

EMMA HAMM  
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



OF  
GOBLINS  
AND  
GOLD

# OF GOBLINS AND GOLD

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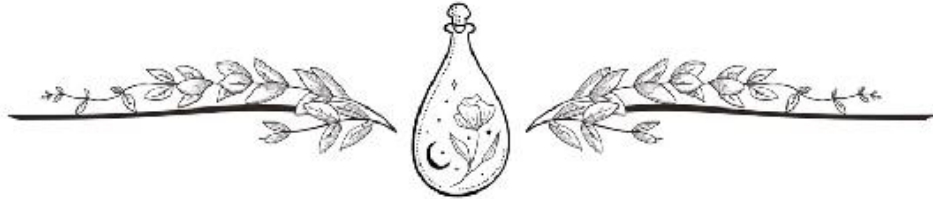
*For the little girls who wanted to meet a goblin king...  
Or maybe just wish away their baby brother.*

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## CHAPTER 1



**T**he chime of goblin bells filled the clearing, as they did every first week of the month. Sunlight slashed through the forest beyond in harsh beams of gold that illuminated their strange carts. All manner of fabric and hide covered wooden wheels and rickety beds. Someone had dyed woolen sheep skins bright red and laid them to hide the rotting planks.

Bells were tied all around the edges. Bells that chimed, twinkled, and rang for visitors from all over to see the goblin wares. And there were hundreds of wares. Food from far-off places, jewelry so beautiful it made tears prick a mortal eye, and perfume that would ensure true love.

In short, magic.

Freya tucked the frayed edges of her scarf securely around her neck, over the layers of her dark hair. Usually, she would lift the edge so she could only see the blurry visage of the goblins. It was bad luck to look at them. Such familiarity invited the goblins to join a weary traveler on their journey home. Those people were rarely seen again.

“Freya,” her sister, Esther, tugged at her sleeve. “Did you see what they have with them today?”

“You’re not supposed to look,” she hissed.

“I know,” Esther replied. “But today they have—”

“I don’t want to know.” Freya yanked her scarf out of its neat knot in the bodice of her dress. She tossed it like a blanket over both of their heads. “Goblin wares are not for us, remember?”

Together, they rushed past the goblins who called out in voices sounding like crows. “Pretty ladies! Don’t you want to see our necklaces?”

I've got the perfect one for that swan-like neck of yours!"

Freya held her breath until they had placed a safe distance between themselves and the goblins with their temptations. When she couldn't hear their voices any longer, she whipped the scarf off their heads.

She spun around on her sister, fury heating her face. "What were you thinking? You know the rules as well as I."

Esther's own face turned beat red, but Freya knew that had little to do with her actions and more with anger. "It was a necklace, Freya. A necklace with a moon at the end, just like mother used to wear. I thought you'd like to know."

The words caught her up short. Their mother had worn a half moon necklace, but she knew for a fact it wasn't goblin made. Their mother had hated goblins. She had dedicated her entire life to researching their kind and creating rules for their town of Woolwich to stay safe from their leathery clutches.

The town emerged from the forest like a mirage lifted from their eyes. Though it was a modest town, it had prospered in the days since it had first been built. They were lucky to have the large salt mine in the distance. Though mining was difficult, it had given the town more money than most.

As such, all the buildings were brand new. Their whitewashed exteriors gleamed in the sunlight, accented by warm wooden beams creating criss-crossed patterns like quilts.

Freya stepped onto the dirt path with her sister and ushered them toward the entrance to town. The well was there, and she desperately wanted a drink after their journey through the forest. Then, they would go to the market and buy all the things they needed for the next month.

Again, her sister tugged on her sleeve.

"What?" Freya said. "Esther, we don't have time, if we want to return by nightfall. You know walking past the goblins is dangerous in the dark—"

"Freya!" Esther's shout echoed. Some townsfolk at the gate paused in their stroll, staring at the two sisters like they had gone mad.

Or maybe more mad. Very few of the townspeople liked Freya or her sister. The two girls who lived in a hut outside the village, all by their lonesome now that their dear parents had departed this realm.

She'd heard their whispers of witchcraft. Freya knew how tentative their place was in this village.

Lowering her voice, she stepped closer to Esther and hissed, “Keep your voice down.”

“I’m tired of living our life as though we’re walking on glass. Mother wore a necklace just like the goblins were selling. Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard you.”

“And you don’t think that’s the least bit suspicious?” Esther’s eyes were wide with hope. “Maybe she sold it, Freya. Maybe she’s still out there and we just haven’t been looking in the right places.”

Freya’s heart cracked in two. Esther had never given up hope their parents would return, emerging from the mist and walking back into their hut like they hadn’t disappeared for years. In some small part, that was why Freya continued to live where they did. But she was the more realistic sister.

She didn’t stay in that hut because she thought they would return. Freya stayed for the memories that lingered in the walls, like ghosts who haunted her waking dreams.

She reached out and brushed a strand of hair behind Esther’s ear. “They’re not coming back, Esther.”

“All we know is that they went into the forest and they never returned. They could still be out there, Freya. Why do you insist on stopping our search?” Tears filled Esther’s eyes, like droplets of pearls clinging to her lashes.

Freya couldn’t have this argument again. She took a deep breath, held it, and tried to think of the right words. What would calm her sister down?

A horse and buggy meandered past them. The sweet grass scent of the horse’s exhale filled her lungs. Clamoring noises of hammers striking metal, people talking on their morning routine, and the clucks of chickens in the farm beyond all took up space in her head.

She couldn’t think with all this noise and sudden sound. Freya’s focus had always been off, but with all these distractions, it was even more difficult to provide Esther with the appropriate answer.

“They wouldn’t want us to keep looking for them,” she settled on. “It’s been two years, Esther. They aren’t coming back.”

What else was she supposed to say? They’d had this argument every week for months now.

