

HARLEQUIN  
TEEN

JULIE KAGAWA

# WINTER'S PASSAGE

AN IRON FEY NOVELLA



# Winter's Passage

*The Iron Fey*

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**HARLEQUIN®  
TEEN**

Meghan Chase used to be an ordinary girl...until she discovered that she is really a faery princess. After escaping from the clutches of the deadly Iron fey, Meghan must follow through on her promise to return to the equally dangerous Winter Court with her forbidden love, Prince Ash. But first, Meghan has one request: that they visit Puck—Meghan's best friend and servant of her father, King Oberon—who was gravely injured defending Meghan from the Iron Fey.

Yet Meghan and Ash's detour does not go unnoticed. They have caught the attention of an ancient, powerful hunter—a foe that even Ash may not be able to defeat...

*An eBook exclusive story from Julie Kagawa's Iron Fey series.*

# Chapter One

## Keeping Promises

In the shadows of the cave, I watched the Hunter approach. Silhouetted black against the snow, it stalked closer, eyes a yellow flame in the shadows, breath coiling around it like wraiths. Ice-blue light glinted off wet teeth and a thick shaggy pelt, darker than midnight. Ash stood between the Hunter and me, sword unsheathed, his eyes never leaving the massive creature that had tracked us for days, and now, had finally caught up.

“Meghan Chase.” Its voice was a growl, deeper than thunder, more primitive than the wildest forests. The ancient golden eyes were fixed solely on me. “I’ve finally found you.”

My name is Meghan Chase.

If there are three things I’ve learned in my time among the fey, they are this: don’t eat anything you’re offered in Faeryland, don’t go swimming in quiet little ponds and never, ever, make a bargain with anyone.

Okay, sometimes, you have no choice. Sometimes, you’ve been backed into a corner and you have to make a deal. Like when your little brother has been kidnapped, and you have to convince a prince of the Unseelie Court to help you rescue him instead of dragging you back to his queen. Or, you’re lost, and you have to bribe a smart-mouthed, talking cat to guide you through the forest. Or you need to get through a certain door, but the gatekeeper

won't let you through without a price. The fey love their bargains, and you have to listen to the terms *very* carefully, or you're going to get screwed. If you do end up in a contract with a faery, remember this: there's no way you can back out, not without disastrous consequences. And faeries *always* come to collect.

Which is how, 48 hours ago, I found myself walking across my front yard in the middle of the night, my house growing smaller and smaller in the background. I didn't look back. If I looked back, I might lose my nerve. At the edge of the woods, a dark prince and a pair of glowing, blue-eyed steeds waited for me.

Prince Ash, third son of the Winter Court, regarded me gravely as I approached, his silver eyes reflecting the light of the moon. Tall and pale, with raven-black hair and the unattainable elegance of the fey, he looked both beautiful and dangerous, and my heart beat faster in anticipation or fear, I couldn't tell. As I stepped into the shadows of the trees, Ash held out a pale, long-fingered hand, and I placed my own in his.

His fingers curled over mine, and he drew me close, hands resting lightly on my waist. I lay my head against his chest and closed my eyes, listening to his beating heart, breathing in the frosty scent of him.

"You have to do this, don't you?" I whispered, my fingers clutched in the fabric of his white shirt. Ash made a soft noise that might've been a sigh.

"Yes." His voice, low and deep, was barely above a murmur. I pulled back to look at him, seeing myself reflected in those silver eyes. When I'd first met him, those eyes were blank and cold, like the face of a mirror. Ash had been the enemy, once. He was the youngest son of Mab, queen of Winter and the ancient rival of my

father, Oberon, the king of the Summer Court. That's right. I'm half-fey—a faery princess, no less—and I didn't even know it until recently, when my human brother was kidnapped by faeries and taken into the Nevernever. When I found out, I convinced my best friend, Robbie Goodfell—who turned out to be Oberon's servant, Puck—to take me into Faeryland to get him back. But being a faery princess in the Nevernever proved to be extremely dangerous. For one, the Winter Queen sent Ash to capture me, to use me as leverage against Oberon.

That's when I made the bargain with the Winter prince that would change my life: help me rescue Ethan, and I'll go with you to the Winter Court.

So, here I was. Ethan was home safe. Ash had kept his side of the bargain. It was my turn to uphold my end and travel with him to the court of my father's ancient enemies. There was only one problem.

Summer and Winter were not supposed to fall in love.

I bit my lip and held his gaze, watching his expression. Though I had once viewed it as frozen solid, his demeanor had thawed somewhat during our time in the Nevernever. Now, looking at him, I imagined a glassy lake: still and calm, but only on the surface.

“How long will I have to stay there?” I asked.

He shook his head slowly, and I could feel his reluctance. “I don't know, Meghan. The queen doesn't disclose her plans to me. I didn't dare ask why she wanted you.” He reached up and caught a strand of my pale blond hair, running it through his fingers. “I was only supposed to bring you back,” he murmured, and his voice dropped even lower. “I swore I would bring you back.”

I nodded. Once a faery promises something, he's obligated to carry it through, which is why making a deal is so tricky. Ash couldn't break his vow even if he wanted to.

I understood that, but... "I want to do something before we go," I said, watching for his reaction. Ash raised an eyebrow, but otherwise his expression stayed the same. I took a deep breath. "I want to see Puck."

The Winter prince sighed. "I suppose you would," he muttered, releasing me and stepping back, his expression thoughtful. "And, truth be told, I'm curious myself. I wouldn't want Goodfellow dying before we ever resolved our duel. That would be unfortunate."

I winced. Puck and Ash were ancient enemies, and had already engaged each other in several savage, life-threatening duels before I was even in the picture. Ash had sworn to kill Puck, and Puck took great pleasure in goading the dangerous ice prince whenever he had the chance. It was only because I insisted they cooperate that they had agreed to an extremely shaky truce. One that wouldn't last long, no matter how much I intervened.

One of the horses snorted and pawed the ground, and Ash turned to put a hand on its neck. "All right, we'll check on him," he said without turning around. "But, after that I *have* to take you to Tir Na Nog. No more delays, understand? The queen won't be happy with me for taking this long."

I nodded. "Yes. Thank y— I mean...I appreciate it, Ash."

He smiled faintly and offered a hand again, this time to help me into the saddle. I gingerly picked up the reins and envied Ash, who swung easily aboard the second horse like he'd done it a thousand times.

“All right,” he said in a faintly resigned voice, staring up at the moon. “First things first. We have to find a trod to New Orleans.”

Trods are faery paths between the real world and the Nevernever, gateways straight into Faeryland. They can be anywhere, any doorway: an old bathroom stall, the gate to a cemetery, a child’s closet door. You can go anywhere in the world if you know the right trod, but getting through them is another matter, as sometimes they’re guarded by nasty creatures the fey leave behind to discourage unwanted guests.

Nothing guarded the enormous rotting barn that sat in the middle of the swampy bayou, so covered in moss it looked like a shaggy green carpet was draped over the roof. Mushrooms grew from the walls in bulbous clumps, huge spotted things that, if you looked closely enough, sheltered several tiny winged figures beneath them. They blinked at us as we went by, huge multifaceted eyes peering out from under the mushroom caps, and took to the air in a flurry of iridescent wings. I jumped, but Ash and the horses ignored them as we stepped beneath the sagging frame and everything went white.

I blinked and looked around as the world came into focus again.

An eerie gray forest surrounded us, mist creeping over the ground like a living thing, coiling around the horses’ legs. The trees were massive, soaring to mind-boggling heights, interlocking branches blocking out the sky. Everything was dark and faded, like all color had been washed out, a forest trapped in perpetual twilight.



"The wyldwood," I muttered, and turned to Ash. "Why are we here? I thought we were going to New Orleans."

"We are." Ash pulled his horse around to look at me. "The trod we want is about a day's ride north. It's the quickest way to New Orleans from here." He blinked and gave me an almost smile. "Or were you planning to hitchhike?"

Before I could reply, my horse suddenly let out a terrifying whinny and reared, slashing the air with its forelegs. I grabbed for the mane, but it slipped through my fingers, and I tumbled backward out of the saddle, hitting the ground behind the horse, snapping bushes underneath. Snorting in terror, the fey steed charged off toward the trees, leaped over a fallen branch and vanished into the mist.

Groaning, I sat up, testing my body for pain. My shoulder throbbed where I'd landed on it, and I was shaking, but nothing seemed broken.

Ash's mount was also throwing a fit, squealing and tossing its head, but the Winter prince was able to keep his seat and bring it back under control. Swinging out of the saddle, he tied the horse's reins to an overhead branch and knelt beside me.

"Are you all right?" His fingers probed my arm, surprisingly gentle. "Anything broken?"

"I don't think so," I muttered, rubbing my bruised shoulder. "That lovely patch of bramble broke my fall." Now that the adrenaline had worn off, dozens of stinging scratches began to make themselves known. Scowling, I glared in the direction my mount had disappeared. "You know, that's the second time I've been thrown off a faery

horse. And another time one tried to eat me. I don't think horses like me very much."

"No." Abruptly serious, Ash stood, offering a hand to pull me to my feet. "It wasn't you. Something spooked them." He gazed around slowly, hand dropping to the sword at his waist. Around us, the wyldwood was still and dark, as if the inhabitants were afraid to move.

I looked behind us, where the trunks of two trees had grown into each other, forming an archway between. The space between the trunks, where the trod lay, was cloaked in shadow, and it seemed to me that the shadows were creeping closer. A cold wind hissed through the trunks, rattling branches and tossing leaves, and I shivered.

With a frantic rushing sound a flock of tiny winged fey burst from the trod, swirling around us in panic and spiraling into the mist. I yelped, shielding my face, and Ash's horse screamed again, the sound piercing the ominous quiet. Ash took my hand and pulled me away from the trod, hurrying back to his mount. Lifting me to sit just behind the saddle, he grabbed the reins and climbed up in front.

