

CHAPTER 3

~Grendel~

Some time later

Grendel woke to find herself on the ground and surrounded by a thicket of weeds. Her head ached, as did her body. “What happened?” She sat up. Bugs darted about in the overgrown area, and she swatted the nuisances away. Her sight was dim and her head swam. Swiping a hand across her face, she groaned. “Where am I?”

The last thing she remembered was testing out her soundometers in the troll castle’s lab. She slapped her palms over her ears. The devices were gone. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Those were her prototypes, the only pair she’d built so far. Grendel struggled to recall what happened, how she’d ended up outside the castle, but her mind wouldn’t cooperate. Moaning against the dizziness, she gathered herself and stood. Blood rushed to her head, and she stumbled to her knees.

The last time she felt this way was when the Erlking had

changed her the first time. Her eyes snapped open. “This is so not good.” A glance at her shredded clothes was the only proof she needed.

After that first change, she’d lost almost a day and felt woozy upon waking miles from home. The memories returned slowly. She swiveled and sat to wait for her foggy brain to clear.

Minutes ticked by. Her mind wrestled with the possibilities of what had happened. Had anyone in the castle seen her change and run off? Would they come looking for her? When some of the murkiness cleared from her brain, she dared a glance at the sky to gauge the time of day.

Grendel was no stargazer. She concentrated on what little she knew of the constellations. “The Shepherd’s Star is the brightest, revealing itself during the day. This star points due north, past the Giant Lands. Below it are the sacred Seven Stars, which are visible on any cloudless day,” she muttered as she glanced across the sky, avoiding looking directly into the sun. “And since Springtide is in full swing now, that means the Seven Stars sits below the Shepherd’s Star. There.” She laughed, pointing at the faint formations. The rush of blood in her veins was from glee this time, not magic.

Standing carefully, she oriented herself. Beyond her resting place, a path appeared. “Oi,” she muttered. Crushed grass and broken foliage in the overgrown area detailed her harried movements. Though not straight, the trail was an arrow pointing back to where she’d come from, clearer than any sign. She’d follow it until she reached the rockier areas where growth was sparser and her footsteps sure to be less clear.

Slowly, she headed south, determination overruling her many aches and pains from dashing about. Her frantic trek was an experience she didn’t long to repeat. Freed from having to navigate every step, she turned her focus to figuring out what

caused her to change back so it would never happen to her again.

AFTER WHAT SEEMED like hours later, Grendel found one of her test antennae among the rubble along the edge of the northern Iron Mountain range. Her reflective tape among the gray stones winked in the light, catching her attention. She rushed to the piece and bent to pick it up. Somehow, she'd snapped it in half. Loose wires stood out like bristles, and she ran a pad of her forefinger across them. "Oh, bother." The broken item was much too small now to rest snugly inside her ear even if it hadn't been half destroyed. The base that amplified the waves, though, was still intact and usable. She could work with that.

Without a pocket to settle the segment in, she opted to carry it. Small as it was, it wasn't hard to do. Shadows lengthened as the sun moved lower in the cloudless sky. Her legs ached, but at least her head had fully cleared. She recalled the immediate audio racket she'd experienced after donning her antennae. So many sounds and whispers.

Whispers? Was that what she'd heard? Grendel shook her head. She didn't remember any words. Her footsteps faltered, and she stopped to contemplate. Rocks skittered with her sudden movement, but she paid them no heed. Like with her experiments, she went back to the beginning and worked her way through what was tangible and what was conceptual. Real and not real.

She sifted through the information but found nothing of substance that pointed to voices. Her mind and her gut warred with each other. The pragmatic, scientific part of her consciousness agreed with no whispers. Her nervous system,

however, blared inside her, a fear that spread from her core and rippled along her limbs. The signal was an instinctual warning, telling her to not believe everything she heard.

Dilemmas such as these rarely plagued Grendel. One and one always equaled two. Giants approached magic as a tool, a means by which to enhance and enrich life. Giant society relied upon their serums for all manner of things, from beauty treatments to extending life. This knowledge allowed her to heal the fairy princess after the multitude of hexes she'd suffered. Their secret elixirs and restoratives were beneficial.

Grendel was top of her class and well-read. Nothing she'd learned had prepared her for the Erlking's unique brand of magic. His sorcery made no sense to her keen mind. The notion of hexes wasn't new or unheard of. Old giants' tales of the Witching Wars and elves' magical manipulations were told and retold over fires. They grew from partial truths to harrowing tales meant to scare the hearers. They hadn't been real to her. Then the Erlking hexed her and all those notions flew out the door.

Grendel walked on, her focus more on her thoughts than her surroundings. The hex turning her into a monster was a punch to the gut of her scientific mind. She dug a fisted hand into the blossoming ache in her chest to ease the harsh memory.

Giants had strict regulations pertaining to magical experiments. Children as young as Galumph used benign potions and elixirs on critters in their formative biology classes. They were harmless and informative to young minds, shaping them into the scientific mold her society deemed worthy.

But nothing about the Erlking followed any rule book. Grendel swallowed hard, her dry throat sticking with the effort. The Erlking had no boundaries with which to keep him in check. He placed no value on life or creature freedoms. Not

that she hadn't known this. But another level of understanding settled across her mind.

