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opening extract from

The Iron Daughter

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LOVE & BETRAYAL.
A FAERY WORLD
GONE MAD.

THE IRON FEY

The IRON DAUGHTER

JULIE KAGAWA

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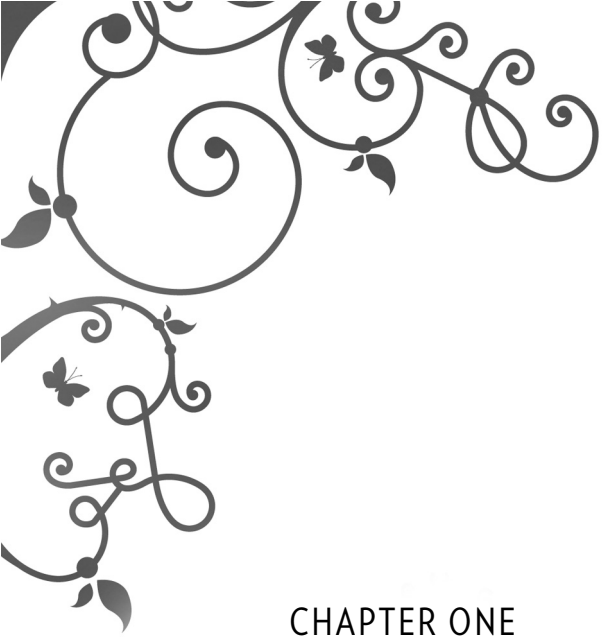

CHAPTER ONE

The Winter Court

The Iron King stood before me, magnificent in his beauty, silver hair whipping about like an unruly waterfall. His long black coat billowed behind him, accenting the pale, angular face and translucent skin, the blue-green veins glowing beneath the surface. Lightning flickered in the depths of his jet-black eyes, and the steel tentacles running the length of his spine and shoulders coiled around him like a cloak of wings, glinting in the light. Like an avenging angel, he floated toward me, hand outstretched, a sad, tender smile on his lips.

I stepped forward to meet him as the iron cables wrapped gently around me, drawing me close. "Meghan Chase," Machina murmured, running a hand through my hair. I shivered, keeping my hands at my sides as the

tentacles caressed my skin. "You have come. What is it you want?"

I frowned. What did I want? What had I come for? "My brother," I answered, remembering. "You kidnapped my brother, Ethan, to draw me here. I want him back."

"No." Machina shook his head, moving closer. "You did not come for your brother, Meghan Chase. Nor did you come for the Unseelie prince you claim to love. You came here for one thing only. Power."

My head throbbed and I tried backing away, but the cables held me fast. "No," I muttered, struggling against the iron net. "This…this is wrong. This isn't how it went."

"Show me, then." Machina opened his arms wide. "How was it 'supposed' to go? What did you come here to do? Show me, Meghan Chase."

"No!"

"Show me!"

Something throbbed in my hand: the beating pulse of the Witchwood arrow. With a yell, I raised my arm and drove the sharpened point through Machina's chest, sinking the arrow into his heart.

Machina staggered back, giving me a look of shocked horror. Only it wasn't Machina anymore but a faery prince with midnight hair and bright silver eyes. Lean and dangerous, silhouetted all in black, his hand went to the sword at his belt before he realized it was too late. He swayed, fighting to stay on his feet, and I bit down a scream.

"Meghan," Ash whispered, a thin line of red trickling from his mouth. His hands clutched at the arrow in his chest as he fell to his knees, pale gaze beseeching mine. "Why?"

Shaking, I raised my hands and saw they were covered in glistening crimson, running rivulets down my arms, dripping to the ground. Below the slick coating, things wiggled beneath my skin, pushing up through the surface, like leeches in blood. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should be terrified, appalled, majorly grossed out. I wasn't. I felt powerful, powerful and strong, as if electricity surged beneath my skin, as if I could do anything I wanted and no one could stop me.

I looked down at the Unseelie prince and sneered at the pathetic figure. Could I really have loved such a weakling once upon a time?

