

CAITLIN KITTREDGE



THE  
NIGHTMARE  
GARDEN

The sequel to **THE IRON THORN**

CHAPTER SAMPLER

# The Gates Are Open. Chaos Reigns.

Everything Aoife thought she knew about the world was a lie. Aoife isn't human—she is half human and half from the land of Thorn. And she is allergic to iron, which permeates her world and will drive her mad. Now she must find a way to seal the gates between the Thorn lands and the Iron lands—and reverse the destruction she's ravaged on the world that's about to poison her.



READ & DISCUSS  
[RANDOMBUZZERS.COM](http://RANDOMBUZZERS.COM)



Keep reading for a sneak peek . . .



## *The Dark City*

**I**N MY DREAM, I am alone.

The spires of a ruined city reach for gunmetal clouds, the horizon a wound in the belly of the sky.

Acrid chemical smoke burns the insides of my nostrils, and all around, Klaxons wail, banshees made of iron, steel, and steam.

A road stretches out before me, and I must walk. Walk toward the dead city, under the red sky stained with the black taint of fire and smoke.

Something breaks under my boot, and I know before I look down what I'll see.

Bones. Human skulls, femurs, ribs. The bones of other things as well, things that starved once the humans rotted away. Twisted spines, elongated jaws. Teeth.

I am alone. Alone except for the sirens, alone except for the burning, empty city on the edge of a rotting, polluted river green with algae, host to rubber-skinned, gibbous-eyed

things with mouths large enough to swallow me whole and protruding stomachs ready to digest me.

Not even a ghou! remains to send up a howl. The city is dead. *My city is dead.*

*My mother was in that city.*

*My mother is dead.*

*I am alone.*

And I know that this city, this disaster, this spreading disease of flame and death, is all my fault.

I woke up with my head pounding and the rest of my body fever-hot. My thin blouse stuck to my skin, while the frozen air that swirled in rivulets through the broken walls of the farmhouse raised steam off my bare legs. The Mists, this place that I'd found myself so far from my home, was unforgiving in every way, including the predawn temperature.

Kicking back the blankets from the half-rotted mattress, I pulled on my coat and shoes and stepped through the door. It was held in place by only one hinge, which let out a rusty shriek. I froze, but no one sleeping inside stirred.

We were all tired. Tired to the bone.

Outside, unfamiliar stars stared down impassively from a crumpled velvet sky. The horizon was silver now, not red like the sky of my dream, and I felt the pounding of my pulse and the sickness of the nightmare subside.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"I had a bad dream," I said to Dean. He leaned against the clay wall, a Lucky Strike jammed between his lips, his hair falling in his face.

Dean blew out a blue cloud that blended with the sky.

"I'd offer you one, but it's my last pack. Somehow I doubt there'll be a filling station around the next bend in the road."

"I don't think so," I said quietly. I went and leaned against the wall next to him. I was shivering, and my stomach snarled at me. We hadn't exactly been eating regularly since we'd run away from Lovecraft. Away from everything.

From what I'd done, and from the city that poisoned me with its very existence. As long as I avoided the Iron Land, I could stave off the madness the world of men injected into my blood. I'd managed to escape the fate shared by my mother and brother—a descent into madness that took hold of every member of our family when we turned sixteen—but I'd be safe only as long as I stayed away from the one place I'd ever thought of as home. If I went back, the clock began ticking again. I'd had less than a week when I left. Every minute I spent there shortened the span of my sanity.

But how long could I stay away? How long until the people who wanted me to pay for what I'd done in Lovecraft caught up and hauled me back there? Once they did, I'd be gone. I'd be as crazy as my mother, poisoned by the city.

If my mother was still alive.

I couldn't think through this circle of frantic worry anymore. It was practically all I'd thought about since the night I'd run away with Dean, my friends Cal and Bethina, and my brother, Conrad. No matter how I tried, I couldn't silence the voice: *Eventually, they'll take you back there.*

Dean dropped his cigarette butt and stomped on it, then collected the filter and tucked it away. He was adept at moving through a place and leaving no trace. Dean was a lot of things.

His arm went around me and pulled me close. "It's gonna

be all right, Aoife. We're gonna get out the other side of this, somehow."

Sixteen years of listening to how I should act like a proper lady tugged at me—I should have told him to take his arm off me, but I moved closer instead. Dean smelled like Dean, like tobacco and old leather and that boy smell of sweat and hair grease. He was practically the only familiar thing in this place, and I was clinging to him with all my might. "You can't possibly know that," I mumbled into his jacket, sliding my arms inside and feeling the warmth of his skin and his body.

"No," Dean agreed. "But men are supposed to say things like that to the womenfolk. Right?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I'm not very good at being 'womenfolk.'"

"I promise, then," Dean said. "From me to you: nothing is going to happen to you while I'm around." He pressed his face against my hair, stirring up the already unruly nest of crow's-feather black atop my head. All the Graysons had black hair and gray eyes; even my mother's fair hair and complexion hadn't changed that.

My mother, whom I'd abandoned in Lovecraft. When I'd left Lovecraft in shambles, burning and destroyed because of what I'd done to its Engine, the heart that drove the city, I'd promised to come back for her. That was before I'd realized the scale of what had happened. Rip out the heart of something and it will die. I'd been a fool, and I'd listened to the wrong whispers, and now my mother could be dead and Lovecraft was a wasteland.

"Dean, what am I going to do?" I whispered. "I can't go back there."

He sighed. "Princess, I haven't the faintest idea what's coming next. But you'll think of something. You always do." He planted a kiss on my hairline and straightened. "You're the brains of this operation, remember?"

The sun was almost up, and the silver line was turning blue and gold. Sunrises were different here in the Mists, the unknowable land between lands, the thin place where things that didn't like the light hid. The sun never shone, not really. It was a dull silver flame rather than a fireball. Just another strange piece of this strange land we'd all fallen into.

I could admit it, alone with Dean.

I was lost, and I had no idea how to find my way home. And now, I didn't even know where home might lie.



## *The Floating City*

**B**EFORE THE OTHERS woke and after Dean had gone to check that the road was clear, I got my battered composition book out of my bag and opened it on my knees. The book was half full of my engineering homework. It was from my other life, from when I was a schoolgirl who thought that magic was a lie and that a virus was responsible for things like creatures and uncanny abilities, ghosts and prophetic dreams.

That girl was gone. The Aoife writing was a new girl, one who'd discovered that the necrovirus was a hoax perpetrated by men who sought the magic for themselves. Who were hunting me, even now. The old Aoife wanted to panic, felt the tightening in her chest even now, watched ink dribble from her pen as her hand started to shake. How was I ever going to stop being a fugitive, knowing what I knew?

But the new Aoife didn't have the luxury of curling up in a ball and pretending the outside world didn't exist. She

had to learn how to be strong and unbending, how to evade the men chasing her and the disease that was eating her mind away from within. Had to, because she had no other choice.

I wrote it all down. I had to write. It was my duty now, because the person who should have been writing this account, my father, was long gone and my brother wasn't interested. I was the last Grayson still able to record her strange life, as all Graysons before me had. Still, I felt like a fraud the moment I put pen to paper.

