

CLASH OF THE OTHERWORLDS

BOOK THREE

PORTAL GUARDIANS

Epilogue only

**\*\*Do not read if you haven't finished the book ... here there be  
spoilers otherwise!\*\***

Elle Casey

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## CLASH OF THE OTHERWORLDS: PORTAL GUARDIANS

Spring was the best time of year for a binding ceremony. I was convinced of that. And no wonder ... the meadow had never been so full of flowers and the Green Forest so covered in fresh leaves and new growth. The majesty here was a fitting metaphor for our lives right now.

"How do I look?" asked Tim, nervously. He had his comb out for the hundredth time, slicking his hair down and spritzing it with some goop a witch had made for him.

"Dude, you're as shellacked as you're going to get. Put the spray away before you completely destroy the ozone."

"Aren't you nervous?! Why aren't you freaking out?!" He looked me up and down quickly, back to staring at himself in the mirror a second later. "You look good, by the way. White suits you."

"Thanks. And Tim ... if you don't calm down, two things are going to happen."

"Oh, yeah? What?" he asked, picking off pieces of lint from his formal fae suit - pieces so small that no one, not even a pixie, would ever be able to see them. They were probably just hallucinations of lint brought on by stress.

"Dial it back, or I'm going to shove you in my bra, and your hair will be a complete mess during the ceremony."

He pointed his comb at me. "Don't you even *think* about it! ... But point taken. I'll chillax. Maybe."

"Papa!" yelled Willy, squeezing through the hole in the wall that led from his home to my bedroom.

"Willy, what are you doing here?" asked Tim, finally distracted from his coiffing and lint-picking. "Aren't you supposed to be at the nursery with the other wee pixies?"

"No! I don't wanna!" he insisted, flying over in a haphazard flight path as he fought in midair against this little jacket and itty bitty bow tie. "And Momma's making me comb my hair and wear this yucky tie and it makes me chokey. It looks like ugly." He was trying to pull it off with two hands, but apparently Abby had gotten smart and either knotted it or spell-superglued it on. He was failing at removing it but succeeding in strangling himself. "Rrrrr! Grrrrr! Rrrrr! Get! It! *Off!*"

"Son, leave it alone. It doesn't look like ugly. It looks like *handsome*. Like your papa. See?" Tim flew in a slow circle, giving Willy his best Zoolander Blue Steel look.

Willy frowned, not appearing very impressed. He glanced over at me for some sort of verification.

## ELLE CASEY

It was a golden opportunity to raise hell in the pixie world, but I decided against it. Today was a big day for me, and the last thing I needed was a thousand pixies all up in arms over rebellious babies. "Baby Bee, if you were a big fae like me, and you were wearing that tie, I'd totally want to go play spider nakies with you right now."

He frowned at me in suspicion. "Is dat true?"

"Of course it's true. Look at you, you handsome little beast." I pointed to the mirror.

He flew over and stood on the dresser, hands on tiny hips, pouting in the mirror at his lopsided tie. "It looks like ugly to me."

"Nope. It's handsome." A flash of inspiration hit me then: rebellion, but on a smaller scale. "Hey ... I have an idea. Why don't you go back to the nursery and ask some of the other pixies to play spider nakies with you? I'll bet they'd love it. You can be the boss of the game since you made it up."

A smile quickly replaced Willy's frown. He looked at me, tempering his reaction with the slightest bit of doubt. "But my momma said no spider nakies today."

"Well, is your momma there at the nursery?"

"Jaaaaayne," said Tim. "I see where you're going with this, and as your roommate I feel compelled to warn you against it."

I laughed. "You're his father. You can override me whenever you want."

"I'm aware of that. But it's possible I might in some small measure agree with your wise counsel while also being aware of the terrifying she-pixie in the other room and what she can and will do to me if I countermand one of her orders."

"Ah. I see. So if he exposes his pixie mcnuggets to the entire pixie community, I'll be the one to take the fall."

"Precisely."

I shrugged, turning back to the wee pixie. "Go for it, Baby Bee. Just make sure you keep the tie on."