"Hold on tight," he warned, and a thrill shot through me as I slipped my arms around his waist, feeling the hard muscles through his shirt. Ash dug in his heels with a shout, and the horse shot forward, snapping my head back. I squeezed Ash tightly and buried my face in his back as the faery horse streaked through the wyldwood, leaving the trod far behind.

We stopped infrequently, and when we did, it was only to let me and the horse rest for a few minutes. As evening fell, Ash pulled several food items from the horse's pack

and gave them to me; bread and dried meat and cheese, ordinary human food. Apparently, he remembered my last experiment with eating faery food, which hadn't turned out so well. I nibbled the dry bread, gnawed on the jerky and hoped he wouldn't mention the Summerpod incident and the embarrassment that followed.

Ash didn't eat anything. He remained wary and suspicious, and never truly relaxed the entire journey. The horse, too, was jumpy and restless, and it panicked at every shadow, every rustle or falling leaf. Something was following us; I felt it every time we stopped, a dark, shadowy presence drawing ever closer

As we rode on through the night, the eternal twilight of the wyldwood finally dimmed and a pale yellow moon rose into the sky. Ash and the fey horse both had seemingly unlimited endurance, more so than me, anyway. Riding a horse for hours and hours is not easy, and the stress of being chased by an unknown enemy was taking its toll. I struggled to stay awake, dozing against the prince's back, leaning dangerously off the sides until a jolt or sharp word from Ash snapped me upright.

I was dozing off once more, fighting to keep my eyes open, when Ash suddenly pulled the horse to a stop and dismounted. Blinking, I looked around dazedly, seeing nothing but trees and shadows. "Are we there yet?"

"No." Ash glared at me in exasperation. "But you keep threatening to fall off the horse, and I can't keep reaching back to make sure you're still on." He motioned to the front of the saddle. "We're switching places. Move forward."

I eased into the saddle and Ash swung up behind me, wrapping an arm securely around my waist, making my pulse beat faster in excitement.

“Hold on,” he murmured as the horse started forward again. “We’re almost to the trod. Once we’re in the mortal realm, you can rest. We should be safe there.”

“What’s following us?” I whispered, making the horse’s ears twitch back. Ash didn’t reply for several moments.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, sounding reluctant to admit it. “Whatever it is, it’s persistent. We’ve been keeping a pretty steady pace and haven’t lost it yet.”

“*Why* is it following us? What does it want?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Ash’s grip around my waist tightened. “If it wants you, it’ll have to get past me first.”

My stomach prickled, and my heart did a weird little flop. In that moment, I felt safe. My prince wouldn’t let anything happen to me. Settling back against him, I closed my eyes and let myself drift.

I must have dozed off, for the next thing I knew Ash was shaking me gently. “Meghan, wake up,” he murmured, his cool breath fanning my neck. “We’re here.”

Yawning, I looked at the small glade ahead of us. Without the cover of the trees, I could see the sky, dotted with stars. The glade was clear, except for one massive gnarled oak in the very center. Roots snaked out over the ground, huge thick things that prevented anything bigger than a fern to flourish. The trunk was wide and twisted, like three or four trees had been squashed together into one. But even with the oak’s size and dominating presence, I could see that it was dying. Its branches drooped, or had snapped off and were scattered about the base of the tree. Most of its broad, veined leaves were dead and brittle; the rest were a sickly yellow-brown. The

glade, too, looked withered and sick, as if the tree was leeching life from the forest around it.

"It wasn't like this before," Ash murmured behind me. I gazed at the dying tree and felt an incomprehensible sadness, as if I were seeing an old friend about to die. Shaking it off, I looked around for a doorway or gate, but the tree was the only thing here.

"Will it still work?" I wondered as he urged the horse into the clearing, toward the ancient tree. "The trod, I mean. Will it open?"

"We'll see." Ash dismounted and led the horse up to the trunk. When it stopped, I slid out of the saddle and joined him.

"So, how does the trod work?" I asked, peering at the trunk for a door of some kind. Doors in trees were not unusual in the Nevernever. In fact, during my first time to Faeryland, I'd spent the night in a wood sprite's tree, somehow shrinking down to the size of a bug to fit through his door. "I don't see a gate. How do you get it to open?"

"Easy," Ash replied. "We just ask."

Ignoring my scowl, he faced the trunk and put a hand on the rough bark. "This is Ash," he said clearly, "third son of the Unseelie Court, requesting passage to the mortal realm and the clearing of the Elder."

"Please," I added.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a loud groaning and creaking, one of the massive roots snaked out of the ground, shedding dirt and twigs. Rising into the air, it formed an archway between itself and the ground, and the space between shimmered with magic.

“There’s your trod,” Ash murmured, as my heart beat faster in my chest. Puck was through that gateway. If he was still alive.

Clutching Ash’s hand, almost pulling him along in my impatience, I ducked through the arch.

I tripped over a root on the other side and stumbled forward, barely catching myself. Straightening, I gazed around the moonlit grove of New Orleans City Park, recognizing the huge mossy oaks from our last visit. The air was humid, warm and peaceful. Crickets buzzed, leaves rustled and moonlight shimmered off the nearby lake. Nothing had changed. It had been this peaceful the last time we were here, though my world had been falling apart.

Ash touched my arm and nodded at a tree, where a willowy girl with moss-green skin watched us from the shadow of an oak, her dark eyes wide and startled.

“Meghan Chase?” The dryad swayed toward us, moving like a wind-blown branch. “What are you doing here?” I blinked at the fear in her voice. “You must not stay!” she hissed as she drew close. “It is not safe. There is something dangerous following you.”

“We know,” Ash said beside me, calm and unflustered as always. The dryad blinked and shifted her gaze to him. “But we came through the Elder gate, so hopefully she won’t let whatever is hunting us into this world.”

Elder gate? I glanced behind me, and my stomach twisted so hard I felt nauseous.

It was the Elder Dryad’s tree, the great oak that once stood tall and proud, looming over the others. Now, like its twin in the clearing, it was dying. Its branches were

bare of leaves, the shaggy moss that covered it brown and dead.

A lump rose to my throat. I remembered the Elder Dryad from our first visit here: an old, grandmotherly fey with a soft voice and kind eyes who had given the very heart of her tree to make sure I could rescue my brother. And kill the faery who'd kidnapped him. The Elder had known she would die if she helped me. But she gave us the weapon we needed to take down the enemy fey and get Ethan back.

The dryad girl stepped beside me, gazing at the dying oak. "She lives still," she murmured, her voice like the whisper of leaves. "Dying, yes. Too weak to leave her tree, she sleeps now, dreaming of her youth. But not gone, not yet. It will take a long time for her to fade completely."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"No, Meghan Chase." The dryad shook her head with a faint rustling sound, and a shiny beetle crawled across her face to burrow into her hair. "She knew. She knew all along what was going to happen. The wind tells us these things. Just as it tells us you are in terrible danger now." She suddenly fixed me with piercing black eyes. "You should not be here," she said firmly. "It is very close. Why have you come?"

My skin prickled, but I shook off the feeling of trepidation and held her gaze. "I'm here for Puck. I need to see him."

The dryad's expression softened. "Ah. Yes, of course. I will take you to him, but I fear you will be disappointed."

"It doesn't matter." I felt cold, even in the warm summer night. "I just want to see him."

The dryad nodded and shuffled back, swaying in the breeze. “This way.”



# Chapter Two

## The Heart of the Oak

Puck, or the infamous Robin Goodfellow, as he was known in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, had another name, once. A human name, belonging to a lanky, red-haired boy, who had been the neighbor of a shy farm girl in the Louisiana bayou. Robbie Goodfell, as he called himself back then, had been my classmate, confidant and best friend. Always looking out for me, like an older brother. Goofy, sarcastic and somewhat overprotective, Robbie was...different. When he wasn't around, people barely remembered him, who he was, what he looked like. It was like he simply faded from their memories, despite the fact that whenever anything went wrong in school—mice in desks, superglue on chairs, an alligator in the bathrooms one day—Robbie was somehow involved. No one ever suspected him, but I always knew.

Still, it came as a shock when I discovered who he really was: King Oberon's servant, charged with keeping an eye on me in the mortal world. To keep me safe from those who would harm a half-human daughter of Oberon. But also, to keep me blind to the world of Faery, ignorant and unaware of my true nature, and all the danger that came with it.

When Ethan was kidnapped and taken into the Nevernever, Robbie's plans to keep me blind and ignorant unraveled. Defying Oberon's direct orders, he agreed to help me rescue my brother, but his loyalty came at a huge cost. During a battle with an Iron faery, a brand-new species of fey born from technology and progress, he was

shot and very nearly killed. Ash and I brought him here, to City Park, and the dryads took him into one of their trees to sleep and heal from his wounds. Suspended in stasis, the dryads kept him alive, but they didn't know when he would wake up. If he woke up at all. We had to leave him behind when we left to rescue Ethan, and the guilt of that decision had haunted me ever since.

I pressed my palm against the mossy trunk, wondering if I could feel his heartbeat within the tree, a vibration, a sigh. Something, *anything*, that told me he was still there. But I felt nothing except sap, moss and the rough edges of the bark. Puck, if he still lived, was far from my reach.

"Are you sure he's in there?" I asked the dryad, not taking my eyes from the trunk. I didn't know what to expect: his head to pop out of the wood and grin at me, perhaps? But I felt that if I took my eyes away for a second, I would miss something.

The dryad girl nodded. "Yes. He lives still. Nothing has changed. Robin Goodfellow sleeps his dreamless slumber, waiting for the day he will rejoin the world."

"When will that be?" I asked, running my fingers down the trunk.

"We do not know. Perhaps days. Perhaps centuries. Perhaps he does not want to wake up." The dryad placed her hand on the trunk and closed her eyes. "He is resting comfortably, in no pain. There is nothing you can do for him but wait, and be patient."