Esther’s face turned white as snow. She gave one firm nod, then darted through the gate into town. Freya sighed and planted her hands on her hips.



It wasn't like Esther could get very far. Woolwich wasn't that big of a town, and everyone knew everyone. She could ask a single villager where her sister had gotten off to, and they would know exactly where to send her. After all, the witch sisters were hard to miss.

She'd let Esther have some time to herself. The last thing she needed was for Esther to take off into the forest trying to find their parents. Freya had no one left. And a single witch in a hut was easier to burn.

Freya wrapped the scarf around her waist now, creating a makeshift basket for them to place food in. She already knew what she wanted to get. Squash was easy to come by this year, and she could make that go farther. Eggs would be best, since they couldn't keep a chicken to save their life.

Esther said the goblins kept stealing their fowl. Freya thought it was the fox that lived within the thicket beside their home.

"Hello, girlie." The unknown voice was startling for two reasons. First, because she'd never heard it before. Freya knew everyone in Woolwich. And second, because it rumbled like water trapped under ice.

Freya curled her fingers in the scarf and looked up at the horse and buggy that had stopped beside her. The horse was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. A great black charger, perhaps something a warrior might have ridden into battle. Its hooves were painted silver and were so bright, the sun gleamed off their sharpened ends.

The buggy was a patchwork of colorful fabric. She could hardly guess what it was made of, although the ancient wooden wheels gleamed like polished mahogany.

And of course, as she had expected, she could see the bells woven along the edge. Each was perfectly made, reflecting her own pale, startled face back at her a hundred times over.

The wind picked up and all the bells began to chime.

She told herself not to respond. The goblin man couldn't steal her away if she said nothing. That was the rule.

So instead, she turned her face slowly to the side. Forcing her eyes to remain on the town that was only a few steps away. The town he couldn't enter, no matter how hard he tried.

But out of the corner of her eye, she could see him. The bird-like beak where his nose should be. The feathers that winged back from his eyes and accentuated the sharp angles of his cheekbones. He wore a cloak over his head, like that would somehow hide the differences. And she knew, if she

looked at him or acknowledged him in any way, he would try to sell her something.

The goblin man reached out a hand into her line of sight. “Are you sure you don’t want to buy anything, Freya?”

Her heart stopped at the sound of her name on his tongue. He couldn’t read her mind. She knew the goblins weren’t capable of magic like that. Her mother had proven it time and time again.

He must have overheard Esther say her name. Nothing more, nothing less.

But that didn’t ease the sudden panic in her veins.

Fruit appeared in his palm. The apple gleamed in the sunlight. Its taut skin was so vividly red, she knew she’d seen nothing like it before. Probably never would again. Food grown in the faerie realm was lovely, but it would bind her as their slave forever.

Taking another deep breath, she took a shaky step forward. Away from him. Away from the temptation of the fruit that called out to her because she knew it would be so delicious. So much better than any food she’d ever tried in her life.

All she had to do was reach out and take it. She had money in her pocket. More than enough to buy a single apple from an old man with an old cloak and a horse that eyed her with fire in his gaze.

Shaking herself out of the spell, Freya squeezed her eyes shut and burst into a run. She didn’t care if she ran into someone in town. All she had to do was reach the boundary.

Her feet touched the edge of town and all the temptation fell from her shoulders like she’d shaken off chains. She spun around wildly, staring back at the goblin man who remained where he’d been. Seated on the buggy with the reins in his hand and an apple in his lap.

He tilted his head back in the sunlight and laughed. The sound was like that of a thousand voices all screaming over each other.

Freya covered her ears with her hands, but stared him down all the same. She would not be cowed by this goblin who thought he could frighten her. Not now that she was in the safety of Woolwich.

“I will never buy from a goblin!” she shouted.

His laughter died down, and for a moment, she thought his skin was shimmering. The feathers unraveled to reveal grey skin like moonlight beneath. Then his visage returned to the monstrous form.

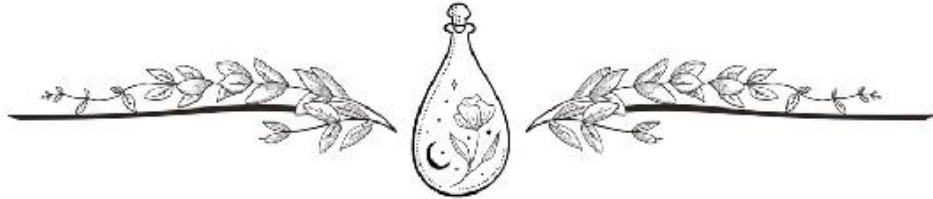
“Oh,” he replied in that stone-like voice. “You are very brave, Freya. But also very foolish. I think you’ll buy something from me far sooner than you realize.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, blinked, and then he was gone. The horse. The buggy. Even the sound of bells had disappeared like he’d never been there at all. All that remained was the lingering scent of apple in the air. Fresh and crisp, like the last temptation after a day of cooking applesauce on the stove.

With a shaky inhalation, Freya turned around and started into town. She needed to find Esther, and then they needed to get back home.

But she couldn’t stop thinking about the goblin man.

## CHAPTER 2



**T**heir little hut at the edge of the wood was an odd building, full of subtle mysteries, but it was home. Freya dropped Esther off, then disappeared to wash the grime of the day from her skin.

And perhaps to wash the oil slick feeling from her goblin conversation off as well.

A long time ago, they had sectioned off a room for washing. Their father had been an incredibly intelligent man, and handy to boot. He'd sealed river stones into the wall, covering the wood and preventing the structure from rotting. A single stained glass window let light spread around her. Warped colors made rainbows cascade over the walls. The ceiling he'd left open with a contraption that caught rainwater in a reservoir.

Though sometimes the water was frigid, today it was warm. The sun had the entire day to heat the water in metal pipes her father had weaved across the roof.

Slicking her hair back, Freya tilted her face to the sky and let the water rush over her cheeks. Goblins. She hadn't ever thought she'd get so close she might have touched one.

