

An Iron Fey Valentine

by Julie Kagawa

“A-ha! There you are.”

Ash glanced up from where he was leaning against a library shelf, an open book in his hands. One leg was drawn up, resting against the edge of the shelf, and his silver eyes glimmered in the shadows. For a moment, he was perfectly still, and I took advantage of that moment to admire him. Even at rest, he looked like a coiled jungle cat, lithe and graceful, his long black coat falling elegantly around him. I'd tracked him to the library after failing to find him in the courtyard where he usually was, sparring with Glitch or training the new recruits. I guessed he'd let them off easy today; most of the guard was terrified of him.

Smiling faintly, Ash replaced the book on the shelf and beckoned me forward. Unable to resist, I stepped into him, and he drew me close, long fingers resting against the small of my back. “Here I am,” he agreed, sounding slightly amused as he brushed a strand of hair from my eyes. “Though if you needed me, all you had to do was call.”

“I know.” I laced my arms around his neck and smiled up at him. “But I wanted to talk to you alone, without gremlins peering over my shoulder or spying from the ceiling.”

“Ah, well, it’s a good thing I came here, then.” Gremlins rarely ventured into the library; there was nothing electrical for them to destroy or short circuit. I knew that was another reason Ash liked to come here; the gremlins often annoyed him, with their high-pitched laughter and general love of chaos. He pulled me closer, his gaze affectionate. “What did you need, Meghan?”

“Do you know what today is?”

“Are you asking me to guess?”

“Um, sure.” If he already knew the day, then explaining what I wanted to do tonight wouldn’t be so awkward. “Give it your best shot.”

Ash lowered his head and kissed the side of my neck, making my insides twirl. “It’s not your birthday,” he murmured, as his lips traced a slow line up my jaw and butterflies erupted in my stomach. “You already went to see your family for Christmas, and Elysium isn’t for a few months.” I felt him smile against my

skin as he breathed into my ear, “You might have to give me a hint, my queen, or we could be here awhile.”

I fisted my hands in his shirt, closing my eyes. It was hard to think of anything when Ash did that; all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him until we were both breathless. The library was dim, quiet, and--most important-- vacant. Staying here awhile was sounding more and more tempting...

Focus, Meghan. That's not what you're here for.

“It's February 14th,” I explained, pulling back to give him a serious look, though even that took no small amount of self-control. He cocked his head, his brow furrowing, and I sighed. “Valentine's Day?”

He pondered that, and I waited to see what he would do. “This is a human holiday,” Ash finally guessed, and I nodded. “What does it celebrate?”

I felt my face heat. “You really don't know?”

“I know of Beltane and Samhain and All Hallows' Eve.” Ash shrugged. “Those were the festivals we celebrated in Tir Na Nog. I'm afraid we didn't do anything for this Valentine's Day ritual.” He gave me a thoughtful look, as if just

realizing something. "So, I assume you came here because you want me to take part in this Valentine's Day festival, as well?" I smiled at him hopefully, and he sighed. "What do need me to do?"

I grinned and gave him a quick peck on the lips. "Go get changed," I ordered, and watched both his eyebrows arch. "Into something more...human. We're going into the real world."

"Now?" He regained his look of mild amusement. "You're leaving Mag Tuiredh? Won't Glitch have something to say about that?"

"I already talked to him." Actually, *talked* probably wasn't the right word. Cajoled, persuaded, then flat-out ordered were better terms. My first lieutenant was loyal to a fault and took his duties very seriously. The thought of the Iron realm bereft of its queen, even for a few hours, was horrifying for him. He'd conceded in the end, but only after I'd promised I would be gone only a night and would return at once if there was an emergency. "Mag Tuiredh will be fine without me for one evening," I said, rolling my eyes. "And Glitch will make sure nothing explodes while we're gone. Relax, Ash. Humans do this all the time. It's called a date."

“I...see,” Ash said, though it was obvious he did not. “Then, you’re implying that this...Valentine’s Day ritual involves courtship. Dinner, flowers, that sort of thing?”

“Yes, exactly.”

He gave me one of those looks where I didn’t know if he was teasing or being serious. “I thought my courtship attempts were successful when you agreed to marry me.”

“Ash,” I groaned, dropping my forehead to his chest. “Please. Just...go along with this, for one night? Please?”

He chuckled.

“How are we getting to the mortal world?” he asked in a half-weary, half-resigned voice.

I hugged him. “Meet me at the back gates in twenty minutes. I have a carriage that will take us to a trod. Just make sure you’re wearing human clothes. We’ll be going into the real world, after all.”

“I *am* wearing human clothes.”

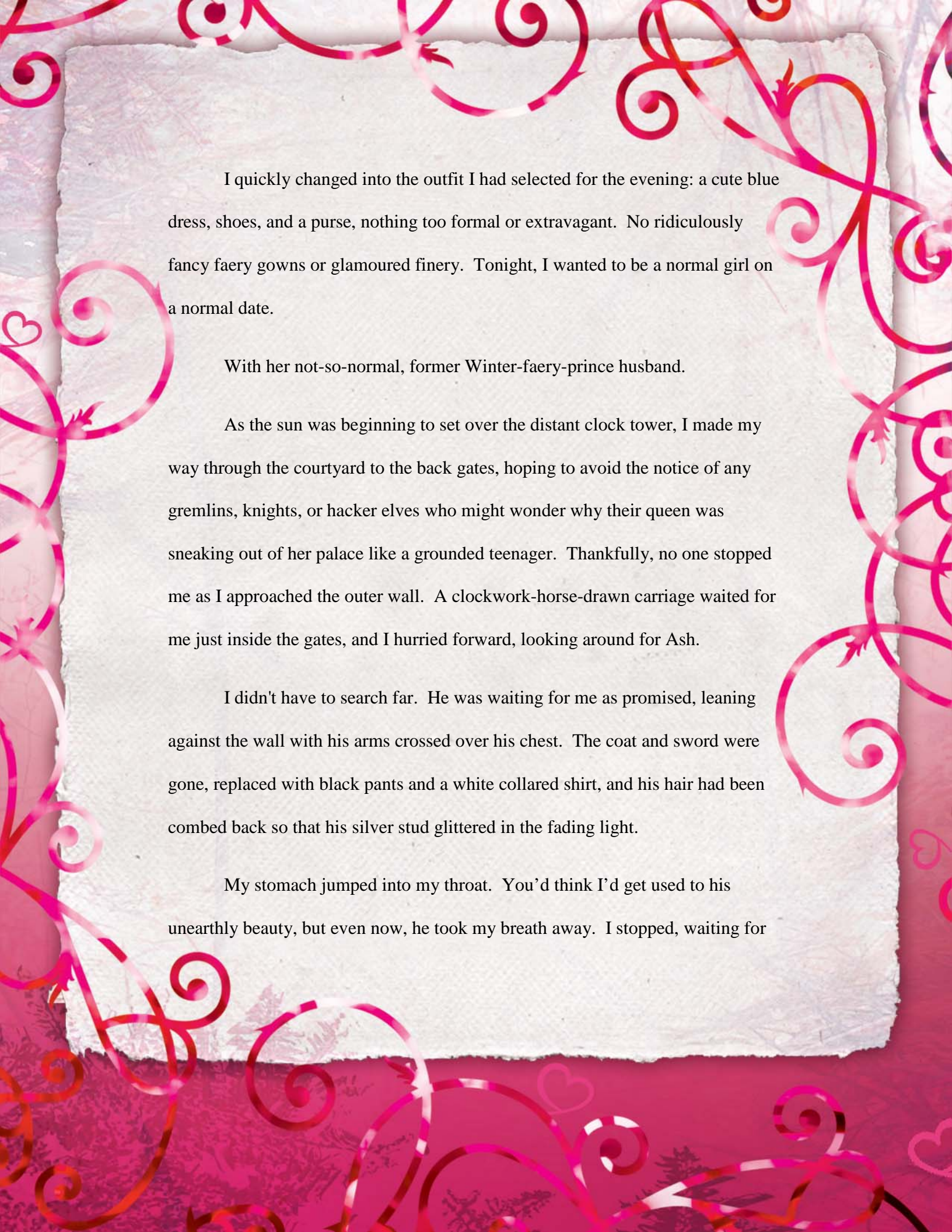
I gave his boots, sword, and stark black coat a scrutinizing look. “Fine. *More* human, then. We want to fit in tonight. Also, that means no swords, knives, or ice-daggers, Ash. Leave all sharp pointy weapons at home.”