"Meghan." Ash knelt there, the life fading from him bit by bit, even as he struggled to hold on. For a brief moment, I admired his stubborn tenacity, but it wouldn't save him in the end. "What about your brother?" he pleaded. "And your family? They're waiting for you to come home."

Iron cables unfurled from my back and shoulders, spreading around me like glittering wings. Gazing down at the Unseelie prince, helpless before me, I gave him a patient smile.

"I *am* home."

The cables slashed down in a silver blur, slamming into the faery's chest and staking him to the ground. Ash jerked, his mouth gaping silently, before his head lolled back and he shattered like crystal on concrete.

Surrounded by the glittering remains of the Unseelie prince, I threw back my head and laughed, and it turned into a ragged scream as I wrenched myself awake.

My name is Meghan Chase.

I've been in the palace of the Winter fey for a while now.

How long exactly? I don't know. Time doesn't flow right in this place. While I've been stuck in the Nevernever, the outside world, the mortal world, has gone on without me. If I ever get out of here, if I ever make it home, I might find a hundred years have passed while I was gone, like Rip van Winkle, and all my family and friends are long dead.

I try not to think of that too often, but sometimes, I can't help but wonder.

My room was cold. It was always cold. *I* was always cold. Not even the sapphire flames in the hearth were enough to drive out the incessant chill. The walls and ceiling were made of opaque, smoky ice; even the chandelier sparkled with a thousand icicles. Tonight, I wore sweatpants, gloves, a thick sweater and a wool hat, but it wasn't enough. Outside my window, the underground city of the Winter fey sparkled with icy radiance. Dark forms leaped and fluttered in the shadows, flashing claws, teeth and wings. I shivered and gazed up at the sky. The ceiling of the vast cavern was too far away to see through the darkness, but thousands of tiny lights, balls of faery fire or faeries themselves, twinkled like a blanket of stars.

There was a rap at my door.

I didn't call out *Come in.* I'd learned not to do so in the past. This was the Unseelie Court, and inviting them into your room was a very, very bad idea. I couldn't keep them out completely, but the fey follow rules above all else, and by order of their queen, I was not to be bothered unless I requested it.

Letting them into my room could almost sound like such a request.

I crossed the floor, my breath streaming around me, and cracked open the door.

A slinky black cat sat on the floor with its tail curled around itself, gazing up at me with unblinking yellow eyes. Before I could say anything, it hissed and darted through the crack like a streak of shadow.

"Hey!"

I spun around, but the cat was no longer a cat. Tiaothin the phouka stood there, grinning at me, canines glinting. Of course. It would be the phouka; they didn't follow social rules. In fact, they seemed to take great pleasure in breaking them. Furred ears peeked out of her dreadlocked hair, twitching sporadically. She wore a gaudy jacket that sparkled with fake gems and studs, ripped jeans and combat boots. Unlike the Seelie Court, the Unseelie fey actually preferred "mortal" clothing. Whether it was in direct defiance of the Seelie Court, or because they wanted to blend in more with humans, I wasn't sure.

"What do you want?" I asked cautiously. Tiaothin had taken a keen interest in me when I was brought to court, the insatiable curiosity of a phouka, I suppose. We'd talked a few times, but she wasn't exactly what I'd call a friend. The way she stared at me, unblinking, like she was sizing me up for her next meal, always made me nervous.

The phouka hissed, running her tongue along her teeth. "You're not ready," she said in her sibilant voice, looking me over skeptically. "Hurry. Hurry and change. We should go, quickly."

I frowned. Tiaothin had always been difficult to understand, bouncing from one subject to the next so quickly

it was hard to keep up. "Go where?" I asked, and she giggled.

"The queen," Tiaothin purred, flicking her ears back and forth. "The queen has called for you."

My stomach twisted into a tight ball. Ever since I'd come to the Winter Court with Ash, I'd been dreading this moment. When we'd first arrived at the palace, the queen regarded me with a predatory smile and dismissed me, saying that she wished to speak to her son alone and would call for me soon. Of course, "soon" was a relative term in Faery, and I'd been on pins and needles ever since, waiting for Mab to remember me.