Unsatisfied with her answer, I pressed my palm against the tree and closed my eyes. Summer glamour swirled around me, the magic of my father Oberon and the Summer court, the glamour of heat and earth and living things. I prodded the tree gently, feeling the sun-

warmed leaves and the life running through their emerald veins. I felt thousands of tiny insects swarming over and burrowing into the trunk, the rapid heartbeat of birds, dreaming in the branches.

I pressed deeper, past the surface, past the softer, still growing wood, deep into the heart of the tree.

And there he was. I couldn't physically see him, of course, but I could sense him, feel his presence in front of me, a bright spot of life against the heartwood. I felt the wood cradling his thin, lanky frame, protecting it, and heard the faintest *thump-thump* of a beating heart. Puck hovered limply, his chin on his chest and his eyes closed. He seemed much smaller in sleep, fragile and ghostlike, as if a breath could blow him away.

I drifted closer, reaching out to touch him, brushing insubstantial fingers over his cheek, pushing back unruly red bangs. He didn't stir. If I didn't hear his heartbeat, vibrating faintly through the tree, I would've thought he was already dead.

*"I'm so sorry, Puck,"* I whispered, or maybe I just thought it, deep inside the giant oak. *"I wish you were here with me now. I'm scared, and I don't know what's going to happen. I really need you to come back."*

If he heard me, he didn't show it. There was no flicker of eyelids, no twitch of his head, responding to my voice. Puck remained limp and motionless, his heartbeat calm and steady, echoing through the wood. My best friend was far from me, beyond my reach, and I couldn't bring him back.

Depressed, feeling strangely sick, I pulled out of the tree, returning to my own body. As the sounds of the world returned, I found myself fighting back tears. So close. So close to Puck, and still so far away.

Ash's expression was grave as I met his eyes; he knew what I'd done, and could guess the outcome.

"He's still alive," he told me. "That's all you can hope for." I sniffed, turning away, and Ash sighed. "Don't worry too much about him, Meghan. Robin Goodfellow has always been extraordinarily difficult to kill." His voice hovered between irritation and amusement, as if he spoke from experience. "I can almost guarantee Goodfellow will pop up one day when you least expect it, just be patient."

"Patience," said an amused voice somewhere over my head, "has never been the girl's strong suit."

Startled, I looked up, into the branches of the oak. A pair of familiar golden eyes peered down at me, attached to nothing else, and my heart leaped.

"Grimalkin?"

The eyes blinked slowly, and the body of a large gray cat appeared, crouched on one of the lower branches. It *was* Grimalkin, the faery cat I met on my last journey to Faery. Grim had helped me out a few times in the past...but his help always came with a price. The cat loved collecting favors and did nothing for free, but I was still happy to see him, even if I still owed him a debt or two from our last adventure.

"What are you doing here, Grim?" I asked as the feline yawned and stretched, arching his fluffy tail over his back. True to form, Grimalkin finished stretching, sat down and gave his fur several licks before deigning to reply.

"I had business with the Elder Dryad," he replied in a bored voice. "I needed to know if she'd heard anything about the whereabouts of a certain individual." Grim scratched behind an ear, examined his back toes and gave

them a lick. "Then I heard that you were on your way here, so I thought I would wait, to see if it was true. You have always proved most entertaining."

"But...the Elder Dryad is asleep," I said, frowning. "They told me she's too weak to even come out of her tree."

"What is your point, human?"

"Never mind." I shook my head. Grimalkin was exasperating and secretive, and I learned long ago he wouldn't share anything until he was ready. "It's still good to see you, Grim. Wish we could stay and talk awhile, but we're in sort of a hurry right now."

"Mmm, yes. Your ill-contrived deal with the Winter prince." Grimalkin's eyes shifted to Ash and back to me, blinking slowly. "Hasty and reckless, just like a human." He sniffed, staring straight at Ash, now. "But...I would have thought that you knew better, Prince."

Before I could ask what he meant by *that*, I felt a hand on my arm and turned to meet Ash's solemn gaze. "We should go," he murmured, and though his voice was firm, his expression was apologetic. "If something is chasing us, we should try to make it to Tir Na Nog as soon as we can. It won't be able to follow us, then. And I can protect you better in my own territory than the wyldwood or the mortal realm."

"One moment." Grimalkin yawned and sidled down from the tree, landing noiselessly on the roots. "If you are leaving now, I believe I will come with you. At least part of the way."

"Really?" I stared at him, surprised. "You're going to Tir Na Nog? Why?"

"I told you before. I am looking for someone."

"Who?"

“You ask a wearying amount of questions, human.” Grimalkin hopped down from the roots and trotted off, tail in the air. Several yards away, he glanced back over his shoulder, twitching an ear. “Well? Are you coming or not? If you say there is something after you, it would make sense not to be here when it comes to call, yes?”

Ash and I shared a bemused look and trailed after him.

The Elder Gate loomed before us, tall and imposing even though the tree was dying. As we approached, the entire trunk suddenly shifted with a groan. A face pushed its way out of the bark, old and wrinkled, part of the tree come to life. The Elder Dryad opened her eyes, squinting as though it was difficult to focus, and her gaze fastened on me.

“Noooooooooooo,” she breathed, barely a whisper in the darkness. “You must not go back this way. *He* waits for you on the other side. He will...” Her voice trailed off, and her face sank back into the wood, vanishing from sight. “Run,” was the last thing I heard.

I shivered all the way down to my toes. Ash immediately took my hand and drew me away, striding in the opposite direction, his body tense like a coiled wire. Grimalkin slipped after us, a gray ghost in the shadows, the fur on his tail standing on end. It would’ve been funny if I didn’t feel eyes on the back of my neck, old, savage and patient, watching us flee into the night.

Ash paused beneath the limbs of another oak, put his fingers to his lips and let out a piercing whistle. Moments later, the fey horse trotted out of the shadows, snorting and tossing its head, skidding to a stop before us.

“Where are we going now?” I asked, as Ash helped me into the saddle.

“We can’t use the Elder Gate to get back,” the prince replied, swinging up behind me. “We’ll have to find another way into the Nevernever. And quickly.” He gathered the reins in one hand and snaked an arm around my waist. “I know of another trod that will take us close to Tir Na Nog, but it’s in a part of the city that’s...dangerous for Summer fey.”

“You are speaking of the Dungeon, are you not?” Grimalkin said, appearing suddenly in my lap, curled up like he belonged. I blinked in surprise. “Are you sure you want to take the girl there?”

“Not much choice, now.” Tightening his grip on my waist, Ash kicked the horse forward, and we galloped into the streets of New Orleans.

I’d forgotten what it was like to be a half faery in the real world, or at least in the company of a powerful, full-blooded fey. The horse trotted down brightly lit streets, weaving through cars and alleyways and people, and no one saw us. No one even glanced our way. Regular humans couldn’t see the faery world, though it was all around them. Like the two goblins sifting through a spilled Dumpster in an alley, gnawing on bones and other things I didn’t want to dwell on. Or the dragonfly-winged sylph perched atop a telephone pole, watching the streets with the intensity of an eagle observing her territory. We nearly ran into a group of dwarves leaving one of the many pubs on Bourbon Street. The short, bearded men shouted drunken curses as the horse swerved, barely missing them, and galloped away down the sidewalk. We were deep in the French Quarter when Ash stopped in front of a wall of stone buildings, old black shutters and

doors lining the sidewalk. A sign swinging above a thick black door read: Ye Olde Original Dungeon, and there was red paint splattered against the frame in what was supposed to be blood, I guessed. At least, I hoped it was paint. Ash pushed open the door, revealing a very long, narrow alleyway, and turned to me.

“This is Unseelie territory,” he murmured close to my ear. “There’s a rough crowd that frequents this place. Don’t talk to anyone, and stay close to me.”

I nodded and peered down the closed-in space, which was barely wide enough to walk through. “What about the horse?”

Ash removed the horse’s pack and pulled off its bridle, tossing it into the shadows. “It’ll find its own way home,” he murmured, swinging the pack over one shoulder. “Let’s go.”

We slipped down the narrow corridor, Ash in front, Grim trailing behind. The alley ended in a small courtyard, where a scraggly waterfall trickled into a moat at the front of the building. We crossed the footbridge, passed a bored-looking human bouncer who paid us no attention and entered a dark, red-tinged room.

From the shadows along the wall rose something huge and green, crimson eyes glaring out of the monstrous, toothy face of a female troll. I squeaked and took a step back.

“I smell me a Summer whelp,” she growled, blocking our way. Up close, she stood nearly eight feet, with swamp-green skin and long, taloned fingers. Beady red eyes glared at me from her impressive height. “You’re either really brave or really stupid, whelp. Lost a bet with a phouka or something? No Summer fey allowed in here, so get lost.”



“She’s with me,” Ash said, stepping up to block the troll’s line of sight. “And you’re going to step aside now. We need to use the hidden trod.”

“Prince Ash.” The troll took a step back but didn’t move aside completely. Facing a prince of the Unseelie Court, she turned almost sniveling. “Your Highness, of course I would let you in, but...” She glanced over Ash’s shoulder at me. “The boss says absolutely no Summer blood in here unless we’re going to drink it.”

“We’re just passing through,” Ash replied, still in that same calm, cool voice. “We’ll be gone before anyone notices us.”

“Your Highness, I can’t,” the troll protested, sounding more and more unsure. She glanced back over her shoulder, lowering her voice. “I could lose my job if I let her through.”

Very casually, Ash dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword.

“You could lose your head if you don’t.”

The troll’s nostril’s flared. She glanced at me again, then back at the Winter prince, claws flexing at her side. Ash didn’t move, though the air around him grew colder, until the troll’s breath hung in the air before her face.

Sensing her dire predicament, the huge faery finally backed off. “Of course, Your Highness,” she muttered, and pointed at me with a curved black claw. “But if she gets stuffed into a bottle and served as the next drink special, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Ash, and led me into the Dungeon.