Ash smirked. “As you command, my queen.” He straightened with great dignity. “Though if we’re attacked by rogue centaurs or rampaging chimera, I’ll be at a distinct disadvantage.”

“I think I can risk it.”

He bowed, still smiling. “Then I will meet you at the gate.”

I hurried to my chambers, excited, breathless, and nervous all at once. My first real date with Ash. On Valentine’s Day, no less. The idea teetered between ridiculous and surreal. Until very recently, Ash had been the last remaining prince of the Unseelie Court. Unseelie faery princes did not take girls out for coffee, or bowling, or to the movies. The thought of Ash in Starbucks, sitting in a booth with his long black coat and sword, nursing a latte, brought on a hysterical giggling fit that lasted several minutes.



I quickly changed into the outfit I had selected for the evening: a cute blue dress, shoes, and a purse, nothing too formal or extravagant. No ridiculously fancy faery gowns or glamoured finery. Tonight, I wanted to be a normal girl on a normal date.

With her not-so-normal, former Winter-faery-prince husband.

As the sun was beginning to set over the distant clock tower, I made my way through the courtyard to the back gates, hoping to avoid the notice of any gremlins, knights, or hacker elves who might wonder why their queen was sneaking out of her palace like a grounded teenager. Thankfully, no one stopped me as I approached the outer wall. A clockwork-horse-drawn carriage waited for me just inside the gates, and I hurried forward, looking around for Ash.

I didn't have to search far. He was waiting for me as promised, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. The coat and sword were gone, replaced with black pants and a white collared shirt, and his hair had been combed back so that his silver stud glittered in the fading light.

My stomach jumped into my throat. You'd think I'd get used to his unearthly beauty, but even now, he took my breath away. I stopped, waiting for

my heartbeat to return to normal, before taking a calming breath and walking forward. Ash looked up and pushed himself off the wall, a wry smile crossing his face.

“Is this human enough?” he asked, raising both arms for inspection then letting them drop. “Will I fit in among the masses?”

Oh sure, I thought, my mouth suddenly dry. You'll fit in about as well as a peacock among pigeons. Or a tiger among sheep. There's no way we're not getting stared at tonight.

I studied him a moment before slipping my arms around his waist. “I guess you look human enough,” I said casually, and he raised an eyebrow. *Arrogant faery. He knows exactly how gorgeous he is.* “Come on,” I said, tugging him toward the carriage. “We should hurry or we'll miss our reservation.”

Ash gave me a strange look, but if he was puzzled about why we needed a reservation, he didn't ask.

The restaurant I'd chosen wasn't elaborately fancy, though it did boast an impressive foyer, already filled wall to wall with people. Ash gazed around curiously, and more than a few admiring stares were leveled his way. A well-dressed hostess took our names, showed us to our seats, and wished us a pleasant meal. Her gaze lingered on Ash even as she walked away. If Ash noticed, he didn't say anything.

"Hold on," he said, stopping me as I reached for my chair. "This ritual requires that I court you, does it not? Allow me." Reaching around, he pulled out the seat for me, and my stomach fluttered at that simple, courteous gesture. Former Unseelie Prince or not, Ash was always a gentleman.

"Look at you," I said, smiling as Ash took the seat across from mine. Our table was small, and positioned intimately in a corner, away from the crowd. A single candle between us cast his features in a hazy glow. "For someone who claims not to know much about human customs, you're certainly fitting in well."

