

Do not enter into a deal with the Fae, lest ye be ensnared, ne'er to return to the land of the living.

Tamora eyed her family's dictum—which her mother had painstakingly carved into the wood above their front door the day they moved to this derelict place—longer than she ever had before, trying to convince herself that this was the only way.

Tucking a strand of lavender-colored hair behind one of her pointed ears, she tightened the straps on her rucksack weighted with food and clothes, took a deep breath, and opened the door into the bleak night.

Stepping out into the cold darkness, fear and uncertainty lodged itself in her throat. Winter had come early, and frost bit at her apricot cheeks as she moved silently towards the ebony tree line of the cursed Black Forest. She lived with her parents, older brother, and younger twin sisters on the outskirts of Thios, the sprawling goblin capital city hidden beneath the lush countryside of the Earthen realm. The lights of the dazzling towers—of the glutinous façade of her people—caught her eye, and she wondered if this would be the last time she'd ever see them. Truth be told, she had no love for Thios. It had taken and *taken* from her family for so long; they'd been lucky to get out with their lives.

Tamora's house—if you could call it that—was pushed up precariously against the edges of the Black Forest, where it was said the dark Fae lived. The Unseelie. It was the only place they could afford after all that had happened. She hadn't even heard of the Unseelie until they were displaced to the outer limits of civilization—their counterparts, the Seelie, practically owned Thios. But the Unseelie kept to themselves, quietly toiling away with their dark magic and doing gods knew what with it.

Any other day, she would've branded herself a fool for even thinking about going to the Fae for help. But she didn't have a choice—her family was running out of currency, and they were going to starve if she didn't find a way to convince the Unseelie to loan her some. She'd heard of others striking similar deals with them, but they weren't allowed to tell anyone what they'd given up—a vital piece of their twisted bargain.

If it meant her family would survive, though, she'd give up whatever she had to her name.

The only acceptable form of currency for the goblins in Thios was gems, which the Unseelie were said to have an abundance of. The mad Goblin king Usachtach called it candy, but, in truth, it was precious rubies, diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, even opals. And they were becoming harder and harder to come by. Tamora's family had once flourished in the capital, with an abundance of currency in their possession, until her father lost everything in a rigged game of Scorail. He was forced to take a job in the mines to pay back his debt, though he hadn't been able to work there for months since his accident. They were out of options—and time.

And since no one else was willing to do something about it, Tamora had taken on the burden alone.

The menacing tree-line approached her, the space between the low-hanging branches opening itself up like it wished to eat her whole. Marking the entrance was a stout outcropping of rocks in the shape of a sitting Goblin. Tamora brushed it with the back of her gloved hand. A few of the superstitious neighbors claimed it was what happened to any Goblin who dared enter the forest: the Unseelie cast some sort of spell over the intruder so that, after they left, they'd be forced to remain at that spot until they died of old age. No matter how hard their loved ones tried to get them to move, it was like they were rooted to the ground. Tamora swallowed hard and bit the

inside of her cheek until she tasted her own blood. But with the sky bruised deep in blues and purples, she couldn't wait anymore.

No turning back now, she thought. With a trembling hand gripping her rucksack strap, and the other wound tightly around the leather hilt of her mother's serrated dagger, she stepped into the waiting maw of the Black Forest.

It's so much colder here, was her first thought as she passed through the fanged teeth into Unseelie land. A shiver scraped up her spine. Frozen branches snapped piercingly beneath her thick boots, and the icy air nipped at her exposed skin. Then, without warning, angry white flakes burst from the trees above her like a swarm of malevolent butterflies. Throwing her arms over her head, she became wrapped in a suffocating blizzard. It was so cold and the wind was so fierce that she felt the air being sucked from her lungs.

Tamora didn't have time to regret her decision to brazenly enter the Black Forest, though—something even colder reached out from the chaos and gripped her arm. Panic seized her and she unsheathed her mother's dagger, lashing out wildly. She heard a hiss amongst the chaos as the thing let go.

