

## CHAPTER 2

*~Rowan~*

Rowan entered the laboratory minutes later, only to find chaos. Overturned tables and splintered chairs greeted him. Glass equipment lay shattered in pieces on the stone floor. Because the broken glass wouldn't hurt his roots, he stepped inside, determined to figure out what had caused his newest friend to lose control.

He sensed a presence behind him. "What was she doing before this happened?" he asked the fairy princess.

"You said it yourself. Researching airwaves or something." Glory kicked a glass shard, and it skittered across the smooth floor before colliding with a wall. Her wings drooped.

Rowan's experience with the princess proved she wasn't as dense as she sometimes acted. If she hadn't been curious herself, she wouldn't have returned to the laboratory. "Sound waves," he said, correcting her. He grabbed a tangled piece of wire and inspected it. His trunk pinched tight around his core. Perhaps he should've paused his research and joined Grendel.

Then he might've known what happened to her and could've created a plan to fix the issue.

"Whatever." Glory's dismissive tone was at odds with her snooping. She lifted an object, studied it, then set it back down.

"What are you looking for?" he asked. "Is there something you know that you aren't telling us?"

Her face scrunched, betraying her annoyance. Glory used the expression with Queen Bearer Fyd often. "No. I gave my word I wouldn't keep things from everyone anymore, and I haven't."

Rowan pivoted to face her fully. "Then what is your motive for staying here?"

Queen Bearer Horra strode into the room carrying a broom and dustpan. "She can't help herself. This is the most drama we've had in days, and she's like a glimmerfly to a flame." The queen bearer placed the dustpan on an undisturbed table and began sweeping the floor. The stiff bristles created a scritch-scratch noise in a rhythmic, uniform pattern. The sound pricked something in Rowan's brain stem.

He held out his arm, stopping her for a moment.

Princess Glory grimaced, splitting her displeasure between him and the grating of the glass across the stone floor.

The queen bearer hesitated, then drew back. "What is it?"

"I don't know." At her dubious glance, he continued. "The sound is triggering something in my memory, but I can't place my finger on what."

"O-kay." She stared his way. "Should I keep going, or—?"

"Yes. But in the same pattern, if you would."

Her next swipes were less vigorous, so he signaled for her to keep going, and she fell into the same rhythm as before. Images of the Riven—the graveyard forest, to be exact—danced across his mind. But why?

The queen bearer continued across the lab, sweeping and

collecting the pieces. Something nagged at his memory, but he couldn't parse out what. The laboratory wasn't big, and overturned tables hampered the queen bearer's progress. Without being asked, she traveled back to the open space. A piece of debris stuck in the bristles maintained the same sharp scratch across the stones.

He shook his head and dropped his arm. "My apologies, Queen Bearer. The answer is there in my mind somewhere, but it's elusive."

The queen bearer stopped sweeping and laid a claw on his forearm. "It's okay. Your confusion could be information Woodsly left in your seed, and it will take some prying to open up. Sometimes I do something else—take my mind off of it—then whatever was nagging me comes easier."

Rowan didn't glance her way. She was trying to be helpful, but information was his specialty. He rarely had a lapse in retrieving it. "Thank you. Maybe I'll go to the Conservatory and discuss this with Master Knurl. He may shed some light on my befuddlement."

"Or you could help us restore the lab." The princess lifted a table and set it back down, crunching glass beneath the legs.

"Isn't that what magic is for?" Queen Bearer Horra's voice held an edge.

Princess Glory narrowed her eyes at the queen bearer, and her wings twitched. "I don't have enough magic to whisk this ... mess back into shape." She pinched her lips together as she moved to the next table.

"That's too bad. The old-fashioned way of actual labor is far superior, anyway."

Rowan turned and left the squabbling duo behind. Their sparring held undertones he didn't understand, and he did not relish being boxed between the two again.

He passed the portraits in the Hall of Monstrosity. Though

he looked at the paintings, he kept his focus on what had triggered him with the scritch sound. Hobgoblins moved in the background, unintrusive to him or any of the other royals who wandered the castle and its grounds. Everything was normal except for the pounding in his heartwood. His sap sped through his fibers at an alarming rate.

Past the great Hall, another passage led to the Conservatory. Though unlit, he knew the way now, so the darkness didn't bother him like the Erlking's mountain had. His memories of that desolate trek still sent shivers across his bark. Outside the double doors, he lifted the key to unlock them. Pidge squealed from inside, alerted to his arrival. The surety of her presence and that of their resident rood, Master Knurl, settled him enough to be able to open the door without his hands shaking.