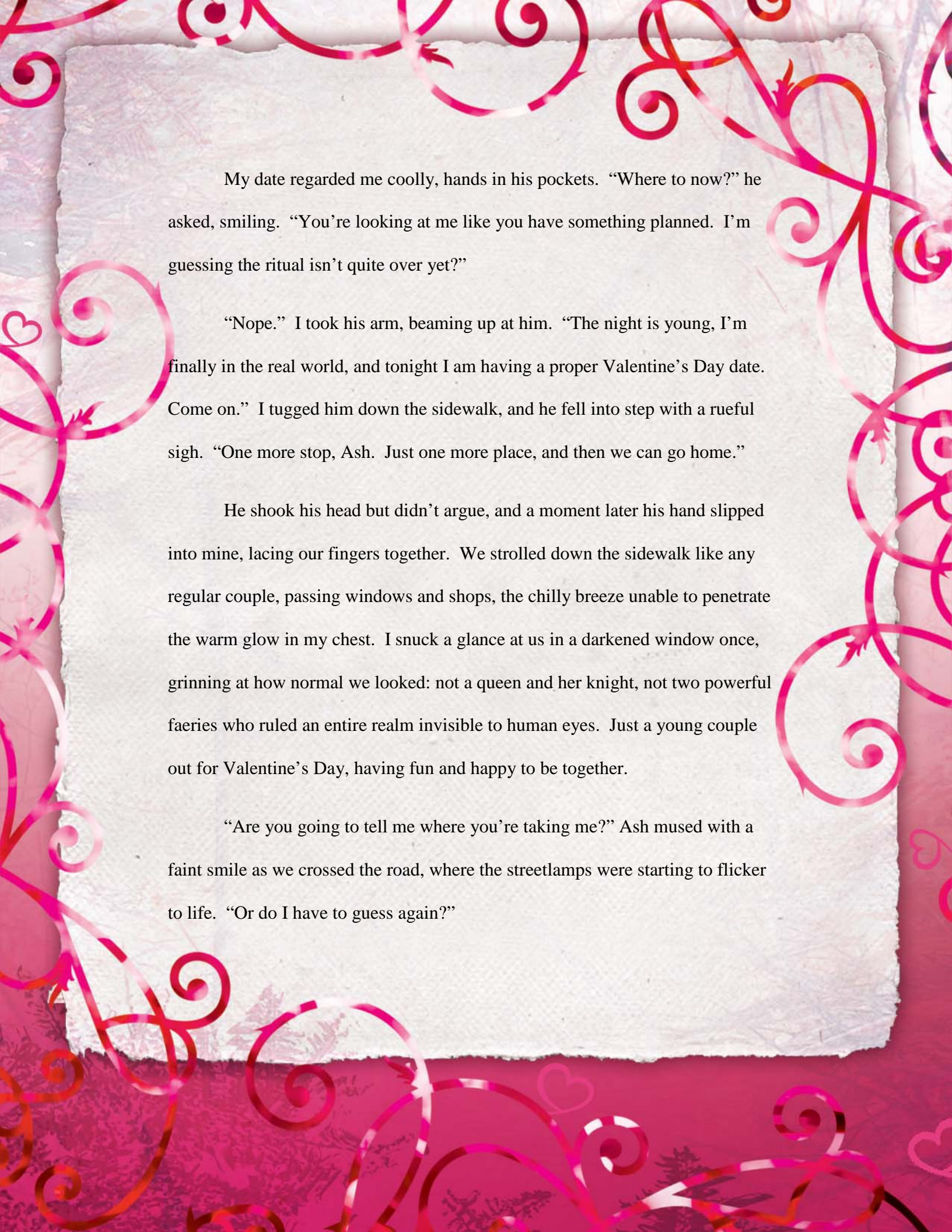
Ash snorted quietly. "I've been around awhile, Meghan. I've picked up a few things over the years. Observe." He plucked the menu from the table and opened it, scanning it gravely. "So, what's good here?"

I giggled into my napkin.

The food was excellent, as was the wine, and the live band playing in the far corner as the evening wore on. The only slightly annoying thing was our waitress, who kept returning to our table far more often than necessary to check on us and refill Ash's drink. For his part, Ash was a perfect dinner companion; polite, charming, attentive. He was taking this "Valentine's ritual" seriously. I even got him to split a slice of triple fudge cheesecake with me for dessert, though I noticed he took very small bites and let me have the parts covered in chocolate sauce.

As we were leaving, another waiter approached, handing me a rose with a smile and a "Happy Valentine's Day, ma'am." I thanked him, and continued out the door with Ash, who gave the rose a puzzled look but didn't say anything.

Outside, the temperature had dropped, and the nippy February weather made me glad I'd brought a coat. I slipped it over my shoulders and envied Ash, who stood beside me looking perfectly comfortable. The cold never bothered him.



My date regarded me coolly, hands in his pockets. “Where to now?” he asked, smiling. “You’re looking at me like you have something planned. I’m guessing the ritual isn’t quite over yet?”

“Nope.” I took his arm, beaming up at him. “The night is young, I’m finally in the real world, and tonight I am having a proper Valentine’s Day date. Come on.” I tugged him down the sidewalk, and he fell into step with a rueful sigh. “One more stop, Ash. Just one more place, and then we can go home.”

He shook his head but didn’t argue, and a moment later his hand slipped into mine, lacing our fingers together. We strolled down the sidewalk like any regular couple, passing windows and shops, the chilly breeze unable to penetrate the warm glow in my chest. I snuck a glance at us in a darkened window once, grinning at how normal we looked: not a queen and her knight, not two powerful faeries who ruled an entire realm invisible to human eyes. Just a young couple out for Valentine’s Day, having fun and happy to be together.

“Are you going to tell me where you’re taking me?” Ash mused with a faint smile as we crossed the road, where the streetlamps were starting to flicker to life. “Or do I have to guess again?”

“No need,” I said, grinning as I spotted our destination on the corner.

“We’re already here. No turning back now.”

He looked up, and his eyebrows rose. “The cinema?”

“Dinner and a movie, Ash,” I said grandly, marching toward the sizable crowd milling in front of the theater. “That has been the protocol for millions, if not billions, of Valentine’s Day dates. This is all part of that ritual you signed up for.”

“I didn’t know what I was agreeing to,” Ash returned weakly, as I dragged him down the sidewalk and through the glass doors. Ha, too late now.

As expected, the theater on Valentine’s Day was a madhouse, packed wall-to-wall with laughing, kissing, screaming teenagers. As I scanned showtimes, Ash moved behind me and slipped his arms around my waist, holding me tight in a jostling sea of people. “Goodfellow told me about these places,” he murmured, sounding equally intrigued and horrified. “He sometimes threatened he would get me into a theater one day. Congratulations, you’ve managed something he could never do.”

“Wow, I’m honored.” I turned my head to glance at Ash, whose chin rested on my shoulder. “But now that I’ve twisted your arm and dragged you here, is there anything you want to see? Action, horror, romantic comedy?”

“This is your occasion,” Ash said, and placed a feather-light kiss on my earlobe, making my stomach knot. “Whatever you want is fine.”

A little distracted now, I looked back at the movies playing. I wasn’t in the mood for horror or drama, though Ash would probably enjoy an action flick, with fighting and blood and chase scenes.

Screw it, it’s Valentine’s Day, and this will probably be the last movie I’ll see for awhile. Romantic comedy it is.

He stood patiently with me in the line to get tickets, then popcorn, and finally in the long line to the theater doors. As we waited in the kernel-strewn corridor, I snuck a glance at the former Winter prince, standing in line for the movies, holding a large tub of extra butter popcorn. I couldn’t help but giggle at the image.

He blinked at me. “You’ve been doing that a lot. Why am I so amusing?”

