



SOULLESS. BANISHED.
BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN.

THE IRON FEY



The
IRON KNIGHT

New York Times Bestselling Author

JULIE KAGAWA

I'd expected to die that day. I was ready. Being ordered by my True Name to walk away, leaving Meghan to die alone in the Iron Kingdom, nearly shattered me a second time. If it wasn't for my oath to be with her again, I might've done something suicidal, like challenge Oberon to a battle before the entire Summer Court. But now that I've made my promise, there is no turning back. Abandoning my vow will unravel me, bit by bit, until there is nothing left. Even if I wasn't determined to find a way to survive in the Iron Realm, I'd have no choice but to continue.

I will be with her again, or I will die. There aren't any other options.

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The Iron Knight

THE IRON KNIGHT

JULIE KAGAWA



Team Ash, this one is for you.

CONTENTS

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE: THE HOUSE OF THE BONE WITCH

CHAPTER TWO: OLD NIGHTMARES

CHAPTER THREE: ARIELLA TULARYN

CHAPTER FOUR: THE HUNTED

CHAPTER FIVE: THE HOLLOW

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIX: THE SEER

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RIVER OF DREAMS

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE HOBYAHS

CHAPTER NINE: IN DREAMS

CHAPTER TEN: THE FORGOTTEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE FERRY

CHAPTER TWELVE: THROUGH THE BRIARS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE GAUNTLET

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: REFLECTION

PART THREE

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE TESTING GROUNDS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE FIRST TEST

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE SECOND TRIAL

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: VOICES OF THE PAST

CHAPTER NINETEEN: HUMAN

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE MARCH OF TIME

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: THE FINAL SACRIFICE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: THE RETURN

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE IRON KNIGHT

[EPILOGUE: THE IRON QUEEN](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[SURVIVAL GUIDE TO THE NEVERNEVER](#)

[Q&A WITH JULIE KAGAWA, PLUS A FEW UNEXPECTED GUESTS](#)

[QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION](#)

PART ONE

THE HOUSE OF THE BONE WITCH

“Oy, ice-boy! You sure you know where you’re going?”

I ignored Robin Goodfellow as we wove through the gray murk of the wyldwood, pushing farth into the soggy swamp known as the Bone Marsh. Mud sucked at my footsteps, and water dripped from twisted green trees so covered in moss they appeared sheathed in slime. Mist coiled around the exposed roots or pooled in sunken areas, hiding what lay beneath, and every so often there was a splash in the still waters farther out, reminding us that we were not alone. As its name suggested, bones were scattered throughout the marsh, jutting out of the mud, half-hidden in tangles of weeds and shimmering beneath the surface of the water, bleached and white. This was a dangerous part of the wyldwood, more so than most—not because of the catoblepas and the jabberwocks and other monsters that called the dark swamp their home, but because of the resident who lived somewhere deep within the marsh.

The one we were going to see.

Something flew past my head from behind, barely missing me, and splattered against a trunk a few feet away. Stopping beneath the tree, I turned and glared at my companion, silently daring him to do that again.

“Oh, hey, it lives!” Robin Goodfellow threw up his muddy hands in mock celebration. “I was afraid it had become a zombie or something.” He crossed his arms and smirked at me, mud streaking his red hair and speckling his pointed face. “Did you hear me, ice-boy? I’ve been yelling at you for some time now.”

“Yes,” I said, repressing a sigh. “I heard you. I think the jabberwocks on the other side of the swamp heard you.”

“Oh, good! Maybe if we fight a couple you’ll start paying attention to me!” Puck matched my glare before gesturing around at the swamp. “This is crazy,” he exclaimed. “How do we even know he’s here? The Bone Marsh isn’t exactly on my list of favorite vacation getaways, prince. You sure your contact knew what he was talking about? If this turns out to be another false lead I might turn that phouka into a pair of gloves.”

“I thought you wanted an adventure,” I said, just to annoy him. Puck snorted.

“Oh sure, don’t get me wrong. I’m all for tromping to all five corners of the Nevernever, getting chased by angry Summer Queens, sneaking into an ogre’s basement, fighting giant spiders, playing hide-and-seek with a cranky dragon—good times.” He shook his head, and his eyes gleamed, reliving fond memories. “But this is like the sixth place we’ve come to look for that wretched cat, and if he isn’t here I’m almost afraid of where we’re going next.”

“You don’t have to be here,” I told him. “Leave if you want. I’m not stopping you.”