"What was that for?" a voice asked. Tamora thrust the blade towards the sound.

"Is that how you always greet people? Stab first, ask questions later?"

She spun frantically in the other direction, pulse pounding as she let out a frustrated scream—and came face to face with a snow child. One of the *Unseelie*. All she could make out of him in the storm was his high, sharp cheekbones, and two piercing, otherworldly eyes. *Shite*, she thought, her mother's dagger loose in her grasp now.

Backing away, she nearly tripped over her own feet. But the faerie boy caught her by the waist, hard fingers curling into her side.

“Please,” she whispered, his cold grasp softening around her once he helped her upright.
“Don’t hurt me.”

The boy’s face was made of stone when he peered down at her, his ice-blue eyes and indigo lips holding her in place. “You’re only hurting yourself by staying here. Come with me, before it gets any worse.”

“I’m not stupid enough to let one of the Unseelie take me,” she blurted out, marking belatedly that the boy had a slight, lilting accent.

His smile was heartbreaking. “That is a wise choice indeed. However, in this case, I think you might see things my way. There’s no getting around it now: it’s either death or a debt to be paid. And I’m fairly certain you didn’t come here to die, youngling.”

Tamora searched his gaze, considering her limited options. She always thought she’d rather die than owe the Fae anything. But she had her family to think of—her whole reason for being in this bloody mess in the first place. They needed her to do this, even if they’d laughed at her when she’d suggested it. Even if doing so trapped her here forever, and they never knew what had become of her.

“Fine,” she said through her teeth. “What’s your price?”

“Not here—it’s not safe,” he said over the howling winds. Then he released her, only to grab her hand and pull her deeper into the woods.

The wind was dulled between these thicker branches, but it still grabbed and ripped at her. Looking down, she saw how the snow had actually torn into her clothes. Her cloak was shredded in places, and the pants and short-sleeved shirt underneath exposed thin slices of her peach-hued skin. *Maybe that wasn’t snow...* she considered.

Peering up at the back of the boy's head as he led her through the trees, she wondered why he'd offered to help her. Whatever the price she was expected to pay, it couldn't be worth much. Or be any worse than dying.

There are definitely worse things than dying, she reminded herself.

Tamora remembered her mother's words when she'd first mentioned going to the Fae for help, and a different kind of shiver crawled along her limbs: *Help from the Fae always comes at a price*. At the time, she'd meant the Seelie, who could be as cruel as they were beautiful. But Tamora imagined it applied to the Unseelie as well, if not more so.

It wasn't long before they reached the end of the teeming shadow-trees and, as if stepping through an indiscernible veil, the snow turned into falling leaves of gold and red. The sky above was thick with gray clouds, though the absence of the sun didn't mute the foliage around them. If anything, sunlight would've spoiled the illusion.

"We'll be safer here," the boy said, stopping abruptly in the middle of a browning meadow and dropping her hand, "for now. You shouldn't have come here."

I see that now.

But Tamora ignored him, flexing the hand he'd held. "So, what's the price for your help, *Fae?*"

The boy grinned, and it turned him into something different. Something charming and dangerous all at once. "Quick to the point, I see. Fortunately for you, I'm not what you think I am."

Notfae notfae. Her gaze wandered over his appearance: his jaw was sharp, his nose slightly bent, his eyes bright with mischief, and he looked like he'd thrived in the deadly snowstorm instead

of nearly being killed by it as she had. His dark green tunic and white pants were untouched, his bare feet unmarred by the murderous ice crystals.

“Are you sure? You definitely look like one of the Fae.”

The boy chuckled. “I suppose I do. This is what humans become when they spend too much time in the company of the Unseelie.”

“You’re human?” she wondered, taken aback. She’d never heard of such a thing. *But...* “Then how can you demand payment from me?”

The boy’s grin slipped off his face, hardening it again. “I’m not the one who demands it, youngling.”

Then who will I be paying my debt to when he was the one to save me?

“But first,” he continued before she could ask, “I must tell you a prophecy, before he finds us and remembers it.”