Willy took off for the crack in the wall, shedding his formal suit as he went, but leaving the tie around his neck. "Bye-bye, Lellamental! I'm gonna go play now!" His butt made it through the hole, and I heard his tiny voice as it disappeared in the distance, yelling, "Spider nakies, to the rescuuuuue!"

Tim shook his head. "I wish I had another witness. You'll testify that I told him no, right?"

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"You got it, roomie. Just remember that you owe me one. A big one."

"Pfft. Yeah right," he said, heading for the hole in the wall, following Willy's path. "You still owe me for choosing you as my roommate. Not sure how you'll ever pay me back for that one."

He flew out of the room before I could respond, probably to yell at one of the thousand pixies who were there to help organize the meadow. The pixies, gnomes, and all their garden partners had been working for a straight week to get the place ready.

It was just a tiny bit early in the year for the meadow to be this colorful, but we had to hurry it forward a little bit. I was scheduled to leave in just a few days for Uamh An Ard-Achaidh - the High Pasture Cave in Torrin on the Isle of Skye, near Scotland. The entrance to the Underworld and the portal were there, where the dragon guardian waited to greet me.

It would be my first trip as the companion to Biad, and I was a little nervous. My friends and I were going a week early so we could see the sights and get settled in. My job on this first trip was not just to chat-up the dragon, but also to find a place that the fae could provide as my permanent place there. I would only be going twice a year for my work, but apparently the council thought I needed a place to call home while I was there. It was my choice whether to find a human home or a fae one - a spot like we had in the Green Forest. And regardless of which one I chose, a very powerful witch was going to be sure to spell the shit out of it so that it wouldn't freak out any humans or anything like that. And I trusted her implicitly. She was my training partner and distant cousin, Samantha the Fate.

I looked at myself in the mirror, examining my new look from the left angle and then the right. Theresa was behind me, packing up all her crap she'd used to fix my hair for me. "You outdid yourself this time, Theresa," I said, liking the way my hair up off my neck in this fancy twist made me look all sophisticated.

"Thank you. Just don't touch it. I don't have time to do any repairs. I have to go take care of Becky before she blows a gasket."

"I haven't seen her. How's she doing?"

"As good as can be expected. You should stop by and say hello, if you have time before the ceremony. It's no big deal if you don't. I know you have a lot to do."

"I'll try. But just in case, tell her I'll see her out there."

"Will do," said Theresa, throwing the bag over her shoulder.

## ELLE CASEY

I reached out and touched her forearm. "So, what's the deal ... are you going with us to Torrin?"

Theresa reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, making it stick out a little. "I'm not sure. I might be taking a trip over to Avebury." She shrugged self-consciously.

"Still not giving up on him, eh?"

"I think he's made a lot of progress. At least, that's what Tony says."

"Well, in my experience, Tony is impossible to shake, no matter how much of an arrogant ass you are - but I guess everyone deserves a second chance, so if you're willing to give it to him, more power to ya."

"I've seen him a few times myself, through the Gray with Tony. He's changed. Being with Heryon has really opened his eyes to a lot of things."

I withheld my comment about how Heryon was probably the only other female in the universe other than me who was immune to his charms, and that maybe Ben had finally met his match in her. It didn't matter what I thought. If Theresa wanted to tame that beast, it was entirely up to her. She was a big girl, strong, and smart enough to know what she was getting into. "I wish you both good luck and total happiness."

She leaned over and gave me a quick hug, patting me on the cheek gently when she was done. When she reached the door, she looked back. "Are you going to see Spike?"

"No. Not until the ceremony. He's running around all over the place with Finn right now, anyway."

She nodded. "Okay. I'll see you out there. Don't be late!"

*"Pfft.* As if. No one better start without me," I said, as she left the room.

Her laughter trickled through the door as she went out into the hallway.

I was coming out of my bathroom a minute later when I heard a knock at my bedroom door. I frowned, wondering who it could be standing on ceremony like that. My friends usually just barged right in.

I pulled the door open and found Céline standing there in a beautiful silver robe. "Come in. You're late."

"Yes, I know. Please forgive me. We had a little mishap in the kitchen, and Torrence was having some difficulty with his clothing that I had to assist with."

"A wife's job is never done, eh?"

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She smiled serenely. "No. And I am happy for that. I wouldn't ever want to feel not needed."

