

CHAPTER 2



The fairy's footsteps crunched on the gritty floor while Horra pointed to statues and noble objects, and droned on with information she'd rehearse three times a week for two years of primary royal training.

They reached the side door to the Hall of Monstrosity. Hobgoblin servants dusting the numerous exhibits scurried out of their way murmuring things about the 'charmed ones.' Horra thanked the Creature God that her hide repelled fairy magic. It resisted most types of magic. Unfortunately, it had also kept magic from curing her mother.

Which was why magic wasn't good for much of anything.

The princesses dawdled behind, which was not an easy feat since Horra's legs were five times shorter than theirs. They remained close together, whispering back and forth, their male fairy escorts behind them.

What was with all the brooding? They'd not been summoned to Oddar. They'd even come without an invitation.

Horra renamed them Misery and Gloomy.

Shaking off her grim musings, she stepped up to the wall of portraits surrounding the chamber. She stood beside the stuffed head of the biggest swamp swine ever recorded and placed her claw on the massive tusk.

With her free hand, she tried to motion elegantly at the first picture and gave them her rehearsed speech on the historical queens and kings of Oddar.

She reached her mother's portrait, where she faltered. "This is my mother Terra's portrait. It is said she lived up to her name and was terrifying in battles. Similarly, my grandmother before her, Queen Petra, embodied her name during her reign."

"I thought Oddar was ruled by female trolls. Why is your father allowed to rule while you live?" the brunette fairy asked.

Horra wanted to ask why they cared since they seemed so bored, but etiquette dictated she not return insolence for insolence. She put some sigh into her exhaled breath. "Father is my proxy by a blood oath. As Queen's Champion, he rules in my place by Oddar law until I turn sixteen. Then he will step down into a Royal Advisor position after my coronation." She glanced at their blank faces. "It's all rather complicated."

Horra assumed since fairies had innate magic, an energy which pooled inside of their being, they wouldn't understand that as non-magical beings, trolls were subject to the magic of the land.

She returned her gaze to her mother's picture. Long ruby hair twisted in braids around her light green, warty hide. Red hair was a royal trait Horra had inherited. She smoothed a claw across her long tresses. Pride burst in her chest for their unruly, red manes—wild as their rugged spirits.

Queen Terra had been a mighty troll warrior. She'd beaten Horra's father in the Battle of the Bogs, a traditional troll competition. Her father used to joke that he fell for her mother in more than one way that day.

Horra both smiled and cringed a bit at the memory of her father's declaration of love. Once, her father had been able to laugh and show love. Her mother's death had locked him inside himself. And Horra no longer had a key.

Her biggest goal in life was to be as great a troll warrior as her mother and their foremothers before them. Horra turned to ask if her guests had any questions.

The fairy princesses stared in disinterest around the room. Their willowy daintiness was out of place amongst the troll's fierce portraits. Horra bit back a stinging comment. She wouldn't ever dishonor someone in this fashion, but she was Oddar's ambassador. There would be no marks on Woodsly's parchment for this.

"The next room is the Grand Library. Its walls are carved out of the rarest alabaster, which glows in the dark, allowing us to read even on the darkest nights. The outer wall is glassed and looks over Oddar's Iron Mountains, a rich view of the tallest mountains in all of the Wilden Lands, except for the elfin mountains, of course. Above the library, my foremothers built a maze of walkways instead of a ceiling because they believed learning has no limits. It's the biggest library in all of Trolldom. I believe we have a few fairy spellbooks—"

"Yes, spoils from the War of the Warts," the blonde fairy stated. Air pulsed around her carrying her displeasure. "Ill-gotten gains from a ridiculous war the fairies were tricked into signing on to. Those items should rightfully be on display in our Hall of Light to honor our fairy knights who died courageous deaths." Although the pretty princess's voice tinkled like bells, her words burned like a bungbee sting to Horra.

The other fairy nodded in agreement.

Were they kidding?

Horra's claws dug into her palms, and she opened her

mouth to set the fliffy fairies straight when Woodsly stepped in front of her. She was left with a view of his ridged tail sticking out of his bark suit coat. Not a pretty sight.

“Yes, well, as I’m sure you know, there are two sides to every tale. Especially when war is involved. Let’s continue our tour with the Conservatory. I’m sure you’ll find our unique gardens fascinating,” Woodsly said.

Horra’s fangs ground against her upper teeth. She took the moment hidden behind her instructor’s trunk to regain her composure. When Woodsly turned toward her and held out an arm to allow her lead, she found some solace in the glimmer of irritation in his gray eyes. It was what she needed for strength to replace her royal poise.

Sunlight was quickly turning to dusk, so Horra snapped her flint-like nails to light the torches lining the cavern walls along the back of the castle to the Conservatory. Normally Horra, with her night vision eyesight, wouldn’t use the torches, but just last week she’d read in *Beasties: An Instruction Guide*, that fairies didn’t have the same capacity for night vision. And she didn’t want them wondering off dark corridors unattended.

“Mustn’t start another War of the Warts,” Horra murmured as she unlocked the Conservatory doors with a special key hung on the wall outside of the door. Some of the creatures they kept inside were smart enough to open unlocked doors.

“Imagine, using a key to open a door!” one of the princesses exclaimed behind her.

Horra spun around to face them. Her flesh heated with the implied insult. She should’ve known magic would be brought up.

The blonde fairy swiped away a spider web that was too high for their servants to reach. Too far up to bother Horra, the

most frequent visitor to the room. “No more astonishing than the state of this castle. It would only take one good spell ...”

Chin raised, Horra snarled, “Trolls don’t use shortcuts like magic to do what a being is quite capable of doing themselves. Hard work is the bounty—”

“Of a kingdom. Yes, so we’ve heard. You don’t really believe that, do you?” Tinkling laughter from the brunette fairy carried an edge of derision.

Clattering came from Woodsly’s throat again. “Your pardon, Majesties. That is Oddar’s motto, just as ‘Magic, Music, and Beauty Are Our Strength’ is the Fairy Overkingdom’s motto. I’m sure you wouldn’t like others bashing your ideals whilst in your castle, hmm?” Woodsly’s smile was as wooden as Horra had ever seen it, and that was saying something for a woodgoblin.

“If you’d like, I can return you to the entry to wait for your mother, the queen.” A grin fought to be loosed at the possibility of dropping the spoiled fairies off in the outer room full of gremlins and imps vying to have the king hear their grievances.

A look of repulsion crossed both princesses’ faces.

Horra turned and pushed the Conservatory’s glass doors open. The scents of moss and muck thickened the air. She drew in a deep, aromatic breath. The neckline pricked her ear again, reminding her she couldn’t get her dress dirty or the redcappers would use more prickly powder in the next washing.

Inside, a metal-webbed frame held up the glassed-in walls and ceiling. Bog bogies croaked in the distance from a troll-made pond. Pygmy clodhoppers creaked from their holes in the dirt. This was her sanctuary.

An enormous pudge wudgie flapped from the limbs of a wicked willow tree and soared across the grand expanse of the Conservatory.

DAWN FORD

It flew directly at the princesses, claws out.

The fairies screamed.

Horra giggled.

Sparkles erupted in the air where the princesses had just stood.