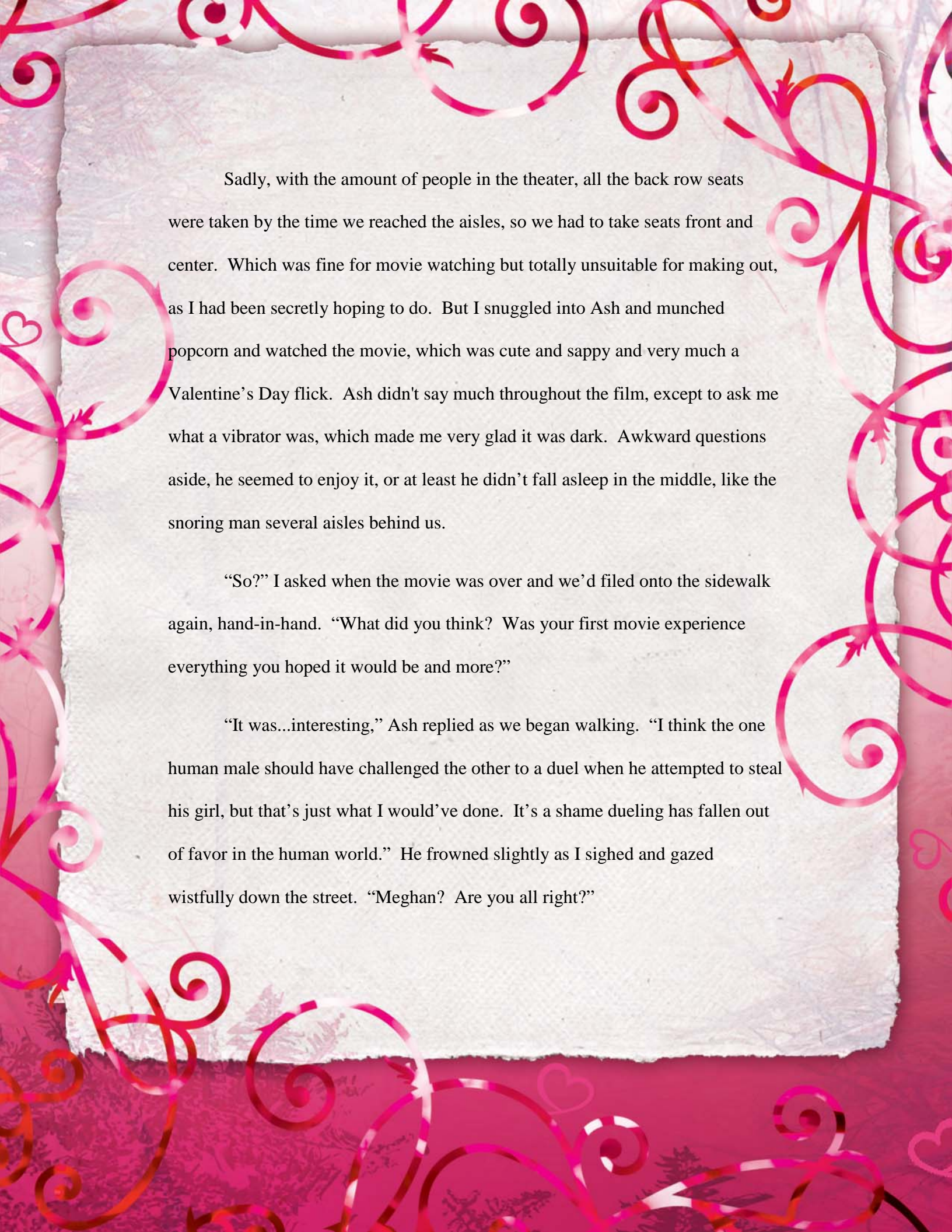
“It’s just...” I gestured at him helplessly. “You look so normal. This whole evening is so...normal. It’s hard to believe I’m having a real date with a centuries-old former faery.” I leaned against the theater wall, inhaling the near-forgotten smells of popcorn, cologne, and too many people in a small space, and sighed. “I’d forgotten what it’s like just to be a teenager.”

Ash grinned. “I could create a blizzard and fill this whole place with ice, if you’re getting bored.”

“No!” I glared at him, and the smirk grew wider. “Don’t you dare. For once, I would like to get through an evening without monsters or magic or faery craziness erupting. Tonight, we are two normal humans, on a normal Valentine’s Day date. Please, no snowballs or icicles or magic projectiles, okay?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ash replied with perfect innocence, and tossed a kernel into his mouth. “I’m just here to watch a movie.”

I would’ve pinched him, but the doors at the end of the hall opened, and the line started moving forward.



Sadly, with the amount of people in the theater, all the back row seats were taken by the time we reached the aisles, so we had to take seats front and center. Which was fine for movie watching but totally unsuitable for making out, as I had been secretly hoping to do. But I snuggled into Ash and munched popcorn and watched the movie, which was cute and sappy and very much a Valentine's Day flick. Ash didn't say much throughout the film, except to ask me what a vibrator was, which made me very glad it was dark. Awkward questions aside, he seemed to enjoy it, or at least he didn't fall asleep in the middle, like the snoring man several aisles behind us.

"So?" I asked when the movie was over and we'd filed onto the sidewalk again, hand-in-hand. "What did you think? Was your first movie experience everything you hoped it would be and more?"

