

CHAPTER 3



~Horra~

Despite worrying that her father would come knocking down her door, he hadn't. Horra had slept well and woken re-energized. She was now ready to face her father at breakfast.

The king's glance was brief when she sat down at the dining room table. Beside him sat a shining scroll, half-rolled up. Where it lay open, fanciful cursive writing filled the page. Fairy-like writing.

Horra eyed the gleaming document, her stomach twisting with dread. "Have they found Queen Toppenbottom?"

He didn't look up from his correspondence strung out beneath the partially rolled sheet. "No." His voice was a low growl. "Princess Misty has requested a meeting to discuss her mother and visit her sister. As you know, she's the only royal left to rule the Shining Kingdom at the moment. She apologized that because of some royal duties, it will be five days

before she arrives.” His words were like a hammer, striking her with meaning. “It’s a reprieve.” His eye ticked.

Horra recognized the fury simmering beneath her father’s calm demeanor. More knots grew in her gut. She knew he’d be angry with her, but not irate. Grumpy though he could be, witnessing true rage within him was rare. She bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

A maid set a steaming bowl of gritty hash in front of her. She gulped back nausea. Her appetite had disappeared.

“Might I inquire what last night was all about?” Her father asked in a low voice.

Anxiety pounded a hole in her chest. She’d rehearsed how she would speak and what she would say, Woodsly style. However, she faltered after the news of the other princess’s visit. She prayed silently to remain steadfast in the face of her father’s ire. “Princess Glory insulted me. All trolls, actually. And I’d had quite enough of her attitude.” Her words ended in an unintentional whine.

“Is that it?” His eyes remained unblinking. Cold. He wasn’t a father asking his daughter about a disagreement. He was a king requiring information from a subordinate.

Vinegar and beans, but she’d stuck her claw in it this time.

Horra took a moment to steady her nerves before glancing back at him. It had been a while since her father was this unhappy with her. “No. She tried to bribe me first.”

King Divitri swiveled his mug on the wooden table. “And that gave you the right to treat a guest in our castle, a royal one at that, so discourteously?”

Horra’s heart sunk to her toes. How could she make him understand? She opened her mouth.

Sageel barged in from the throne room, halting Horra’s speech. The maid twisted the apron she wore in her bony

hands. Head bent low, she rushed toward the king. “Majesty, the princess is missing.”

Horra waved her claw at her favorite maid. “No, I’m not. I’m right here.”

Sageel shook her head. “Not you, Princess. The other one. Princess Glory. I went to pick up her breakfast tray—she likes it first thing in the morning—and it was untouched. So I knocked on the door. When she didn’t yell at me for interrupting her, I knew something was wrong, so I checked her room. She’s tied sheets together and escaped out her window.”

The king frowned.

Horra groaned and dropped her head into her claws. This was so much worse than her argument with the insolent princess. This was a waking nightmare.

Not only was Glory’s disappearance a political blunder, but if the fairy princess fell into the Erlking’s hands, it might cause a war between the two former allied kingdoms. Especially with Princess Misty’s promised visit only days away.

King Divitri turned his grim face toward Sageel. “Gather a search party from among the reinstated warriors. My daughter will lead them as Oddar’s Queen Bearer.”

His words were like thunder in Horra’s ears, and lightning zinged through her blood as the meaning settled in. Her father had just declared her in charge of the kingdom, despite the fact she hadn’t been coronated yet. She was queen in all but ceremony now.

Her father was essentially cleaning his claws of her actions.

Horra willed the tears not to fall as she asked to be excused.

Nodding, the king refused to look at her as he released her to her new fate.

QUEEN BEARER. Horra thought about the title as she made her way from the dining room to the Conservatory.

Only one other in Oddar's history had carried that title. During the War of the Warts, her mother became Queen Bearer while her grandmother and grandfather fought on the front lines. In her mother's words, "someone needed to run the kingdom during a war, and that was me." When her grandmother, Queen Petra, captured the first Erlking, her mother gave up the title and became princess again until her mother's early death.

It was why her mother was the best queen Oddar ever had. She already knew how to rule when she inherited the title for real.

Horra didn't feel like a queen at the moment.

A few minutes later, she walked down a sparkling-clean hallway and opened the Conservatory doors, her breakfast uneaten and her stomach tied in knots.

"Good afternoon, Princess." Rowan's clackity voice drifted over the rustle of the new leaves growing on the replacement plants the fairies had sown. "Is this a Pidge visit, or are we back on mission?"

"I brought Pidge a treat. But yes. We're heading back out for a different reason, though." She opened the jar of dried grubby worms she'd collected thus far. She'd had to dehydrate them in the lab. Live grubbies were too dangerous to make a mistake with, and the hobgoblin kitchen staff wouldn't come near them.

Pidge screeched in the distance, probably smelling the bugs the instant Horra cracked the lid. She spent the next few minutes tossing them in the air for her pet to snag and gobble up—a small piece of joy on an otherwise abysmal morning. "You're getting good at air catch, Pidge."

