

CHAPTER 2



~Glory~

Glory waited for the king to spring to her defense against his daughter's cruel words. But instead, King Fyd stood, glaring at them both with an unreadable expression on his warty green face.

Horra leaned toward her, her face ruddy with anger and a sparkle of satisfaction gleaming in her mud-brown eyes.

Glory screeched as she spun away from them and stormed into her room. She glared at her bleak, prison-like bedroom as anger erupted inside her. "The nerve of that pathetic troll princess!" she shrieked. Magic, which she'd once so easily accessed, tickled her skin but fizzled out instantly. She screamed louder, tearing off the dingy, hooded cloak she wore to cover up her ugliness.

The troll princess didn't understand. Fairies couldn't survive without beauty. She was slowly going mad, and she couldn't do a thing about it. Glory threw the vial at the pocked stone wall. The magic she'd created formed a gold vein that

bloomed in the crevices of the rock, beautifying the drab room. By morning, there'd be more gold than the trolls would know what to do with. But it was better than curing that horrible troll princess of her warts.

She sobbed. The potion worked on stone, and it would've worked wonders for the troll princess. Why wouldn't the potion work on her?

"You don't deserve to be beautiful. It's all your fault, anyway." Glory kicked a shard of glass away from her foot as tears streamed down her face. A gold vein spread on the wall and across the floor. She stepped away. A few drops of the gold had changed her voice earlier, and she wasn't sure what might happen if more touched her. Nothing good, she knew. The potion hadn't untangled her wings or changed her face back to its natural beauty as she had intended. The Erlking's spell was stronger than her magic, and nothing she came up with would overpower it.

Thinking of her wings, she attempted to flutter them, but the movement was painful. She grimaced, her mood darkening.

If it hadn't been for the trolls, she'd still be in her Shining Kingdom, celebrated as the brightest creature to exist in a lifetime. More beautiful even than her twin sister, Misty. Her life would be full of art, laughter, and most of all, music.

Music. She laughed, but there was no humor in it. She thought back to where it all began—the Erlking disguised as a dark fairy prince who loved melodies as much as she did.

He'd caught her eye with his pale skin and spiked black hair. He was everything she wasn't supposed to want but did. Her rebellion against her controlling mother and perfect sister had been sweet.

Except it had all been a ruse. He'd lured her with his dark enchantment like a fisher hooking an innocent glimmerfish.

He tricked her into mesmerizing her mother first, her sister next, and then used them all to invade the troll kingdom to gain access to the troll princess.

Betrayal and contempt warred for dominance in her heart. How could she have been so gullible? She shook her head. The Erlking knew a fairy's weakness lay in their beauty and love of artful things. He'd used that knowledge to his advantage.

Glory knocked the unwanted food off of a silver dining tray next to the lumpy bed and gazed at her reflection. Her eyes were fishlike—overlarge, with one lower than the other. Lumps protruded from her once-perfect skin. The sight was repulsive, worse than the troll princess's dreadful face.

Horra was right about one thing. Fairies were above other creatures. And Glory was already tired of being ugly like the troll princess. How the trolls had built such a powerful kingdom without beauty and music, she wasn't sure. But she also didn't care.

Her tears dried, but anger remained—a friend she didn't know she needed. "I'll find you," she muttered to the dark fairy ghost in her memory. Obviously only a figment of her imagination, but real enough in her heart. "And when I do, you'll have no choice but to trade me back my beauty."

She pulled out the book from beneath her bed that she'd stolen from him all those weeks ago when he wooed her with his edgy compositions. Beside it sat a golden kelpie bridle, which she set aside. Glory flopped onto the mattress, ignoring the uneven surface. "Somehow you figured out I stole them, didn't you? Otherwise, you wouldn't have disfigured me so badly."

The kelpie, which he'd used to spirit her away from her shining castle, had given her a taste of independence. His spellbook, though, had led to her downfall. Glory ran a gnarled hand across the cover. "You, my pretty, will be the weapon I

use to gain freedom from his dark spell.” She opened it and flipped through the pages. Her affinity for music drew her to the notes written in crisp penmanship. Each symbol contained magic, but not the light kind used by her kingdom. Dark and broody, the notebook practically hummed with it.

“Hobgoblin’s Thrall. Trance of the Fairies.” She ripped that page out, tore it into small pieces, and tossed them into the hearth. “Lullaby into Longing. Mind over Mouse,” she read aloud, scouring the pages until she flipped to the only one she needed. “Aha! Taming of the Trolls.” Her grin was maniacal, she knew. But she would be hex-free, and that was the only thing she cared about. It was time to take her life back.

The troll’s spell page tore out of the book evenly, as if meant to be. Glory folded it and stuck it in her pocket. Both she and the troll princess would get what they deserved.

Glory used the extra sheets she’d hidden from the hobgoblin maids, tied them together, and in less time than it took to walk out the castle’s front doors, escaped into the night with the sheet and the bridle.