I snorted. "That's not likely." Her husband was a pigheaded dope, Céline being the only fae who seemed able to tamp down his inner Torrie and make his company even bearable. She noticed none of it, floating around on her cloud of love. The only time he wasn't making my lip curl with disdain over how much he acted like Ben, was when he was making goo-goo eyes at his wife. It was in those moments that I could forgive his Ben-ness. There truly was someone for everyone.

"Do you have it ready?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's right here," I said, taking the paper out of my top drawer and handing it to her.

She scanned the page.

"Is it going to work?" I asked.

She smiled. "Yes. This is perfect."

"Do you want it? I have it memorized."

"Yes. Thank you," she said, tucking it into a hidden pocket at her side. "Jayne ... I just want to say something, before we go out there."

I shrugged. "Say it, then. I'm all ears."

"Thank you."

"For ...?"

"For your forgiveness. For your understanding. For your friendship. It means so very much to me and to Torrie."

I smiled. "I feel funny saying you're welcome, but whatever. You're welcome. I'm hardly the one to fault someone for making stupid mistakes. I do it almost daily, myself."

"Yes, but there are mistakes and then there are *my* kind of mistakes."

"*Meh*. Like the old coot Dardennes says ... life is not black and white. Everything lives somewhere in the gray eventually. I'm not here to judge you or anyone else. Lord knows, I don't want anyone doing it to me. I'd be in the Underworld for sure."

She stepped over and gave me a warm hug. "See you in a couple minutes, then." She left my room, the door not even coming fully to a close before it was pushed open by my next visitor.

"You ready?" asked Scrum.

## ELLE CASEY

His newly-shorn hair and fancy outfit had me whistling in appreciation. "Daaamn, Scrum. You clean up nice."

He smiled, his face going pink. "Thanks. Theresa helped me with my hair."

I nodded. "Better her than me. Seriously, dude, you look awesome."

He held out an elbow. "I'm your escort. Spike says he'll meet you out there."

I rolled my eyes. *Typical*. Spike was the party planner and general entertainment manager. No way was I going to see him until the last minute. But I liked it that way. It built up the anticipation of being with him, making it feel like it was the first time I was seeing him all over again. I smiled to myself, thinking about my sexy pizza delivery man from Miami.

Tony came out of his room as we neared his door and joined us in the hallway. "Wow, Jayne ... I mean ... wow. You look really nice." He glanced over at my escort. "You too, Scrum. Sharp."

Tony looked better than I'd ever seen him. He was filling out in the shoulders, and his face had completely cleared up. With his formal wrathe robes on, he looked like a very studious athlete. I shook my head at the transformation. Love looked good on him.

Felicia came out behind him. "Oh, hey, guys." She stepped over to hug me. "Theresa worked her magic, I see." She kissed me on the cheek and then took Tony's hand and stood next to him.

"Yep. Buffed me up for the big day. You guys ready?" I asked. They both nodded, so we continued down the hall, headed to the door with the infinity symbol on it.

"Do you have your stuff ready?" asked Tony. "Did you finally decide on what you're going to say?"

"Yes. I was up all night. Tim threatened to use hemorrhoid cream on my eye baggage, as he likes to call it."

"Isn't that for ... butts?" asked Scrum.

We all laughed before I answered, "Yeah. It shrinks swelling in general, though. Apparently I had some righteous under-eye puffiness this morning, but it's calmed down."

"Okay. Good," said Scrum sounding a little uncomfortable.

"Where are Jared and Samantha? I haven't seen them all morning," I asked.



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"Busy working with the pixies and stuff out in the meadow," answered Scrum. "They had some last-minute changes and stuff, so Sam was up late."

I nodded as we turned a corner, the door we sought not far away.

"Is everything set for our trip, Tony?" I asked.

"Almost. We have the travel arrangements in place, spells being finalized, itineraries almost finished. We'll be ready by departure day. Operation Fae School Fieldtrip is well in-hand."

I laughed. The plan they'd come up with was brilliant. We were a supposed group of students from a private school, and Jared was our teacher and chaperone taking us on a field trip to study archeological mysteries. The Miami crew was riding again, and I for one couldn't wait to get out into the world with my friends at my side. The equinox couldn't come soon enough. The last several months of training and working with the council and guardians to get everything back to the way it was supposed to be and heal the veil between the realms had been exhausting work - exhilarating, too, but I was ready for a little R and R.