And who was the man? She knew monsters when she saw them. They were small, crippled creatures with the faces of animals. Horrible, gnarled things like roots dug out of a garden too late. Rotting. Beyond saving.

At least, that's what her mother had always said. Freya tried hard to never look at them.

But this goblin man was different from the others. Though he'd certainly had the features of an animal, his spine had been straight and rigid. He'd been strong, clearly, and his hands had held the reins with the grip of a

powerful man. Even his eyes had stared at her with a shrewdness that denoted intelligence.

Such things went against everything her mother had taught. The goblins weren't strong. They weren't powerful. They were nasty little creatures who could easily be crushed by a careless heel.

Opening her eyes, she reached up and turned off the water. She should leave some for Esther, poor girl. She was still mad about their conversation, and Freya didn't blame her.

Their parents were a sore subject for them both. Neither wanted to admit they were truly gone. No one wanted to say, "Yes, my parents are dead and I've given up searching for their bodies to lay my mind at peace."

But Freya remembered that night when they had left. She remembered the storm that raged through the forest, unnatural in its speed and smelling like the bitter bite of magic. Her mother had been the first to dart out into the night. She'd carried her basket full of herbs and offerings to the faeries.

Of course their father had followed her when she didn't return. He had left with his pistol in hand, and nothing else but the shirt on his back.

Neither had left the forest again.

Freya knew what that meant. The magic had gotten them, whether a witch or fae conjured that storm, it didn't matter. They were gone and wasting any energy on wondering when they might return was foolish. No matter how it eased the pain in their hearts.

She reached out and nudged the amethyst crystal on the windowsill. Her mother had always put crystals in every window, above every doorway, and over their beds. Each had a different meaning, something it protected against.

Freya didn't know how much a rock could really help, but she couldn't bring herself to remove them after their mother disappeared.

She wrapped a towel around herself and grabbed a second to run through her hair. The black locks reached her hips when it wasn't piled atop her head in intricate braids. Brushing it was a burden, but Esther refused to cut it.

And just like that, as she scrunched her hair with the old worn out towel, Freya heard the sound again. Goblin bells.

It wasn't possible for goblins to steal them away from here. Their property was warded, just like the town. Goblins couldn't step foot through

the talismans, and that meant they were perfectly safe as long as they were in the bounds of their property.

Well, she supposed if they had made a goblin deal, then perhaps the faerie creatures could. But neither she nor Esther had bought anything from them.

She pressed a hand against her heart, feeling the rapid thump beating beneath her ribcage. Everything was fine. Everything had to be fine.

“Esther?” she called out.

No one responded.

Her sister wasn't so foolish as to walk out and greet the goblins when they were riding back to their realm. Esther had grown up being taught of the dangers these creatures brought with them. She wouldn't have wandered out into the forest without at least telling Freya she was going.

Wouldn't she?

Better check, just in case. Her sister was many things, and reckless was at the top of that list.

Freya knotted the towel between her breasts and stepped out of the shower room. She tried to be positive. Esther had learned alongside Freya what to do if goblins passed by their house. They could watch as long as the wards glowed brightly in the bark of the trees. Maybe that's what her sister was doing.

The sound of bells had come from the front of the house. She was certain of it. The sound had long since died down. She could only hope that meant the goblins had already passed their home, and that Esther was likely buried in a book somewhere and ignoring her calls.

So when Freya strode around the corner, she fully expected to see nothing. Just the trees she remembered with moss growing on their trunks. Perhaps a few pollen motes fluttering in the air and birds chirping.

What she found was a full goblin market set up outside her house.

The market was more beautiful than ever. The jewelry was blinding with gemstones and gold so bright they rivaled the stars and the sun. The fabric was even more vivid than she remembered. Every bit of food smelled divine and threatened that only gods should taste their glorious bounty.

Freya was safe within the wards, she reminded herself. Her eyes flicked to the runes carved into each tree that surrounded their hut. Every ward was still there, glowing because the goblins were far too close.

Movement caught her eye, and she stared, horrified, as she realized Esther was right at the edge of the wards. She was talking to a goblin boy with the face of a rat and a tail that flicked back and forth behind him. Their mouths moved, but she couldn't guess what they were saying.

"Esther!" she screamed.

Freya ran. She threw her body into motion and hoped she could get there in time, but it seemed as though time was against her. Everything moved like she was running in place rather than sprinting across the meadow to her sister. She hauled herself over the tiny fence where they kept their garden and further to the other side. The wards were so close she could have touched them, and yet it seemed like she was miles away.

The rat-faced goblin held out something in his hand. A necklace swung from his fingers. The silver, crescent moon glinted in the sunlight.

"Esther, no!" Freya cried out one last time.

Esther didn't listen, or perhaps she couldn't hear her sister through the spell the goblin had cast. She reached through the wards and grabbed the swinging necklace in the goblin boy's clawed hand.

Freya felt the wards shimmer, shudder, and then shatter as her sister broke them. Each and every one. They popped with little explosions all around the circle of their house. Each one sounded like the cracking of glass on stone.

At the sound, Esther flinched. She jerked away from the goblin boy as though she could retreat to the safety of the wards, but they didn't exist anymore.

Freya grabbed her sister around the waist and pulled Esther into her arms. At least her little sister had the where-with-all to bury her face in Freya's shoulder.

The necklace dug into Freya's ribs, clutched in Esther's hand. The tiny prick of the moon gave her some semblance of bravery, although it would leave a mark in the morning. Either way, Freya had to protect her sister. No matter the cost.

"Begone, goblin folk," she growled. "You'll find no business here."

The rat face boy grinned, then bowed like a prince at a ball. "We weren't looking for business, miss. Just wanted to give a charming thing to the prettiest girl in the village."

As if she would ever believe his poisonous words. Freya knew their kind, and they never gave anything away for free. Hissing out a long breath,

she bared her teeth in what she hoped was an intimidating snarl. “Get off my property.”