“Riddles,” she scoffed, remembering how often the Seelie in Thios had used their pretty words to trick her into doing all sort of things. “I thought you weren’t Fae.”

He shook his head. “This is no riddle. It was the one thing given to me instead of taken away when I came to the Unseelie court. You see, I too wandered into a forest and got lost in a snowstorm. But I was saved by one of the Unseelie. They told me I would remain here for a hundred years, until the day a goblin girl found her way into the realm. She alone could save me.”

Tamora remained silent, despite her heart thumped wildly in her chest. A hundred years—this human boy had among the Unseelie for *a hundred years*? He didn’t look much older than her, yet she was inclined to believe him. But it didn’t change anything. *I’ve gotten myself in enough trouble trying to save my family, much less helping a complete stranger.* She almost felt bad for disappointing him, though she’d done nothing wrong.

The boy continued. “That is why I must warn you: the price the Unseelie Prince demands for trespassing is a single kiss.”

Tamora squinted at him. “A *kiss*? That’s all?” She’d never kissed anyone before, but what did that matter? If it would mean getting out of this place, she’d give away a dozen kisses.

The boy worked his jaw. “A kiss from an Unseelie, especially one of royal blood, reaps a piece of your soul, forcing you to live a half-life. And the only way to get it back is to kill the Fae that took it.”

The breath in Tamora’s throat stalled. Her father lived a half-life now, and she wasn’t ready to live like that. Not yet. “That would’ve been nice to know before you thought to save me.”

“I was afraid you were going to say no,” he admitted unabashedly. “And I need you.”

That was the first time anyone had ever said that to her.

Tamora looked away, trying to quell her confusion and anger at the strange boy. She was used to being taken advantage of; her family, her friends, the Seelie, they all thought they could get away with it just because she was the middle child and a girl. She was tired of it—but she had no choice now. If she was going to escape the Unseelie realm, she would have to pay her debt. She’d have to trust this strange, beautiful human.

She wasn’t even sure he *was* human, though; all she had to go off of was his word. The Fae couldn’t lie, but they loved to omit things—important things—and she was having trouble remembering everything he’d said...

“So I kiss the Unseelie prince, he takes a part of my soul, and then what?” she asked. “How am I supposed to help you escape and then get myself back home.”

A grin split open his face. *Now this is the boy who’s spent far too much time with the Unseelie.* “A kiss from a human makes the Fae grow stronger. But a kiss from a goblin weakens

them long enough to weaken their hold on the Unseelie realm. All we need to do is get back to the seam between realms you came through before he regains his full strength.”

“Sounds complicated,” she admitted, “and dangerous.”

The boy nodded, taking a step towards her. “It will be. But I’ve been waiting for you a long time, Tamora. And I believe we’re lost without each other now.”

She couldn’t help the gasp that escaped her. “How do you know my name?”

“It’s written along your arms, around your neck, atop your lips,” he murmured gently, his softened gaze dipping just below her nose and then back to meet her eyes. “It calls to me like a *bean sidhe*. And the Unseelie prince will notice it too. I’ll try to hide it from him for as long as I can.”

He took another step towards her. She should’ve taken a step back, to keep her distance from him. But whether it was Unseelie magic or something else, she found she couldn’t. He reached behind her, and for a moment, she thought he was going to be the one to collect the Prince’s payment after all. And...she didn’t hate the idea. But then he pulled the hood of her cloak over her head.

“For your Goblin ears,” he whispered, remaining close. His cold breath pressed against her cheek, warming it somehow. “It’s a shame to hide them, but we can’t have them giving you away, now can we?”

Tamora opened her mouth to speak, to protest, *something*. But she was rendered speechless by the sight of a towering figure drifting out from the trees.

Draped across this creature’s narrow shoulders and dragging in the browning grass were deep blue robes embossed with delicate, silvery ice crystals. The crown on its head, too, was made of lacey ice, and it managed to sparkle like precious diamonds despite the dark shadows cast by

the clouds above them. But the features were jagged, harsh, eyes completely black—everything about them screamed at her to *run*. Fear gripped her heart in a vice.