The Dungeon, for all its eerie decor, turned out to be nothing more than a bar and nightclub, though it definitely catered to the more macabre crowd. The walls

were brick, the lights dim and red, casting everything in crimson, and snarling monster heads hung on the walls over the bar. Music pounded the ceiling from an overhead room, AC/DC screaming out the lyrics to *Back in Black*.

There were human patrons at the bar and sitting throughout the room with drinks in hand, but I saw only the inhuman ones. Goblins and satyrs, phouka and redcaps, a lone ogre in the corner, drinking a whole pitcher of a dark purple liquid. Unseen and invisible, the Unseelie fey milled through the throng of humans, spitting in their drinks, tripping the drunker ones, stealing items from purses and wallets.

I shivered and drew back, but Ash took my hand firmly. “Stay close,” he murmured again. “This isn’t as bad as upstairs, but we’ll still have to be careful.”

“What’s upstairs?”

“Skulls, cages and the dance floor. Not something you want to see, trust me.”

Ash kept a tight hold on my hand as we navigated around tables and bar patrons, moving toward the back of the room. Grimalkin had disappeared—normal for him—so it was just us receiving the cold, hungry glares from every corner of the room. A redcap—a short, evil faery with sharklike teeth and a cap dipped in his victim’s blood—reached for me as we passed his table, snagging my shirt. I tried to dodge, but the space was tight and narrow, and the clawed fingers latched onto my sleeve.

Ash turned. There was a flash of blue light, and a half second later the redcap froze, a glowing blue sword at his throat.

“Don’t. Try. Anything.” Ash’s voice was colder than the chill coming off his blade. The redcap’s Adam’s apple bobbed, and he very slowly pulled back his claws. The

rest of the Unseelie fey had frozen as well and were staring at us with glowing, hostile eyes.

"Meghan, go." Ash kept his threatening gaze on the rest of the crowd, daring anyone to get up. No one moved. I slipped past him and the redcap, who was keeping very still in his seat, and moved toward the back of the room.

"This way, human." Grimalkin appeared at the edge of a hallway, his eyes coming into focus before the rest of his body. Behind him, the narrow corridor was tight, dim and full of smoke. Strangely enough, bookshelves lined the walls, floor to ceiling—the type you'd find in a library or old mansion, not a shadowy bar in the French Quarter.

"Okay, why is there a library in the back of a goth bar?" I asked, peering around at the books. "Spell books for the black arts? Recipes for human hors d'oeuvres?"

Grimalkin snorted.

"Watch and learn, human."

At that moment, the bookshelf at the very end of the hallway swung open, and two college-aged girls walked out, laughing and giggling. I blinked and moved aside as they passed, reeking of smoke and alcohol, and stumbled back toward the main bar. Looking back, I caught a glimpse of the room behind the panel as it swung closed—a toilet, a sink and a mirror—and stared wide-eyed at Grimalkin.

"The *bathroom*?"

Grimalkin yawned. "What humans will not do to keep themselves entertained," he mused with half-lidded eyes. "It is even more amusing when they are drunk and cannot find the door. But I suggest we get moving. That redcap motley has taken quite an interest in you."

I looked back to see that the redcap had been joined by three of his friends, and all four faeries were staring at

us and muttering among themselves. Ash joined us in the hall, his icy blade still unsheathed, tendrils of mist writhing off it to mingle with the smoke.

“Hurry,” he growled at us, pushing me toward the end of the hall. “I don’t like the attention we’re getting. Cat, have you opened the trod?”

“Give me a moment, Prince.” Grimalkin sighed, and sauntered toward the panel that had so recently opened.

“Wait, aren’t you their prince?” I wondered. “They’re Unseelie too, right? Can’t you just order them to leave us alone?”

Ash gave a low, humorless chuckle. “I’m *a* prince,” he replied, still keeping an eye on the redcaps, who in turn were keeping an eye on us. “But I’m not the only one. My brothers are looking for you as well. Rowan has eyes and ears everywhere, I’m sure. He’s much more ruthless than I am. Those redcaps could work for him, or they could be spies for Mab herself. Either way, they’re going to inform *someone* of our passing the moment we leave this place. I can guarantee it.”

“Sounds like a great family,” I muttered.

Ash snorted. “You have no idea.”

“Done,” said Grimalkin from the end of the hallway. “Let us go.”

“After you,” Ash said, motioning me forward. “I’ll make sure nothing follows us.”

I slid the panel open, half expecting to see the tiny bathroom with the stained sink and toilet and scrawled-on walls. Instead, a cold breeze blew into the hallway, smelling of frost and bark and crushed leaves, and the gray, misty forest of the Nevernever stretched away through the door.

Grimalkin slipped through first, becoming nearly invisible in the fog. I followed, stepping through the doorway that became a split tree trunk on the other side. Ash ducked through and shut the door firmly behind us, where it faded into nothingness as soon as he let it go, leaving the mortal world behind.

It was colder in this part of the wyldwood. Frost coated the ground and the branches of the trees, and the mist clung to my skin with clammy fingers. I couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction. Everything was overly quiet and still, as if the forest itself was holding its breath.

"Tir Na Nog is close," Ash said, his voice muffled by the clinging fog. His breath did not puff or hang in the air like mine did. Trembling, I rubbed my arms to get warm. "We should move quickly. I want to get to Winter as fast as possible."

I was tired. My legs were cramped, both from riding and walking, my head hurt, and the cold was sapping the last of my willpower. And I knew from personal experience that it would only get colder the closer we got to Tir Na Nog.

Thankfully, Grimalkin noticed my reluctance. "The human is about to fall over from exhaustion," he stated bluntly, twitching his tail. "She will only slow us down if we push her much farther. Perhaps we should look for a place to rest."

"Soon," Ash said, and turned to me. "Just a little farther, Meghan. Can you do that? We'll stop as soon as we cross the border into Tir Na Nog."

I nodded wearily. Ash took my hand, and with Grimalkin leading the way, we walked into the curling mist.

Minutes later, the howl rang out behind us.

# Chapter Three

## The Living Cold

Ash stopped, every muscle in his body coiling tight, as the echo of that eerie cry faded into the mist.

“Impossible,” he murmured, his voice frighteningly calm. “It’s on our trail again. How? How could it find us so quickly?”

Grimalkin suddenly let out a long, low growl, which shocked me and caused goose bumps to crawl up my arms. The cat had never done that before. “It is the Hunter,” Grimalkin said, as his fur began to rise along his back and shoulders. “The Eldest Hunter, the First.” He glanced at us, teeth bared, looking feral and wild. “You must flee, quickly! If he has your trail he will be coming fast. Run, now!”

We ran.

The woods flashed by us, dark and indistinct, shadowy shapes in the mist. I didn’t know if we were running in circles or straight into the Hunter’s jaws. Grimalkin had disappeared. Direction was lost in the coiling mist. I only hoped that Ash knew where he was going as we fled through the eerie whiteness.

The howl came again, closer this time, more excited. I dared a backward glance, but could see nothing beyond the swirling fog and shadows. But I could *feel* whatever it was, getting closer. It could see us now, fleeing before it, the back of my neck a tempting target. I stifled my panic and kept running, clinging to Ash’s hand as we wove through the forest.

The trees fell away, the fog cleared a bit and suddenly a great chasm opened before us, wide and gaping like the maw of a giant beast. Ash jerked me to a stop three feet from the edge, and a shower of pebbles went clattering down the jagged sides, vanishing into the river of mist far below. The crack in the earth ran along the edge of the wyldwood for as far as I could see in either direction, separating us from the safety on the other side.

Beyond the chasm, a snow-covered landscape stretched away before us, icy and pristine. Trees were frozen, covered in ice, every twig outlined in sparkling crystal. The ground beneath looked like a blanket of clouds, white and fluffy. Snowdrifts glittered in the sun like millions of tiny diamonds. Tir Na Nog, the land of Winter, home to Mab and the Unseelie Court.

“This way.” Ash tugged my hand and pulled me along the chasm, where the mist from the wyldwood rolled off the edge and down the cliff sides like a slow-moving waterfall. “If we can get to the bridge, I can stop him.”

Panting, I followed the edge of the gorge and gasped in relief. About a hundred yards away, an arched bridge, made completely of ice, sparkled enticingly in the sun.

Something snapped in the woods at our right, something huge and fast. The Hunter was silent now, no howls or deep throaty bays; it was moving in for the kill.

We reached the bridge, and Ash pushed me forward onto the icy surface. There were no guards or handrails, just a narrow arch over a terrifying drop. Stomach clenching, I started across, trying not to look down. Because the bridge was ice, it was perfectly clear; I felt I



was walking out over nothing, seeing the dizzying fall right beneath my feet.

My foot slipped, and my heart slammed against my ribs, pounding wildly as I flailed. Right behind me, Ash grabbed my arm tightly, and somehow we made it to the other side.

As soon as we were off, the Winter prince drew his sword. Sunlight flashed along the blade as he raised it and brought it slashing down on the narrow bridge. The bridge cracked, icy shards glittering as they spiraled into the air, and he raised the sword for another blow.

Across the chasm, something dark and monstrous broke out of the trees, fog swirling around it. Through the mist and shadows, I couldn't see it clearly, but it was huge, black and terrifying, with burning, yellow-green eyes. When it saw what Ash was doing, it roared, making the air tremble, then bounded for the bridge.

Ash brought his sword down again, then once more, and with a deafening crack, the ice bridge shattered. Our end slid away and dropped into oblivion, taking with it the entire arch, which clashed and screeched its way down the side of the cliff. The shadow on the other side slid to a halt, green eyes blazing with fury as it stalked up and down the edge for a moment, panting. Then, with a snarl that showed a flash of huge white teeth, it turned and slipped back into the misty wyldwood, vanishing from sight.