Another voice interrupted them. “What wards will keep us away?”

The sound of burbling deep waters, the grumble of sea, ocean, and lake, could only be one goblin. The one she had met before. He stepped from the mass of feathers, fur, and claws, then let the cloak fall from his shoulders. As the fabric slid away from his face, so did the magic that kept his true form hidden from her gaze.

He really was made of moonlight. Shimmering silver skin, almost like metal but moving like the shadows of a forest in starlight. His pointed ears had tiny tufts of fur at the end, and when he caught her staring, he touched claws to his face. He grinned, revealing sharp canines.

“What?” he asked. “Not what you were expecting?”

His voice was the only thing he couldn’t change. Smooth as the sound of a storm rumbling in the distance. He was a tempest, that was for certain. Something to be feared.

Esther pressed her face against Freya’s shoulder and shuddered. “I want to go back to the house.”

“We will.” But she didn’t know if that was a lie.

The goblins could come through the wards now. They could walk onto their land with nothing inhibiting them. And no matter how hard she tried to stop them, they could do anything they wanted.

Her mother’s words bubbled in her mind. “Goblins can only make deals with the willing.”

Her hands clenched on Esther’s shoulder. “Did you make a deal?”

“No, of course not.”

“Did you buy something from them? Did you buy the necklace?” She pulled Esther away from her shoulder and shook her sister hard. “Did you buy it?”

“No!” Tears ran freely down Esther’s face. “I’m not so foolish. He gave it to me, Freya. It is a gift.”

She’d never heard of that before, but she also knew the goblin rules. If no deal was struck, and no payment was made, then perhaps her sister was safe.

Drawing herself up strong and straight, Freya glared at the silver goblin. “Get off my property. No deal was made and until then, you are not allowed here.”



“Big words for one so small.” He looked her up and down. Then those sharp teeth flashed again.

“I am not small. Nor will you make me feel weak. Leave, goblin, or I’ll go back into my home and get my shotgun. I know you might be made of magic, but sometimes iron is the only answer to an intruder like yourself.”

She met his gaze head on and told herself she wasn’t afraid. That her sister shuddering in her arms would not make her break. To her great surprise, the strange goblin relented. He bowed his head, then swept his arm out in a grand bow.

“Lady of this keep, you have banished us. As you wish, we goblins will retreat.”

She felt the knot in her chest ease. Maybe they would be all right. Maybe this all would end without losing her sister for a foolish mistake.

She released her hold on Esther, who darted back toward their hut. The tangled vines hanging from the roof would hide her from their gaze, and the solid wood door with the moon carved out of the front would prevent them from entering. She hoped.

Freya waited, clutching her towel to her chest as the goblins packed up their wares. She refused to allow them any time to themselves. Not on her property.

Through all their movement and packing, the silver goblin stared back at her. He crossed his arms over his chest and let his eyes meander over all the skin her towel revealed. She’d never had anyone stare at her this long. Let alone even see her knees.

Freya ground her teeth and let him look. They would remove themselves if she had to stand here all night.

Finally, they packed everything in boxes and crates, and the bells jangled again. Horses emerged from the forest behind them, and the animalistic goblins hooked them up to every cart. The great beasts tossed their heads, jangled the bells, and then the carts moved.

The silver goblin was the last to leave. He uncrossed his arms and gave her a wink. “I’ll see you again soon, Freya.”

“You’re not welcome here,” she reiterated.

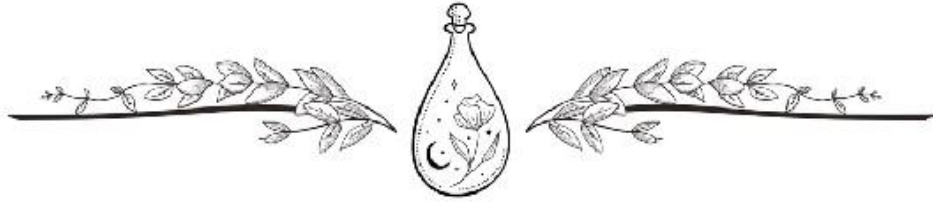
“Oh, I know. But you see, your sister is mine now.”

“She didn’t make a deal.” Her voice shook in fear because she couldn’t lose her little sister. There was no one left, and she’d be damned if this goblin would take away her only family.

He lifted a brow. “What’s your definition of a deal?”

The goblin walked away with the rest. They disappeared into the inky shadows of the forest, leaving behind the faint sound of bells and the scent of freshly baked apples.

## CHAPTER 3



**F**reya burst into their home. The door slammed against the wooden interior and dust blew up from the well-worn sheepskin in the living room. Esther stood beside the woodstove. The iron monolith was the largest thing in the hut and was framed by hanging herbs drying in the rafters.

Her sister was wringing her hands in worry. And she should be worried because Freya was going to singe her ears with angry words.

“What were you thinking?” Freya snapped. “You know how dangerous goblins are. You know the wards can be broken so easily. You’ve left us completely unprotected!”

“I just wanted to get mom’s necklace back,” Esther whispered. She opened her hand and there it was. The damned necklace that looked eerily similar to what their mother wore when she was still alive.

That’s what all this was about? Esther had put them both in significant danger just so she could get back a necklace that looked like mom’s?

She was so mad she could have spit fire. Freya didn’t even know what to say that wouldn’t end in a screaming match. In the end, she grumbled, “You know that’s not mom’s necklace. Hers wasn’t silver, Esther. It was gold.”

But that didn’t deter her sister at all. Esther closed her fingers around the pointed ends and hugged the jewelry close to her chest. As if it had brought her a little closer to their mother after all.

She couldn’t stand the sight.

Freya stalked to the back room. Their bedroom didn’t have a door, but there wasn’t much privacy here, anyway. Back when they were children,

she and Esther had slept in front of the wood stove while their parents slept with a curtain over this doorway. Now, the sisters shared the space.

