her foot, she heard the old man grunt as he stumbled. This didn't give her the satisfaction causing the pedestrians to be splashed did earlier, though.

Sophia marched indignantly up the stairs toward the third floor, an Italian tirade flowing from her unchecked and uncensored. She made no effort to lower her voice or to not let the stairs creak under her feet. In fact, she stomped down

hard on the loudest of the stairs, the one on this flight that she would've hopped over if she didn't want him to hear. For such an old man, the landlord still possessed excellent hearing, and he seemed to have nothing better to do with his time than sit and listen to the comings and goings of his tenants.

"Wretched old man," Sophia muttered, unlocking the door to her room. She slammed the door behind her and made as if to toss her violin case onto the small bed in the corner. At the last moment, she checked and kept her fingers wrapped tightly around the handle to soften the violin's landing. The watch bounced and clattered against the wood, and Sophia glanced at it, then sighed and paced the half dozen steps from the window beside the bed to the door and back, looking around at the tiny room she just spent her earnings on.

The bed was a horrid thing with a straw mattress set on a rusted iron bedframe. She brought a good pillow and blanket with her when she immigrated, and she was grateful for them, but the soft cotton blanket and pillowcase, embroidered with a countryside scene, looked miserable against the thin mattress. A battered chest of drawers scraped the wall in the corner across from the bed. The drawers would not close properly, stuffed full of her clothing. She had struggled with the wretched thing for several hours over the last few months, trying to force it to behave, and finally gave it up. The room bore no other furniture or decoration.

Sophia had been forced to sell most of what she had brought over from Venice to keep this cramped little room. She knew if she lost the contract, the chances of finding another room in the city would be slim, and she would have to go elsewhere in the country.

Sophia turned her eyes miserably out the window, not wanting to look at the room anymore. Dusk rapidly darkened into night, but people still streamed by just as thickly as when she played for those getting off their work shift.

People were constantly walking by below, at all hours of the day and night. Even in the very early morning, men stumbled along, just getting off night shifts in the factories or trying to find the right tenement building in their drunken stupors after trading their hard-earned pay to drown their feelings.

"Wretched old man," Sophia repeated. "Wretched city." She felt her eyes prickle and wiped them surreptitiously as she lay down beside her violin case, stroking the worn wood.

Sophia wouldn't risk leaving the instrument anywhere but on her bed next to her while she slept. Over the last few months, she heard too many of her fellow tenants complain of thievery throughout the building.

Tales of America circulated throughout Europe and even reached as far as Venice. The opportunities seemed too good to be true, but there were too many tales of people returning to Europe rich for the rumors to be utterly discounted.

When a patron told Sophia he intended to make the voyage and wanted her to accompany him, she leapt at the chance.

A fever took the poor man partway through the journey. Upon arriving, Sophia tried to contact the acquaintances he had claimed to have, but his contacts proved to be either fictitious or uninterested in helping her. Possibly both. Either way, she was alone in the foreign city. She sold off her belongings and tried to make her way as best she could, sure that an opportunity to play for the city's elites would arise.

After a month, when she no longer had the funds she needed, she realized she should've immediately booked passage back to Venice. The city was nothing like she had imagined, and it was uninterested in her and her music.

Sophia turned her face against the pillow and again wiped her eyes. She would not cry. In the relative quiet, she heard something padding back and forth outside her door. She recognized the sound as a cat's quiet tread. Many of the patrons she'd stayed with throughout her years in Venice owned mousers. She loved cats for their simple pleasures and useful existences. Feeling safer with the cat outside her door, Sophia slipped into peaceful slumber.

Ciaran paced the dark hallway into the late hours of the night. He could hear the revelry of distant humans and fey. A dog howled somewhere far off, and his ear twitched to listen, but it was a mortal creature, and the sound didn't trouble him further.

He paused at the corner and looked down disdainfully at the dirt that clung to the pads of his paws. His lips curled, and he shook it off, one paw at a time. As soon as he placed each paw back down, he could feel the grits once more.

The Cait Sidhe sighed and padded back over to the violinist's door. He could hear her soft breathing and pressed his head to the wooden barrier.

Ciaran longed to hear the music the Venetian drew from the strings of the violin. The strains of music enchanted him, reminded him of home even when she played classical tunes. The Irish jigs she played made his blood sing. After nearly two weeks of shadowing her, hoping to hear her play, he longed for more.

Being relatively young for a fey, Ciaran didn't remember the old ways that others spoke of. He knew that humans used to leave out tribute though: plates of milk and honey or other food to appease the fey and keep them from causing trouble.

Nobody did that in New York. Irishmen immigrated, and the fey followed, but the old ways stayed in Ireland.