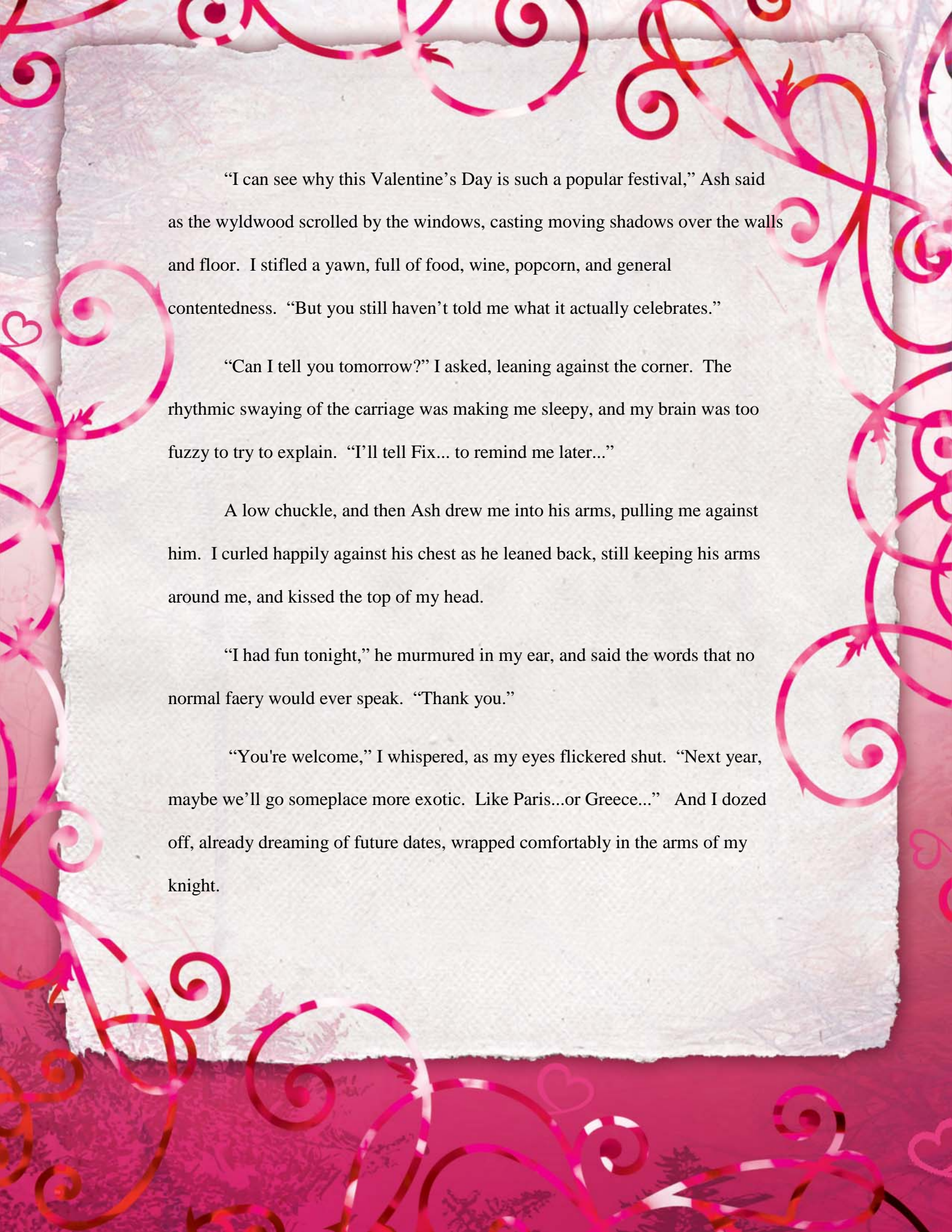
"It was...interesting," Ash replied as we began walking. "I think the one human male should have challenged the other to a duel when he attempted to steal his girl, but that's just what I would've done. It's a shame dueling has fallen out of favor in the human world." He frowned slightly as I sighed and gazed wistfully down the street. "Meghan? Are you all right?"

I nodded. "I'm just sad the night is almost over," I said, shrugging. "I suppose we should head home, before Glitch bursts a blood vessel or short circuits his hair."

That made us both chuckle. Sadly, it was mostly true. Our night together was nearly at an end, and it was time to return to Mag Tuiredh. To leave Normal Meghan behind and return as the Iron Queen.

I sighed again, feeling melancholic. Still, it was as wonderful a date as I could've hoped for, a pitch-perfect Valentine's Day. Ash put an arm around me, and I leaned into him as we left the mortal realm and slipped back into the Nevernever.

We found our carriage where we'd left it on the Faery side of the trod, and Ash helped me onto the seat before sliding in himself. The door slammed, the driver clucked his tongue, and the carriage started moving, bouncing softly as it headed back to Mag Tuiredh.



“I can see why this Valentine’s Day is such a popular festival,” Ash said as the wyldwood scrolled by the windows, casting moving shadows over the walls and floor. I stifled a yawn, full of food, wine, popcorn, and general contentedness. “But you still haven’t told me what it actually celebrates.”

“Can I tell you tomorrow?” I asked, leaning against the corner. The rhythmic swaying of the carriage was making me sleepy, and my brain was too fuzzy to try to explain. “I’ll tell Fix... to remind me later...”

A low chuckle, and then Ash drew me into his arms, pulling me against him. I curled happily against his chest as he leaned back, still keeping his arms around me, and kissed the top of my head.

“I had fun tonight,” he murmured in my ear, and said the words that no normal faery would ever speak. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I whispered, as my eyes flickered shut. “Next year, maybe we’ll go someplace more exotic. Like Paris...or Greece...” And I dozed off, already dreaming of future dates, wrapped comfortably in the arms of my knight.

Opening my eyes, I sat up, blinking and confused. I was still in the carriage, but a pale silver light was shining through the curtains, and Ash was no longer beside me. The carriage had stopped moving, and I scooted to the door, wondering if we were back in Mag Tuiredh. Before I could reach for the handle though, the door swung open, and silver light flooded the dark chamber, nearly blinding me.

I stared in amazement at what lay beyond the door. A dazzling, snow-covered glen stretched away through the frame, sparkling like crystal under the moon. The ground was covered in roses. They carpeted the snow-dusted meadow, but not in their normal shades of red, yellow, or white. These roses were the blue of the ocean, the bright tint of a cloudless sky, the deep color of midnight. Their scent drifted through the open carriage door, heady and powerful, making all other flowers seem weak in comparison.

“Where...where am I?” I asked, wondering if this was a dream and I was still snoozing, on my way back to Mag Tuiredh. “What is this?”

A shadow stepped in front of me, filling the empty space. A tall, lean shadow in a black and silver uniform, a dark cloak draping his shoulders and a sword at his side. My heart pounded as I gazed up into the gorgeous face of a Winter prince, solemn and beautiful under the light of the moon.

Ash smiled at me, charming and magnificent, and extended a hand. “My contribution to the evening,” he said in a low voice. Dazed, I put my palm in his, and let him lead me from the carriage into the field of roses. He chuckled at my shock. “Did you really think I had no clue about what Valentine’s Day is? What it means?” Pulling me to him, he lowered his head, his cool breath tickling my ear. “I haven’t survived this long by not being observant.”

“Where... are we?”

“Tir Na Nog. Someplace I’ve always wanted to show you. I thought this would be the perfect time.”