Esther's side of the room was covered in brightly colored tapestries. She bought a new one each year during the winter festivals, to celebrate the new year. Now, she had exactly sixteen covering the walls.

In contrast, Freya's side was rather bland. She had her small cot, an oak dresser for her clothes, and a small jewelry box on top. It was all she needed, anyway. Esther was more interested in finding things that made her happy. Items. Nik naks. Things that filled their space and let other people know someone lived here. If it were up to Freya, the entire place would be nearly empty.

She pulled out a plain white shift and brown smock to put over it. The goblin's words had gotten into her head, and now she couldn't get them out.

Would he return?

The chill spread down her spine and into her hands, her feet, her very soul. Something inside her said he would absolutely return, and that he would come for her sister.

Swallowing hard, she went back into the center room where Esther waited. At least her sister looked apologetic. Esther likely hadn't wanted to make Freya mad, and the last thing she had planned to do was break the wards. She knew just how dire the circumstances were now that they were unprotected.

Freya only stayed in the forest because of those wards. Her mother had drawn them, and yes, they could recreate the symbols. But that would take time, and night was falling. Wards must be drawn during the day. They drew upon the powers of the sun.

"We have to sew the wards again," she muttered, crossing the room to grab the jug they usually filled with water for tea. She shook it, pleased to find there was enough liquid for her to make a cup.

"Yes, I realize that. I'm so sorry, Freya."

"Don't apologize. Words don't help." She stuffed the wood stove and lit it before adding, "You should get some sleep."

Esther hissed in a long breath. "Look, I know you don't agree with what I did. But I remember mom like it was just yesterday. How am I supposed to forget them? Like you?"

That icy chill traveled down her spine again. Freya straightened and looked her sister in the eyes. "Do you really believe I've forgotten them?"

Do you think that's even possible?"

"Well, you certainly act like it."

Freya had never been so angry. The rage poured through her veins like her blood had boiled rather than the water on the stove. "Everything I do is in memory of them. I take care of the crystals and the herbs. I grow the plants that keep the goblins at bay. I sew the wards when they break, and I sing the songs to the stream so it flows. What more do you want as proof that I miss them?"

"You could say it once in a while."

Was that what Esther wanted? Freya would not sit here and mourn their parents two years after their disappearance. "Things have to get done around here," she replied, her voice thick. "I can't sit here and wish them back with you. Someone has to take care of us and our home."

She didn't expect that person to be Esther. Her sister was only a child, sixteen and still thinking the world would be kind to two women on their own. Neither of them were likely to get married, not while living within the heart of the forest as they did. Not to mention their dowries had already been spent on food and a new roof. Although, Esther didn't know that yet.

Freya had to step up and take on the responsibilities of both mother and father. She had to do all the things that she might not have wanted to do.

Didn't Esther see that? How could she not understand the difficulty of Freya's position?

Of course Freya had wanted a life different from this. She wanted to live as a normal woman and find a young man who would woo her. She wanted to build her own house in the forest, design it so that many babies could stagger through the halls into the arms of a father who wouldn't disappear into the woods and never return.

Esther shook her head in disbelief. "That's all you have to say? After everything we've lived through together, and all the things that mother and father did for you, all you can say is that you're busy?"

"I don't know what you want from me." Freya made her way to the wood stove and reached behind it. Their father's sawed-off shotgun was in a special iron lined box. No faerie would ever steal it, and no goblin could ever touch the box.

Esther sucked in a low breath. "What are you planning on doing with that?"

“I plan on letting you go to sleep and get your rest. Tomorrow is a long day of ward building. One of us needs to have their wits about them to keep watch for any goblins that might return.” She opened the barrel and looked into it, reassured by the sight of two thick bullets. Clicking it back in place, she nodded toward the front door. “I’ll keep watch tonight for anyone who might sneak in.”

“I told you, I didn’t make a deal.” Esther stared like Freya had lost her mind.

Maybe she hadn’t. But that goblin with the moonlight skin made the hair on her arms stand on end. This wasn’t over. She feared what he might plan with magic at his fingertips.

Freya dragged a chair from the dining table into the middle of the room. She sat down hard on the sturdy wood, shotgun held across her chest and eyes on the door. She could see the outside through the moon carving.

“Freya, are you really going to do this?”

She didn’t respond. What else could she say that she hadn’t already? Yes, she was going to sit here all night and make sure not a single goblin thought they could sneak into their hut.

And yes, this was her sister’s fault. Esther knew better. Freya had to fix this situation before they both regretted it for the rest of their lives.

Esther should count herself lucky if Freya ever let her leave the property again. The goblins could take her at any point now if they considered the fine print of a deal as also being given a gift. She had no idea.

Their mother had never taught them what to do in this situation. She’d always said to never get close enough to a deal for goblins to mince words and steal them away. That was the rule.

Esther huffed out a disbelieving breath. “I’ll talk to you in the morning then, I guess. I obviously can’t have a normal conversation with you right now.”

Why she would even try was a mystery to Freya. She didn’t look at her sister as she heard clothing hitting the floor and the bed creaking. If Esther got some sleep, even a small amount, that would feel as though she had succeeded.

As much as Esther liked to think Freya was controlling and a horrible sister, she didn’t remember their mother’s teachings. Esther had always been with their father. He was a kindly man, soft around the edges, and more likely to chat with a goblin than try to keep them at bay.

Their mother had seen the creatures for what they truly were. Faeries liked to kidnap children. They bred mortality into their lines so they weren't so ugly, so disgusting to look upon. They wanted mortal blood and the only way they could get that was by stealing children away.

Sure, the mortal women would cry and beg to be sent back to their homes. They'd want to be in the mortal realm, and maybe they would even wither into a shadow of their former selves. Maybe they would ask to see their loved ones in scrying mirrors or glassy pools.