I shuddered with relief and sank down into the snow, gasping, feeling as if my lungs and legs and whole body were on fire. But as the adrenaline wore off, I realized how frigidly cold it was on this side of the chasm. The icy wind cut through my bones and stabbed into me like a knife.

Ash knelt beside me and gently pulled me close, wrapping me in his arms. I leaned into him, felt his heart racing, and shivered against his chest. He was silent, resting his forehead against mine, saying nothing. Just there.

“Come on,” he murmured after a few moments. “Let’s find a place to rest.”

“What about the Hunter?”

He rose, pulling me to my feet. “The Ice Maw runs for miles in either direction,” he said, nodding at the chasm behind us, “until it meets the Wyrmtooth Mountains in the north and the Broken Glass Sea in the south. The Hunter won’t find a way across for a long time. Besides,” he added, narrowing his eyes, “this is *my* realm. I doubt he’ll attack us here.”

“Do not be too sure of that, Prince,” said Grimalkin, popping into view on what was left of the shattered bridge. “The Hunter is older than you—much older. He does not care whose realm he is in when tracking his prey. If he is after you, you will see him again.”

I sneezed, causing the cat to pin his ears. Ash took my elbow and drew me away from the chasm, positioning himself so that he blocked the wind howling up from the gap. “We’ll worry about that if he ever gets across,” the prince stated calmly as I hugged myself to conserve heat. “But night is coming, and so is the cold. We have to get Meghan inside.”

“Before she turns into an icicle? I suppose.” Grimalkin hopped off the shattered post, landing lightly in the snow. “The only shelter I know of is old Liaden’s place in the frozen wood. Surely you are not taking the girl there?” He blinked under Ash’s steady gaze. “You are. Well, this will be interesting. Follow me, then.” He

trotted away, making light paw prints in the snow, a fuzzy cloud gliding over the whiteness.

“Who’s Liaden?” I asked Ash.

An icy gale howled up from the chasm before he could answer, slicing into me and tossing drifts of snow into the air. “Later,” Ash said brusquely, giving me a slight push. “Follow Grimalkin. Go.”

We trailed the paw prints into the woods. Icicles hung from frozen trees, some longer than my arms and as sharp as a spear. Every so often one would snap off and plummet to the ground with the tinkle of breaking glass. The cold here was a living thing, clawing at my exposed skin, stabbing my lungs when I breathed. I was soon shivering violently, teeth chattering, thinking longingly of sweaters and hot baths and burrowing under a thick feather quilt until spring.

The woods grew darker, the trees closer together, and the temperature dropped even more. By now I was losing feeling in my fingers and toes, the cold making me sluggish. I felt as if icy hands were grabbing my feet, dragging me down, urging me to curl up in a ball and hibernate until it was warm again.

A flash of color in the trees caught my eye. On the branch above me, a small bird perched on a twig, bright red against the snow. Its eyes were closed, and it was fluffed out against the cold, looking like a feathery red ball. And it was completely encased in ice, covered head-to-toe in crystallized water, so clear that I could see every detail through the shell.

The sight should have chilled me, but I was so cold all I felt was the spreading numbness. My legs belonged to someone else, and I couldn’t even feel my feet

anymore. I tripped over a branch and fell, sprawling in a snowbank, ice crystals stinging my eyes.

I was suddenly very sleepy. My eyelids felt heavy, and all I wanted to do was lay my head down and sleep, like a bear through the winter. It was an appealing thought. I wasn't cold anymore, just completely numb, and darkness beckoned temptingly.

"Meghan!"

Ash's voice cut through the layers of apathy, as the Winter prince knelt in the snow. "Meghan, get up," he said, his voice urgent. "You can't lie here. You'll freeze over and die if you don't move. Get up."

I tried, but it seemed a Herculean effort to even raise my head when all I wanted to do was sleep. I muttered something about how tired I was, but the words froze in the back of my throat, and I only grunted.

"The cold has her." Grimalkin's voice seemed to come from far away. "She is already icing over. If you do not get her up now, she will die."

My eyelids were slipping shut, even though I tried keeping them open. If they closed, they would freeze and stay shut forever. I tried using my fingers to pry them open by force, but a layer of ice now covered my hands and I couldn't feel them anymore.

*Give in, the cold whispered in my ear. Give in, sleep. You'll never feel pain again.*

My eyelids flickered, and Ash made a noise that was almost a growl. "Dammit, Meghan," he snarled, grabbing both my arms. "I am not going to lose you this close to home. Get up!"

He rose, pulling me to my feet and, before I could even register what was going on, pressed his lips to mine.

The numbness shattered. Surprise flooded in, as my heart leaped and my stomach twisted itself into a knot. I laced my arms around his neck and kissed him back, feeling his arms around me, crushing us together, breathing in the sharp, frosty scent of him.

When we finally pulled back, I was breathing hard, and his heart raced under my fingers. I was also shivering again, and this time I welcomed the cold. Ash sighed and touched his forehead to mine.

“Let’s get you out of the cold.”

Grimalkin had vanished again, perhaps annoyed with our display of passion, but his delicate paw prints cut plainly through the snow. We followed them until the trail finally ended at a small, dilapidated cabin beneath two rotting trees. I wouldn’t think anyone lived there, but smoke curled from the chimney and a dim orange light glowed through the windows, so someone must’ve been home.

I was eager to get inside, out of the biting chill, but Ash took my hand, forcing me to look at him.

“You’re in Unseelie territory now, remember that,” he warned. “Whatever you see in that room, don’t stare, and don’t make any comments about her baby. Understand?”

I nodded, willing to agree to anything if I could just be warm again. Ash released me, stepped onto the creaking, snow-covered porch, and knocked firmly on the door.

A woman opened it, peering out with tired, bloodshot eyes. A gray robe and cowl draped her body like old curtains, and her face, though fairly young, was lined and weary.

“Prince Ash?” she said, her voice breathy and frail. “This is a surprise. What can I do for you, Your Highness?”

“We wish to spend the night here,” Ash stated quietly. “Myself and my companion. We won’t bother you, and we intend to be gone by morning. Will you let us in?”

The woman blinked. “Of course,” she murmured, opening the door wide. “Please, come inside. Make yourselves comfortable, poor children. I’m Dame Liaden.”

That’s when I saw her baby, cradled lovingly in her other arm, and bit my lip to stifle a gasp. The wrinkled, ghastly creature in a stained white blanket was the most hideous child I’d ever seen. Its deformed head was too large for its body, its tiny limbs were shriveled and dead, and its skin had an unhealthy blue tinge, like it had been drowned or left out in the cold. The child kicked weakly and let out a feeble, unearthly cry.

It was like watching a train wreck. I couldn’t tear my eyes away...until Ash nudged me sharply in the ribs. “Nice to meet you,” I said automatically, and followed him over the threshold into the room. Inside, a fire crackled in the hearth, and the warmth seeped into my frozen limbs, making me sigh in relief.

There was no crib anywhere in the cabin, and the woman didn’t put her infant down once, moving about the room clutching her baby as if she feared something would snatch it away.

“The girl can take the bed under the window,” Liaden said, wrapping the baby in another ratty, once-white blanket. “I fear I must go out now, but please make yourselves at home. There is tea and milk in the

cupboards, and extra blankets in the closet. But midnight draws close, and we must depart. Farewell.”

Holding her infant close to her chest, she opened the door, letting in a blast of painfully cold air, and slipped out into the night. The door clicked behind her, and we were alone.

“Where is she going?” I asked, moving closer to the fireplace. My fingers were finally getting some feeling back, and were all tingly now. Ash didn't look at me.

“You don't want to know.”

“Ash...”

He sighed. “She's going to wash her baby in the blood of a human infant to make her own child whole and healthy again. If only for a little while.”

I recoiled. “That's horrible!”

“You asked.”

I shuddered and rubbed my upper arms, looking out the cabin's grimy window. Moonlight sparkled through the glass, and the land beyond was frozen solid. This was Unseelie territory, like Ash had said. I was far from home and family and the safety of a normal life.

Closing my eyes, I started to shake. What would happen to me once I reached the Winter Court? Would Mab throw me in a dungeon, or maybe feed me to her goblins? What would a centuries-old faery queen do to the daughter of her ancient rival? Whatever it was, I couldn't imagine it would be good for me. Fear twisted my gut.

I felt Ash move behind me, so close that I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. He didn't touch me, but his presence, quiet and strong, calmed me somewhat. Though the logical part of my mind told me he might be the one I should fear the most.

“So, how will this work?” I asked casually, trying to keep the accusation from my voice. It crept out anyway. “Am I a prisoner of the Winter Court? A guest? Will Mab toss me in a cell, or is she planning something much more interesting?”

He hesitated, and I could hear the reluctance in his voice when he finally spoke. “I don’t know what she intends to do,” he said softly. “Mab doesn’t share her plans with me, or anyone.”

“It’s going to be dangerous for me there, isn’t it? I’m Oberon’s daughter. Everyone will hate me.” I remembered the redcap’s hungry gaze and rubbed my arms. “Or want to eat me.”

His hands lightly grasped my shoulders, making my skin tingle and my heart flutter in my chest. “I will protect you,” he murmured, and his voice went even lower, as if talking to himself. “Somehow.”

Grimalkin appeared abruptly, leaping onto a stool by the fire, making me jump and Ash withdraw his hands. I mourned the loss of his touch. “Get some rest,” the Winter prince said, moving away. “If nothing else happens, we should reach the Winter Court by tomorrow night.”

Gingerly, I lay down on the bed beneath the window, trying not to imagine the last thing that used the mattress. Ash claimed a chair by the fire, turning it so he faced the door, and drew his sword into his lap. Surprisingly, the bed was warm and comfortable, and I drifted off to the outline of Ash’s profile keeping watch by the fire.