“Nice try, prince.” Puck crossed his arms and smiled. “But you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“Then let’s keep moving.” It was getting dark, and his constant chattering was getting on my nerves. Joking aside, I did not want to attract the attention of a hungry jabberwock and have to fight it in the middle of the swamp.

“Oh, fine,” Puck sighed, tromping along behind me. “But if he’s not here, I refuse to go to the Spider Queen’s palace with you, ice-boy. That’s where I draw the line.”

MY NAME, MY FULL, TRUE NAME, is Ashallayn'darkmyr Tallyn, and I am the last son of the Unseelie Court.

There were three of us at one time, all princes of Winter, myself and my brothers, Sage and Rowan. I never knew my sire, never cared to know him, nor did my siblings ever speak of him. I wasn't even positive we shared the same sire, but it didn't matter. In the Unseelie Court, Mab was the sole ruler, the one and only queen. Handsome fey and even wayward mortals she might take to her bed, but Mab shared her throne with no one.

We were never close, my brothers and I. As princes of Winter, we grew up in a world of violence and dark politics. Our queen encouraged this, favoring the son who earned her good graces while punishing the others. We used each other, played vicious games against one another, but we were all loyal to our court and our queen. Or so I'd thought.

There is a reason the Winter Court freezes out their emotions, why feelings are considered weakness and a folly among the Unseelie fey. Emotion corrupts the senses, makes them weak, makes them disloyal to kith and court. Jealousy was a dark, dangerous passion that ate at my brother Rowan until he did the unthinkable and turned on his court, betraying us to our enemies. Sage, my eldest sibling, fell to Rowan's treachery, and he was only the first. In a bid for power, Rowan sided with our greatest enemies, the Iron fey, helping their king nearly destroy the Nevernever. I killed Rowan in the end, avenging Sage and the rest of my kin, but retribution cannot bring either of them back. It's on me now. I am the last, the only remaining son of Mab, Queen of the Unseelie Court.

And I'm already dead to her.

Rowan was not the only one to succumb to emotion and passion. My fall began, as many stories do, with a girl. A girl named Meghan Chase, the half-human daughter of our ancient rival, the Summer King. Fate brought us together, and despite everything I did to shield my emotions, despite the laws of our people and the war with the Iron fey and the threat of eternal banishment from my home, I still found myself falling for her. Our paths were woven together, our fates intertwined, and before the last battle I swore I would follow her to the end of the world, to protect her from all threats, including my own kin, and to die for her if called to do so. I became her knight, and would have gladly served the girl, this mortal who had captured my heart, until the last breath left my body.

But Fate is a cruel mistress, and in the end, our paths were forced apart, as I'd feared they would be. Meghan became the Iron Queen, as was her destiny, and took the throne in the kingdom of the Iron fey. A place I could not follow, not as I am—a faery creature whose essence weakens and burns at the touch of iron. Meghan herself exiled me from the lands of the Iron fey, knowing that staying would kill me, knowing I would try anyway. But before I left, I swore an oath that I would find a way to return, that someday we would be together, and nothing would separate us again. Mab tried to convince me to return to the Winter Court—I was her only prince now, and it was my duty to come home—but I bluntly stated that I was no longer part of the Unseelie Court, that my service to her and Winter was at an end.

There is nothing more terrible than a spurned faery queen, particularly if you defy her a second time. I escaped the Winter Court with my life intact, but just barely, and I won't be returning anytime soon. Regardless, I feel little regret at turning my back on my queen, my kith and my home. That part of my life is done. My loyalty—and my heart—belongs to another queen now.

I promised I'd find a way for us to be together. I intend to keep that promise. Even if it means trekking through a sprawling, deadly marsh in search of a rumor. Even if it means putting up with my fiercest and most annoying rival, Robin Goodfellow, who—despite all his attempts to hide it—is in love with my queen as well. I don't know why I haven't killed him yet. Maybe because Puck is Meghan's closest friend, and she would mourn him terribly if he were gone (though I can't understand

why). Or, maybe, deep down, I'm tired of being alone.

~~In any case, it matters little. With every ruin we search, every dragon we slay, or every rumor we unearth, I'm one step closer to my goal. Even if it takes a hundred years, I will be with her in the end. Another piece of the puzzle lurks somewhere in this dreary swampland. The only difficulty lies in finding it.~~

THANKFULLY, DESPITE PUCK'S constant griping and complaining, the jabberwocks decided *not* to see what the racket was about and come stalking through the marsh to find us. That was just as well, because it took nearly the whole night to find what we were looking for.