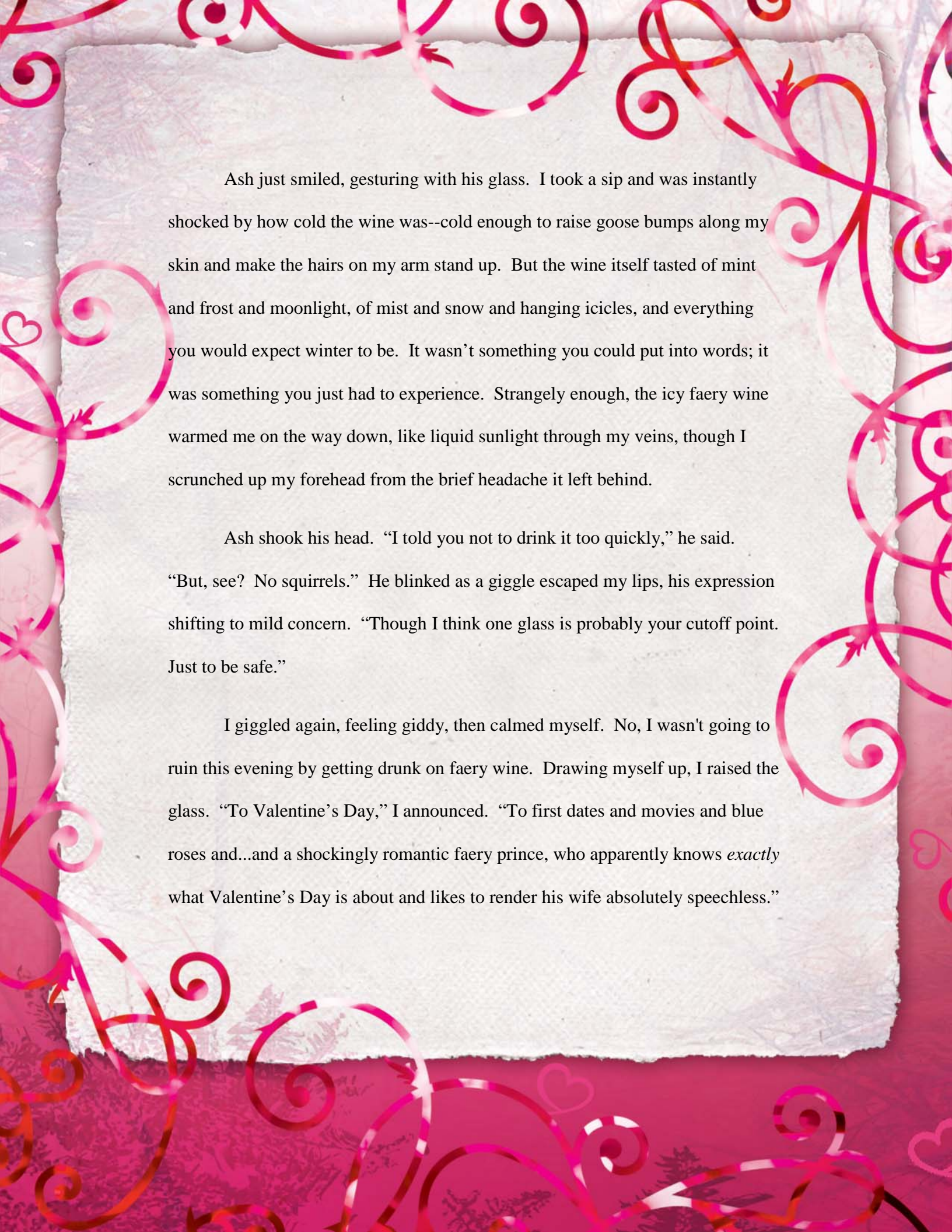
I followed him across the carpet of blue and black roses, still wondering if this was a dream. A gazebo made entirely of crystal ice sat at the edge of the field, sparkling under the moon. Inside, an ice bucket sat on a round table, a dark

green bottle chilling within. Two wine glasses perched on either side, and a huge bouquet of sapphire-colored roses loomed over the whole display.

“Ash...” I looked around in astonishment. “How? When did you find the time to set this up?”

“I have my ways.” Ash slipped by me and walked to the table, taking the wine bottle from its bucket and turning back with a grin. “Winterberry and icewine,” he explained, as I gave the bottle a dubious look. He smiled. “I promise it won’t put you to sleep, make you dance uncontrollably, or turn you into a hedgehog. The most it will do is give you--what do you call it?-- brain freeze, if you gulp it too quickly.”

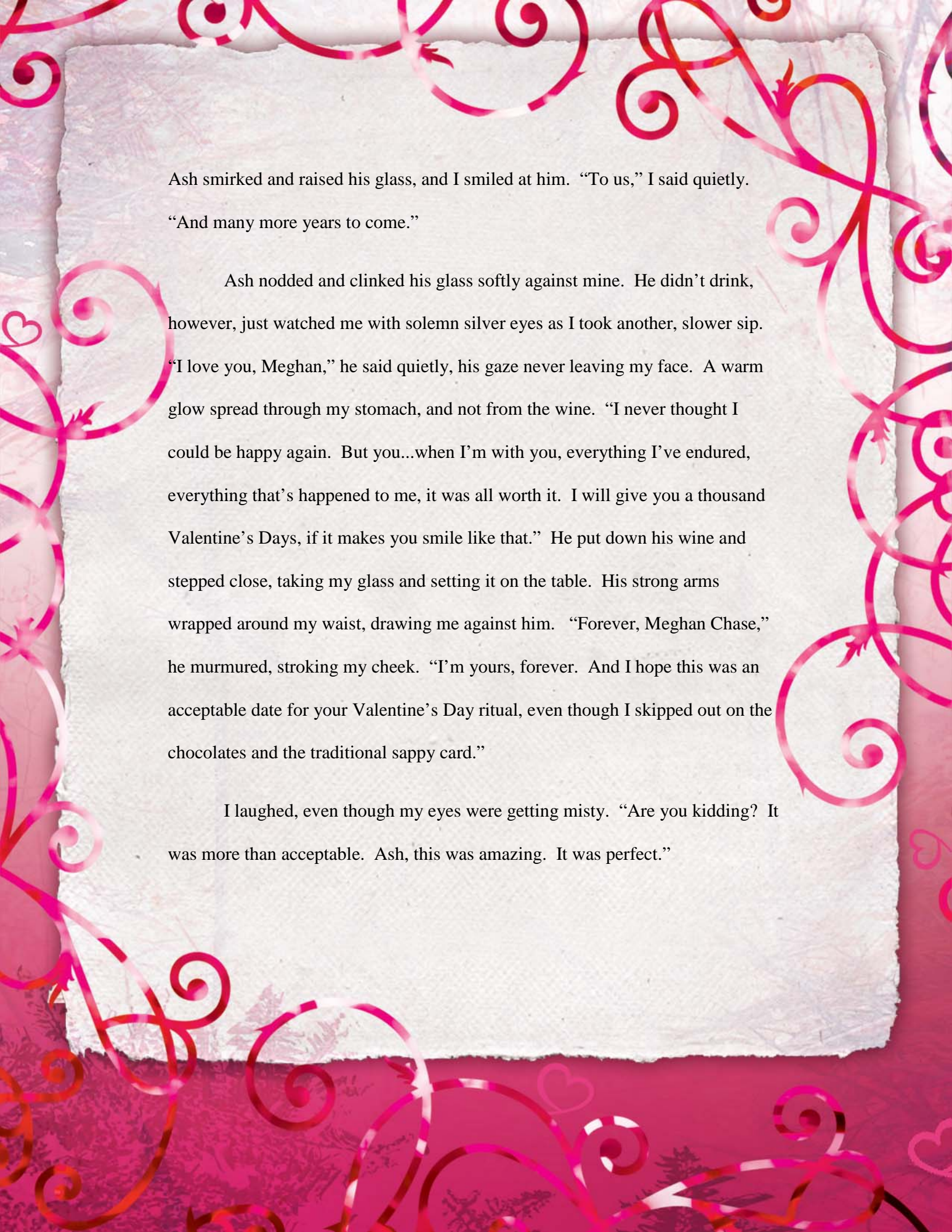
“I’ll hold you to that,” I said, watching as he poured a pale blue liquid into the two glasses. It bubbled and fizzed, filling the air with the scent of mint and something sweeter. Gingerly, I took the offered cup. “You’re certain it’s okay?” I asked, watching the wine sparkle in the dim light. “I haven’t had the best experiences with faery wine. Promise you’ll take me home if I turn into a squirrel?”