*First entry:*

*My name is Aoife Grayson, and I am the last person who should be writing this account, but know I am the only one left who can.*

*Others like me and my family, the Gateminders, who watch the thin spots known as Gates between the Iron Land, the Mists, and the land of Thorn, have the confidence of those who have come before. They know how to navigate the Gates, how each different type works, from the Fae hexenring to the mechanical marvels of the Erlkin. I know nothing.*

*I have nothing. I am the Gateminder by default, due, I believe, to chaos and chance. It sometimes feels like I'm being punished for uncovering the hoax of the necrovirus, as my father did. For daring to question the Proctors, the order of things. Gateminders before us labored in secret, but at least the rest of the world was not actively encouraged to believe they deserved death.*

*The Proctors told us that the strange creatures, my family's madness, everything in the world that could*

*not be explained by science and reason, was a virus. A powerful virus with no origin and no cure. They never hinted that its origin was inhuman and that the cure was to embrace my Faerie blood, the inhuman, immortal side of me, and to stay far away from iron.*

*At the time, all I saw was that my mother was one of the mad, that my brother was a fugitive, and that I was about to follow in their footsteps and go mad. I would be locked up, another victim of the “virus.”*

*It was all a lie. I was trapped in the stone and iron of Lovecraft, trapped by my own mind and by the lie I believed. And now Lovecraft lies ruined. Ruined because I was stupid.*

*I scratched out that word, stupid, so many times, writing this. But it's the right word. I believed the Fae creature Tremaine when he came from Thorn and told me I was the heroine who would free the Fae from bondage, curing my iron madness in the process. He set me up, and I fell, harder than I ever could have imagined.*

*I should have listened to the words my father left behind, in his own diary: as a Gateminder: You should trust only yourself. Only you stand between the Iron Land of men and what lies beyond. And in that role, you have only your own mind to rely on, your own wit and intellect.*

*I should have listened to Dean, too. He said it—you can't trust the Fae. They lie. And Tremaine did lie to me. I destroyed the Lovecraft Engine, in a great cataclysm of magic. I broke down the barriers my father and his Brotherhood of Iron were so careful to*

*construct, over hundreds of years, before the lie of the necrovirus. Barriers the evil things of Thorn had never broken.*

*I left my mother in Lovecraft.*

*I can forgive myself, possibly, for being the gullible little girl Tremaine thought I was, but I can never forgive myself for abandoning my mother.*

*The only way I can sleep at night is by promising myself that I am going to find her and help her escape the city and the iron madness, as I have escaped it, at least temporarily. Conrad, my brother, said that as long as we stay out of the cities, and out of the Iron Land entirely, with its train tracks, iron pipes, steel conveyances, we might stave off madness. In his case, spending months away from the Iron Land meant total remission. In my case, the progress has slowed; I avoided the full psychotic break that usually occurs around age sixteen, and suffer only the occasional headache, visual disturbance out of the corner of my eye, and bad dream.*

*But nothing I'm doing now seems any saner than the dreams I started having weeks ago, before my birthday and the inevitable onset of madness. The dreams are the first sign of acute and chronic iron poisoning, the warning bell. Though I'm still reasonably sane because I fled, the dreams haven't stopped. I don't know now if they come from madness or from another source. From something worse.*

*I do know we're running, me and Conrad and Dean, Cal and Bethina, too. It seems like there's no one we aren't running from. The Proctors and Grey*

*Draven, who has some bizarre notion I'll lead him to my father, his true target.*

*The Fae, who did not exact their full price from me after I woke their sleeping queens and ripped the thin, thin barrier between our worlds. Tremaine has more for me to do. He said as much. Opening the Gates between Thorn and Iron was only the beginning.*

*It was like knocking aside a spiderweb. How could breaking something so huge feel like less than nothing?*

*These things I do have: My brother. Dean and my friendship with Cal, and I suppose with Bethina, too—she was loyal to my father before I came along, even though she's only human and the law dictates she should have turned me in. But Bethina is steadfast, and stubborn to a fault; plus, it's good to have another girl along.*

*Things I don't have: A plan to hold off the iron madness and keep ahead of the Proctors and Grey Draven. A way to get to Lovecraft. Anything to go home to if I can get to the city, because the Lovecraft Academy sure isn't my home any longer. I don't know what is.*

*I meant what I said—I'm the last person who should have taken over my father's burden, recording my life for the next Gateminder. Yet I continue to write in the books that the Brotherhood calls witches' alphabets, grimoires of power and experience that are supposed to help me along, to keep me safe.*

*Fat lot of good my father's records did me. And he's not here, even though I've never needed him more and his absence makes me want to sob or scream.*

*The one thing he asked of me was to be strong,  
willful and resolute, and I couldn't do it.*

*All I can truthfully say now is that my name is  
Aoife Grayson, and I have my freedom, and my sanity.  
I could at least temporarily cure my mother, if I could  
take her from the Iron Land and the poison that's  
clouding her mind.*

*But I don't know how much longer she'll survive in  
ruined Lovecraft. And if I go back to the iron, I don't  
know how much longer I'll have, either.*

After the days of walking, of little food and less sleep, of cold and wet and none of the comforts of the human world—like, say, beds, bathrooms and hot food—the Mists had lost their charm.

The Mists weren't exactly the world as humans understood it. Human saw a single world with no others sitting beside it. Really, the Iron Land sat beside all the others like marbles in a sack. But at least the Mists weren't Thorn, home of the Fae. We'd run here from my father's house, Graystone, in Arkham, in a desperate bid to escape both the Proctors and my iron madness. The Mists were where the tides of reality ebbed and flowed, and the edges of other places knit and then split apart like wounded skin held by poorly stitched thread.

Austere and alien as the Mists were, though, they were largely devoid of iron, and that was important. Iron made me sick, made me see things. This endless windswept wilderness at least wouldn't drive me insane, according to Conrad. If Conrad was sane. He certainly hadn't appeared

that way the last time we'd met, when he'd shown up and dragged me here with little preamble. That was the extent of his plan—the part he'd shared with me, anyway. Asking him questions just got silence or grumbling.

Really, I had only his word that he even *had* a plan other than hiding in the Mists for the rest of our lives, and I hadn't been able to trust the word of anyone in my family in years.

And despite the lack of iron, I was still dreaming.

I'd fallen to the back of the group, my steps leaden and my thoughts heavier, and Dean slowed down to let me catch up.

"You all right?" He nudged my hand with the back of his and then wound our fingers together.

"No," I said. "I'm hungry and I feel like my feet are going to fall off." I'd taken sturdy boots from Graystone, but they were mud-spattered now, and one of the heels was starting to come away. My legs felt like logs, and my mind was fuzzy from lack of sleep. I'd felt this way before, during finals at the Academy, when I'd slept maybe two hours a night and crammed my brain so full I thought it would burst, but I'd never had to trek through a swamp on top of that. More than anything I wanted to shut my eyes and lie down in a patch of soft moss.

"I could use a break myself," Dean said. "Hey, Connie!"

Dean had taken to calling my brother Connie, and I could see from the twitch of Conrad's shoulders how much he hated it.

"Yes, Dean?" He turned his head slightly, but he didn't slow his pace.

"Looks like the group's voted for a sit-down," Dean called.

Conrad turned fully but continued walking backward.

He'd always been quicksilver graceful, my brother, in a way I'd never been and never would be. It just wasn't in me. I tried not to let it bother me as my holey boot filled up with water when I misstepped and put my foot in a soft patch of moss and muddy water. Back in Lovecraft, Conrad was the handsome one, the smart one, and I was, well, the shy, plain younger sister who was never quite as good at anything. Even according to the lore of the Gateminders, he was first in line, being the eldest son of the current Gateminder. I was just the girl. The second choice. The replacement, if neither my father or Conrad could perform the duties, after all this was said and done—despite my being able to pass between Thorn and Iron, my being able to communicate with the Fae when Conrad had never even seen them. Still just the girl. It stung, and just once, I wanted him to fall on his face.

“I don't care what the group wants,” Conrad said to Dean. “We stop when I say we stop, and we need to get through these woods before nightfall. You don't know the Mists, Dean, despite what you are. You've spent your entire life in the Iron Land. I've spent almost a year here. The Mists aren't Thorn or Iron—they're treacherous, and I don't want to get caught in an ambush because my baby sister's feet hurt, so why don't you two toughen up and accept that I know what I'm talking about?”

Dean snarled under his breath. To look at him, you'd never know he was only half human, but he was, and his other, Erlkin half had a bad temper when it was crossed. Conrad was like me, human blood poisoned with a drop of Fae. More than poisoned—saturated. But at least we weren't like our mother, struck mad simply by virtue of

living in the Iron Land, as all full-blood Fae like her would eventually be. Conrad and I, with our human father, were hopefully all right as long as we steered clear of iron. More than that, though, Conrad thrived and never seemed bothered by much. With his charm and force of will, Conrad could say anything and make it so. It merely annoyed me, but it made Dean furious, and to head off the fight that had been brewing for days, as the fog got thicker, the ground wetter, and the food scarcer, I dropped Dean's hand and jogged to catch up with my brother.

"We're all tired," I told him. "If you keep up this pace we're just going to stop following you. We can't run from the Proctors and the Fae if we're dead of exhaustion." My brother listened to me very rarely; and I hoped this would be one of those times.

Conrad's jaw twitched, and my hopes fell. "It's not your call, Aoife," he snapped.