~Rowan~

MASTER KNURL MUTTERED in his sleep. A shadow of a thought from the old rood fluttered like a leaf in the wind in Rowan’s mind, leaving no trace of its substance.

Roods weren’t supposed to slumber, but many things were yet beyond Rowan’s understanding.

He called out and woke the dead druid spirit.

“*Why do you disturb me?*” Master Knurl’s clackity voice creaked more than usual. The rood should’ve faded by now, but because of his bonding to the ageless Yew tree in Oddar’s

Conservatory and the magic in the elven soil, he endured. Until the tree died as well, the rood would survive, untouched by the taint spreading across the Wilden Lands and disabling the rood network beyond these walls.

Rowan sensed a weakness in Master Knurl's voice. The sap in Rowan's veins stilled before flowing fluidly again. Rowan reached out and touched the tree. To comfort the rood? The druid woodgoblin didn't understand comfort beyond his needs, such as water, sunshine, and soil sustenance. The urge to aid pulled at him, though, in a peculiar way. "You were talking. It was incoherent but seemed important."

The tree split to form a face. "A dream, perhaps. I have no recollection of what I said." High branches rattled, and a dark figure leaped into the air from their depths.

Pidge, the resident pudgie wudgie, scree'd and fluttered to the ground next to them. She bobbed her head at the newly formed creases in the trunk.

Rowan hesitated, ignoring the bird. "Roods dream?"

"In times of old, the Creature God would communicate to us druids in visions and dreams."

Rowan waited, but the old rood didn't continue. "Which was it? A vision, or a dream?"

Master Knurl hacked a cough, the Yew's limbs trembling.

Rowan jerked back as Pidge squawked. Was the tree ill? The thought of losing him, the last link to his ancestors, chilled the sap in his body.

"Fear not, young druid. I will be here for quite some time yet," Master Knurl answered his unspoken question. "It is only the resonance of the castle that affects me. I believe the fairy princess has left and taken something vital to your mission with her. I sense an unpleasant evil surrounding the item."

Rowan stroked Pidge's chin, his hands steadier now that

Master Knurl had assured him of his continuing presence. “What is it? Has she stolen something from the trolls?”

“No. She has stolen something from the second Erlking.” The ground beneath the Yew tree murmured as if the rood were attempting to communicate. But to whom? He couldn’t communicate with anything outside the Conservatory walls. The only tree inside the Conservatory with a live spirit inside it was a mute dryad living in the ropy Weeping Willow Welter tree who guarded a hidden entry along the back wall.

Rowan dug his roots into the soil, hoping to detect any connection to other roods the Yew tree might have. Silence. “How do you know she stole something?”

“When Princess Glory came to the castle last, I sensed she possessed an elven item. Its aura is similar to the magic in the Conservatory’s soil, which, as you know, comes from the former Elf Lands.”

“Yes, but the Conservatory soil is not evil.” Rowan steepled his fingers as he often did while learning.

“The soil is neutral, that’s true. But it is elven. Did Mellow teach you anything about the elves?” The tree puckered its lips.

“No, but he believed Woodsly left some of his knowledge in my seed’s core. I knew answers the seedkeeper did not teach me, nor did he fully understand himself.”

The tree grunted, rustling its leaves. “Woodsly was the best of our brotherhood. If anyone could leave knowledge behind, it would be him.”

“But what do you know about elves?” Rowan prodded, leaning closer.

Master Knurl cleared his throat. “Our Creature God created our noble order after the elves relinquished control of their lands, removed all knowledge of their culture, then secreted themselves away. Thanks to the druid clans, we documented everything from that point forward. However, what we don’t

understand is why no additional information about them survived. It wasn't as if there weren't any intelligent creatures around. Besides the magic they left behind, it's as if they never existed. Until we discovered the Riven."

Rowan furrowed his brow. "The Riven didn't always exist?"

"It did not. It came into being a couple generations before the first Erlking appeared. At first, it seemed as if a scourge had taken over a forest we now know as the Riven. Two druid researchers went to find the source but never returned." The rood's voice cracked.

Rowan blinked at the face's outline on the trunk. "What happened then?"

"The trees died outside of that forest, and the druids realized it was more than a plague. It was a presence. Soon, we came to realize the forest shifted and grew like a living thing. Since then, we've been able to hold the borders, but with the Weald damaged and the roods' influence crippled, that too might change."

"What does this mean for the future of the Wilden Lands? What about the balance of good and evil we're supposed to maintain?"

"That, my young friend, is why you are here. Every period of terrible darkness allows for a set of heroes to rise and meet the challenge. You and your companions must be brave enough to stand in the gap between good and evil to fend off the flood the Erlking is sending upon the Wilden Lands. We are all counting on you."

Rowan stilled. The moss growing along his bark rippled. "You've given me much to think about. Thank you for your wise counsel."