We reached the door and stepped out, just inside the trees that surrounded the meadow. Becky stood alone behind one of them, her hand resting on its bark.

"You guys go ahead," I said. "I'm going to talk to Becky."

I walked over, my feet making swishing sounds as they kicked dead leaves out of the way. The winter had left the trees' old clothing on the ground to become the next layer of our forest carpet.

"Hey, Becks. What're you doing out here all by yourself?"

She turned to face me, a little pale, and as delicate-looking as I'd ever seen her. "I'm just waiting for you guys. I didn't want to walk out there all by myself."

"You're not going to be by yourself, silly. Come on." I took her by the elbow, trying to lead her towards the ceremony which had been set up under the big oak.

She resisted my guidance. "I'm not ready."

I sighed. "What's the matter?"

"It's just a big step, Jayne. How do you know when you're ready?"

I threw up my hands, not angry at my friend but at a loss for answers. "You just know, I guess. You feel like the person is the only one you want to see on a consistent basis for the rest of your life. Someone who makes you feel special and smart and awesome."

## ELLE CASEY

"Finn does that for me."

"Well, there you go. You know what the secret formula is. You guys are perfect together."

She smiled. "We are, aren't we?" She looked down. "I'm so glad Jared found us in Miami. We owe him so much. It's a debt I'm afraid I'll never be able to repay."

"Good thing he doesn't hold that over our heads, because I owe him the same. Can we go now?"

She looked at me, pleading with her eyes. "I'm nervous. I know you're the one doing all the talking, but I'm still freaking out."

I sighed, stepping closer to the tree that was holding her up. "Let's hug it out, Beckster. Come on ... you know you want to." I gestured with my finger. "Hug the damn tree."

Her smile lit up her face. "Oh, boy, I never thought you'd offer!" She grabbed onto the tree and hugged for all she was worth. "I'm ready," she said, her face smooshed up charmingly against the bark.

I shook my head, smiling at her silliness. Even on a day like today when she was freaking out to the max, she still managed to be the sunniest being in the forest. I wrapped my arms around the tree, overlapping my arms with hers. The Green came flooding into us through the living things around us that we touched through this young tree.

Becky sighed, a look of bliss coming over her face. "Oh, man, that is just exactly what I needed. Life is so, so good, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah. Life is awesome. Ready to go now?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I'm ready. But you're going to have to pull me off this tree though, because I'm still a little scared."

I disconnected, letting The Green go back into the earth, and stepped over to detach my friend. "Come on, little water sprite. Brush your robe off. We have a binding ceremony to get to, and it can't start without us."

She worked at getting the last bits of bark from her robe as I practiced my lines in my head. When she was ready, I took her by the hand and led her out into the meadow.

As soon as the group saw the guest of honor, they stopped mingling and organized themselves into a mass of fae with a path between them. It wasn't a straight

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aisle, but curved, making it possible for more fae to see the bride and wish her well as she walked past them.

A beautiful song rose up above the heads of the guest, and I saw my handsome incubus standing nearby giving slight movements of his hand to direct the music. He winked at me once before turning back to the group of sirens who were the entertainment for the special occasion.

I walked with Becky to the edge of the crowd where Dardennes waited, wearing his finest duds. We stopped in front of him. "Are you good?" I asked her.

She nodded, silently, unshed tears making her eyes bright.

I pointed in her face. "No crying. That's an order. You'll mess up your makeup and make me cry too."

She jumped at me, grabbing me in a stranglehold of a hug. "I love you, Jayne. You're a wonderful friend."

I patted her on the back, rolling my eyes at Dardennes who watched over us, smiling. "I love you too, freak. Now let me go. I have to walk up that stupid aisle."

She stepped back and touched the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief that Dardennes had given her.

I looked up at the silver elf, standing silently and waiting for us. "You ready to deliver the package?" I smiled, nervous now about what I was about to do.

"I am ready and honored." He held out his elbow. "Shall we?"