In order to fight the Erlking, they would have to surrender their preconceived notions about how to fight him. They'd have to throw their guides out and create new ones. Changing tactics was the only way they'd win.

~Glory~

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Glory reluctantly returned to the guest hallway before the evening meal. She didn't relish facing her comatose mother and her indignant sister again. The sweet smell of her sister's magic permeated the air in front of their suite at the end of the hallway. She glanced longingly at the door of the room the trolls had originally assigned her.

After the Erlking injured their mother, her sister, Misty, had insisted they all room in the larger suite for their mother's benefit. Being together would help heal the queen, so she'd said.

So far, that hadn't been the case.

With a hefty sigh, Glory turned the handle and entered the large room. Clouds of sparkling magic hazed the sitting area. The cloud was thickest by the bedroom in the back of the suite.

"Good. You're back. Your turn to sit vigil." Misty donned a silk robe over her silver chiffon dress. Slits in the back allowed her diaphanous wings to slip through easily.

Glory longed to have her normal wings back. Though the giantess had restored them a little, they were stiff and easily fatigued. She eyed her sister—from the top of her coifed head to her crystal heels. The only thing absent was the royal scepter.

And that, along with their royal carriage, was missing. “What royal duties are you dressed for?”

Her sister huffed, striding past her to the door. “If you were around more, you’d already know. The giantess has done all she can to heal Mother. It’s time to return to our Shining Kingdom. While you watch over the queen, pack and prepare to leave.”

Glory’s chest tightened. She didn’t desire to go home for the same reasons she’d escaped her mother after being cursed. Though she still yearned to have her beauty back, she no longer wished to trade the Erlking for the favor of it. His wickedness, she knew now, was beyond repair. He’d used and abused her affections in the most atrocious way. If only she’d realized her quest for gaining back her beauty wasn’t worth the effort, her mother would not be in the shattered state she was currently in. That was on her. “Wait!” she cried out to her sister before the door shut.

Misty stood with her back rigid and her delicate hand clenched tight to the handle. “What is it this time?” Her voice bore thin restraint, something rarely seen with her sister’s temperament.

Glory needed to approach her carefully or lose any chance of freedom. She took a steady breath. “I’d like to stay, help in the fight to bring the Erlking to justice for his crimes.”

Her sister’s wings drew together as her shoulders pinched.

She hurried on. “It’s not—” She stopped and restarted. “I’m not staying for selfish reasons. I pinky swear.”

Misty turned to side-eye her at that promise, which was their childhood oath they’d always held to.

Glory walked to her sister and took her free hand in her chilled ones. “I’ve made too many mistakes for you to trust me, I know. There’s nothing I can do to prove my intentions except to do better going forward. But someone has to hold him accountable.”

“Say his name,” Misty growled through clenched jaws.

Glory frowned but rallied. Her sister knew how to pierce her heart to create the biggest wound. She deserved Misty’s ire, but that didn’t make it any easier. “The name he used is fake and doesn’t matter. He is the elven Erlking, second coming of the greatest enemy of our state, and the evil fiend who gravely wounded our mother and queen. I have no delusions of him now.” She dropped her sister’s hand and held out her pinky. “I swear to you I will avenge her and our kingdom.”

Misty stood motionless for longer than Glory was comfortable with, but she didn’t rush her sister. Misty’s keening must be growing, for she felt the pinpricks of the other fairy’s magic testing her truthfulness. After a few more moments, she nodded. “Fine. But you realize that leaves me the as Official Fairy Ruler. Once done, I cannot undo it until mother recovers, or in the event of my death.”

Glory knew. Their training had ensured they understood. Only one could bear the royal title at a time. Her mother had bound them against each other since their birth. Twins were rare, and only the strongest would gain the throne. The battle for her mother’s favor had always been like an ill-fitted dress. That struggle was partly why she’d rebelled and fallen into the Erlking’s trap. “I’ve never desired the crown. The crystal throne was always going to be yours.”

She endured more of Misty’s probing truth-seeking. She knew her sister would become a wonderful queen. Much better than she would’ve ever been.

With a sigh, Misty hooked her pinky with Glory’s. “Fine. Though you know I’ve never been comfortable with a leadership role, either. We were going to rule together, remember?” She unhooked her finger. “You owe me big time for having to care for Mother alone. Don’t think I will let that go unpaid.”

Glory grinned. "I am in your debt."

"I must speak to the queen bearer and the king before I depart. Just don't—" A sob caught in her sister's throat and she coughed, blinking back the wetness flooding her forest-green eyes. "Don't leave me alone to bear the crown. Not forever."

Glory shook her head. "You are much stronger than you believe yourself to be. Much stronger than I ever was or could hope to be. However, I promise to do all I can to return to you and Mother. I will be there for you when this is over, I promise."

Though not an oath, magic zinged between them, sealing her words. Misty left, shutting the door quietly.

Glory wrapped her arms around herself. She prayed she would survive facing the Erlking again, but she was no fool. Or she wasn't any longer. Defeating the evil elf was going to take a miracle.