Ciaran curled up, pressed against the door, and had almost dozed off when footsteps creaked up the stairs. A high-pitched laugh echoed up the stairwell and made Ciaran's ears fold back against his head.

The woman reeked of strong perfume. The man smelled of sweat and oil from a factory. He continued to speak to the woman and nearly trod on Ciaran.

The Cait Sidhe lunged forward and sank his claws into the man's calf, just over his work boot. The man gasped and reeled around, aiming a kick at the black cat. The woman exclaimed shrilly, the man shouted, and Ciaran oozed into the shadows until only his green eyes gleamed out of the darkness.

The humans muttered angrily then continued to their own door. Ciaran fluffed his fur out indignantly and returned to his place by the violinist's door.

Sophia often closed her eyes while she played her violin and lost herself in the music. Here in this city, doing so gave her a brief respite from her surroundings. The tactic also prevented her from becoming too irritated with the number of people that hurried past without even a glance as she spent another day playing on the corner.

Sophia didn't want to become bitter. She knew enough bitter old women, both here and in Venice.

When she came to the end of the song and opened her eyes again, her gaze was drawn like an arrow to the man. Sophia couldn't say why he caught her attention, save that he stared right back at her.

He stood on the far side of the street, watching her despite the foot and horse traffic that passed between them. He wore fine attire: a mahogany brown shirt under a bright scarlet vest. A thin gold chain attached to a loop on one side of the vest and stretched over to the pocket of his trousers on the opposite side. His posture was relaxed, his hands tucked into his trousers' pockets, and an air of lazy confidence exuded from him. A smirk played over his lips when he noticed Sophia looking. She couldn't tear her gaze away from the jagged scar that ran from his forehead, over his closed left eye, and down onto his cheek. It gave his face a disorienting, lopsided look that only added to the rakish appearance his unkempt mane of black hair gave him.

Without taking his eyes from her, the man took a step into the street. A horse veered away from him and trotted past, the rider shouting indignantly at him. The man didn't blink. An icy chill slid down Sophia's spine, and an overpowering instinct to run made her tighten her grip on the neck of the violin until the strings dug painfully into her fingers.

Sophia once saw a wolf, bound and in a cage. It glared out through the bars at the gawkers, a harsh and ferocious energy brimming in its tense legs and slightly visible fangs. She could see a similar energy visible in this man's stormy gray gaze. As he came closer, he grinned, baring sharp canine teeth, as if he could smell her fear. Sophia's resolve to stay still snapped. Trembling like a frightened deer, she grabbed up her violin case and fled, heedlessly scattering the few coins resting inside onto the sidewalk.

Faolan watched the girl run, the coins still bouncing down the pavement. He stepped off the road and bent to pick the slivers of metal up. They didn't have her scent, but he didn't need that. He never forgot a scent.

Out on an errand, he was surprised to catch a whiff of a Cait Sidhe's odor. That reek had stayed in his nose for hours after the recent chase, and he still longed to sink his teeth into that sneak thief's dark fur.

He remained unseen, watching the girl for a time, to discover where the scent came from. Finally, he caught sight of the silver pocket watch that a member of the Hunt reported stolen. So, this is why the fool pickpocketed on their turf. Giving wealth to mortals would be laughable if the Hunt wasn't so furious.

An idea began to form in Faolan's head. Bait and traps weren't nearly as fun as a proper chase, but the pursuit could happen after, and there was a certain satisfaction in sitting back and letting the prey come to you. Faolan's mind brimmed with the delightful possibilities, and a spring came into his step when he started off again, following the faint trace of the girl that still wafted through the air.

"Have you heard the news?" Enda's voice made Ciaran twitch. He raised his head off his paws and stared at the man. Enda bounced on the toes of his leather shoes, a smile hovering unpleasantly at the corners of his mouth.

"Obviously not," Ciaran said, unable to hide his irritation. *Why must Enda always play these games?* "Spit it out already and stop dancing around, you wretch."

"You would know if you went to the court, like I said you should," Enda taunted in reply. Ciaran hissed, and Enda's smile became more evident. "Okay, okay. I won't torture you anymore," he added in a singsong tone.

"Say it already!" Ciaran leapt to his feet, his tail thrashing furiously and his magic building within him. "If I repeat myself, so help me, Enda..." He let the other fey sense the sharp edge of his magic.

"The Wild Hunt have invited the Queen, and many other fey, to a feast tonight," Enda said in a rush, his grin widening. He paused for dramatic effect while Ciaran pondered this, his tail held to the side mid-swish. "I heard they've captured a Venetian violinist as entertainment."