I must’ve woken sometime in the night, or perhaps I dreamed, for I remember opening my eyes to see Ash and Grimalkin standing before the hearth, talking quietly. Their voices were too low to hear, but the look on Ash’s



face was scary in its bleakness. He raked a hand through his hair and said something to Grimalkin, who nodded slowly and replied. I blinked, or maybe drifted off again, because when I opened my eyes again Grimalkin was gone. Ash stood with his hands braced on the mantel and his shoulders hunched, staring into the flames, and didn't move for a long time.

# Chapter Four

## The Hunter

“Get up.”

The cold voice was the first thing I heard the next morning, cutting through layers of sleep and grogginess, bringing me fully awake. Ash loomed over me, his posture stiff, regarding me with empty silver eyes.

“We’re leaving,” he said in a flat voice, and tossed something on the bed, where it landed in a cloud of dust. A thick, hooded cloak, gray and dusty, as if all color had been leached out of it. “Found that in the closet,” Ash continued, turning away. “It should keep you from freezing. But we need to go, now. The sooner we reach the Winter Court the better.”

“Where’s Grim?” I asked, struggling upright, reeling from his sudden change in mood. Ash opened the door, letting in a blast of frigid air.

“Gone. Left early this morning.” He waited, still holding the door, as I swirled the cloak around my shoulders. When I drew up the hood, the prince nodded briskly. “Let’s go.”

“Is something coming?” I asked, jogging after him through the snow, my breath puffing in the air. Everything was covered in a new layer of ice. “Is the Hunter getting close again?”

“No.” He didn’t look at me. “Not that I can tell.”

I swallowed. “Did I...do something wrong?”

He hesitated this time, then sighed. “No,” he said in a softer voice. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Then why are you being like this? Ash? Hey!” I lunged forward and grabbed his sleeve, bringing us both to a halt.

“Let go.” Ash’s voice held the subtle hint of warning. I shook off my fear and stubbornly planted my feet.

“Or what? You’ll kill me? Haven’t you already made that threat?”

“Don’t tempt me.” But his voice had lost its coldness—now it just sounded tired. He sighed, raking his free hand through his hair. “It’s not important. Just...something Grimalkin said. Something I already knew.”

“What?”

He turned. “Meghan...”

In the distance, a howl echoed over the trees.

I jerked, and Ash straightened, his gaze sharpening. “The Hunter,” he muttered. “Again. How could it catch up so quickly?”

The howl came again, and I shivered, drawing closer to Ash. “What *is* it?”

The prince’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know. But this stops now. Come on!”

Ash kept a tight hold on my hand as we sprinted through the snow. I thought of the bridge and the impossible chasm that Hunter had, somehow, cleared, and hoped this plan would work out better. It didn’t seem likely that we would outrun whatever tireless beast was behind us.

The forest thinned, and jagged cliffs rose up on either side of us, sparkling in the sun. Huge blue and green crystals jutted out from the sides, sending fractured prisms of light over the snow. Ash led me through a narrow

canyon, sheer cliff walls pressing in on either side until it opened up in a snowy clearing surrounded by mountains.

The howl rang out again, echoing eerily through the gully we had just come through. Whatever it was, it was closing fast.

“This way.” Ash tugged on my hand and pulled me toward the far side of the clearing. Between two pine trees, a dark blot in the cliff face marked the entrance to a cave, icicles dangling from the opening like teeth.

“Go,” Ash said, pushing me forward. “Get inside, hurry.”

I scrambled through the opening, being careful not to stab myself on the icicles, and straightened, looking around. The cave was huge, a vast, ice-covered cavern, sunlight slanting in through the holes in the roof far, far above us. The ceiling sparkled, every square inch covered with sharp, gleaming icicles, some longer than I was tall. A breeze howled through the cave, and the icicles tinkled like wind chimes, filling the cavern with song.

“Ash,” I said as the Winter prince came through the opening, shaking snow from his hair. “What—”

“Shh.” Ash put a finger against my lips, shaking his head in warning. He pointed to the skeletons scattered about the cave, half-buried in snow. The bones of some large animal lay sprawled on the ground nearby, a fallen icicle jutting through its ribs. I winced and nodded my understanding.

And then something black and monstrous exploded through the cave mouth, snapping at my face.

Ash jerked me backward, his hand snaking around my mouth to stifle my shriek, as the snap of teeth echoed inches from my head. If Ash’s hand hadn’t been pressed hard against my lips, I would’ve screamed again as two

burning, yellow-green eyes peered at me from the face in the door.

It was a wolf, a huge black wolf the size of a grizzly bear, only longer and leaner and a thousand times more frightening. This wasn't the majestic creature you saw on the nature channels, loping through the snowy wilderness with its pack. This was the rabid beast in every horror movie about wolves: dark shaggy fur, slavering muzzle, glowing, pupil-less eyes. Its lips were curled back to reveal shiny fangs longer than my hand, and ribbons of drool dripped from its jaws, crystallizing in the snow. Only its head fit through the opening, but it turned its muzzle in my direction, and I swore it grinned at me.

"Meghan Chase. I finally found you."

Ash pulled me back farther, toward the far end of the cave, as the enormous wolf thrashed and wriggled in the doorway, somehow, impossibly, sliding through. My heart thudded as the creature rose to its full height inside the cave. He seemed to fill the chamber. Ash shoved me behind him, pressing me against the wall beneath a rocky overhang, and drew his sword. The wolf chuckled, the deep tone making my skin crawl, and bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"Think you're going to hurt me with that little thing?" His guttural voice echoed through the cavern, and icicles clinked above him, swaying dangerously. "Do you know who I am, boy?" He lowered his head, peeling his lips back. "I am *Wolf*. I am older than you, older than Mab, older than the most ancient faery to walk this realm. I was in stories long before the humans knew my name, and even then they feared me." He took one step forward, his huge paw sinking into the snow. "I am the wolf at the door, the creature that stalked the girl in the red hood to

grandma's house. I am the wolf who becomes a man, and the man who is a beast inside. My stories outnumber all the tales ever told, and you cannot kill me."

"I know who you are." Ash's voice shook slightly, which chilled me even more. That Ash, fearless, unshakable Ash, was afraid of this thing filled me with dread. "But you're here for the Summer princess, and I have my own vow to bring her back to my court. So I can't let you take her." He brandished his sword, the faery glamour of Winter swirling around him. "You'll have to go through me first."

The Wolf smiled. "As you wish."

He lunged with a roar, jaws gaping wide, tongue lolling between dripping fangs. Insanely fast, he covered the area in a single bound and leaped at us, a dark blur in the air. I shrank back as the Wolf charged but Ash whirled, glamour snapping around him, and slammed his sword hilt into the wall.

A deafening crack echoed throughout the cavern, like a gunshot. The ceiling trembled, icicles clicking wildly and then, like a million china plates being smashed at once, collapsed in a deadly gleaming rain. The Wolf paused for an instant, looking up...and was buried under a ton of pointed crystal shards.

I turned away, covering my eyes as a single high-pitched yelp rose over the clatter of smashing ice. The snow cleared, the cacophony died away, and there was silence.

I started to peek through my fingers, but Ash grabbed my hand, blocking my view. "Don't look," he warned softly, and I saw a spatter of red behind him, seeping through the snow, making my stomach curl. "Let's get out of here."

Deliberately not looking at the dark mass in the center of the room, we fled the cave, scrambling through the hole back into the clearing. Snow was falling, light wispy flakes that danced on the breeze. I took a shaky breath, and the cold burned my lungs, reminding me I was still alive. I glanced at Ash, who was staring back at the cave mouth.

"The Wolf," he murmured, almost to himself. "The Big Bad Wolf. Few ever live to tell of seeing him." He shook his head in wonder, glancing back at me. "I wonder why he was after you? Who sent him, that he would track us this far?"

"Mab?" I guessed. Ash snorted and his lips curled in a smirk.

"Mab wants you alive," he said, walking away from the cave mouth, back toward the gully. I pulled my hood up and hurried after him, jogging through the snow. "You're no use to her dead. She was very specific about that. Besides, she wouldn't put me at risk like that." He paused, frowning slightly. "I think."

He sounded terribly unsure. I felt a pang of sympathy, that Ash didn't know if his queen, his own mother, would send the Wolf after us, not caring if it hurt him. I closed the last few paces and reached out to touch his arm.

The Wolf's giant, bloody head lunged between us with a roar, knocking me back, sending me sprawling. Lightning quick, Ash drew his sword, a second too late. The monster's jaws clamped shut on his arm, and the Wolf hurled him away. I screamed.

"I told you, you can't kill me!" the Wolf snarled, stalking toward Ash, who had rolled to his feet with his sword in front of him. The thick, shaggy pelt was covered

in blood. It dripped in a steady rain to the ground, raising faint puffs of steam where it struck the snow. Icicles stuck out of his body like a hundred jagged spears. Despite that, he moved smoothly, easily, as if he felt no pain.

“Foolish boy,” the Wolf growled, circling Ash, leaving a crimson trail behind him. “You will not win this. I am immortal.”

“Meghan, run,” Ash ordered, his eyes never leaving the Wolf. His own blood dripped from his sword arm to stain the ground. “The Winter Court isn’t far from here. You’ll be protected—tell whomever you meet that Ash sent you. Run, now.”

“I’m not leaving!”

“Go!”

The Wolf shook himself, sending blood, foam, and icicles flying. “I will deal with you momentarily, Princess,” he growled, lowering himself into a crouch. Muscles bunched under his shaggy pelt, and the icicles gleamed as they stuck out of his thigh and bony ribs. “Are you ready, boy? Here I come!”

He leaped. Ash brought up his sword. And I charged the Wolf.

The Wolf hit Ash with the full weight of his body behind him, driving them both into the snow, ignoring the sword that slashed into him. His massive paws slammed into Ash’s chest and arms, pinning the sword beneath them. They hit the ground with the Wolf on top, those huge jaws gaping wide to bite off Ash’s head.