Ash just smiled, gesturing with his glass. I took a sip and was instantly shocked by how cold the wine was--cold enough to raise goose bumps along my skin and make the hairs on my arm stand up. But the wine itself tasted of mint and frost and moonlight, of mist and snow and hanging icicles, and everything you would expect winter to be. It wasn't something you could put into words; it was something you just had to experience. Strangely enough, the icy faery wine warmed me on the way down, like liquid sunlight through my veins, though I scrunched up my forehead from the brief headache it left behind.

Ash shook his head. "I told you not to drink it too quickly," he said. "But, see? No squirrels." He blinked as a giggle escaped my lips, his expression shifting to mild concern. "Though I think one glass is probably your cutoff point. Just to be safe."

I giggled again, feeling giddy, then calmed myself. No, I wasn't going to ruin this evening by getting drunk on faery wine. Drawing myself up, I raised the glass. "To Valentine's Day," I announced. "To first dates and movies and blue roses and...and a shockingly romantic faery prince, who apparently knows *exactly* what Valentine's Day is about and likes to render his wife absolutely speechless."

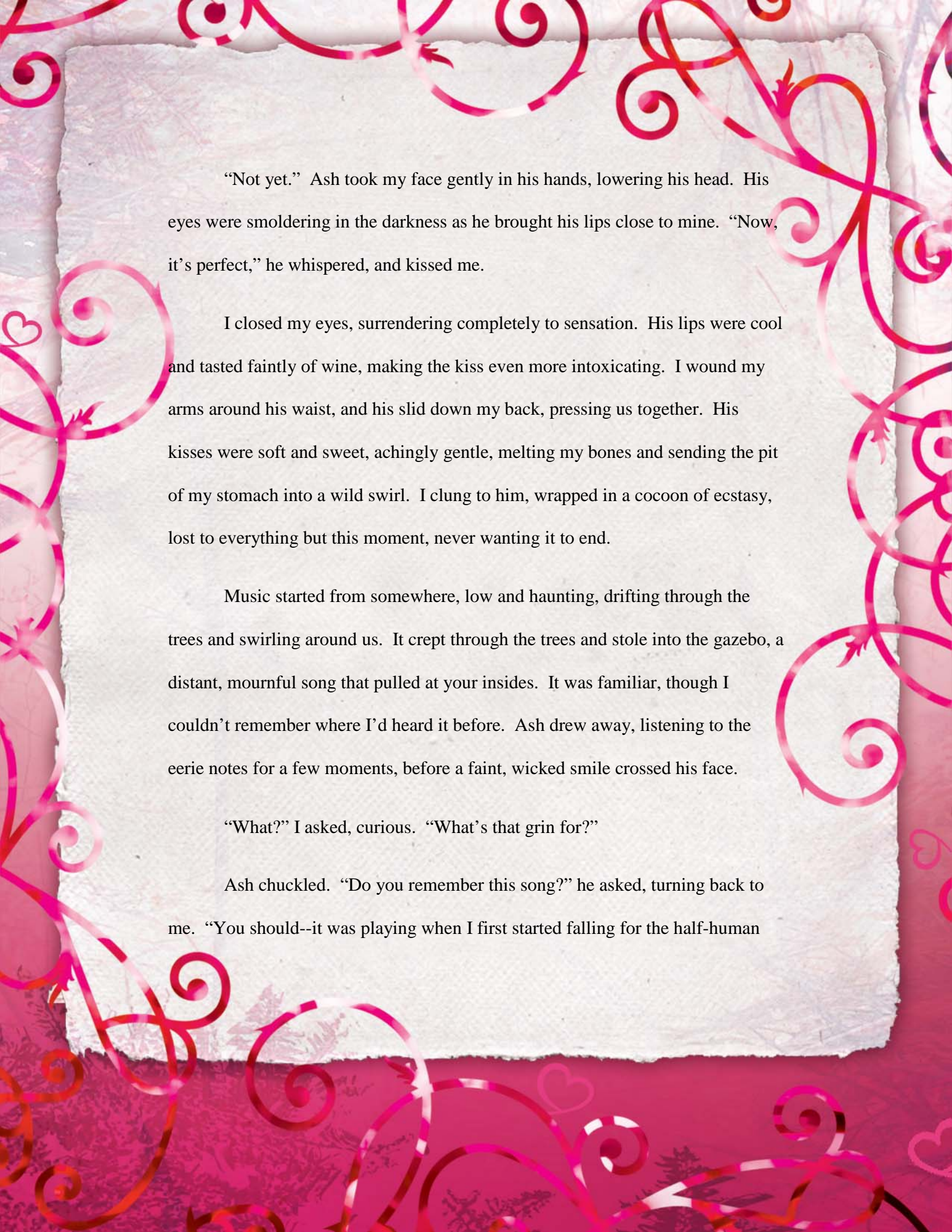


Ash smirked and raised his glass, and I smiled at him. “To us,” I said quietly.