"You're right," I agreed, through gritted teeth to avoid outright angry shouting. "It wasn't my call to leave Lovecraft looking for you, it wasn't my call to run here when the Proctors came for us. But I followed you, Conrad. I've done what you said without complaining for almost a week, and now I'm telling you I'm tired. You can walk." I stopped and plopped down on a mossy stump. "I'm not going another step."

The old Aoife would never have dreamed of disagreeing with anyone, but this new Aoife had no such compunctions. Her feet hurt, and I was glad she'd spoken up. She didn't even care that Conrad was puffing up his chest, getting ready to chastise her like the father we'd never had. We stared at each other while the throaty call of a crow

echoed from a nearby thicket. I wasn't going to be the one to look away. I'd been glad of Conrad's protection in our care-homes, and at the Academy, but since he'd left, I'd realized I didn't need him. He needed to see it now too. He was my brother, and I loved him, but the closeness of our old relationship had blown away with the ash from the ruined Lovecraft Engine.

"Well?" I said at last. Dean, Cal, and Bethina, who'd been a chambermaid in my father's house before a few days ago, stopped and clustered around me. Conrad had elected himself group leader, but so far they'd stuck with me. Not that I knew where we were going, or where we were going to stay when it got dark again. These were ancient forests, night forests, and who knew what was lurking in the shadows? In Lovecraft, things like nightjars, shape-shifting blood drinkers, and springheel jacks, terrifying long-toothed predators, ruled the night along with the ghouls. And those were just the creatures who'd managed to slip through from Thorn and other places. Here in the Mists, this native land of theirs so far from Iron, if they caught us we'd be so much lunch meat. I felt a small, traitorous prick of pride at that and tried not to show it on my face. I'd managed to get us as far as the Mists. I tried to believe I could see us through to wherever we ended up, but I wasn't very convincing, even inside my own head. Conrad *did* know the Mists, and I had no idea how to even find my way out of this wood.

Conrad folded his arms. "Aoife, you're being a child."

"I left her there, Conrad," I said quietly, voicing what had been bothering me since the morning dream. "I left her to whatever might happen."

Conrad sighed, shifting his feet. "Listen, when we get

somewhere safe we can talk about this. Right now, we're exposed and we need to keep moving." He started walking again, until my words distracted him and he tripped.

"She's *our mother*."

My brother turned back to me, and his face was colder than I'd ever seen it. "Nerissa hasn't been a mother to me for ten years, Aoife. To you either. She left us to the mercy of people who'd just as soon burn us alive, or cut us open and study us. She didn't even try to keep us from that when she knew she couldn't take care of us. Some kind of *mother* to do that."

"I said I wouldn't leave her there," I told him. I'd promised her. No matter what she'd done, I'd promised that I'd keep her safe because she couldn't do it for herself. That was what you did, when you had a mother, and I hadn't managed to do anything except put her in more danger. Guilt made my stomach roil. "This is my fault," I said, "all of it, but most of all Nerissa, and I have to—"

"Damn it, Aoife!" Conrad bellowed. The crows took flight in a ripple of glossy black against the silver sky. "Going back to the Iron Land and risking your neck won't change what happened! You're going to have to accept that so we can all stay alive."

I wished he'd just slapped me. The hole that opened in me at his words was a hundred times more painful than any blow would have been. Because I knew he was right. My guilt was like a chain around my ankle, attached to a weight the size of my mother. If I couldn't put the thoughts out of my mind until we'd reached safety, I'd drag them with me. But I didn't know how. I swiped at my eyes, telling myself my face was only damp with cool fog, not hot tears.

“All right, now,” Dean said. “I think we’ve established neither of you is giving up this ghost, so why don’t we agree to disagree?” He helped me off the stump and put his arm around me. “And Conrad—how about shutting your big trap and not making your sister cry before I knock your teeth in?”

Conrad blinked once. “What did you just say to me?”

“Hey!” I clapped my hands. Boys could be like unruly dogs. Where was a bucket of water when I needed one? “I’ll keep going,” I told Conrad quietly. “But I’m not going to forget about this. I *am* going to get her back.”

“I’m not saying forget it,” he said. “Just focus on staying safe until our father comes back and can help us settle things.”

He started walking again, his stiff-shouldered posture evidence that he was dismissing Dean and me—and the straggling Cal and Bethina—so I spoke my last thought to his back: “You know, Archie coming back and saving the day is about as likely as a snowball surviving the heart of the Engine.” It was harsh, but it was true. Conrad was the only one who refused to see that.

*Second entry:*

*What can I say about my father? I knew him as only a story for the first fourteen years of my life, a figure both larger and smaller than any real father could hope to be.*

*I know that he stayed just long enough to watch Conrad take his first steps and see me born before he returned to the city of Arkham, to Graystone, his family home, and then had nothing more to do with us.*

*Nerissa never mentioned it, but I knew they weren't married, and that a family like the Graysons didn't need bastards running around. It made me angry, made me feel small and worthless, like a trinket rather than somebody's child. Usually I pretended I didn't have a father at all.*

*I only saw him once: when the Proctors scooped me up and Grey Draven told me the truth about the necrovirus, that it was a lie and that he planned to use me to lure in the insurgents my father was running with. My father showed up and helped me get out of Ravenhouse, the bastion of the Proctors in Lovecraft, and run to Arkham, back to my brother and into the Mists.*

*We spoke maybe ten words to each other.*

*So you can see why I don't have a lot of faith in Archibald Grayson showing up and saving the day, even though Conrad thinks he'll solve everything. People relied on the Proctors to solve everything too—to keep them safe from the necrovirus—and look what happened. The world is going to burn. Maybe not all at once, but what happened in Lovecraft is surely worldwide news by now, and who knows what's already crossed over from the Thorn Land to make a picnic of the human race? I can't even think about it without feeling like I want to cry, scream, or simply lie down, let the guilt eat me alive, and give up.*

*I don't know if our father is coming back. I don't know if he'll help us if he does.*

*I don't know anything except that Conrad's wrong about me, and about our mother when he says that*

*she's a lost cause, and that if I want to survive, I have to cast my lot with a father I barely know. If I can go back, if I can at least make sure she's alive and see what condition the city is in from what I did—if it still exists at all—then I'll know.*

*I'll know exactly what I did and what the damage was, the number of deaths and exactly how many tons of guilt should press on me. I'll know if there's anything I can do to make it right, because the plain fact is, innocent people shouldn't pay for my stupidity. That nobody had to teach me. That's just the truth.*

*And maybe if I know what happened, I can stop dreaming about it.*

I'd stopped keeping track of how many miles we'd walked days ago, but not of the day. My birthday had come and gone, and so far, I still had my mind. But I wasn't cured. Periodically I felt the scratches and whispers of the madness, and I waited for the iron poison to awaken it fully in my blood and plunge me down an endless hole of insanity.

The road disappeared into the forest, and we relied on the dim sun to navigate. Well, Conrad did. The rest of us were so tired we mostly just trudged. Cal had barely spoken since we'd come through from Arkham to the Mists, and finally, when I looked back and saw him stumble, I dropped back to walk with him.

"How are you holding up?"

Cal grunted. He was a head taller than me, and I watched his knobby Adam's apple bob up and down.

Of all of us, Cal was the least what he appeared to be. I

should have been afraid of him—after all, the Proctors had filled my mind for years with warnings about the ghouls that lived in the old sewer tunnels below the streets and surged up to hunt when the moon was full.

But they'd also told me my mother was crazy and had to be locked away, and that a bloodborne virus was responsible for my abilities and my madness dreams, so there you were. Cal might have been a monster before he'd come to the Academy, a ghoul who'd hunted people like me, but he'd stuck by me when everything went wrong. Draven had sent him to spy on me, threatened to burn Cal's family alive if he rebelled, and Cal had still helped me get out of Lovecraft. Cal was loyal. I trusted him a lot more than Conrad at that moment.

Which made me feel lousy, like I was betraying my own blood in favor of someone who wasn't even human, but the fact remained that Cal had been there for me when Conrad hadn't. And he didn't have potential madness lurking in the dark corners of his mind, ready to spring forward and sink its teeth in the moment he got too close to the Iron Land. I loved Conrad, but I'd never forget that in his worst moment, he'd hurt me, and hadn't hesitated to do it. I had a scar to ensure I'd never forget.