I slammed into the Wolf with every bit of strength I had, aiming for one of those gleaming ice spears, driving my shoulder into it. The sharp edge sliced into me, cutting my skin through the cloak, but I felt the spear jam farther into the Wolf’s ribs. The huge creature let out a startled,



painful yelp and swung around, pinning me with a blazing yellow glare.

“Foolish girl! What are you doing? I’m trying to help you!”

Shocked, I stared at him, panting. Still pinned beneath the Wolf, Ash tried to get up, but two giant paws held him down. “What are you talking about?” I demanded. “Let Ash up, if you say you’re helping me.”

The beast shook his head. “I was sent to rescue you and kill this one,” he replied, shifting his weight to better lean on Ash, who gritted his teeth in pain. “You are a prisoner no more, Princess. Just let me finish him off and you can return to the Summer Court.”

“No!” I lunged forward as the Wolf turned back, opening his jaws. “Don’t kill him! I’m not a prisoner. We made a deal, a contract—I would go to the Winter Court in return for his help. He’s not keeping me here by force. I *chose* this.”

The Wolf blinked slowly. “You made a contract,” he repeated.

“Yes.”

“A contract with this one.”

“Yes!”

“Then...your father was mistaken.”

“*Oberon?*” I stared at him, aghast. “Oberon ordered you to do this?”

The Wolf snorted. “No one orders me,” he growled, baring his fangs. “The Summer Lord thought you had been captured. He asked me to find you, kill your captor and free you to return to the Summer Court. He thought the hunt might be difficult, so deep within Winter’s territory, and I could not pass up the challenge.” The Wolf paused, scrutinizing me with intense yellow eyes, a flicker

of irritation crossing his face. “However, if you have made a deal with the Winter prince, that changes things. The agreement with Oberon was to rescue you from your captor, and you do not have a captor. Therefore...” He snarled in annoyance and reluctantly stepped back, freeing Ash from beneath his paws. “I must honor the contract and let you go.”

He glared at us as he moved aside, the Hunter so close to his prey only to have it ripped from his jaws. I stepped between him and Ash, just in case the Wolf changed his mind, and helped the prince to his feet. Ash’s sword arm bleed freely, and the other was wrapped around his ribs, as if the Wolf’s weight had crushed them. Sheathing his blade, he faced our pursuer and gave a slight bow.

The Wolf nodded. “You’re very lucky,” he told Ash. “Today.” Backing off, he shook himself once more and glared at us with grudging respect. “It was a good chase. Pray we do not meet again, for you will not even see me coming.”

Throwing back his head, the Wolf howled, wild and chilling, making the hairs on my neck stand up. Bounding into the trees, his huge dark form vanished instantly, swallowed up by snow and shadows, and we were alone.

I looked at Ash in concern. “Are you all right? Can you walk?”

He took a step and winced, sinking to one knee. “Give me a moment.”

“Come on.” I slipped an arm under his shoulder and carefully eased him upright. The clearing looked like a war zone: trampled snow, crushed vegetation and blood everywhere. It could attract Unseelie predators, and though I was sure none were as scary as the Big Bad

Wolf, Ash was in no shape to fight them off. "We're going back to the cave."

He didn't argue, and together we limped across the clearing to the ice cave, ducking inside. The floor was a mess of shattered icicles, making passage difficult and treacherous, but we found a clear space near the back of the room. Ash sank down against the wall, and I tore a strip off the hem of my cloak.

He was silent as I wrapped the makeshift bandage around his arm, but I could feel his eyes on me as I tied it off. Releasing his arm, I looked up to meet his silvery gaze. Ash blinked slowly, giving me that look that meant he was trying to figure me out.

"Why didn't you run?" he asked softly. "If you didn't stop the Wolf, you wouldn't have to come back to Tir Na Nog. You would have been free."

I scowled at him.

"I agreed to that contract, same as you," I muttered, tying off the bandage with a jerk, but Ash didn't even grunt. Angry now, I glared up at him, meeting his eyes. "What, you think just because I'm human I would back out? I knew what I was getting into, and I am going to uphold my end of the bargain, no matter what happens. And if you think I would leave you to that monster just so I wouldn't have to meet Mab, then you don't know me at all."

"It's *because* you're human," Ash continued in that same quiet voice, holding my gaze, "that you missed a tactical opportunity. A Winter fey in your position wouldn't have saved me. They wouldn't let their emotions get in the way. If you're going to survive in the Unseelie Court, you have to start thinking like them."

“Well, I’m *not* like them.” I rose and took a step back, trying to ignore the feelings of hurt and betrayal, the stupid angry tears pressing at the corners of my eyes. “I’m not a Winter faery—I’m human, with human feelings and emotions. And if you want me to apologize for that, you can forget it. I can’t just shut off my feelings like you can. Though the next time you’re about to get eaten or killed, I guess I won’t bother saving your life.”

I whirled to stalk away in a huff, but Ash rose with blinding speed and gripped my upper arms. I stiffened, locking my knees and keeping my back straight, but struggling with him would have been useless. Even wounded and bleeding as he was, he was much stronger me.

“I’m not ungrateful,” he murmured against my ear, making my stomach flutter despite itself. “I just want you to understand. The Winter Court preys on the weak. It’s their nature. They will try to tear you apart, physically and emotionally, and I won’t always be there to protect you.”

I shivered, anger melting away as my own doubts and fears came rushing back. Ash sighed, and I felt his forehead touch the back of my hair, his breath fanning my neck. “I don’t want to do this,” he admitted in a low, anguished voice. “I don’t want to see what they’ll try to do to you. A Summer faery in the Winter Court doesn’t stand much of a chance. But I vowed that I would bring you back, and I’m bound to that promise.” He raised his head, squeezing my shoulders in an almost painful grip as his voice dropped a few octaves, turning grim and cold. “So, you have to be stronger than they are. You can’t let down your guard, no matter what. They will lead you on, with games and pretty words, and they will take pleasure in your misery. Don’t let them get to you. And don’t trust

anyone.” He paused, and his voice went even lower. “Not even me.”

“I’ll always trust you,” I whispered without thinking, and his hands tightened, turning me to face him almost savagely.

“No,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “You won’t. I’m your enemy, Meghan. Never forget that. If Mab tells me to kill you in front of the entire court, it’s my duty to obey. If she orders Rowan or Sage to carve you up slowly, making sure you suffer every second of it, I’m expected to stand there and let them do it. Do you understand? My feelings for you don’t matter in the Winter Court. Summer and Winter will always be on opposite sides, and nothing will change that.”

I knew I should be afraid of him. He was an Unseelie prince after all, and had basically admitted he would kill me if Mab ordered him to. But he also admitted to having feelings for me—feelings that didn’t matter, true, but it still made my stomach squirm when I heard it. And maybe I was being naive, but I couldn’t believe Ash would willingly hurt me, even in the Winter Court. Not with the way he was looking at me now, his silver eyes conflicted and angry.

He stared at me a moment longer, then sighed. “You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?” he murmured, closing his eyes.

“I’m not afraid,” I told him, which was a lie; I was terrified of Mab and the Unseelie Court that waited at the end of this journey. But if Ash was there, I would be all right.

“You are infuriatingly stubborn,” Ash muttered, raking a hand through his hair. “I don’t know how I’m

going to protect you when you have no concept of self-preservation.”

I stepped close to him, placing a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beat under his shirt. “I trust you,” I said, rising up so our faces were inches apart, trailing my fingers down his stomach. “I know you’ll find a way.”

His breath hitched, and he regarded me hungrily. “You’re playing with fire, you know that?”

“That’s weird, considering you’re an ice prin—” I didn’t get any further, as Ash leaned in and kissed me. I looped my arms around his neck as his snaked around my waist, and for a few moments, the cold couldn’t touch me.

We spent the night in the cave, both to give Ash a chance to heal from his wounds and to give us one more night of rest before entering Tir Na Nog. It didn’t take long for Ash to recover. The fey heal insanely fast, especially if they are within their own territories, and by the time darkness fell his bite wounds were almost gone. As the temperature dropped, he started a fire, solely for my benefit, and we sat around the flames sharing the last of the food, lost in our own thoughts.

Outside, the snow continued to fall, piling outside the entrance and in the center of the room through the holes in the ceiling. It sparkled in the icy moonlight, like flakes of diamonds drifting from the sky, tempting me to stand in the center of the light and catch them on my tongue.

Ash was silent through most of the evening. He’d broken the kiss earlier, pulling away with a guilty, agonized look, and mumbled something about making camp. Since then, he’d given me short, one-word answers

whenever I tried talking to him, and avoided eye contact whenever possible.

He sat across from me now, chin on his hands, brooding into the fire. Part of me wanted to walk up to him and hug him from behind, and part of me wanted to hurl a snowball at his perfect face to get some kind of reaction.

I opted for a less suicidal route. "Hey," I said, poking at the flames with a stick, making them cough sparks. "Earth to Ash. What are you thinking about?"

He didn't move, and for a second I thought he would reply with his favorite one-word answer of the night: *Nothing*. But after a moment he sighed and his eyes flickered, very briefly, to mine.

"Home," he said quietly. "I'm thinking of home. Of the court."

"Do you miss it?"

Another pause, and he shook his head slowly. "No."

"But it's your home."

"It's the place I was born. That's all." He sighed and gazed into the fire. "I don't go back often, and I rarely stay at court for any length of time."

I thought of Mom, and Ethan, and our tiny little farmhouse out in the bayou, and a lump rose to my throat. "That must be lonely," I murmured. "Don't you get homesick once in a while?"

Ash regarded me across the flames, understanding and sympathy dawning in his gaze. "My family," he said in a solemn voice, "is not like yours."

He rose gracefully, abruptly, as if the subject had become tiring. "Get some sleep," he said, and the chill was back in his voice. "Tomorrow we reach the Winter Court. Queen Mab will be anxious to meet you."

My gut twisted. I curled up inside my cloak, as close to the fire as I dared, and let my mind go blank. I was certain that Ash's last words would prevent me from getting any sleep, but I was more exhausted than I realized and soon drifted into oblivion.