“And many more years to come.”

Ash nodded and clinked his glass softly against mine. He didn’t drink, however, just watched me with solemn silver eyes as I took another, slower sip. “I love you, Meghan,” he said quietly, his gaze never leaving my face. A warm glow spread through my stomach, and not from the wine. “I never thought I could be happy again. But you...when I’m with you, everything I’ve endured, everything that’s happened to me, it was all worth it. I will give you a thousand Valentine’s Days, if it makes you smile like that.” He put down his wine and stepped close, taking my glass and setting it on the table. His strong arms wrapped around my waist, drawing me against him. “Forever, Meghan Chase,” he murmured, stroking my cheek. “I’m yours, forever. And I hope this was an acceptable date for your Valentine’s Day ritual, even though I skipped out on the chocolates and the traditional sappy card.”

I laughed, even though my eyes were getting misty. “Are you kidding? It was more than acceptable. Ash, this was amazing. It was perfect.”



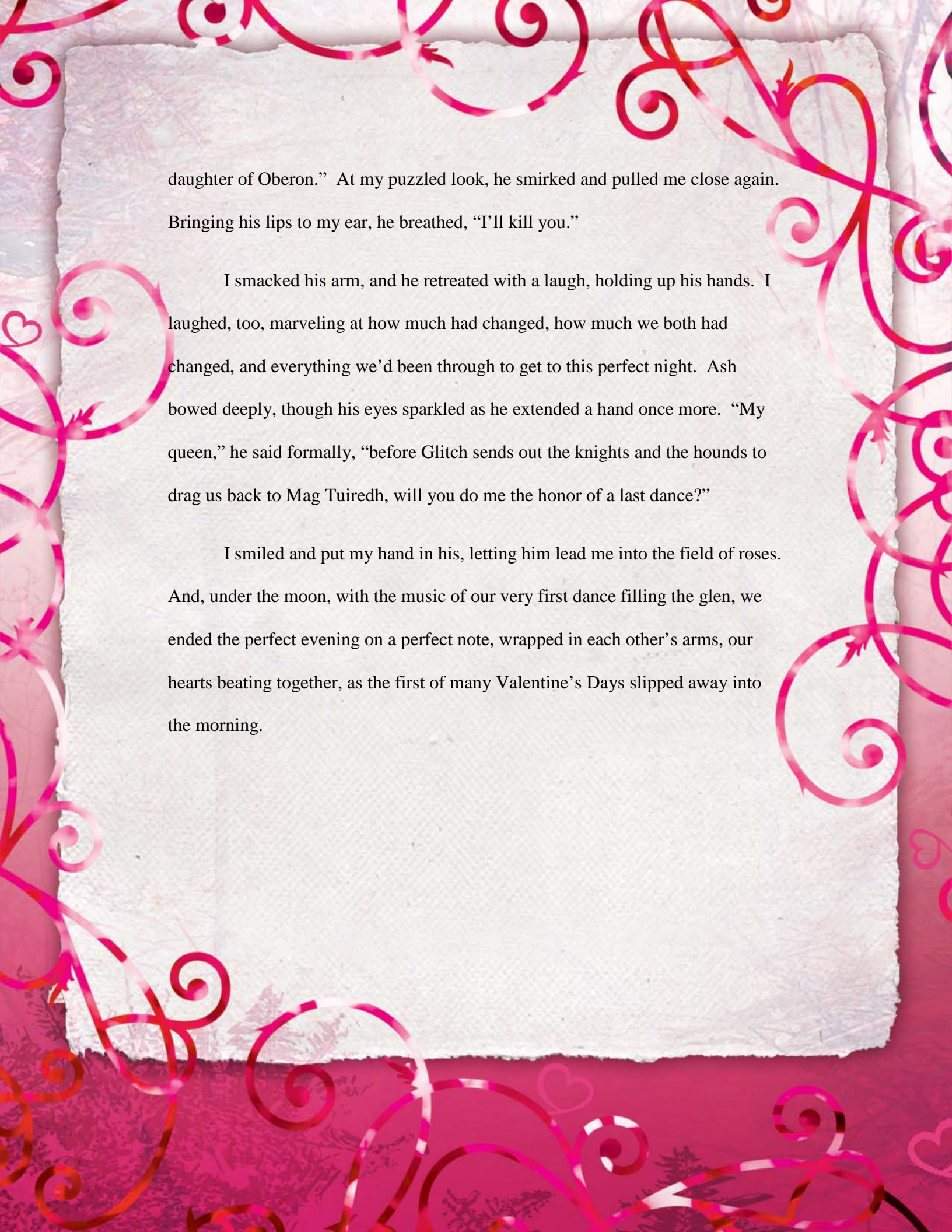
“Not yet.” Ash took my face gently in his hands, lowering his head. His eyes were smoldering in the darkness as he brought his lips close to mine. “Now, it’s perfect,” he whispered, and kissed me.

I closed my eyes, surrendering completely to sensation. His lips were cool and tasted faintly of wine, making the kiss even more intoxicating. I wound my arms around his waist, and he slid down my back, pressing us together. His kisses were soft and sweet, achingly gentle, melting my bones and sending the pit of my stomach into a wild swirl. I clung to him, wrapped in a cocoon of ecstasy, lost to everything but this moment, never wanting it to end.

Music started from somewhere, low and haunting, drifting through the trees and swirling around us. It crept through the trees and stole into the gazebo, a distant, mournful song that pulled at your insides. It was familiar, though I couldn’t remember where I’d heard it before. Ash drew away, listening to the eerie notes for a few moments, before a faint, wicked smile crossed his face.

“What?” I asked, curious. “What’s that grin for?”

Ash chuckled. “Do you remember this song?” he asked, turning back to me. “You should--it was playing when I first started falling for the half-human



daughter of Oberon.” At my puzzled look, he smirked and pulled me close again. Bringing his lips to my ear, he breathed, “I’ll kill you.”

I smacked his arm, and he retreated with a laugh, holding up his hands. I laughed, too, marveling at how much had changed, how much we both had changed, and everything we’d been through to get to this perfect night. Ash bowed deeply, though his eyes sparkled as he extended a hand once more. “My queen,” he said formally, “before Glitch sends out the knights and the hounds to drag us back to Mag Tuiredh, will you do me the honor of a last dance?”

I smiled and put my hand in his, letting him lead me into the field of roses. And, under the moon, with the music of our very first dance filling the glen, we ended the perfect evening on a perfect note, wrapped in each other’s arms, our hearts beating together, as the first of many Valentine’s Days slipped away into the morning.