“What have you brought us today, Nathaniel?” the Unseelie Prince asked in a delicate yet commanding voice. The Fae were rife with contradictions.

At the sound of his voice, she had to fight the all-consuming impulse to drift towards it, feet aching to take just one step closer...

“A goblin, your grace,” the boy—Nathaniel—said, bowing low and fracturing the faerie spell Tamora had unwittingly been under.

Wait, wasn't I supposed to be human? she wondered, thinking of how close he'd gotten to her to pull her hood over her head. And for nothing.

“And her debt?”

“A single kiss.”

The Unseelie Prince's flinty gaze turned on Nathaniel. “You know how goblins affect the Fae. I hope this isn't another one of your misguided efforts.”

Misguided efforts? To what? Then Tamora wondered if she was the first Goblin girl to set foot in the Unseelie Court.

Nathaniel dropped his gaze. “No, your grace, I've learned my lesson. This girl is forced to hide her true self in her realm. There is not much she could do to you.”

He barely thought on it before conceding. “Very well.”

The Unseelie Prince turned hungrily to Tamora, seeming to take that ridiculously vague excuse as absolute truth. Despite Nathaniel humanity, he'd somehow earned the trust of the Prince wholeheartedly.

Suddenly, the Unseelie Prince was directly in front of her, filling up her entire line of sight. She wanted to find Nathaniel, but it was impossible with him so close. Fear clung to her like a stench, she knew, but that only seemed to spur him on. The Unseelie Prince dipped his head in a graceful arc before his cold lips pressed against hers. It was almost—

But then the worst pain she'd ever felt sparked from his touch, rendering her immobile. His thin fingers sunk into her ruined clothes as hot pokers stabbed her in her lungs, her heart, her stomach...

And when she thought she might die from the pain, the Unseelie Prince released her, collapsing among the decadent leaves.

She nearly crumpled with him, but familiar arms caught her and carried her back through the wintry forest. The snow did not tear at her as it had before. But she felt empty; as if the cruel, cold Prince truly had taken a piece of her for himself.

"I'm sorry," Nathaniel told her. She managed to shift towards him, and a single, twinkling tear rolled down his cheek. She had the sudden urge to wipe it away, to comfort this poor, tortured human boy.

Nathaniel met her gaze, and instead of remembering the Prince's lips on hers, draining the life from her, she imagined they'd been *his*. Stealing her breath from her in the most delicious way. As if reading her thoughts, his gaze fell to her lips, and the sharper angles of him softened. He stopped walking, his grip tightening around her. The snow around them was calm now, quiet. As if the boy had sway over it. Though that was ridic—

He pressed his soft, blue lips to hers. She breathed in sharply at the contact, the winter air searing her chest, until she was wholly consumed by wanton fire.

It was over before she had a chance to understand what she felt, having been nothing like her kiss with the Unseelie Prince. There were no deals, no bargains. Just a Goblin girl and a human boy. He gazed into her eyes, and she felt at peace.

When he finally set her down again, her legs wobbled beneath her, though she wasn't sure whose kiss it was from anymore.

Realizing where she was, she peered through the familiar maw. She could just make out her family's home, bathed in the glow of a red Thios morning. She thought she'd never be so happy to see it—or her family. She was coming back empty-handed, she realized, but at least she was coming back with her life.

Instinctively, she grabbed Nathaniel's hand and stepped into the warming light of her realm.

But he slipped his hand out of hers—she turned to look at him. The veil between their two worlds shimmered invitingly.

“Go,” he said breathlessly, tired determination sharpening his gaze. “I'll take care of the Unseelie Prince and come find you. Wait for me.”

Then he was gone and the realm of the Unseelie shut itself off to her, leaving Tamora with an emptiness in her chest and still-weak knees. Once again, she was alone and poor at the edge of the Black Forest. Something tickled the edge of her mind, something about a spell...but it slipped away.

And so what else could she do except sit on the grass beside the stone outcropping, and wait for him.