Becky nodded, slipping her arm through his. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"I'll catch you guys on the flip side," I said. "And hey ... don't walk too fast. I have to get through all your fans." I took off running for the outskirts of the crowd, intent on beating my water sprite buddy to the altar. I practiced the vows I'd written with Spike's help in my head as I pushed through the fae who'd gathered to celebrate the love of two of their youngest members.

I reached the front in record time, the crowd having split for me like the Red Sea. Spike came over and gave me a quick kiss and a thumbs up before going back to stand with the sirens.

Finn stood all alone at the head of the aisle, a mess of nerves, waiting for his bride to be delivered to him. He hadn't seen her since yesterday, and I took pity on him, seeing him standing there visibly shaking.

## ELLE CASEY

I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder, causing him to jump. "Nervous?"

"Oh, hell yeah, I'm nervous. I ain't never been this sick in my life. There's a whole troop-a butterflies in my stomach and they're doin' the cha-cha or somethin' in there." His freckles stood out in stark relief against his overly pale face.

"You have nothing to be nervous about. I just saw her, and she's totally ready to be bound to you. And she looks amazing."

"She is? She does? Are ya sure? What if she changes her mind? What if she takes off runnin' like one-a them runaway brides or whatnot? What'll I do then?"

"You'll chase her down, tackle her, and bring her back here. Then I'll say the words and finish her off. She won't know what hit her."

Finn smiled. "I knew you'd have my back, Jayne Blackthorne. You ain't half bad, you know that?"

I punched him in the arm. "You aren't so bad yourself, country boy. Hey, look ... here comes the bride."

Finn followed my gaze and laid eyes on his beautiful life partner. I watched his face as he saw her coming and recognized the expression I saw there. It was just like the one Spike had for me, when he hadn't seen me for a day and was glad to be back together. I sighed with barely contained happiness. If I wasn't careful, I was going to start jumping up and down and clapping with glee like my nutty water sprite friend.

I stepped back, centering myself on the spot that had been designated as the binding ceremony's epicenter. It was a circle outlined in a huge pile of flowers of every shape and color.

Dardennes brought Becky to the edge of the circle, leaning down to kiss the top of her head before stepping away.

I cleared my throat. "Becky of the Water Sprite Clan of the Green Forest," I said in as confident a voice as I could manage with my pulse rocketing into outer space.

"Yes," she said in barely a whisper.

"Do you wish to enter into the binding circle?"

She nodded.

"Then enter, please, with your heart holding only love."

She stepped over the flowers and moved to the center of the circle.

"Becky, do you wish to invite another to enter the circle with you?" I asked.

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She lifted her chin. "Yes, I do," she said, more confidently now.

"Name this other." My voice was gaining volume, carrying over the crowd in front of us.

"I invite Finn of the Green Elves of the Green Forest into the binding circle with me." She glanced over at me, and I nodded, telling her she'd gotten it exactly right.

"Finn, step to the edge of the circle if you wish to join Becky," I said.

Finn's face was on fire. Except for the fact that he had all his hair and eyebrows back, he looked a lot like he had the day the dragon had sizzled him.

When he reached the edge of the flower ring, with eyes for no one but Becky, I said, "Finn, enter please, with only love in your heart."

When he was centered in the circle, I said, "Face each other and hold hands. Turn so I can see you both equally."

They followed my instructions, staring into each other's eyes, both of them flushed and shaking.

I raised my head to face the crowd, lifting my voice so it would carry across the hundreds of heads I saw before us. "Thank you, gentlefae, for coming to the binding ceremony of Becky and Finn. We ask that you bear witness to their dedication to one another, and do nothing but feed the love that grows in their hearts from now until their departure from the Here and Now." I looked at the couple in front of me. "Becky and Finn ... please repeat after me."

They both nodded nervously at me and then faced one another.

I began my speech, waiting after each line for them to repeat it.

*I, Becky and Finn, vow that on this day,*

*We will be bound to one another.*

*And that no man, no fae, no beast, nor creature,*

*Shall come between us or sever this bond,*

*Not upon penalty of death or other threat of pain*

*But out of respect for the love that binds us all*

*The power that ties each of our destinies to that of the other.*

I raised my arms up, gesturing to the crowd. "Gentlefae, I ask that you show your enthusiasm for the loving couple. Put your hands together!"

