

CHAPTER 2

“**D**on’t scream, deary! You’ll reveal our position to those vile creatures following you.” The woman bent down toward her. Horra recognized the woman from when she’d gotten lost and taken by the giant child, Galumph. Now, all she needed was a blown-up version of a catterwump and a torentula to make her nightmare complete.

She squealed and scrambled back—against her boulder of a pet. Of all times for the gulgoyle to turn to stone.

“Troll princess?” the man asked, reaching for her.

She raised her arms over her head. The last time a giant had grabbed her, the girl had nearly shaken and strangled Horra to death. “Don’t!”

“You’re scaring the poor girl, Grint. Have some manners.” The woman’s voice was admonishing.

Horra glanced up at them.

The woman smiled, creating crease lines at the ends of her flecked eyes. “You’re the troll princess, aren’t you? We’ve been searching for you, hoping you can help us.”

Help them? Taken aback, Horra was speechless for a moment. Jewels sparkled from the sides of the woman's shaved head. A tuft of bright red hair wafted on the top of her too enormous head.

"I-I am Princess Horra, yes." She flipped over to her knees. The boulder she braced herself against to stand was hot to the touch, making her flinch back and stumble.

The giantess caught Horra before she would fall over, steadying her. "Oh, my. We're so glad to have found you! Have you seen our daughters? They've both gone missing. We believe it might have something to do with your visit to our lands."

Horra stared. Visit? It wasn't a visit if she was kidnapped, was it? She'd never look at a torentula or a catterwump the same again.

Sensing Horra's reluctance, the woman moved back, giving her some space. "Please, we're desperate to find them. First Grendel disappeared. Then, shortly after, Galumph went missing. When news about the coup at your castle spread to us, we realized the dolly our youngest daughter referred to was you. We're right, aren't we? It was you?" Tears filled her brown eyes, trailing down her orange cheeks.

"It's not only our daughters. Many other children have gone missing from Giborham. It's happening as far up as the shores of the Burly Sea." The man, looking earnest despite his disheveled clothes, referenced a unique area of the giant lands.

From what Horra recalled of her geography knowledge, that encompassed a large area of the southern giant region. This land bordered the mysterious elflands and was northeast of the Riven.

"No one can find them, orange hide, nor red hair." He snuffled and wiped a handkerchief across his bulbous nose.

Sympathy overtook her. She hadn't had time to warn

anyone. Even Balk hadn't completely believed her when she told him about what happened with the music and the giant girl—hence his teasing. Horra inhaled a deep breath, letting it out slowly, before recounting her encounter with their daughters. She started with getting lost and ended with Grendel's strange behavior on the bridge.

“So, you're saying this Erlking has a magic flute that does strange things to different creatures?” The giantess wrung her hands and glanced uneasily at the man. “How is that possible?”

“The same way he mesmerized the trolls. I'm not sure what kind of music magic he has, but he's able to bring even the biggest troll under his control.” Horra shrugged, knowing the giants would understand that trolls were famous for their immunity to magic. “As for Grendel, I'm not sure what happened after we escaped the bridge.”

The woman nodded. “The villagers contacted our leaders about the destruction. It's why we came—to restore the bridge and find our daughters. But then word about the coup at your castle reached us. We'd hoped you might know something that would help us locate our daughters.” Tears flowed down the woman's flushed face.

“It should be easy to locate a giant in your lands,” the man continued. “But we haven't had any luck. Do you know of any large place she could hide away?”

Horra considered his question. “She wasn't the same size as before. Like with the contracting candy, she'd shrank. The Iron Mountains have many enormous caverns and canyons, but nothing I could point you toward off the top of my head.” A terrible thought struck her. “And there are many hidden doorways into the lower dwarf mountains. With her new smaller size, she could've easily fallen in.”

Their eyes widened, and the woman's face twisted with more grief.

Dwarfs were not a welcoming bunch. Even giants tended to give them a wide berth.

The man handed the woman his handkerchief, which she used to mop her face and blow her nose—a very wet and disgusting sound.

Horra tried not to grimace. “Possibly you should send a search team to the lower Iron Mountains?”

“Or storm the Riven?” the man stated, anger replacing the sadness in his voice.

“No one enters the Riven and returns.” Horra couldn't help the disbelief in her tone. On a scale, giants couldn't rival elves—especially dark elves—in magic and power. “I don't think—” Horra started but stopped when the man spun around and took the woman's hand.

“C'mon, Giga. She's of no more use. We have all the information we need to start searching. Let's go find our daughters.” Hands interlaced, they strode out of the forest in a swift march without so much as a glance back at her.

Horra stared blankly after them. Woodsly had never taught her how strange giants were.

Noises of something moving startled her back into her own dilemma—the worqs. With a frantic search, she found nowhere to hide, and Nimble was still a boulder. Because of her pet's condition, she couldn't get to her woodencloak.

With no other recourse, Horra unlatched her dagger from the sheath at her side and stood, readying for anything. Vague recollections of her old instructor Woodsly's admonishment, “If you have no better option, run,” flashed through her mind.

Before she could do that, Balk, on his steed, blasted through the trees. He caught sight of her, his face frantic. He

jerked on the reins, and he and his horse slid to a stop beside her. “Where’s your gulgoyle, Princess?”

She slapped the boulder. “The giants scared it.”

“Giants?” He shook his head. “You don’t have time to explain. We need to go. The worqs are hot on my trail.”

The Stempner sniffed at Nimble’s rock hide. It shimmered, then cracked, and then broke into pieces. The gulgoyle shook its head and gazed at Horra with its dark eyes. Flakes of rock and dust fell to the ground. The arrow was gone. Horra touched the space where the wound should be, but it was completely healed.

Balk grunted. “Get on. Let’s go before they catch up.”