At the edge of a scummy pond stood a house, faded and gray like everything else. A picket fence made of bleached white bones surrounded it, naked skulls topping the posts, and a few scraggy chickens milled about in what passed as a yard. The hut was old and wooden, creaking faintly though there was no wind. The most unusual thing, however, wasn't the house itself, but what held it up. It stood on a pair of massive bird legs, gnarled and yellow, blunt talons digging into the mud. The legs were crouched low, as if sleeping, but every so often they shifted restlessly, causing the whole house to shudder and groan.

"We're heeeere," Puck sang softly. "And can I say that the old gal hasn't gotten any less creepy than when I saw her last."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Just shut up and let me do the talking this time. It was bad enough when you insulted the centaur chief."

"All I suggested was that we could've used a ride out of the meadow. I didn't mean from *him*."

Sighing, I opened the bone gate and crossed the weed-choked yard, scattering chickens in front of me. Before we reached the steps, however, the door creaked open and an old woman emerged from the darkened interior. Tangled white hair framed a lined, wrinkled face, and sharp black eyes peered out at us, bright and gleaming. In one gnarled hand she held a basket, in the other a butcher knife, stained with the blood of many victims.

I stopped at the foot of the stairs, wary and alert. Old as she appeared, the witch of this house was powerful and unpredictable. If Puck said something stupid or accidentally insulted her, it would be a vastly annoying if we had to fight our way out.

"Well," the witch said, curling bloodless lips to smile at us. Crooked yellow teeth flashed in the light like jagged bits of bone. "What do we have here? Two handsome faery boys, come to visit a poor old woman. And if my eyes don't deceive me, that's Robin Goodfellow I see before me. The last I saw of you, you stole my broom and tied my house's legs so it fell over when we tried to catch you!"

I repressed another sigh. This wasn't starting well. I should've known Puck had already done something to earn her wrath. But at the same time, I had to fight the urge to smile, to laugh at such a ridiculous thought, the house falling on its face in the mud because the Great Prankster had tied its feet together.

I kept my expression neutral, as it was obvious the witch was not amused in the slightest. "What do you have to say for yourself, villain?" she continued, shaking her butcher knife at Puck, who ducked behind me in a pathetic attempt to hide, though I could hear him trying to muffle his laughter. "Do you know how long it took me to repair my home? And then you have the gall, the absolute gall, to leave my broom at the edge of the forest, just to prove you could take it. I've half a mind to stick you in the pot and feed you to my chickens!"

"I apologize for him," I said quickly, and those sharp black eyes suddenly turned on me. I held myself tall, unafraid but still polite, lest she lump me together with the buffoon at my back. "Excuse

this intrusion, old mother,” I continued formally. “I am Ash of the Unseelie Court. And I need your help, if you would hear me.”

The witch blinked. “Such manners. You were not raised in a barn like that one, I see.” She stabbed her knife in Puck’s direction, wrinkling her long nose. “And I know who you are, son of Mab. What would you have of me? Be quick about it.”

“We’re looking for someone,” I said. “He was rumored to be traveling through here, through the Bone Marsh. We thought you might know where he is.”

“Oh?” The witch cocked her head, giving me a scrutinizing look. “And what makes you think you know where this person is?”

“Not a person,” I corrected. “A cat. A cait sith. In some tales he’s known as Grimalkin. And in some tales he’s been rumored to keep company with a powerful witch out in the swamps, whose house stands on chicken legs in a fence made of bones.”

“I see,” said the witch, though her face and voice remained expressionless. “Well, I admire your tenacity, young prince. Grimalkin is not easy to find in the best of times. You must have come very far to seek him out.” She peered closely at me, narrowing her eyes. “And this is not the first place you have searched. I can see it on your face. Why, I wonder? Why does he come so far? What is it that he desires so badly, to risk the ire of the Bone Witch? What is it you want, Ash of the Winter Court?”

“Would you believe the cat owes him money?” Puck’s voice came from behind my shoulder, making me wince. The witch scowled at him.

“I did not ask you, Robin Goodfellow,” she snapped, jabbing a clawlike finger at him. “And you had best watch your tongue, lest you find yourself neck-deep in a pot of boiling snake venom. Right now your friend’s civility is the only thing keeping me from skinning you alive, and you will be silent on my land or you will leave. My question was for the prince.”

“I am a prince no longer,” I said softly, interrupting her rant. “My service to the Winter Queen is done, and Mab has cast me from her circle. I am dead to her.”