That was also the last time I saw Ash.

Thinking of Ash sent a flutter through my stomach, reminding me how much had changed. When I first came to Faery, searching for my kidnapped brother, Ash had been the enemy, the cold, dangerous son of Mab, Queen of the Unseelie Court. When war threatened the courts, Mab sent Ash to capture me, hoping to use me as leverage against my father, King Oberon. But, frantic to save my brother, I made a bargain with the Winter prince, instead: if he helped me rescue Ethan, I would return with him to the Unseelie Court without a fight. At that point, it was a desperate gamble; I needed all the help I could get to face down the Iron King and save my brother. But, somewhere in that blasted wasteland of dust and iron, watching Ash battle the realm that was poisoning his very essence, I realized I was in love with him.

Ash had gotten me there, but he almost didn't survive his brush with Machina. The King of the Iron fey was insanely strong, almost invincible. Against all odds, I

managed to defeat Machina, rescue my brother, and take him home.

That night as per our contract, Ash came for me. It was time to honor my end of the bargain. Leaving my family behind once more, I followed Ash into Tir Na Nog, the land of Winter.

The journey through Tir Na Nog was cold, dark, and terrifying. Even with the Winter prince at my side, Faery was still savage and inhospitable, especially to humans. Ash was the perfect bodyguard, dangerous, alert and protective, but he seemed distant at times, distracted. And the farther we went into Winter, the more he drew away, sealing himself off from me and the world. And he wouldn't tell me why.

On the last night of our journey we were attacked. A monstrous wolf, sent by Oberon himself, tracked us down, intent on killing Ash and spiriting me back to the Summer Court. We managed to escape, but Ash was wounded fighting the creature, so we took refuge in an abandoned ice cave to rest and bind his wounds.

He was silent as I wrapped a 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. I waited, hoping I would finally glean some insight into his sudden aloofness.

"Why didn't you run?" he asked softly. "If that thing had killed me, you wouldn't have to come back to Tir Na Nog. You would've 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 was going to 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'd leave you 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 come back. 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 feeling 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."

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, he was much stronger than 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 fey 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 almost savagely to face him.

"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 in no uncertain terms admitted he would kill me if Mab ordered him to. But he also admitted to having feelings for me, feelings that didn't matter, 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 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.

The next morning, he was back to being distant and aloof, barely speaking to me no matter how much I prodded. That night, we reached the underground palace of the Winter Court, and Mab dismissed me almost immediately. A servant showed me to my quarters, and I sat in the small, chilly room waiting for Ash to find me again.

He never returned from his meeting with the queen, and

after several hours of waiting, I finally ventured into the halls of the Winter Court, looking for him. That's when I found Tiaothin, or rather, she found me in the library, playing keep-away with a hulking Jack-in-Irons as he stalked me between the aisles. After getting rid of the giant, she informed me that Prince Ash was no longer in the palace, and no one had any idea when he would be back.

"But that's just Ash," she'd said, grinning at me from atop a bookcase. "He's hardly ever at court. You catch a glimpse of him and *poof!* He's gone for another few months."

Why would Ash just leave like that? I wondered for about the billionth time. *He could've at least told me where he was going, and when he'd be back. He didn't have to leave me hanging.*

Unless he was deliberately avoiding me. Unless everything he'd said, the kiss we'd shared, the emotions in his eyes and voice, meant nothing to him. Maybe everything he'd done was only to bring me to the Winter Court.

"You're going to be late," Tiaothin purred, jerking me back to the present, watching me with glowing cat eyes. "Mab doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Right," I said faintly, shaken out of my dark mood. *Oops, that's right. I've got an audience with the Faery Queen of Winter.* "Just give me a minute to change." I waited, but when Tiaothin didn't move, I scowled at her. "Uh, a little privacy, please?"

Tiaothin giggled, and in one shivery motion, became a shaggy black goat, who bounced out of the room on all fours. I shut the door and leaned against it, feeling my heart thud in my chest. Mab wanted to see me. The Queen

of the Unseelie Court was finally calling on me. I shivered and pushed away from the door, walking to my dresser and the icy mirror on top.