That night, for the first time, I dreamed of the Iron King.

The scene was eerily familiar. I stood atop a great iron tower, a hot wind stinging my face, smelling of ozone and chemicals. Before me, a huge metal throne rose into the mottled yellow sky, black iron spikes raking the clouds. Behind me, Ash's cold, pale body was sprawled against the edge of a fountain, blood oozing slowly into the water.

Machina the Iron King stood at the top of his metal throne, long silver hair whipping in the wind. His back was to me, the numerous iron cables extending from his shoulders and spine surrounding him like glittering wings.

I took a step forward, squinting up at the silhouette on the throne. "Machina!" I called, my voice sounding weak and small in the wind. "Where's my brother?"

The Iron King raised his head slightly, but didn't turn around. "Your brother?"

"Yes, my brother. Ethan. You stole him and brought him here." I kept walking, ignoring the wind that tore at my hair and clothes. Thunder boomed overhead, and the mottled yellow clouds turned black and crimson. "You wanted to lure me here," I continued, reaching the base of the throne. "You wanted me to become your queen in exchange for Ethan. Well, here I am. Now let my brother go."



Machina turned. Only it wasn't the Iron King's sharp, intelligent face that stared down at me.

It was my own.

I jerked awake, my heart hammering against my ribs, cold sweat trickling down my back. The fire had gone out, and the ice cave lay dark and empty, though the sky showing through the holes was already light. Snow lay in huge glimmering piles where it had drifted in through the roof, and several new icicles were already forming on the ceiling, growing back like teeth. Ash was nowhere to be seen.

Still trembling from the nightmare, I rolled away from the dead campfire and stood, shaking snow clumps from my hair. Pulling my cloak tighter around myself, I went searching for Ash.

I didn't have to look far. He stood outside in the clearing, snow flurries drifting around him, his sword glowing blue against the white. From the sweeping footprints in the snow, I knew he'd been practicing sword drills, but now he stood motionless, his back to me, gazing toward the entrance of the gully.

I pulled up my hood and walked out, tromping through the deep snow until I stood beside him. He acknowledged me with a flick of his eyes, but otherwise didn't move, his gaze riveted to the edge of the canyon.

"They're coming," he murmured.

A group of horses appeared then, seeming to materialize out of the falling snow, pure white and blue-eyed, trotting a few inches above the ground. Atop them sat Winter knights in icy blue-and-black armor, their gazes cold beneath their snarling wolf helms.

Ash stepped forward, very subtly moving in front of me as the knights swept up, horses snorting small geysers from flared nostrils. “Prince Ash,” one knight said formally, bowing in the saddle. “Her majesty the queen has been informed of your return and has sent us to escort you and the half-breed back to the palace.”

I bristled at the term *half-breed* but Ash didn’t seem terribly fazed by their arrival.

“I don’t need an escort,” he said in a bored voice. “Return to the palace and tell Queen Mab I will arrive shortly. I’m fairly capable of handling the half-breed by myself.”

I cringed at his tone. He was back to being Prince Ash, third son of the Unseelie Court, dangerous, cold and heartless. The knights didn’t seem at all surprised, which somehow made me even more apprehensive. This cold, hostile prince was the Ash they were used to.

“I’m afraid the queen insists, Your Highness,” the first one replied, unapologetic. “By order of Queen Mab, you and the half-breed will come with us to the Winter Court. She is rather impatient for your arrival.”

Ash sighed.

“Very well,” he muttered, not even looking at me as he swung into an empty saddle. Before I could protest, another knight reached down and pulled me up in front of him. “Let’s get this over with.”

We rode for several silent hours. The knights did not speak to me, Ash, or each other, and the horse’s hooves made no sound as they galloped over the snow. Ash didn’t even look in my direction; his face remained blank and cold throughout the ride.

Completely ignored, I was left to my own thoughts, which were dark and growing more disturbing the farther

we went. I missed home. I was terrified of meeting Queen Mab. And Ash had turned into someone cold and unfamiliar. I replayed our last kiss in my mind, clinging to it like a life vest in a raging sea. Had I imagined his feelings for me, misread his intentions? What if everything he'd said was just a ploy, a scheme to get me to Tir Na Nog and the queen?

No, I couldn't believe that. The emotion on his face that night was real. I had to believe that he cared, I had to believe in him, or I would go crazy.

Night was falling and a huge frozen moon was peeking over the tops of the trees when we came to a vast, icy lake. Jagged ice floes crinkled against one another near the shoreline, and fog writhed along the surface of the water. A long wooden dock stretched out toward the middle of the lake, vanishing into the hanging mist.

As I wondered how close we were to the Winter Court, the knights abruptly steered their horses onto the rickety dock and rode down single file, the dark waters of the lake lapping the posts beneath us. I squinted and peered through the fog, wondering if the Winter Court was on an island in the center.

The mist cleared away for just a moment, and I saw the edge of the dock, dropping away into dark, murky lake water. The horses broke into a trot, then a full gallop, snorting eagerly, as the end of the dock rushed at us with terrifying speed.

I closed my eyes and the horses leaped.

We hit the water with a loud splash and sank quickly into the icy depths. The horse didn't even try to resurface, and the knight's grip was firm, so I couldn't kick away. I held my breath and fought down panic as we dropped deeper and deeper into the frigid waters.

Then, suddenly, we resurfaced, bursting out with the same noisy splash, sending water flying. Gasping, I rubbed my eyes and looked around, confused and disoriented. I didn't recall the horse swimming back up. Where were we, anyway?

My gaze focused, my breath caught and I forgot about everything else.

A massive underground city loomed before me, lit up with millions of tiny lights, gleaming yellow, blue and green like a blanket of stars. From where we floated in the black waters of the lake, I could see large stone buildings, streets winding upward in a spiral pattern and ice covering everything. The cavern above soared into darkness, farther than I could see, and the twinkling lights made the entire city glow with hazy etherealness.

At the top of a hill, casting its shadow over everything, an enormous, ice-covered palace stood proudly against the black. I shivered, and the knight behind me spoke for the first time.

“Welcome to Tir Na Nog.”

I glanced at Ash and finally caught his gaze. For a moment, the Unseelie prince looked torn, balanced between emotion and duty, his eyes begging forgiveness. But a half second later he turned away, and his face shut into that blank mask once more.

We rode through the snow-laced streets toward the palace, and the denizens of the Unseelie Court watched us pass with glowing, inhuman eyes. We stopped at the palace doors, where a pair of monstrous ogres glared menacingly, drool dripping from their tusks, but let us through without a word.

Even within the palace, the rooms and hallways were coated with frost and translucent, crystal ice in various

colors; it was possibly colder inside than it was outside. More Unseelie roamed the corridors: goblins, hags, redcaps, all watching me with hungry, evil grins. But since I was flanked by a group of stone-faced knights and one lethally calm Winter prince, none dared do more than leer at me.

The knights escorted us to a pair of soaring double doors carved with the images of frozen trees. If you looked closely, you could almost see faces peering at you through the branches, but if you blinked or looked away they would be gone. A chill wafted out from between the cracks, colder than I thought possible, even in this palace of ice. It brushed across my skin and tiny needles of cold stabbed into me. I shivered and stepped back.

The knights, I realized, were now standing at attention along the corridor, gazing straight ahead, paying us no attention. As I rubbed my stinging arm, Ash stepped close, not touching me, but close enough to make my heart beat faster. With his back to the knights, he put a hand on the door and paused, as if gathering his resolve.

"This is the throne room," he murmured in a low voice. "Queen Mab is on the other side. Are you ready?"

I wasn't, really, but nodded anyway. "Let's do this," I whispered, and Ash pushed open the door.

A blast of that same cold, stinging air hit my face as we went through, nearly taking my breath away. The room beyond was painfully cold; ice columns held up the ceiling, and the floor was slick and frozen. In the center of the room, surrounded by pale, aloof Winter gentry and pet goblins, the queen of the Unseelie Court waited for us.

Queen Mab sat atop her throne of ice, regal, beautiful and terrifying. Her skin was paler than snow, her blue-black hair coiled elegantly atop her head, held in place

with icy needles. She wore a cloak of white fur and held a crystal goblet in one delicate, long-fingered hand. Her eyes, black and as depthless as space, rose slowly, capturing me in a piercing stare. Above the furred ruff, bloodred lips curled into a slow smile.

“Meghan Chase,” Queen Mab purred. “Welcome to the Winter Court. Please, make yourself comfortable. I’m afraid you could be here a long, long time.”

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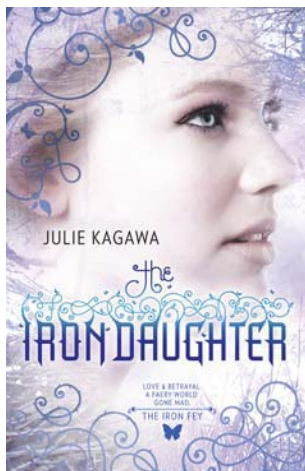


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**And more coming soon....**

**Julie Kagawa** was born in Sacramento, California. But nothing exciting really happened to her there. So, at the age of nine she and her family moved to Hawaii, which she soon discovered was inhabited by large carnivorous insects, colonies of house geckos and frequent hurricanes. She spent much of her time in the ocean, when she wasn't getting chased out of it by reef sharks, jellyfish and the odd eel.

To pay the rent, Julie worked in different bookstores over the years, but discovered the managers frowned upon her reading the books she was supposed to be shelving. So she turned to her other passion: training animals. She worked as a professional dog trainer for several years, dodging Chihuahua bites and overly enthusiastic Labradors, until her first book sold and she stopped training to write full-time.

Julie now lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where the frequency of shark attacks are at an all-time low. She lives with her husband, two obnoxious cats, one Australian shepherd who is too smart for his own good and the latest addition, a hyperactive papillon.

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Winter's Passage

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