Rowan walked to the platform she stood on. He bent his

face toward the ceiling, where Pidge flew in happy circles. Though two steps below, he stood at eye level with her. “Her eyesight is better than most creatures.”

Normally, Horra would mention his deficiency in that department. However, his inability to hit anything besides her backside was the least of her worries now. The king declared her Queen Bearer, meaning she held an equal title to that of her father. The title implied many things she’d rather not consider at the moment. “Did anyone tell you Princess Glory snuck out last night?”

Rowan twisted to face her, his brown eyes steady. “Master Knurl mentioned it. He said her leaving shifted the resonance of the castle.”

Horra puckered her lips, her tusks poking her upper lip. She had no clue what that meant. Nor did she have the patience to ask Rowan for an explanation. “Did Master Knurl say which way she went?”

He shook his head, his wooden mouth creasing in a frown. “Once a creature leaves the castle, he can no longer sense them.”

Pidge fluttered, then landed in front of them. She clucked at Horra.

“It’s all gone, girl. You’ve eaten the last of them.” She held the jar out so the bird could peck at the remaining crumbs. With another squawked complaint and a blur of black feathers, the pudgy wudgie flew back to whatever she was doing before Horra entered.

“You are more tense than usual. What’s on your mind?” Rowan asked. “Are you worried Princess Glory will get lost?”

“No. I’m worried she won’t. If she finds the Erlking, or he finds her, then the queen won’t be the only fairy missing.” Horra studied the moss covering his bark. The sigils that Merrow had carved on the smooth surface a few short weeks

ago were now hidden. She hoped they still carried power. They would need it. This was not their usual mission, and Rowan's safety wasn't a sure thing.

Melancholia struck her. Woodsly's poisoning, Torren's father's death, and the magical fire that destroyed the Weald were all the Erlking's fault. Why couldn't Glory have understood how dangerous the evil elf was? Did she even consider the political consequences her leaving would cause Oddar? Horra shook her head.

Rowan made an uncertain noise in his throat, a despicable crickety sound that broke her chain of thoughts. "And you want to go after her?"

Horra's laugh held no humor. "No. I am now Queen Bearer. It's my duty to find the princess and bring her back." Though her father hadn't said it in so many words, Horra knew what he meant when he'd given her the new title. Equal to him in rank, she was now in charge of their army. Any failure or embarrassing mistake would reflect upon her reign now. She was no longer a child or a princess to be coddled. An un-crowned queen, but a queen no less.

"I see. And you're not happy with this new title? Or is it the mission that troubles you?" Rowan's question was more of a challenge than an inquisition.

"I didn't ask to be Queen Bearer. I simply told Princess Glory the truth about the Erlking and herself. She's not only selfish, she's insulting and reckless. She's risked not only her life, but mine and that of anyone else assigned to hunt her down. With Princess Misty on her way here, this escape has put Oddar at risk of retaliation and war. For that, I can't forgive her."

Rowan rubbed a tuft of moss on his chin and hummed. "Would it not be in your best interest to lay aside your differences before searching for the other princess?"

Horra narrowed her eyes. “I don’t see why that matters.” Understanding formed in her mind. “Are you saying my attitude toward Princess Glory would cause me to fail my mission?”

He clacked his tongue and frowned. “Do not put words in my mouth.”

She flung her arms wide. “Then what does it matter if I’m angry or not? It’s not stopping me from searching for her royal stupidity. It certainly wouldn’t keep me from bringing her back. I’m more than ready to drag her hide back here and lock her inside the dungeon for good measure.”

A whisper of a breeze fluttered across the garden. Rowan closed his eyes as if listening to something she couldn’t hear. When he opened them, he moved toward a potted plant, a vine that grew only a few feet and had sparse foliage.

“You brought this plant with us when we escaped the Weald after the fire. The vine had burned from around a Yew tree. The only signs of life were two green leaves.” He stroked the spiky stem. “Do you know what this plant is?”

Horra tried not to show her impatience with the woodgoblin’s ability to take the long way around a story. “It’s in the fig family. Why?”

Rowan glanced at her then back down at the sad-looking vine. It hadn’t thrived like other seeds and plants she’d brought back. “You’re correct. It’s a strangler fig, a *ficus mortuum totalis*—a deadly species that wraps around a tree and strangles it to death.”

Horra blinked. “Why would there be dangerous plants in the Weald?”

“Because there is a place for all plants, but only where they’re managed with an experienced hand. Merrow placed this vine next to a tree whose rood had passed on to the after-life. Without its essence, that tree died. Druid tradition allows

no spirit-bound tree to be chopped down, but instead preserved in honor of the rood who once dwelled inside it.” Rowan left the plant and came back to stand next to Horra.

She crossed her arms, no longer hiding her impatience. “Okay. I’m still not sure what you’re getting at.”

“Bitterness and an unforgiving spirit are like this vine. They wrap around a creature’s heart and choke out anything good within. Be careful, Princess, not to allow something this fatal to take hold inside you. For you will then become what you see in the fairy princess. And I need you to stay on the side of good, not evil, or we will fail.”