"Cal?" I said when he didn't answer me.

"How do you think I'm holding up, Aoife?" he snapped, thin face growing a deep frown. "Being in this place isn't going to get us into any less trouble, and it just might get us into more."

Regardless of the shape he took, Cal had a nearly endless capacity for worrywarting. I was just glad he'd decided

to keep his human shape for the time being, though that was a credit more to Bethina than to me. Cal was sweet on her, and she thought he was a regular boy. I just hoped she wouldn't try to light him on fire when she figured out the truth. Bethina was bubbly and sometimes flighty, but she wasn't stupid, and eventually all the strange bits of Cal's personality would fall into place for her.

I'd decided at the outset that I'd cross that bridge when we came to it. Besides, how was I supposed to pull her aside and tell her the nice boy with the city manners was actually a flesh-eating beast? *That* was a conversation I couldn't even fathom how to start. It would come up one way or another—Cal wasn't always good at hiding his true nature. None of us were, I guessed. Dean snarled when he was angry, and I got blinding visions when I was too close to iron. Conrad was the only one among us who could appear effortlessly human, and I was really starting to resent him for it. He'd been out of the Iron Land long enough that his madness had largely receded. I hoped it would be the same for me, but sooner or later, I'd have to go back, and if he went with me we'd both be in trouble.

"Fine," I grumbled.

"If you say so," Cal said, and I could tell I'd played on his last nerve. He could tell I was wishing I could just leave the lot of them, aside from Dean, in the woods and go home.

Not even that. I wished I could wind time backward until none of this had ever occurred. And if I could live that time over again, I would ignore what was happening to me, go on being a good student, a good girl, good little Aoife Grayson, who adored her brother because he was the

strong one, the charming one who could do no wrong. He was a brother she could trust, implicitly. A brother who'd never hurt her.

But then I'd also be insane from the iron of Lovecraft, locked up with my mother, and who knew what would have happened to Conrad? I could never have that little girl's imaginary version of my brother back, and I was just going to have to live with it. If I'd done it sooner, I might not have been so easily swayed by Tremaine, or so quick to dismiss my mother's ramblings. If I'd been more willing to accept reality, my mother would be safe and alive, instead of alone in a city overrun with creatures of Thorn.

If she'd survived. I didn't let myself think that my mother might be dead too often, because the very idea was a physical pang in my chest. Nerissa had managed to survive for fifteen years in the worst madhouses in Lovecraft. She couldn't be dead. I kept repeating that, with all the dedication of a fanatic. My mother couldn't be dead. She had to be waiting for me when I went back.

I became aware that the Cal's skinny shadow no longer loped next to me, and I turned back. Cal was frozen, quivering, his nostrils flared and his chest vibrating like a plucked string.

"Cal?" I said with soft alarm, motioning to the others to stop.

His lips drew back from teeth that razored out of human gums, leaving thin red trails of blood and spittle on his lips. They disappeared just as quickly, when Bethina turned toward him, but the wire-tight tension didn't leave his skinny frame. "Someone else is here."

Dean cut his eyes toward the brush and back to me. “Get off the road.”

“What’s going on?” Bethina called tremulously from behind Cal.

“Get off the road *now!*” Dean bellowed, and grabbed me by the arm, dragging me into the brush. I gasped in pain as thorns snagged my sweater, rending skin and finding blood beneath.

I saw Cal, Conrad, and Bethina go into the ditch on the other side of the path as Dean pulled me down. Mud soaked into my stockings and through the holes in my boots, and freezing water numbed me.

“What—” I started, but Dean pressed his finger against my lips.

A second later, I felt something unfurl in my mind, like a flower opening under the light of the moon. It prickled across my forehead, over my scalp, and down my spine, fingers of feeling scraping across my every nerve.

*Please*, I thought as panic pressed on my chest, slowing my breath to almost nothing, *not here. Not now.* I knew the sensation bubbling up from the recesses of my brain, knew it the same way I knew my own heartbeat. My blood was reacting to iron, iron that whoever Cal had scented carried, iron worked into an unseen machine. And with the machinery came something else: the power that my father, in his journal, had called a Weird. And on the heels of the Weird, because machines and iron were inexorably intertwined, the madness would bloom.

My Weird had been quiet since we’d been walking through the Mists, but not now. Now it was pushing against

the inside of my skull, threatening to crack it. I pressed a palm against my forehead and dug the heel in, willing myself to stay quiet as my thoughts went wild, clamoring for me to scream and let my Weird free. Behind them was something blacker, something that crawled and giggled as it picked at the scars on my psyche. *Let me in, Aoife. Let me show you. . . .*

I saw a sharp stone protruding from the embankment, and I ran my hand against it, dragging it down my palm. Blood dribbled down my wrist and the sharp, clear prick of pain pushed the whispers back. When all else failed, physical hurt would quiet the voices in my head. For now, anyway.

The Weird still pressed on my skull, and I pushed harder against the stone, focusing only on the pain, keeping my eyes trained toward the whisper of a path we'd vacated.

On the road, the trees parted ahead of us and disgorged two tall, thin figures. They weren't Fae—I could tell that much from their lack of silver eyes and pointed teeth—but they weren't human, either. They moved too smoothly for that, like the fog all around us glided between the trees, and their forms were too slim and angular

The Erlkin had found us. The people of the Mists, the other half of Dean's bloodline, had found the intruders in their domain and were coming to exterminate us. At best. At worst, they were Erlkin working for Grey Draven, and we were about to be shackled and taken back to Lovecraft. I pressed my forehead down into the dirt. That couldn't happen. It would be the end of even a faint hope that I could remain free and sane.

Dean squeezed my arm, each finger carving a groove

that would leave purple marks behind. He was telling me to stay quiet. Stay still. Not to give us away.

I wasn't the one, as it turned out, who screwed up—a splash came from the ditch on the other side of the path and I knew it could only be Cal.

“Oh, iron *damn* this day!” I hissed, breaking free of Dean's grasp, trying to reach Cal before the Erlkin did . . . something. I'd use my Weird, keep them from taking us, keep us free of imprisonment for one more day. Honestly, I didn't know what I was going to do. The new Aoife moved without thinking, summoning the scream of the Weird into the front of her mind.

Conrad erupted from his side of the ditch before I could fully leap from my hiding spot, entrapped my arms, and took me to ground, my knees crashing into the gravel with sharp, hot blossoms of pain as he smothered me.

The Erlkin shouted at us in a guttural language I didn't understand, but I knew when someone was yelling at me not to move. And Conrad was muttering to me as the ground shook with their approaching footsteps, a single word over and over.

*“Stupid, stupid, stupid. So stupid, Aoife.”*

“We know there are more of you skulking in there!” the Erlkin shouted in English. “Show your faces!”

“I'm going to let you up and we're going to run, all right?” Conrad whispered into my hair. “Fast as you can. Get off the road and just run. The others will be all right—the Erlkin don't want them, just us.”

I struggled, trying to get out from under his weight. “Get off me, Conrad!” I hissed. “You're not making this any better.”

“Show yourselves,” the Erlkin ordered. “Or we open fire into the bushes and drag your bodies back to the dirigible!”

“Wait!” Conrad shouted, raising his head. “We aren’t Fae spies. We’re just traveling through. There’s no need for all this, I promise you.”

I heard the lock and snap of a weapon, and my Weird pounded against my skull at the proximity of a complex machine, a machine it wanted to bend and twist to its will. My will. But that couldn’t happen. The Erlkin couldn’t know about my ability, so I held it back, until I thought I’d burst. I threw Conrad’s arms off me, feeling as if I’d suffocate if he touched me for another second.

“I’m Conrad Grayson,” Conrad announced. He stood above me now, hands out to the side, the long, clever fingers we shared splayed in deference to show his empty palms. “I’ve been here before, and I’ve always been a friend to the Erlkin, just like my father, Archibald Grayson. Maybe you’ve heard of him?”

To my right, Bethina and Cal climbed slowly from the ditch they’d thrown themselves into, Bethina clutching Cal’s arm. He was doing an all-right job of not losing his form, but it wasn’t good enough. I could see long teeth, and yellow eyes, and claws. I jerked my chin at him and he swallowed his ghoulish face, features rippling until he was human again.