The fur on Ciaran's shoulders slowly stood on end. Sophia had not come home the night before. He left to do some pickpocketing to get more coins to give her, and when he returned, the corner by the flower shop where she played was vacant. He slipped into the tenement building, but her scent smelled hours old. He had lain down at the end of the hallway and waited, as he often did, but she never came home. The idea she might be taking up with a human male caused him to fret all morning, which made him irritated with himself for being bothered by the notion. He shouldn't be giving a mortal this amount of attention just because he loved her music.

Enda still stood watching him, rolled forward on his toes, with an eager expression on his face.

"Go away, Enda," Ciaran said mechanically and turned his head away so as not to give the fey the satisfaction of seeing the turmoil brewing inside him. "You're blocking my sun!" he roared when Enda did not move, and he leapt up, bringing both his magic and his claws to bear on the fey.

Enda yelped and fled, a hand pressed to the long set of gouges in his arm. Ciaran watched him go with satisfaction. That would not heal quickly and might keep the bird-fey from flying for a time. His gratification proved short-lived, though. *What am I going to do now?* he wondered and sank miserably down onto the frozen ground.

The hours blurred by. Sophia knew she was somewhere bright, with high chandeliers and a long, long table, crowded with a jostling group of men and women. Rough singing, chatter, and barking filled the air alongside the clatter of cutlery against plates.

She was stretched out on something soft, and, despite the noise, the chandeliers reminded her of the grand Venetian palaces. She stared up at the flickering light and wondered if she were waking up from a bad dream. Perhaps her decision to go to the United States had just been a nightmare.

A shadow fell over her face, and she tried to focus her eyes on the man who peered down at her. "Sir?" she asked and sat up slowly, certain if she moved too

quickly she would be sick. Her hand fell against plush fabric and the wooden edge of the couch she lay on. "Penso di aver bevuto troppo," she said with a touch of amusement. Her head swam. Yes, surely she drank too much the night before. She wasn't given to inebriation, but it occurred occasionally. She knew the words to claim as much in English, but it felt so delightful to say as much in her own language.

Then her eyes cleared, and she saw that the man standing by her was the same man who had terrified her so badly the day before.

She leapt to her feet, and the room tilted around her, all bright gold light and vibrant colors. The man's hand closed around her upper arm to steady her, and a tremor shook her at the touch. The dizziness slowly abated, leaving her feeling sick.

"Let me go," she said tightly and yanked free of him. Another bout of dizziness struck her, and she struggled to stay on her feet.

The man took a step back and held his hands up soothingly. "Be calm, miss," he said kindly. "I am Faolan, and I brought you to my home to perform tonight. We've been waiting for you to wake up. The feast is already underway, and my guests are anxious for some entertainment."

Sophia's head jerked around. "My violin," she breathed and took a step toward him. "Where is it?"

Faolan smiled and produced it out of thin air with a grand flourish. He bowed as he held it out to her. "I have heard you play often," he said in a silken tone. Sophia frowned as something buzzed in her head. "You should be playing in a concert hall, not on the street. Do well tonight..." His smile widened with the predatory expression she had seen earlier. "And we may just keep you."

"And if I perform badly?" Sophia asked. She set the case down on the chaise lounge and opened it to examine her violin. She breathed a sigh of relief at seeing it wasn't damaged and then plucked it up and brought it up to tune it.

"We shall see," Faolan said lightly, walking off toward the table. "I wouldn't suggest disappointing us on purpose, miss."

Sophia stamped down the sense of danger that thrilled through her at those words. She would not be intimidated. She had played for much grander audiences than this one. She tilted her head and considered the buzzing. It ran like an undercurrent through the room, filling the space, not quite a sound but something akin to it.

The sensation felt terribly familiar. A slow smile to match Faolan's came to her lips when she placed it. What a delightful challenge, she thought as she followed Faolan to the head of the table. He called out in Irish, and the revelry quieted into breathless anticipation. Sophia tucked the violin under her chin and began to play.

Sneaking into the Wild Hunt's mansion took first place for the most insane things Ciaran ever tried. That said something, with how curious and mischievous the Cait Sidhe had been in his youth.

His fur stood on end involuntarily as he crept softly along the wall and looked for a way onto the roof. The mansion, brick and covered with ivy, reeked of the fey

hounds. The wind changed, blowing the stench straight into his face and making it impossible for him to lift his paws.

Ciaran huddled into the ivy and trembled. This was suicide. The Hunt would be waiting for him as the night's true entertainment.

He very nearly turned to slip away back into the safety of the city beyond the iron fences. Then he heard the violin music drifting through an open window, and an ache filled him. He hissed and resumed inching along the wall toward the window.