My reflection stared back at me, slightly distorted by the cracks in the ice. Sometimes, I still didn't recognize myself. My straight blond hair was almost silver in the darkness of the room, and my eyes seemed far too big for my face. And there were other things, a thousand little details I couldn't put my finger on, that told me I wasn't human, that I was something to be feared. And of course, there was the most obvious difference. Pointed ears knifed up from the sides of my head, a screaming reminder of how unnormal I was.

I broke eye contact with my reflection and looked down at my clothes. They were warm and comfortable, but I was pretty sure meeting the Queen of the Unseelie Court dressed in sweatpants and a baggy sweater was a bad idea.

Great. I'm supposed to meet the Queen of the Winter fey in five minutes. What do I wear?

Closing my eyes, I tried collecting the glamour around me and shaping it over my clothes. Nothing. The massive rush of power I'd drawn on while battling the Iron King seemed to have faded, so much that I couldn't craft even the simplest illusion anymore. And not for lack of trying. Recalling my lessons with Grimalkin, a faery cat I'd met on my first trip to the Nevernever, I'd tried to become invisible, make shoes levitate and create faery fire. All failures. I couldn't even feel the glamour anymore, though I knew it was all around me. Glamour is fueled by emotion, and the wilder and more passionate the emotion—rage, lust, love—the easier it is to draw on. Yet I couldn't access

it like I used to. It seemed I was back to being plain, non-magical Meghan Chase. With pointy ears.

It was strange; for years, I hadn't even known I was half-fey. It was just a few months ago, on my sixteenth birthday, that my best friend Robbie had revealed himself to be Robin Goodfellow, the infamous Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. My kid brother, Ethan, had been kidnapped by faeries and I needed to rescue him. Oh, and by the way, I was the half-human daughter of King Oberon, Lord of the Summer fey. It took some getting used to, both the knowledge that I was half-faery and that I could use the magic of the fey—faery glamour—to work my own spells. Not that I was very good at it—I sucked, much to Grimalkin's irritation—but that wasn't the point. I hadn't even believed in faeries back then, but now that my magic was gone, it felt like pieces of me were missing.

With a sigh, I opened the dresser and pulled out jeans, a white shirt and a long black coat, shrugging into them as quickly as I could to avoid freezing to death. For a moment, I wondered if I should dress in something fancy, like an evening gown. After a moment I decided against it. The Unseelie spurned formal attire. I'd have a better chance of survival if I tried fitting in.

When I opened the door, Tiaothin, no longer a goat or cat, stared at me and broke into a toothy leer. "This way," she hissed, backing into the icy corridor. Her yellow eyes seemed to float in the darkness. "The queen awaits."

I FOLLOWED TIAOTHIN down the dark, twisted hallways, trying to keep my gaze straight ahead. Out of the cor-

ners of my eyes, however, I still caught glimpses of the nightmares lurking in the halls the Unseelie Court.

A spindly bogey crouched behind a door like a giant spider, the pale, emaciated face staring at me through the crack. An enormous black hound with glowing eyes trailed us down the hallways, making no noise at all, until Tiaothin hissed at it and it slunk away. Two goblins and a shark-toothed redcap huddled in a corner, rolling dice made of teeth and tiny bones. As I passed, an argument broke out, the goblins pointing to the redcap and crying "Cheat, cheat!" in high-pitched voices. I didn't look back, but a shriek rang out behind me, followed by the wet sound of snapping bones. I shuddered and followed Tiaothin around a corner.

The corridor ended, opening into a massive room with icicles dangling from the ceiling like glittering chandeliers. Will-o'-the-wisps and globes of faery fire drifted between them, sending shards of fractured light over the walls and floor. The floor was shrouded in ice and mist, and my breath steamed in the air as we entered. Icy columns held up the ceiling, sparkling like translucent crystal and adding to the dazzling, confusing array of light and colors swirling around the room. Dark, wild music echoed throughout the chamber, played by a group of humans on a corner stage. The musicians' eyes were glazed over as they sawed and beat at their instruments, their bodies frighteningly thin. Their hair hung long and lank, as if they hadn't cut it for years. Yet, they didn't seem to be distressed or unhappy, playing their instruments with zombielike fervor, seemingly blind to their inhuman audience.