“Regardless,” the witch said, turning back to me with her piercing black eyes, “that does not answer my question. Why are you here, Ash-who-is-no-longer-a-prince? And do not attempt to mislead me with faery riddles and half truths, for I will know, and I will not be happy about it. If you wish to see this Grimalkin, you must answer my question first. What is it you seek?”

“I...” For a moment, I hesitated, and not because Puck nudged me sharply in the ribs. He knew the reason we were here, why I wanted to find Grimalkin, but I’d never voiced my intentions out loud. Maybe the witch knew this, maybe she was just curious, but saying it aloud suddenly made it all the more real. “I want to become...mortal,” I said in a low voice. My stomach recoiled, hearing those words for the first time. “I promised someone... I swore I would find a way to survive the Iron Realm and I can’t go there as I am.” The witch raised an eyebrow, and I drew myself up, fixing her with a cold stare. “I want to become human. And I need Grimalkin to help me find a way.”

“Well,” said a familiar voice behind us, “that *is* an interesting request.”

We whirled around. Grimalkin sat on an overturned bucket, a bushy gray cat with his tail curled around himself, watching us lazily.

“Oh, of course!” Puck exclaimed. “There you are. Do you *know* what we’ve been through to find you, cat? Have you been there the whole time?”

“Do not make me state the obvious, Goodfellow.” Grimalkin twitched his whiskers at him, then turned to me. “Greetings, prince. I have heard that you were looking for me.”

“If you knew, why didn’t you come to us?”

The cait sith yawned, curling a pink tongue over sharp white teeth. “I have grown rather bored with court politics,” he continued, blinking gold eyes. “Nothing ever changes between Summer and Winter, and I did not want to become embroiled in the endless bickering of the courts. Or the games of certain

Dark Muses.”

~~Puck winced. “You heard about that, huh? Word travels fast.” He shook his head at me and grinned. “I wonder if Titania has calmed down yet, after that trick we played in the Summer Court.”~~

Grimalkin ignored him. “I wanted to know why you were looking for me, to see if I wished to make myself known. Or not.” He sniffed, cocking his head at me. “But *this* request was definitely not what I was expecting of you, prince. How very...interesting.”

“Foolish, if you ask me,” the witch stated, wagging her knife in my direction. “Does a crow become a salmon simply because it wishes to? You do not know the first thing about mortality, prince-who-is-not. Why would you want to become like them?”

“Because,” Grimalkin answered before I could say anything, “he is in love.”

“Ahhh.” The witch looked at me and shook her head. “I see. Poor creature. Then you will not hear a word I have to say.” I gazed at her coolly, but she only smiled. “Fare ye well, then, prince-who-is-not. And Goodfellow, if I see you again, it will be to hang your skin over my door. Now, excuse me.” She gathered herself up and tromped down the steps, taking a swipe at Puck as she passed, which he deftly avoided.

I didn’t like the way Grimalkin continued to stare at me, a hint of laughter in his slitted eyes, and I crossed my arms. “Do you know a way for a faery to become mortal, or not?”

“I do not,” Grimalkin said simply, and for a moment my heart sank. “But, there are...rumors. Legends of those who wanted to become mortal.” He lifted a front paw and began washing it, scrubbing it over his ears. “There is...one...who might know the way to becoming human,” he continued, much too nonchalantly. “A seer, in the wildest regions of the Nevernever. But the way to the seer is twisted and tangled, and once you step off the path, you will never find it again.”

“Right, and you just happen to know the way, don’t you?” Puck interjected, but Grimalkin ignored him. “Come on, cat, we all know where this is going. Name your price, so we can agree and get on the road already.”

“Price?” Grimalkin looked up, and his eyes gleamed. “How well you seem to know me,” he mused in a voice I didn’t like at all. “You think this is some simple request, that I guide you to the seer and that will be all. You have no idea what you are asking, what lies ahead, for all of us.” The cat stood, waving his tail, regarding me with a solemn gold gaze. “I will name no price, not today. But the time will come, prince, when I arrive to collect this debt. And when that day comes, you will pay it full.”

The words hung in the air between us, shimmering with power. A contract, and a particularly nasty one at that. Grimalkin, for whatever reason, was playing for keeps. A part of me recoiled, hating being bound in such a way. If I agreed to this, the cat could ask anything of me, take anything, and I would be forced to comply.

But, if it meant being human, being with her in the end...

“You sure about this, ice-boy?” Puck caught my gaze, worried as well. “This is your quest, but there’s no backing out if you agree to do this. You can’t just promise him a nice squeaky mouse and be done with it?”

I sighed and faced the cait sith, who waited calmly for my answer. “I will not deliberately harm anyone,” I told him firmly. “You will not use me as a weapon, nor will I work evil against those I consider allies or friends. This contract will involve no one else. Just me.”