My changeling friends began clapping enthusiastically, cluing the other fae into what was expected of them. Soon the meadow was filled with thunderous applause.

## ELLE CASEY

I looked at my two friends. "Becky and Finn, you can smooch now."

Becky threw her arms around Finn's neck and gave him the biggest whopper of a kiss I'd ever seen. The longer it went on, the more exuberant the crowd became. Leaves began to fall gently from the oak over our heads, caressing my arms gently and giving me a small shiver.

Flowers came flying over the heads of the crowd to land in the binding circle. Soon my two friends were covered in colors, surrounded by the love and magic of more than a hundred fae.

Spike came over and pulled me into a warm embrace. "You did a great job, babe. Perfect."

"I like your band. They have potential now that they have the right conductor."

"Yeah. Just wait for my next act. I got some guitars and drums brought in for the reception."

"It's going to be an epic party," I said, smiling so hard I thought my face might crack.

"You said it. Come on ... let's get the happy couple over to the reception hall." Spike took me by the hand and started to lead me away, but then a slight breeze at my back had me stopping to look around.

"You go ahead," I said. "I'll be right there."

I ran to the edge of the forest on the other side of the meadow, following a sense I had that something was happening, something that needed my attention. I passed through the edge of the trees, seeing nothing at first. But then the shimmering began, and three sets of wings attached to three angels appeared before me.

"Hello, Jayne."

"Hello, Shayla. Chase ... Beau. What's up?"

"We've come to pay our respects to the happy couple," she said.

"And to remind you that we are here to watch over you, should the need arise," said Beau.

I looked at Chase. "Anything to add?" It was a challenge, but a friendly one.

"I just wanted to tell you how proud we are of you."

My cheeks turned pink. "Thanks. That means a lot."

"And I wanted to tell you too how happy I am that you accepted Spike's love for you. He's a good man. A good fae," said Chase.

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"He is exactly what you need," said Shayla. "Don't ever forget to be grateful for what he has to offer you."

"I won't. I promise. Thanks for stopping by. I'll tell Becky and Finn you said congrats."

The forms of Beau and Shayla began to fade out, but Chase's remained solid.

"What's up?" I asked him, confused about the tortured expression on his face.

"I also came to apologize."

I smiled. "For what?"

"For making your life difficult ... for keeping you from doing what you needed to be doing. It was selfish and unkind, and for that I'm sorry."

I stepped over and rubbed his upper arm. "Stop worrying about that crap. I'm totally happy right now. I'm not pining over you or wishing I could go live in the Overworld. Spike's the guy for me. I know that now."

Chase smiled. "You really are happy."

"Yeah, I really am. Life has a way of working out, even when it seems like there's no way it can."

He nodded. "I've got to go now. I'll see you on the other side?"

"Yep. In a few thousand years."

"Good enough." He slowly faded out to nothing, leaving me alone in the trees. I turned to go, noticing Spike waiting for me at the edge of the meadow.

"Everything cool?" he asked, putting his arm around me and drawing me near.

"Yeah. Everything's awesome. Especially now that I have you."

"So ... uh ... I was wondering ..."

"Yeah?" It was weird, Spike sounding so nervous all of a sudden.

"I kind of have a question for you. It's ... you know ... important."

I laughed. "Out with it, dope. You're making me nervous."

"Okay. Do you think you'd ever want to do that with me ... you know ... what Finn and Becky just did? A binding ceremony?"

I smiled. It was impossible not to. "Hmmm ... I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Yeah. Maybe. If you play your cards right. You know, show me that the foot massages aren't just a passing phase, convince me you'll still love me even when I look like Maggie, stuff like that. Then, maybe ... yeah. I could see that happening."

## ELLE CASEY

Spike lifted me up and spun me around in circles. "It's not exactly a yes, but I'll take it anyway!"

I laughed with the joy of it - the strength of Spike's arms around me, the smells of Spring in the air, and the anticipation of being in a circle of flowers one day with the man I loved. I could see it already, a vision coming through my mind and warming my heart as we walked back to join our family - Spike holding my hands in a beautifully-flowered meadow and standing under the oak where my mother had been laid to rest, telling the fae world he wanted to be with me forever.