Time wore away at everything, though. Even love. And eventually, the mortals would forget their lives before goblins, claws, and broods of ugly children.

That was why she stared at the door so fiercely and gripped her gun tightly. She knew what the goblins could do once they sank their claws into children. She knew Esther would eventually forget Freya even existed while she was stuck here in the mortal realm, desperately wishing for her sister to return.

Wishing for her mother.

Her father.

Anyone who would love her because Freya was so scared of losing everything and then being stuck here. Alone. All by herself, without a single person who knew her name.

That future was unacceptable. It made her heart race and her palms slick with sweat. She couldn't survive that fate, and she wouldn't let Esther go because of it.

She tightened her grip on the shotgun. The metal had seen better days. Rust made the handle a little difficult to grip, but that was all right. She knew just how powerful the shotgun was. All she had to do was point it in a direction and fire. Whatever stood in her way wouldn't remain standing for very long.

Goblins were hardy creatures, but she doubted even they would survive a direct shot.

Freya didn't recognize the time passing. All she knew was that she stared for what felt like an eternity. She tried to not even blink, for fear the goblins would appear in front of her as if by magic.

Then she heard it. The chiming of bells that her tired mind thought might be someone tapping a fork against a glass. For a toast, perhaps? Or maybe that was just foolish thoughts because she needed to sleep.

Her eyelids grew heavy. She took a deep breath to force her mind to clear, but all she could smell was the wondrous scent of apples and cinnamon.

No, he couldn't be here. They weren't allowed to come into a house without invitation. At least, that's what her mother had always said. Freya snapped upright again, eyes wide, peering around the room as though he was about to step from the shadows.

When no goblin made himself known, she settled into the chair again. Her hands gripped the wood handle and sweat made them slide dangerously. She needed to get a grip on herself. The sun was coming up, wasn't it?

The cloying scent clawed its way into her nose. It poured into her lungs like someone had tipped whiskey into her mouth and suddenly, she didn't know what time it was. How long had she been sitting in this chair? It felt as though she hadn't been here long, but also as though she'd also been here forever.

She looked out of the little moon carved in their door and felt her hands shake. The sun was rising, but the moon was doing the same. They rose together in the sky until she didn't know whether it was day or night.

"Magic," she muttered. "It's just magic."

And then she heard him. His deep voice whispering in her ear. "Yes, Freya. Of course it's magic."

The sound sent a flutter from her head all the way into her belly. She quivered in the chair, her breath sawing out of her lungs. "What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing at all. I just want you to sleep."

She felt claws on the back of her neck. The cold tips shifted her hair to the side, and then she swore he inhaled the scent of her skin. She could feel the warm heat of his breath brush through her hair.

Freya shook her head, but her eyelids were even heavier. She couldn't keep them open. No matter how hard she tried. "I need to protect my sister," she whispered.

"You need to sleep."

No, just one more breath and she'd be fine. Freya's hands tightened on the shotgun. She would bolt up from her chair, spin around, and shoot him point blank. He wouldn't survive it. He'd never make it out of this cabin alive.



She jolted upright, hands clutching the gun. But as she opened her eyes and spun around, Freya's eyes widened with fear.

The room was filled with sunlight when she had been certain it was still night.

The scent of apples and nutmeg was only a faint trace in the air.

And her sister's bed was empty.

She dropped the gun on the floor and darted into their bedroom. "No, no, no," she muttered, frantically yanking the blankets from her sister's bed. "Esther! Esther, please be here."

But her sister wasn't in the bedroom at all. All that remained was a single, snow white letter on Esther's pillow.

Freya didn't want to touch the cursed page. Goblin magic was all over it. It sparkled like fresh snow when the sun hit its glistening surface, and all she wanted to do was set the entire room on fire.

Esther couldn't be gone. She just couldn't.

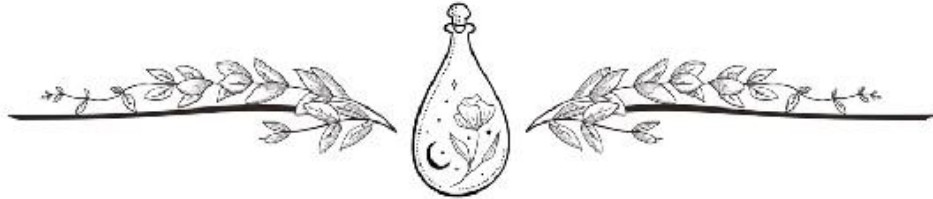
Freya's mind refused to believe what was in front of her, but her heart knew the truth. What other choice did she have?

The goblins considered a gift as a debt, and Esther was the only one who could pay that price. They'd cast a spell on Freya and she'd been asleep for the entire ordeal. Had her sister screamed out for help? Had Esther reached for her while they dragged her from the hut, only to realize Freya couldn't help?

Tears in her eyes, she lifted the small note from the pillow and turned it over.

*Thank you for your sister,  
she'll make a lovely snack.  
Please don't try to find her,  
we won't give her back.*

## CHAPTER 4



**F**reya sat on her sister's bed for hours with the note clutched in her hand. She poured over the wiggly words, clearly written by an inhuman hand. They had to have some kind of hidden meaning in them. Some quest she could partake in to get her sister back.

But the more she read the letter, the more she realized there was no quest. No deal. No way to win back the lost sister in some heroic story. It clearly stated that she wouldn't ever get Esther back.

A swell of emotion was building in her chest. She couldn't think through it. The panic rose into her throat, silencing her voice and bubbling up to her eyes. Tears built, but they refused to spill over.

Freya recognized that she was holding her breath. She needed to inhale or she would pass out, but she couldn't make her lungs work. Not when her sister was gone. Not when she was going to be alone forever and all her fears were finally realized.

The village wouldn't take her in. They'd always liked Esther more than her, because her younger sister knew how to be kinder. Softer. Easier to be around. Freya was all about her work and what she needed to get done. She had little time to pause and talk with villagers who didn't make her own life easier.