Now that we’d been caught, all I could think of was how could we convince the Erlkin we weren’t a threat. I wasn’t leaving Dean and Cal and Bethina, that much was certain. Conrad could run if he wanted to. I’d already left enough people behind.

*"You,"* the Erlkin said to Conrad. "Oh, we know all about *you*, Conrad Grayson."

I took the chance to examine the Erlkin while he was focused on my brother and his big mouth. He was tall, thin, with hollow cheeks and stringy black hair pulled back with a leather thong at his neck. He looked like a human who'd been dead a few days, whose skin, tinged blue, had begun to tighten. In another life, when I'd been a student, some of us freshmen had been dared to go into the anatomy room in the School of Hospice. The cadaver on the table, dead of a ghoulish attack, had looked much the same.

The thing he held in his hands was about the size of a crossbow but had a bulbous end, a glass ball that enclosed a coil of copper piping running back to a bulky gearbox near a trigger. Putting together what I'd learned at the Academy, I guessed it was a stun gun, with a windup static charge.

"You think you can hire slipstreamers to smuggle you back and forth across our borders any time you please?" the lead Erlkin snarled. "You think we don't know every time your sack of meat walks through the Mists? We're not stupid, human, nor are we savages. We see you. We know that someone breached the Gates, and we know that our borders aren't safe. You're not welcome here, by any true citizen of the Mists who's not just out to take your money and leave you to die in a swamp."

I looked up at Conrad in alarm. I'd thought the Erlkin who'd helped us escape Graystone, our father's house, had been, at the very least, not criminals. Honestly, I'd hoped they'd been in some kind of authority, that Conrad had used his charm to sway the Erlkin to his cause, but I saw now

that I was wrong. Slipstreamers, Dean had said, were Erlkin who used the Gates on the sly, for illicit purposes, caring nothing for what might happen if they misused the Gates or allowed something unwanted to come through along with them. It was horribly dangerous—slipstreamers didn't really know what they were doing, and often as not, their charges disappeared into a void.

In short, I thought we'd been invited to the Mists. But knowing Conrad as I did, I should have guessed he'd done something underhanded. I could have strangled him in that moment, and I doubted Dean or Cal or Bethina would have stopped me, judging from the looks on their faces.

"Listen," Conrad said, making a smoothing motion in the air between the Erlkin and himself. "I'm sure we can work this out."

"You're a wanted man," the Erlkin snarled. "And the rest of you are trespassers. Every time you cross from the Iron Land or anywhere else to the Mists, you raise the chance of the Fae finding a way in and crossing over with you. This may be an in-between place, but it's *our* place. And we don't want you. Breaching borders without permission of the Erlkin is a grave offense." He moved his leather-clad finger to the trigger of his weapon. "For the danger you've caused our lands, I could put you down right here, by law."

Conrad took another step forward. I wanted to yell at him not to be an idiot, but I couldn't make myself talk. I wanted to grab him like he'd grabbed me, foolish and frantic, and run, but the trees rustled behind us and two more Erlkin with similar weapons stepped onto the road. Who knew how many more might be in the trees? I stayed still, my heart pounding, hating myself for hesitating.

“We can work this out,” Conrad said again. “I have money.”

“We’re soldiers—we work for the people of Windhaven. We don’t want your money.” The Erlkin nodded to the weapon in his hands. “This is a shock rifle. Might not kill you, but it’ll knock you out. Now stay put before I prove it to you.”

“I say we shoot him here,” said the other. “Lowlife consorting with slipstreamers, and probably a human criminal himself. We don’t need that kind in our land.”

Both Erlkin raised their rifles. I opened my mouth to shout. Conrad might have been a complete idiot for using criminals to get him into the Mists and escape the Proctors, but he was my brother, and if I had to throw myself into the line of fire, I would.

Before I could do more than stumble to my feet, Dean’s shape appeared between us and the Erlkin. “Don’t shoot.”

The Erlkin looked at Dean, then each other. The pair behind us shifted uncomfortably, but at a gesture from the leader, they lowered their rifles.

“Is it . . . ?” said the one who’d wanted to vaporize Conrad, passing a look of recognition to his leader.

“I think it is,” said the leader. He cocked an eyebrow at Dean. “You’ve grown a foot or two, Nails, but I’d know that smug face anywhere.”

I cut a glance at Dean. I knew that he was half Erlkin, but I’d had no idea he was known to the Erlkin at large. I stayed quiet, waiting for him to say something and praying that it wasn’t one of the smartass comments that usually came out of his mouth.

Dean bristled, his shoulders going up the way they did

when he got insulted. "That's not my name. It hasn't been for years, and you of all people, Skip, should know that."

"*That's his name?*" Cal said, surprised. "Skip? Kinda light-hearted."

"Cal," I said, trying not to move my lips or my body in any way that could be interpreted as threatening. "*Shut up.*"

"I forget what you're running under these days," Skip said. "Dave or Dale or something, right? While you pretend you're flesh-and-blood human?"

"It's Dean," Dean gritted out. "And I'm a hell of a lot more human than you."

For a breathless second, I thought Skip was going to shoot Dean, and then move on to Conrad and the rest of us. His cadaverous brow furrowed, and his body language tightened so much I was surprised he didn't break. Then he dropped his rifle and laughed.

Dean laughed too, but he didn't drop his shoulders. Neither did Skip, although he pasted a great big smile on his face, one that looked about as out of place as I'd have looked at a formal tea party.

"Hell, man," Skip said. "How long has it been?"

"Ten years, at least," Dean said. "We were both still playing with toys, for sure."

"Yeah, except it looks like you never stopped playing around," Skip said, gesturing at us. "What on the scorched earth is going on here? You still running humans around in circles and calling yourself an underground guide?"

Dean's shoulders tightened another notch. "Why are you asking, Skip? You keeping tabs on me?"

"Not me." Skip shrugged. "But someone up there is keeping an eye on you, boyo, a close and watchful eye, at that."

Dean didn't stop smiling, but he dropped back to stand next to me. The implicit meaning wasn't lost on me: he was with us, even though he shared Erlkin blood, just like Conrad and I shared the Fae's. None of us were one thing or the other. We were caught in the middle, just like we were caught between the Erlkin and their rifles.

"We're not here to make trouble," Dean told Skip. "We're just passing through."

Skip shook his head. "Don't even try to sell that one to me, Nails. Dean. Whatever. You know we've got to take you up. That one's a wanted criminal, and the others, well." He sighed. "We know what's happening in the Iron Land."

"I really doubt that," Dean muttered, but he nodded to Conrad and the rest of us. "Fine. Take us up to the city on Windhaven. Can't say I missed that flying junkyard at all, so let's get this over with."

Skip gestured at Conrad. "We're going to arrest him and put the cuffs on."

Conrad bristled. "The hell you are."

"Conrad," I snapped at him, jabbing him on the arm. "You've done enough to aggravate these gentlemen, don't you think?"

He looked at me like I'd slapped him with my hand rather than my tongue. I felt a pang in return. I used to be a good girl, a nice girl, who never so much as raised her voice. Who'd never scold her brother for only doing what he thought he had to.

Well, she was gone, along with the life she'd lived. Conrad had led us back into the Mists as a wanted criminal, and he'd gotten us into this mess. I loved my brother, but he could be a prize idiot.

Skip gestured to his fellow soldier, who pulled out a pair of old-fashioned skeleton-key shackles. I flinched when I saw the gleam of polished, oiled iron. I just hoped Conrad would be out of them before the madness started to creep in. The last time he'd had a fit, back in Lovecraft, he'd attacked me and tried to slash my throat. I tried not to think about it, the feel of the knife against my skin, the curious warmth of blood loss, but the memories crept in and I flinched as the Erlkin snapped the cuffs shut around my brother's wrists.

Skip gestured to the group, and we fell into a loose line, bracketed by the four Erlkin.

Dean grabbed my arm and leaned close enough that his lips were against my ear. "When he asks—and he will—you and I met somewhere that didn't involve guiding, you're here because your brother got you mixed up in a scheme, and for the love of all that's iron, don't mention the Fae stuff unless you want your head hung out as a warning to anyone else who'd wander into the Mists. Got it?"

"Got it," I murmured, keeping my eye on the back of Skip's head. Dean had made it evident there was no love lost between Fae and Erlkin, but I had the sinking impression that I'd gotten into a swamp much deeper and more dangerous than I could have conceived. I wasn't as good a liar as Dean and Conrad, and I couldn't lie inside my own mind at all—I was scared of what we'd find when we reached this Windhaven, whatever it was.