The Cait Sidhe hesitated, peering at the square of light that illuminated the ivy and grass below the window. What now? The music paused, and he heard Sophia laugh, clear and joyful. He climbed the ivy and peeked in, keeping as much of his head below the sill as possible.

The young woman stood at the front of the Hunt's banquet table, dressed in a sumptuous emerald green gown in the style of an earlier age, the velvet delicate and gleaming in the bright chandelier light. Her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders in curls, and a grin tugged at her mouth as Lord Faolan pressed a drink toward her hand. She stepped back and shook her head.

"No, I will not eat or drink until I am finished playing," she insisted.

Sophia couldn't have noticed the dangerous light in Faolan's eyes above his razor-thin smile. Ciaran sank down below the window again, puzzling out what to do now. He could provide a distraction, but the girl did not know to run. He took a deep breath and caught the scents of many fey mingled with the stink of the Hunt's hounds, including the Queen's. He knew he should expect no aid from that quarter, though.

A small black storm petrel descended out of the darkness and landed in front of Ciaran, its feathers fluffed out and trembling slightly over flying at night.

"Enda," Ciaran breathed and huddled lower, praying that the Hunt would not hear. "What are you doing here?"

"The Queen asked if I would help," the bird whispered. "She offered me a favor and reminded me you would be in my debt if I did." Enda hesitated. "You're fun to tease," he added. "I don't want to see you get ripped apart by the Hunt." He shook his feathers out. "I will not perish for you, Ciaran, but I'll give you a chance to get to the mortal and warn her. After that, it's on you."

"Thank you." Ciaran placed a paw on the bird's head. "I did not expect kindness. From the Queen or you. I will owe you a favor for this."

"May you live to repay it," Enda muttered. "I still think this is folly." He took a deep breath that puffed out his chest, then launched himself through the window, screeching loudly and flapping as hard as he could.

Ciaran surged up and over the window below Enda, a small shadow in the blazing light inside the grand room.

Faolan leapt after Enda, and half the table jumped to their feet, barking at the bird, while the guests looked on in amusement.

The commotion gave Ciaran the chance to slip unnoticed to where Sophia stood, well away from the confusion, with her violin held protectively close. He skidded to a stop at her feet and looked up at her, his eyes wide and large against his dark fur.

"You must escape now!" he yowled and scrabbled around. The Hunt would catch his scent any moment.

Sure enough, Faolan advanced toward them, his grin widening. Ciaran scurried back toward the window, but the man pounced and caught him up, holding him up by the scruff. Ciaran flailed uselessly at him and struggled to draw in breath with the skin pulled tight on his head.

"Enough!" The word rang with magic and caused the room to instantly become still and silent.

Faolan turned slowly and stared indignantly at the human woman. Sophia gently set the violin down in its case and then advanced on him, radiating power.

"You're a witch," Faolan snarled and backed away, his movements slow and jerky with the difficulty of fighting her magic.

"Give him to me," Sophia ordered and slid a hand under Ciaran's belly, alleviating the pressure on his head. When Faolan released him, Ciaran lolled against her and purred instinctively, happy to feel safe so suddenly.

Sophia cradled him against her chest and looked around imperiously, a smile on her lips. "This was delightful," she said and used one hand to curtsy. "I would enjoy playing for all of you again, if you will have me." She nodded to Faolan. "But ask me properly. I do not wish to be carried off again. I know the Irish have more manners than that."

"Enda," Ciaran breathed and peered around over her arm. Where did the storm petrel go?

"The bird flew out," Sophia whispered back as she picked up her violin case and left the banquet hall, keeping her back straight despite the snarling. Animosity chased her out, and her pace sped up despite her determination to not allow them to frighten her.

"Thanks for that," Sophia added. "I wondered when I would use some magic to make my exit." She paused and stroked the cat's ears. "I appreciate what you've been doing for me. Would you like to keep watch inside my room, from now on? I could use a mouser to keep the vermin out. I found a hole behind my bed the other night."

Ciaran snorted. "You're plucky," he said dryly, blinking up at her. "Maybe a few nights." He glanced away haughtily. "If you'll play some songs for me only and leave out a tribute."

"I can do that," Sophia said cheerfully. "The money you gave me will more than pay for some cream and fish." A wistfulness flashed across her face. "I've longed to get in touch with other mages and the fey community in the city, but they're a suspicious lot. I'm delighted you liked my music enough to give me this open door."

Ciaran chuckled and allowed his eyes to drift closed while the scents of the Hunt faded in the clean night air once they were outside. "That is certainly one way to look at what happened here tonight." He paused then added, "I'm the one who should thank you." His purr rumbled deep in his chest as the human woman carried the Cait Sidhe home.