They thought she was off-putting. Too difficult, very stubborn, and certainly not the kind of woman who was suitable for a spouse. Let alone friends.

Damn it.

She couldn't survive without her sister. Her family was more important than anything in this world, and the goblins couldn't take her sister from

her. Not without a fight.

Freya burst into movement. She thundered through the room, a woman on a mission as she stuffed the panic back into her belly. It rolled there, rumbling through her intestines, but she refused to pause.

Her mother had discovered many things about the goblins, and she had to know more than what she'd told Freya. How had she learned how to make the wards? Who had taught her?

A thought appeared in her mind, one that she would never have dared to think when her mother was still here.

No one knew how to get rid of a goblin better than a goblin.

Long before her parents had disappeared, Freya's father had buried her mother's books in the backyard. He'd said they were cursed. That they drew the goblins to them because such creatures could sniff out magic like dogs.

Freya grabbed a shovel from the shed behind their house and stomped to the garden. Her father had buried it beneath the turnips because no one in their right mind would ever dig up a good bed of turnips.

But Freya wasn't in her right mind.

She stomped hard on the shovel, sinking into the earth she had tilled for years. She heaved dirt over her shoulder, not caring where it landed. Sweat slicked her brow, and the sun rose as she destroyed their garden. The box had to be here. It had to be.

Finally, her shovel struck something hard. She fell to her knees and dug her hands into the soil. Shifting it to the side, she revealed a small wooden chest with golden clasps holding it shut. The wood looked like not a single thing had touched it for years. Perfect. Pristine.

Magical.

The chest where her mother had kept all her books had to be part of that Other realm. Where goblins marched to their bells and faeries flew overhead.

Freya planted her feet on either side of the chest and heaved. Her back strained, aching under the weight and hours of digging, but she didn't stop. Not until the earth released its treasure, and the chest slid out of its tomb.

She pulled it out of the hole in the ground and placed her hands on the golden clasps. Her mother had always said this box wasn't for the faint of heart. Children shouldn't know of the magic that made their realm work.

Freya had never wanted to know what was inside. She'd always been rightfully afraid of the goblins and their work.

Her fingers shook as she flipped the latches up. No locks kept it shut. And within the box, she could hear a faint rustling. As though the wooden frame hid something alive within.

She opened it and threw up an arm, just in case something came flying out. She had no idea what would have survived within the box that long, but magic could do many impossible things.

Nothing flew out at her. No attack, no sound, even the faint rustling stopped.

Freya slowly lowered her arm and peered into the chest.

The contents were rather unremarkable. Four books in the right corner, a small terrarium with plants still growing inside it, a jewelry box, and a stack of loose papers that moved as she watched.

Papers shouldn't move on their own. But they shifted again as she watched.

Was there a mouse or other small creature still alive after years of being buried? She looked back to the hole she'd just dug, and then to the box again. It wasn't possible. There couldn't be a creature living within the chest.

Hesitantly, she reached out and picked one page up. There wasn't anything underneath it, but the page still fluttered in her hand.

"Are you moving?" she whispered.

The page wiggled again.

With a soft sound of fear, she let the page drop from her hand. It wriggled back to the other pages, tunneling under them as though it were frightened of her. But a page of paper couldn't be afraid. It was just an inanimate object someone had written on a long time ago.

Maybe this was why her father had buried the chest. Unnatural things should remain underground.

Shivering, she braced her hands on the sides of the box. "I need to find my sister."

The pages all stopped moving. It almost appeared as though they were waiting for something, or perhaps they were listening. Waiting for her to continue asking them more questions.

Licking her lips, Freya tried to still the shaking of her voice. "The goblins took her. They had a necklace she thought was our mother's, and even though she didn't make a deal, they still gave her the necklace."

That made the pages rustle again. Each loose leaf shifted, jostling with each other to move. They reorganized themselves until a single page was on the top.

Making sure the pages understood her need, Freya added, "I need to go into the goblin realm and find her. I have to get her back."

The top page lifted at the bottom, then slapped back against the others. Almost as though it were trying to say it knew she wanted to find her sister.

Her skin crawled with the magic that made these pages come alive. She couldn't stand the thought that they were listening to her. Or that they could somehow help her, even though they should have just been dormant. They should be still like real paper and not as though they were alive.

Hands shaking, she reached for the top page and lifted it up into the sunlight. The words at first made little sense. Then she realized she was looking at a map.

It was the forest around their hut. Written in her mother's hand because of course she'd been keeping track of the magical things that happened around her own home. She'd been trying to do that for so many years, and here it was. The map of all magical things in the forest surrounding Woolwich.

Freya tilted the map, rotating it in her hands until she was looking in the right direction. There was the town on the bottom left. Their hut was in the bottom right. And then the entirety of the forest spread out like the ever reaching arms of nature.

Her mother had made a few marks. Some of them made sense. A magical pool that must be avoided because kelpies lived within it. A couple spots where she'd seen sprites making away with honey and wine from the village.

But in the very top corner was a marking that didn't make sense. A little square box with lines like the rays of the sun.

"What is this?" she asked.

The pages shifted again.

Without thought, Freya picked up the next page and read what her mother had written.

"While wandering the forest, I found the most fascinating of doors. It stands between two rather impressive old trees. At first, I thought someone was playing a prank on wanderers like myself. But when I opened the door, I realized there was another world beyond it. This is a portal into the Faerie

Realm and must be avoided at all costs. I tried to cover it, but no matter how many sticks I placed, when I turned around they were gone. Magic protects the door.”

Her mother had drawn a picture of it. The wooden door was unremarkable, but the trees were older than most in the forest. She’d even taken care to draw moss on the bark.

Tears built in Freya’s eyes. Her mother had found a portal, marked it on a map, and then buried the knowledge so no one would ever mistakenly go through it.

And Freya was about to do exactly what her mother had taken such precautions to prevent.