"Knew you'd catch on, princess," Dean muttered, and brushed a kiss against the top of my ear before he let go of me.

I put aside the way his touch made my thoughts jiggle

out of alignment. It wasn't the time for crushes and weak knees, even if I wanted nothing more than to have everything be right again, and my biggest concern to be what to wear on a date with Dean, a real one with no Proctors and no specter of their lie. I raised my voice instead and spoke to Skip.

“Where are we going?”

“Windhaven,” he said. “And to get to Windhaven, we’re going to fly.”



## *The Dance of the Air*

WE WALKED PERHAPS half a mile, to a clearing down a gravel path off the main road. Skip and his friends kept in tight formation around Conrad, leaving the rest of us to trail behind. I found it a bit ludicrous—they had no idea who the real threat was. Conrad, presumably, had a Weird like I did, some kind of elemental magic that allowed the Graysons to conjure wind and flame and everything in between. But he had never shown it to me, and I hadn't brought it up.

It'd be much better if Skip kept thinking of Conrad as criminal but basically harmless, just a stupid human overstepping his bounds. This goal in mind, I walked with my head down, the same ache in my feet that had been there all day twinging in my worn-out boots.

"There's going to be a weight issue," said Skip's short friend. "The dirigible wasn't built for eight. Or more like nine, including the portly dame."

“Excuse you!” Bethina snapped. “I’m not an ounce overweight!”

“You’re too heavy for the sky,” Skip said bluntly. “That’s just simple math.”

“Better than being a walking cadaver, like some of us,” I piped up. Skip looked at me, then at Dean.

“Keep a gag on your girlfriend, Deano, unless you want me to do it for you.”

Dean looked at me and, no doubt seeing the murder in my eyes, brushed his hand against mine. “Not the time,” he muttered.

I took a deep breath and then leaned a bit closer to him, so that the sides of our hands stayed in contact as we walked. Dean caught my eye again and gave me a sideways smile.

“You three can walk back to the drop zone,” Skip told the other Erlkin. “I’ll stay with the prisoner.”

“That’s fifteen miles!” his friend protested.

“You don’t like it, go live in the woods with the slipstreamers,” Skip snapped. “You have your orders.”

We came within range of the dirigible, and surprise made me stop and stare. Far from the metal-walled zeppelins I was accustomed to, the Erlkin’s dirigible looked like it shouldn’t fly at all. It consisted only of a metal cage slung under a balloon with bronze-colored ribs holding it in place, the red skin of the balloon rising and falling like the sides of a sentient creature.

The cage looked delicate, the wire thin and woven intricately, and Skip opened the retractable door with a crank handle. “Get in,” he ordered, shoving Conrad. My brother

fell to the floor of the cage, and Skip kicked him hard in the gut.

“Hey!” I shouted, lunging for Skip. Dean grabbed me by the sweater and yanked me back.

“No, Aoife,” he hissed through gritted teeth. I struggled against him for a moment before going still. I’d always had a temper, and it was coming out more and more now that I didn’t have the admonition to be a “proper young lady” hanging over me as I had at the Academy. I gave Skip the worst look I could muster, but I smoothed my hands over my skirt and stood down.

“I’m fine,” I told Dean. “He’s not worth it.”

“You’re a firecracker,” Skip sneered. “Time was, Dean knew just what to do with a girl like you.”

I crouched next to Conrad, cradling his head in my lap as Skip got Cal and Bethina on board and reeled in his mooring lines. “Bastard,” I said to him, stroking my brother’s hair. Seeing Conrad hurt brought back the old feelings, the feelings of the girl who’d do anything for her strong, loyal brother. Conrad coughed weakly.

“I’m fine, Aoife,” he said. “We’ll get this fixed. Just a misunderstanding.”

Once we’d all boarded, the craft rose from the forest floor with a bump. I looked at the ground drifting away below my feet and tried to focus on the construction of the Erlkin’s craft to still my temper and the fear that once we reached Windhaven, we’d be in even worse trouble. The cage was made of fine silver mesh and iron bones that echoed in the wind, giving an empty *bong* when I tapped my knuckle against it. Hollow bones, like a bird’s, light and strong. The Erlkin were better engineers than the Fae, that

was for sure. The Fae feared anything with moving parts, treated it like it was some object from beyond reason if it mimicked their magic in any way.

Except I was in an iron cage, and even now I could feel it pressing on my mind, stirring in my blood, and bringing on lightheaded fits.

I tried to breathe, to think of orderly numbers and figures, the physics that allowed us to rise from the ground and drift above the treetops. Tried not to think of my dreams or my mother, as impossible as that might have been.

“How far?” I asked Dean.

“Not much longer,” he announced. “The faithful of the fold never venture too far from Windhaven. Isn’t that right, Skip?”

Skip said nothing, just kept his hand lightly on the rudder of the dirigible, until we were far enough off the ground that all I could see were the tops of trees, rising through the fog like the blackened fingers of dead hands.

“Not far now,” Skip said, but his tone didn’t fill me with hope.

When Windhaven came into view, it wasn’t a sight that anything in my life, including my visit to the Thorn Land, the home of the Fae, had prepared me for.

The fog parted like the sea before the prow of an old-fashioned ship, and I saw gleaming towers of iron suspended high above the ground.

The distinctive burnt-paper scent of aether reached my nostrils, and as Windhaven got larger, I realized it wasn’t merely suspended—the entire city was flying along before

us, moving above the Mists like a great raven casting its shadow across the ground. Iron didn't poison the Erlkin, I knew—Dean had been just fine spending his life in an iron city surrounded by machines. Good for Dean and the Erlkin. Bad for Conrad and me. My stomach dipped along with the craft.

As we drew closer, I saw that Windhaven's structures were built on an oval platform supported at the thinnest and widest points by giant fans whirring so loudly that even now, hundreds of yards off, they overwhelmed my ears. At the base of the city a giant aether globe hung by flexible cables, supplying Windhaven with light and communication. It looked small as a marble, or a twinkling star in a vast sky, against the grand scale of the flying city.

A mass of radio aerials flew from the highest tower at the apex of the buildings, which were largely curved but didn't look as if they'd come together in any particular order. It was, for lack of a better description, a flying scrap yard, albeit one held aloft by engineering that made me dizzy with its genius.

I saw a cluster of spindly docking arms radiating from the back of the flying structure, in the dead spot for drag near of one of the giant fans. Some were already occupied by crimson-sailed dirigibles similar to ours. Skip steered us toward an empty berth.

The arm extended toward us, long, flexible cables seeking out the iron ribs of the balloon.

"Magnets," I said to Cal, analyzing how everything worked out of habit. We'd both been students at the School of Engines before I'd found out he was actually a ghoul and I was actually, in the eyes of the Proctors, an abomination.

“It’s boss,” he murmured, distractedly keeping one hand on Bethina’s where it clutched his arm in a death grip.

The magnets clamped on and reeled us in, safe against the docking arm. A thin ladder that looked like it couldn’t support even its own weight reeled down and locked onto the outside of the dirigible’s cage.

“I’m not climbing that,” Bethina said instantly.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Skip said shortly. “Once the city climbs up to night flying altitude, the temperature will drop enough that you should freeze to death in an hour or two. You probably won’t feel a thing.”

Cal put his hand on Bethina’s shoulder. His stringy body was vibrating, and I could tell it was taking everything he had not to change and launch himself at Skip’s throat.

I was thinking it would be a toss-up who clocked Skip first—Cal or me.

“Come on,” Cal soothed Bethina. “It’ll be okay. I’ll be right behind you.” He opened the door and helped her out onto the ladder. She was sheet-white, her knuckles the color of bone where she held on to the metal, and I didn’t envy her. I wasn’t afraid of heights, but I had plenty of other fears to fill that void, and being so close to iron was making every one of them stir and raise their heads.

Skip turned to Conrad and pulled a key on a flexible chain from his belt. “I’m going to unlock you to climb up. There are more of us at the top than you could hope to overpower, and if you pull anything you’re going off the side.” He smacked the cage for emphasis, and it rattled. “It’s a long way down.”

“You can lay off the lantern-reel-villain talk,” Conrad told him. “I’ll be a good boy.”