Dozens of Unseelie fey milled about the chamber, each

one a creature straight out of a nightmare. Ogres and redcaps, goblins and spriggans, kobolds, phoukas, hobs and faeries I didn't have a name for, all wandering to and fro in the shifting darkness.

I quickly scanned the room, searching for tousled black hair and bright silver eyes. My heart fell. He wasn't here.

On the far side of the room, a throne of ice hovered in the air, glowing with frigid brilliance. Sitting on that throne, poised with the power of a massive glacier, was Mab, Queen of the Unseelie Court.

The Winter Queen was stunning, plain and simple. When I was in Oberon's court I'd seen her beside her rival, Titania, the Summer Queen, who was also beautiful but in an evil socialite type of way. Titania also held a grudge against me for being Oberon's daughter, and had tried to turn me into a deer once, so she wasn't my favorite person. Though they were complete opposites, the two queens were insanely powerful. Titania was a summer storm, beautiful and deadly and prone to frying something with lightning if it pissed her off. Mab was the coldest day in winter, where everything lies still and dead, held in fear of the unforgiving ice that killed the world before and could again.

The queen lounged in her chair, surrounded by several fey gentry—the sidhe—dressed in expensive, modern-day clothes, crisp white business suits and pin-striped Armani. When I saw her last, in Oberon's court, Mab had worn a flowing black dress that writhed like living shadows. Today, she was dressed in white: a white pantsuit, opal-tinted nails and ivory heels, her dark hair styled elegantly atop her head. Depthless black eyes, like a night without

stars, looked up and spotted me, and her pale mulberry lips curved in a slow smile.

A chill slithered up my back. Fey care little for mortals. Humans are merely playthings to be used up and discarded. Both the Seelie and Unseelie Courts are subject to this. Even if I was half-fey and Oberon's daughter, I was all alone in the court of my father's ancient enemies. If I irritated Mab, there was no telling what the queen would do. Maybe turn me into a white rabbit and sic the goblins on me, though that seemed more Titania's style. I had a feeling Mab could come up with something infinitely more awful and twisted, and that made me very afraid.

Tiaothin ambled through the crowds of Unseelie fey, who paid her little attention. Most of their interest was directed at me as I followed, my heart thudding against my ribs. I felt the hungry stares, the eager grins and the eyes on the back of my neck, and concentrated on keeping my head up and my step confident. Nothing attracts faeries more than fear. A sidhe noble with a face that was all sharp angles caught my gaze and smiled, and my heart contracted painfully. He reminded me of Ash, who wasn't here, who had left me alone in this court of monsters.

The Winter Queen's chill grew more pronounced the closer we got; soon it was so cold it hurt to breathe. Tiaothin reached the foot of the throne and bowed. I did the same, though it was hard to do so without my teeth chattering. The Unseelie fey crowded behind us, their breath and murmuring voices making my skin crawl.

"Meghan Chase." The queen's voice rasped over the assembly, making my hair stand on end. Tiaothin slunk away

and disappeared into the crowd, leaving me truly alone. "How good of you to join us."

"It's an honor to be here, my lady," I replied, using every ounce of my willpower to keep my voice from shaking. A tremor slipped out anyway, and not just from the cold. Mab smiled, amused, and leaned back, observing me with emotionless black eyes. Silence fell for a few heartbeats.

"So." The queen tapped her nails with a rhythmic clicking sound, making me jump. "Here we are. You must think you are very clever, daughter of Oberon."

"I—I'm sorry?" I stammered, as an icy fist gripped my heart. This wasn't starting well, not at all.