“As you wish,” Grimalkin purred.

“Then you have a deal.” I felt a tingle in the air as the bargain was sealed, and clenched my fist. There was no backing out of it now, not that I had any intention to do so, but it seemed that I’d made more deals, accepted more contracts, in a single year than I had in my entire life as a prince of Winter.

I had the feeling I’d sacrifice more before the trip was over, but there was nothing for it now. I

made my promise, and I would see it through.

~~“Then it is done.” Grimalkin nodded and leaped off the bucket, landing in a patch of weeds surrounded by mud. “Let us go. We waste time dallying here.”~~

Puck blinked. “What, just like that? You’re not going to tell the old chicken plucker you’re leaving?”

“She already knows,” Grimalkin said, picking his way across the yard. “And incidentally, ‘the old chicken plucker’ can hear every word you say, so I suggest we hurry. After she is done with the fowl she intends to come after you as well.” He reached the fence and leaped up on it, somehow balancing himself on a crooked skull, peering back with glowing yellow eyes. “You did not think she would let you go so easily, did you?” he asked. “We have until nightfall to be clear of the marsh, before she comes riding after us with all of hell close behind her. So let us pick up the pace, hmm?”

Puck shot me a sideways look, grinning feebly. “Er. Never a dull moment, huh, ice-boy?”

“I’m going to kill you one day,” I told him as we hurried after Grimalkin, back into the swampy marshland. It was not an idle threat.

Puck just laughed. “Yeah. You and everyone else, prince. Join the club.”

OLD NIGHTMARES

Our exit from the Bone Marsh was far more harrowing than our journey to find the witch. True to Grimalkin's prediction, as the sun sank beneath the western horizon, a mad howl arose, seeming an echo from the swamp itself. A shudder passed through the land, and a sudden wind stole the late afternoon warmth.

"Perhaps we should move faster," Grimalkin said, and bounded into the undergrowth, but I stopped and turned to face the howling wind, drawing my sword. The breeze, smelling of rot, stagnant water and blood, whipped at my face, but I held my blade loosely at my side and waited.

"Oy, prince." Puck circled back, frowning. "What are you doing? If you didn't know already, the old chicken plucker is on her way, and she's gunning for Winter and Summer stew."

"Let her come." I was Ashallayn'darkmyr Tallyn, son of Mab, former prince of the Unseel Court, and I was not afraid of a witch on a broom.

"I would advise against that," Grimalkin said, somewhere in the bushes. "These are her lands after all, and she will be a formidable opponent should you insist on fighting her here. The wisest course of action is to flee to the edge of the swamp. She will not follow us there. That is where I will be, should you decide to come to your senses. I will not waste time watching you fight a completely useless battle based on ridiculous pride."

"Come on, Ash," Puck said, edging away. "We can play with extremely powerful witches some other time. Furball might disappear, and I do not want to tromp all over the Nevernever looking for him *again*."

I glared at Puck, who shot me an arrogant grin and hurried after the cat. Sheathing my weapon, I sprinted after them, and soon the Bone Marsh was a blur of malachite moss and bleached bone. A cackling scream rang out somewhere behind us, and I leaned forward, adding speed and cursing a Summer fey under my breath.

We ran for an hour or more, the cackle of our pursuer never seeming to gain, but never falling behind. Then the ground began to firm under my feet, the trees slowly gaining breadth and height. The air changed as well, losing the acrid odor of the bog and turning to something sweeter, though mixed with the faintest hint of decay.

I caught sight of a gray stillness in one of the trees and skidded to a halt, so suddenly that Puck slammed into me. I turned with the impact and gave a little push. "Oy!" Puck yelped as he careened off and landed in an ungraceful sprawl. I smirked and stepped around him, dodging easily as he tried to trip me.

"Now is not the time for playing," Grimalkin said from his perch, watching us disdainfully. "The witch will not follow us here. Now is the time for resting." Turning his back on us, he leaped high into the branches and disappeared from sight.

Settling against a trunk, I pulled my sword and laid it across my knees, leaning back with a sigh. Step one, complete. We'd found Grimalkin, a task harder than I'd thought it could be. The next task would be to find this seer, and then...

I sighed. Then everything became fuzzy. There was no clear path after finding the seer. I didn't know what would be required of me, what I would have to do to become mortal. Perhaps it would be painful. Perhaps I would have to offer something, sacrifice something, though I didn't know what I could offer anymore, beyond my own existence.

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