Skip curled his lip and looked at Dean. "And what about you, Nails? You going to be a good boy?"

"Doubt it," Dean told him. "Never managed it before."

Skip snorted before he manhandled Conrad onto the ladder and followed him up.

Dean helped me out, his hand warm on mine even though the breeze whipping along the docking stations was icy cold. "Why does he call you Nails?" I asked.

"Long story," Dean said. "Not one I'm going to waste time telling, either."

I looked up the ladder at the dark, arched mouth of the entrance to Windhaven. The lump of fear in my chest hadn't dissolved, and in fact felt like it had grown. "Is this in any way a good idea?"

"No," Dean said. "Probably the opposite, as a matter of fact, but I don't see that we've got much of a choice on this one."

I didn't either, so up I went. As we climbed, we went from breathless open space to a tiny, enclosed tunnel. Skip was waiting at the top of the ladder, snapping the cuffs back on Conrad, and as soon as we were all on our feet on the platform, we marched down the tunnel to a hatch leading to Windhaven proper, marked with a symbol in the shape of a wheel and spokes with wings attached.

More Erlkin dressed in uniforms like Skip's waited at the hatch, and he handed Conrad off to them before turning to me. "We'll keep your friends in holding until we determine their status. You too. Nails, you're free to go." He gave Dean a look I couldn't identify. Not anger, not contempt, but not pleased, either. "I'm sure Shard will want to see you."

An Erlkin even taller than Skip took my arm. “You come with me, girlie.”

I glanced back at Dean as they led me away. I was smart enough to know that I had to stay calm and passive with this many edgy Erlkin around, so I didn’t fight, but it was hard to take my eyes off Dean. Dean was constant, and he was safety. Separated from him, I didn’t know how long I could hold off the madness dreams. Besides, I didn’t want to leave him and the gleam of his silver eyes, the blush that sat on his lips, full for a boy’s, and the feeling of his strong hands gripping mine.

Dean didn’t look at me. He was staring into the middle distance, and I could tell he was seeing something I couldn’t see at all.

I didn’t get to view much of Windhaven as the Erlkin marched me to my cell. They kept me belowdecks, and we passed through a series of hatches lit by spitting aether globes, the walls pitted with rust and painted with more of the strange pictograms like the wheel-shaped symbols that marked the entry. I reasoned it was the Erlkin language, and these must be shorthand for directions to the various levels of the city-ship. I tucked them away in my memory to write out and puzzle over later. I was good at symbols and riddles, and the sooner I didn’t have to rely on an Erlkin to translate, the sooner I’d be able to escape Windhaven if I had to.

I hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but I had the bad feeling it was going to, and rapidly. The Erlkin didn’t seem overly friendly now, when they thought Conrad and I were

only human. Who knew what would happen if they ferreted out our secret?

The cell wasn't nearly as cell-like as the one the Proctors had shoved me in when they'd caught me, after I'd escaped Lovecraft. It was more like a deserted classroom, plain metal tables with stenotypes arranged around the perimeter of the room, and a chalkboard with numbers—latitude and longitude—written on it. It looked as if the room's rightful occupants had just stepped out.

The Erlkin pulled out a chair for me and sat me in it with a hard push. He dropped my bag next to me, after searching it and removing my engineer's toolkit, and anything else I could use to escape. Luckily he didn't find my notebook, which I'd tucked away in a hidden pocket.

"Stay put," he said. "Someone will be in after a while."

"How specific," I muttered. "Will it be before my hair turns gray?"

The Erlkin sneered at me and closed the hatch. I heard a rumble and saw the rods at the top and bottom lock into place. It would take a blast to dislodge the door now. I was stuck in here until they decided to let me out. If they ever did. Unless I used my Weird.

I had discovered in Lovecraft that I could move machines, that they responded to my blood as my blood responded to iron. But to use my Weird was to invite pounding headaches, hallucinations, and nosebleeds. I drummed my fingers against the nearest desk. The Erlkin hadn't actually hurt anyone yet. I had to save my strength for when we were really in danger. Being on the run had taught me that, if nothing else.

Windhaven moved slowly, but it did move. I could feel

the barest vibration of motion from where I sat at the bare desk, spatters of ink from the steno tapes coating the pale surface.

I searched the drawers and found a mechanical pencil. It would have to do. I flipped open my battered notebook and sketched out the symbols I'd seen from memory. Underneath I scribbled *Erlkin symbols as seen at Windhaven*.

My father had never run into the Erlkin, except once. They'd taken him into the Mists, like they had Conrad, before the Fae could get to him.

But were they the same smugglers who had gotten Conrad into trouble? Or had it been someone else, someone who had allowed him my father escape the Fae? I didn't know, nor did I know where my father was now.

I started an entry on the next page. Writing at least gave me something to occupy my mind, rather than fretting over what would happen when the door opened again. Fretting rarely did anyone any good.

*Third entry:*

*The Erlkin seem hostile at best, but they helped my father escape so the Fae couldn't force him to do what they eventually made me do—break the Gates, allowing the Fae and their nightmare creatures to flow freely through the Iron Land and attempt to eradicate the iron, then annex the land to the Thorn. And they helped Conrad, or at least a certain group of them did.*

*They don't love the Fae any more than they love humans or other trespassers, that much Dean told me. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Straight out of Proctor propaganda, when it encouraged us to*

*inform on each other, to collude to send heretics to the castigator for punishment.*

*Who's worse? The Proctors or me? They fought the power beyond their understanding with lies and terror. On the other hand, I've read enough from my father's books about the Brotherhood of Iron to realize that at least I'm not entirely alone in my struggle. The Brotherhood was my grandfather's cadre of scientists, magic-users, and scholars. They fought that same power by keeping their society absolutely secret, accepting the occasional casualty and adhering to ancient rules that neither the Fae nor the Proctors are playing by any longer. My father himself fought it . . . or did he? I still don't know why he broke with the Brotherhood, only that Draven has a score to settle with him.*

*And then there's me. I didn't even try to fight the power. I set it free, and in the process I shattered the world.*

*Not shattered—cracked. I've cracked the mask, and the true face is showing from underneath, and it is horrible, ugly, and crawling with maggots, something no human eye should be forced to look at.*

*Where is my father? He got me out of Lovecraft, but he could be dead now, for all I know. If he didn't get out before the blast, before the cataclysm, he could be gone, like all the other poor souls.*

*Gone. My mother can't be gone. I can't have unwound things that badly. I'll get out of Windhaven and go back and find her, no matter what Conrad says. I'll do what I have to.*

*Somehow.*

The sound of the hatch wheel spinning alerted me, and I jammed the pencil back into the drawer and my notebook back into my bag. When the hatch opened, I was sitting primly, my ankles crossed and my hands folded, like the star of any comportment class.

A single Erlkin entered, and I tried not to stare. She was nearly as tall as Skip, with twin braids running from her temples down her back, thin and tight as bullwhips. Her clothes were a simple olive drab jacket with a double row of silver buttons and tight military pants tucked into steam ventor's boots like the ones Dean wore, steel toes gleaming and the leather spit-polished.

"Aoife Grayson, I gather," she said. She gestured at me with a long-fingered hand. "Stand up."

I raised an eyebrow at her, more in surprise that she was being so businesslike about taking me prisoner than anything else. "Why?"

Her lip twitched, and I could tell she wasn't used to being questioned when she gave an order. "Get up, you wretched girl," she said, and grabbed my arm, hefting me easily out of the chair. I wasn't big, and she was, and strong besides. "I just want to get a look at you." She took my chin between her thumb and forefinger and turned my head from side to side. "Skinny," she said, "but not too skinny. Not a pale-faced wreck, either. That hair—that hair is most definitely human."

I flushed, even though my grooming or lack thereof should have been the furthest thing from my mind. My black curls had been a gift from my father—my mother had

hair sleek and golden as a lion's pelt. Back at the Academy, my hair had been one of my primary worries. Thing sure did change. "I've been in the wind."

"And a sense of humor," the Erlkin marveled. "You pass very well. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were a sweet little human." Her grip on my chin tightened, and I felt her fingernails dig into my skin. "But you're not, are you? You're a filthy quicksilver-blood changeling."

"I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name." My voice rose on the last word, but I tried to keep the fear there and not let it creep into my face. She knew what I was. Who I was. And I had no idea what the Erlkin did to people like me.