"You're not," Mab continued, giving me a patient smile. "But you will be. Make no mistake about that." She leaned forward, looking utterly inhuman, and I fought the urge to run screaming from the throne room. "I have heard of your exploits, Meghan Chase," the queen rasped, narrowing her eyes. "Did you not think I would find out? You tricked a prince of the Unseelie Court into following you into the Iron Realm. You made him fight your enemies for you. You bound him to a contract that nearly killed him. My precious boy, almost lost to me forever, because of you. How do you think that makes me feel?" Mab's smile grew more predatory, as my stomach twisted in fear. What could she do to me? Encase me in ice? Freeze me from the inside out? Chill my blood so I would never be warm again, no matter what I wore or how hot it became? I shivered, but then noticed a faint shimmer, like heat waves, around me, and suddenly realized Mab was tinting the air with glamour, manipulating my emotions and letting me imagine

the worst fate possible. She didn't have to threaten or say anything; I was terrifying myself quite well.

In a lucid moment of distraction, I wondered if Ash had done the same to my emotions, manipulating me into falling for him. If Mab could do it, I'm sure her sons had the same talent. Were my feelings for Ash real, or some sort of fabricated glamour?

Now's not the time to wonder about that, Meghan!

Mab stared at me, gauging my reaction. I still shook in fear, but a part of me knew what the queen was doing. If I lost it and begged for mercy, I would find myself trapped in a faery contract before I knew what was happening. Promises are deadly serious among the fey, and I wasn't going to let Mab strong-arm me into pledging something I would instantly regret.

I took a furtive breath to collect my thoughts, so that when I did answer the Queen of the Winter fey, I wouldn't start bawling like a two-year-old.

"Forgive me, Queen Mab," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I meant no harm to you or yours. I needed Ash's help to rescue my brother from the Iron King."

At the mention of the Iron King, the Unseelie fey behind me stirred and growled, glancing around warily. I felt hackles rise, teeth bare and claws unsheathe. For normal faeries, iron was deadly poison, draining their magic and burning their flesh. An entire kingdom made of iron was horrible and terrifying to them; a faery ruler called the Iron King was blasphemous. For a moment, I had the satisfying thought that the Iron fey had become the bogeys and bogeymen of the faery world, and bit down a vindictive smile.

"I would name you a liar, girl," Mab said calmly, as the growls and mutterings behind me died down, "if I had not heard the same from my son's own lips. Rest assured, the Iron King's minions are no threat to us. Even now, Ash and his brothers are scouring our territory for these Iron fey. If the abominations are within our borders, we will hunt them down and destroy them."

I felt a rush of relief, but not because of Mab's claim. Ash was out there. He had a reason not to be at court.

"And yet…" Mab regarded me with a look that made my stomach squirm. "I cannot help but wonder how you managed to survive. Perhaps Summer is in league with the Iron fey, plotting with them against the Winter Court. That would be terribly amusing, wouldn't it, Meghan Chase?"

"No," I said softly. In my mind's eye, I saw the Iron King, reeling back as I drove the arrow through his chest, and clenched my fists to stop them from shaking. I could still see Machina writhing in pain, felt something cold and serpentine slithering under my skin. "The Iron King was going to destroy Summer as well as Winter. He's dead, now. I killed him."

Mab narrowed her eyes to black slits. "And you would have me believe that you, a half-human with virtually no power, managed to kill the Iron King?"

"Believe her," a new voice rang out, making my stomach twist and my heart jump to my throat. "I was there. I saw what happened."

Voices rose around me as the ranks of Unseelie fey parted like waves. I couldn't move. I was rooted to the

spot, my heart pounding in my chest as the lean, dangerous form of Prince Ash strode into the chamber.

I shivered, and my stomach began turning nervous backflips. Ash looked much as he always did, darkly beautiful in black and gray, his pale skin a sharp contrast to his hair and clothes. His sword hung at his side, the sheath a luminous blue-black, giving off a frozen aura.

I was so relieved to see him. I stepped toward him, smiling, only to be stopped dead by his cold glare. Confused, I stumbled to a halt. Maybe he didn't recognize me. I met his gaze, waiting for his expression to thaw, for him to give me the tiny smile I adored so much. It didn't happen. His frosty eyes swept over me in a brief, dismissive glance, before he stepped around me and continued toward the queen. I felt a stab of shock and hurt; maybe he was playing it cool in front of the queen, but he could've at least said *hi*. I made the mental note to scold him later when we were alone.