Before the pudge wudgie could sneak through the door, Rowan reached in his pocket and brought out a wrapped chunk of vapid viper flesh. Murly, one of their stable hands, had found the poisonous snake by the barns and killed the viper before it could attack their horses. He'd saved the skin for Rowan to test out the specialized toxins it held. After he and Grendel had extracted the glands, he dissected the snake specially for Pidge.

Rowan tossed the chunk in the air and left the parchment wrapping in the disposal crate so the poison wouldn't affect anything living. The pudge wudgie would have no trouble digesting any toxins left behind.

Pidge darted—a bright flash of ebony feathers—and caught her treat before it landed on the ground. She chirruped in delight.

He meandered to the central Yew tree and rested next to the aging trunk. Its leaves spread above him in a grand canopy. If Rowan tried, he could almost imagine he was back in the Weald.

He shook his head at such folly. It wasn't like him to be so reflective.

A creak sounded, and Master Knurl's face appeared in the bark. "Why are you troubled, young druid? What is on your mind?"

"Two things." Rowan dropped his head to study his branchy hands. "Grendel lost control and changed back to her giant form. I'm unsure what happened to her. Then, when we were cleaning the destruction she left behind, a sound pricked my memory. But no matter how hard I try to figure it out, I don't know what about it is bothering me."

Bark snapped as the rood frowned. "Another shift surged in the castle. Because the change was by air, I couldn't grasp what it was or why it happened. As for the sound, is it a remnant from your forebearer?"

Rowan pondered the rood's declaration before answering. "Grendel was researching sound waves. Perhaps something she heard triggered her change, then." He rubbed at the thinning moss on his face. Springtide ushered in warmer weather, and the foliage was receding, its cover and warmth not needed as much as during Wintertide. "As for your question, I'm not sure. Whatever the blockage is, it's beyond my perception."

"In my years of experience, I have found that the information will come, usually unheeded, when your mind strays to other topics. Often, it's a vague memory of something more concrete. What was the trigger, and what impression did it leave you with?"

Rowan explained what happened and spoke of his memory of the Riven.

Master Knurl remained silent for a few seconds before responding. "Since the giant girl was working on sound waves, and you mentioned the sound of the broom, could it have something to do with the music the Erlking uses?"

He was going to disagree with the old rood that the noise of the sweeping had anything to do with the evil elf's magic, when he recalled the chitterbugs. Their "music" was the ebb and flow of their mating calls. More than obnoxious, the sound was much like the screeching sound the glass made against the stone floor. "Thank you, Master Knurl. You've been very helpful." Rowan rushed out of the Conservatory, Pidge's dismayed screeches following him down the dark hallway.

*~Horra~*

SEVERAL MINUTES LATER, Horra and Glory were arranging the last of the chairs around the lab tables when Rowan burst back into the room, startling them both. "Rowan! What in the name of snake skin are you trying to do? Scare us to death?"

He raised a finger. "Chitterbugs. That's the sound your sweeping reminded me of."

Horra propped the broom against the wall and faced him, unsure what the connection was. When she turned, the druid was only a step away from her. "Space, Rowan." She pushed him away as his eyes grew wide and his brow lifted as if waiting for her to understand. She motioned with her claw for him to keep going. "And?"

He steepled his fingers, and Horra's shoulders slumped, knowing she was in for a lecture. "In the Riven, I caught the sound of the chitterbugs for a moment. The noise was loud, but it held a particular cadence. I rushed to block the racket, and that's probably why the significance didn't automatically come to me. What I'm deducing is that the Erlking uses his critters for more than just spying. Either he's enhancing their "songs," or they're enhancing his music magic."

Glory snickered and crossed her arms. Her muted lilac dress, which matched the hue of her wings, puckered in the center, scrunching the colorful embroidered flowers she'd magicked across the bodice section. "So? What's so important about that?"

Horra bumped her arm, a silent reminder to be nice to the druid, as she climbed into a tall chair along the far wall. "It means if we can stop the bugs, we can weaken the Erlking." She turned back toward Rowan. "How do we do that, though?"

Rowan dropped his hands. "I haven't figured that part out yet."

Glory tsked, then scoffed. "Not more research! You guys are the most boring group of creatures I've ever had the displeasure of spending so much time with." She swiveled and left through the doors on the opposite side of the lab.

Horra waited for her to leave before addressing Rowan again. "She's not wrong." A long breath escaped her. "So, we concoct a plan to destroy all the bugs across the Wilden Lands. What about the frogs and the rodents? The Erlking uses ignored or unappreciated critters. If we targeted them all, the results would wreck the balance of nature everywhere."

Rowan's bark quirked into a rare grin. "Not if we do it right."