The woman smiled. It was cold, like watching the steel of a switchblade pop out. "I'm Shard. Dean's mother."

I stayed frozen, not making eye contact. After a time, Shard tilted her head. "Got anything to say for yourself, Aoife?"

The first thing that came to mind made my stomach drop out, as if Windhaven had begun to plummet from the sky. It was a horrifying thought, but it was entirely possible, seeing as Dean shared half his blood with the Erlkin, just as I shared mine with the Fae. "Dean told you about me. What I am."

"*Hmm?*" Shard shook her head, her smile softening a degree so that she no longer looked like she was about to eat me. "He didn't tell me a thing, dear. I smell it on you, like sewer filth."

I twitched back a step from Shard. She could have passed for human. Though her features were sharp and ethereal, she didn't have the predatory quality shared by most of

the Erlkin I'd seen, with bones jutting from their faces like they'd been specially made to frighten anyone who looked at them. But she was more terrifying than Skip and his cronies by an order of ten. "I . . . smell? Strange?"

"I'm a tracker, dear," Shard said. "I spend my days chasing down fugitives and slipstreamers. You stink like a Fae, but you don't look like one. You're a changeling. *Half-breed* is probably the right word."

"I don't like that word," I told her angrily. How dare Shard pass judgment on my family? She didn't even know us. I was guilty of being gullible and trusting, it was true, but I wasn't the enemy. Shard let go of my face, giving my cheek a pat that stopped just shy of being a slap. I flinched, and felt like the worst sort of frightened, shrinking girl.

"I don't give a damn what you like, dear. You brought the shadow of the Fae here. You and that brother of yours." She folded her arms and regarded me. "You're lucky Nails is taken with you. Otherwise, you'd be over the side of Windhaven without a second thought."

With that, she opened the door and gestured me out of the makeshift cell. "Come on," she snapped, when I hesitated. "We're not barbarians. Get moving and clean yourself up. That Fae stench is bad enough without your generally unwashed state on top of it."

Shard led me up another ladder, down another set of halls, and to a hatch that was less rusted, and painted with a number rather than one of the cryptic symbols. "You should be comfortable here." She appraised me. "You're the size of one of my lieutenants. I'll have some clothes sent over for you."

She opened the hatch and waited until I was inside, when she promptly shut and locked it again.

It was a better class of cell, but I was still a prisoner, and I had no idea what was happening to Dean, Conrad, and the others. I slung my bag down and took in my new surroundings, sitting on the carpet and wrapping my arms around my legs. I was alone—I felt I was entitled to have a few seconds of pure panic and shaking before I got myself together and tried to find a way out.

Shard hadn't outright condemned me, but it was clear Conrad and I weren't welcome. The sooner we were away from these hostile Erlkin, the better.

I breathed in, breathed out, and willed my heartbeat to slow down. After a moment, I stood up and examined the room. I would cope. I'd use my brain and get us out of here. It was what I did. Iron or not, I had to keep myself together for just a little longer.

The room was cramped, the ceiling following the curve of Windhaven's lower hull, the base of the floating city that held up the spires above, and the bunk barely looked long enough for me to fit into. There was one empty closet and a desk barely larger than a single sheet of paper. A thin door opened onto a water closet with a steam hob and copper covering the walls in one corner, sloping down to a drain so that I could wash standing up.

Otherwise, it was only me and my things.

First things first—I took out my notebook and pried the cover off the air-shaft vent above the door, standing on the desk to reach it. I slipped the notebook inside and slid the vent cover back in place. Knowing that no one would happen upon my writing if they searched the room while I was gone made the tightness in my gut relax a little. I'd gotten very good at hiding things, living under the Proctors—

searches for contraband had been practically weekly at the Academy, and with a brother who was a wanted heretic, who sent me letters that I couldn't bear to throw away, a foolproof hiding place in my dorm room had been essential.

Next thing—I had to find a way out of here under my own power. I wouldn't be at the mercy of the Erlkin when they so clearly mistrusted me. Besides, I couldn't waste time at Windhaven—I had to keep my plan in motion. Evade my pursuers, go back to Lovecraft, and get my mother.

Once she was safe, I could come up with a cunning plan, like the heroine of some adventure play, to set right what had happened in Lovecraft. I could find a way to outsmart the Fae and reverse the shattering of the Iron Land's Gate, the only protection ordinary humans had. I might even find a way to stave off iron madness a little longer.

I wished Dean were in the room with me. He was good for telling my ideas to, no matter how far-fetched they were. Dean was a believer in doing the impossible, which he was usually convinced needed only a little push from my brains and his charm to become possible. He had more confidence in me than I did, most days. I could have used his hand in mine, his wiry arms around me, the shine of his silver eyes. I could have used a moment pressed against his chest, smelling leather and tobacco.

I had begun to need Dean. But he wasn't here. So I was going to have to do this one on my own.

Portholes were an obvious choice. I checked the one above the bed. It was latched but not locked, yet when I looked I saw only the slick riveted side of the hull above and below and small pieces of iron to the side, on flexible springs. Designed, I thought, to increase or decrease drag

and enable Windhaven to turn. It really was a miraculous thing, this flying city. Not my city, though. Not where I needed to be.

At any rate, the small rudders were too far away to be of any use. The wind would peel me off the side of the craft and toss me to the swampy ground of this place before I could even think of grabbing for one.

That left the door. The idea made sense on paper, but in reality, the place was lousy with Erlkin on the other side. Plus, I had no idea about the layout of the underside of Windhaven, the myriad tunnels and hatches that comprised the bulk of the flying fortress, so if I did manage to get out, I'd be running blind.

Still, I went to the door and eased my forehead against it. My Weird responded to the locks and the mechanisms in the wall, to the gears that vibrated throughout Windhaven.

It would be easy to slip the lock, and I splayed my fingers against the metal. Pressure built in my skull, my mind aligning itself with the thing that lived in my blood, which could talk to machines and make them its disciples.

When the hatch wheel unlocked and started to turn, I let out a small sound and jumped back onto the bed just as the door swung open.

An Erlkin about my size came in, holding a uniform over her arm. "You Aoife?"

I nodded. "Who are you?"

She curled her lip at me. "Captain Shard told me to bring you clean clothes." She tossed them onto the bed next to me.

"Thank you," I said, with a game smile. I really wanted to return her glare, but I was the prisoner, and I wanted the

Erlkin to think I was harmless. Well, less harmful than Conrad, anyway. At least until I figured out how much trouble we were actually in.

“Half-breed,” the Erlkin spat at me, and then left, the hatch slamming shut behind her retreating back.

I slumped on my bed next to the clothes, shoving them aside to give myself space. The hull vibrated gently, and I leaned into it. I was exhausted, and being in a place that wasn't an abandoned farmhouse or the crook of a tree was lulling me to sleep.

I tried to stay awake and think of more plans to get Conrad out of trouble, but sleep stole my senses, and soon I was deep under the waves of dreaming.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2012 by Caitlin Kittredge  
Jacket art copyright © 2012 by Eva Kolenko

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Delacorte Press,  
an imprint of Random House Children's Books,  
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark  
of Random House, Inc.

Visit us on the Web! [randomhouse.com/teens](http://randomhouse.com/teens)

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at  
*randomhouse.com/teachers*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data* [tk]

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Berling.  
Book design by Trish Parcell

Printed in the United States of America  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
First Edition

Random House Children's Books  
supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.

**ATTENTION READER:  
THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED ADVANCE EXCERPT**

# Meet Caitlin Kittredge



Photo © Cherie Priest

*Caitlin Kittredge* is a history and horror movie enthusiast who writes novels wherein bad things usually happen to perfectly nice characters. But that's all right—the ones who aren't so nice have always been her favorites. Caitlin lives in western Massachusetts in a crumbling Victorian mansion with her two cats, her cameras, and several miles of books. When not writing, she spends her time taking photos, concocting alternate histories, and trying new and alarming colors of hair dye. Caitlin is the author of two bestselling adult series, *Nocturne City* and the *Black London* adventures. *The Nightmare Garden* is second book for teens. Look for her first book for teens, *The Iron Thorn*, available from Delacorte Press. You can visit her at [CaitlinKittredge.com](http://CaitlinKittredge.com).