"Prince Ash," Mab purred, as Ash went down on one knee before the throne. "You have returned. Are your brothers with you?"

Ash raised his head, but before he could answer, another voice interrupted him.

"Our youngest brother practically fled our presence in his haste to get to you, Queen Mab," said a high, clear voice behind me. "If I didn't know better, I would think he didn't want to speak to you in front of us."

Ash rose, his face carefully blank, as two more figures strode into the chamber, scattering fey like birds. Like Ash, they wore long, thin blades at their hips, and carried themselves with the easy grace of royalty.

The first, the one who had spoken, resembled Ash in build and height: lean, graceful and dangerous. He had a thin, pointed face, and black hair that bristled like spines atop his head. A white trench coat billowed out behind him, and a gold stud sparkled in one pointed ear. His gaze met mine as he swept past, ice-blue eyes glittering like chips of diamond, and his lips curled in a lazy smirk.

The second brother was taller than his siblings, more willowy than lean, his long raven hair tied back in a pony-tail that reached his waist. A great gray wolf trailed behind him, amber eyes slitted and wary. "Rowan," Mab smiled at the first prince as the two bowed to her as Ash had done. "Sage. All my boys, home at last. What news do you bring me? Have you found these Iron fey within our borders? Have you brought me their poisonous little hearts?"

"My queen." It was the tallest of the three that spoke, the oldest brother, Sage. "We have searched Tir Na Nog from border to border, from the Ice Plains to the Frozen Bog to the Broken Glass Sea. We have found nothing of the Iron fey our brother has spoken of."

"Makes you wonder if our dear brother Ash exaggerated a bit," Rowan spoke up, his voice matching the smirk on his face. "Seeing as these 'legions of Iron fey' seem to have vanished into thin air."

Ash glared at Rowan and looked bored, but I felt the blood rush to my face.

"He's telling the truth," I blurted out, and felt every eye in the court turn on me. "The Iron fey are real, and they're still out there. And if you don't take them seriously, you'll be dead before you know what's happening."

Rowan smiled at me, a slit-eyed, dangerous smile. "And

why would the half-blood daughter of Oberon care if the Winter Court lives or dies?"

"Enough." Mab's voice rasped through the chamber. She stood and waved a hand at the fey assembled behind us. "Get out. Leave, all of you. I will speak with my sons alone."

The crowd dispersed, slinking, stomping or gliding from the throne room. I hesitated, trying to catch Ash's gaze, wondering if I was included in this conversation. After all, I knew about the Iron fey, too. I succeeded in capturing his attention, but the Winter prince gave me a bored, hostile glare and narrowed his eyes.

"Didn't you hear the queen, half-breed?" he asked coldly, and my heart contracted into a tiny ball. I stared at him, mouth open, unwilling to believe this was Ash speaking to me, but he continued with ruthless disdain. "You're not welcome here. Leave."

I felt the sting of angry tears, and took a step toward him. "Ash—"

His eyes glittered as he shot me a glare of pure loathing. "It's *Master* Ash, or *Your Highness* to you, half-breed. And I don't recall giving you permission to speak to me. Remember that, because the next time you forget your place, I'll remind you with my blade." He turned away, dismissing me in one cold, callous gesture. Rowan snickered, and Mab watched me from atop her throne with a cool, amused gaze.

My throat tightened and a deluge pressed behind my eyes, ready to burst. I trembled and bit my lip to keep the flood in check. I would *not* cry. Not now, in front of Mab and Rowan and Sage. They were waiting for it; I could see

it on their faces as they watched me expectantly. I could not show any weakness in front of the Unseelie Court if I wanted to survive.

Especially now that Ash had become one of the monsters.

With as much dignity as I could muster, I bowed to Queen Mab. "Excuse me then, Your Majesty," I said, in a voice that trembled only slightly. "I will leave you and your sons in peace."

Mab nodded, and Rowan gave me a mocking, exaggerated bow. Ash and Sage ignored me completely. I spun on my heel and walked from the throne room with my head held high, my heart breaking with every step.

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