It didn’t matter. She had to get Esther back because who was she without her sister? A nothing, a nobody. Just the strange girl in the woods who didn’t know how to talk to other people because her sister had always done it for her.

Freya could see her future as though she looked into a crystal ball. She would end up alone and the forest would grow in around her. Eventually, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with all the things that had to be done. She would disappear into the moss just like the rest of the hut. The villagers would talk about the strange forest woman who they thought was a witch, and that rumor would spread.

The villagers would no longer want a witch on their land. She would be an old woman by the time they decided she had to be taken care of, and the younger people wouldn’t see her as a person anymore. She would become a mythical, magical creature who needed to be removed.

None of these fears would come to light if she had her sister, however. Esther would know what to do.

Standing, she raced to their home and grabbed her leather pack off the wall. She shoved as much food as possible into it, a canteen for water, a few pieces of clothing to change into. A second pair of boots. The sides bulged until she was certain that was all she could carry in it. Unfortunately. Now, she just had to start the journey.

Freya threw the pack on, tugged on her thick boots for walking, and threw a plain brown dress on top of her chemise, and raced out the door.

The sun was already halfway across the horizon, and she had a long way to go. The door was at the far corner of the forest, farther than she’d ever traveled with her mother.

Branches slapped at her face, scratching her arms and digging through her clothing to her shoulders. The forest fought back as she advanced through it. Almost as though even the trees didn't want her to find the door.

"What were you searching for in the forest?" she muttered to the spirit of her mother. "I don't understand."

She'd never quite understood why her mother had been so set on finding something in these woods. She'd looked every week for something new. Something magical. And then she'd write it down in her books, or perhaps on the map she found and move onto the next. She had instilled within Freya a deep fear of the magical. So where had this obsession come from?

The sun was setting by the time she made it to the far side of the map. Freya stopped in the dim light, peering down at the pages and looking around at the trees. This was the spot. It should have been, at least.

"Where are you?" she called out as she turned in a circle.

The door could easily hide itself from anyone it didn't want to open for. Magic could do a number of things. All she had to do was find it now.

"Come on," Freya muttered. "Show yourself."

As if those were the words the door was waiting for, it was right behind her on her second turn. Hidden between two trees. The trunks had grown around the solid wood door, pressed against the sides like they were parts of a wall. Leaves crowned the top and spilled over the frame.

A door to the faerie realm, just like her mother had said. All Freya had to do was reach forward and open it, then she would be able to save her sister. Or at least start the journey.

Doubt clouded her mind. Why did she think she could be a hero? How could she save her sister? She was just a mortal who knew nothing about goblins, faeries, or sprites. The only knowledge she held was told to her by her mother, who had hated the dreadful creatures.

"Faerie magic clouds the mind," she said. The words were her mother's, and she knew in this moment, magic was making her think terrible things about herself.

She was strong. She was capable. And nothing was going to stand in her way in saving her sister. This door. Magic. Nothing could ever turn her mind away from what she had to do.

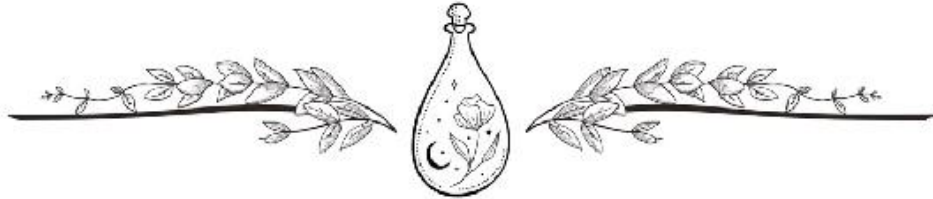
There was no other choice.

Light glowed from underneath the door. Freya reached out her hand and settled it on the golden doorknob that was strangely warm to the touch. She took a deep breath and told herself everything would be fine.

Then she turned the knob and stepped into the faerie realm.



## CHAPTER 5



**F**reya stepped through the door, and the ground shifted beneath her feet. It rolled as though she had somehow stepped onto a wave. She stumbled, then fell onto her hands and knees where the earth tumbled beneath her.

She let out a startled shriek, but the sound didn't stop the magic. Instead, the ground churned up and down until it spit her out. Ejecting her from the tumultuous game it had played, as though she weren't interesting anymore.

Freya pressed her palms into the dirt and tried to get her bearings.

Her head was spinning. A headache bloomed between her eyes and pressed against the front of her skull.

She lifted a dirt smeared hand and pressed it to the ache. The blistering pain didn't stop, but perhaps that was the price of magic. She should have known walking through a magical door wouldn't be easy.

Magic was never easy, according to her mother. Humans couldn't wield it like the faerie kinds could. Goblins used it because they'd already paid its price with their beauty. That's why they looked like animals. Mortals had to continually give bits and pieces of themselves until they were lost forever.

Groaning, she sat down hard on her bottom and held her head until the pounding slowed. She was still very light-headed, standing wouldn't happen for a while without passing out. But at least she could see straight without the world tilting again.

Letting her hands fall down to her sides, she stared at the path she'd been spat out upon.

The ground was covered in beautiful, vibrant leaves of red, gold, and orange. She'd never seen colors that looked so bright. The trees arched over the lane, creating a ceiling of tangled branches and colorful leaves that fell with the passing wind. She could just barely see the sky through the gaps. Bright blue and lovely.

Most concerning, it wasn't fall in the mortal realm. It was the middle of summer, so she wasn't sure why it was autumn here.

Another shower of leaves fell down around her head. She shook them out of her hair with a disgruntled snort. There wasn't anything familiar around her, although it also looked like there wasn't a way off the path. The trees were pressed so tightly against each other, Freya didn't think she could fit past their trunks. Only a small child might be able to fit, and even then...

She stood and dusted off her bottom. If the only way to continue was forward, then she best be putting one foot in front of the other.

At first, Freya kept her eyes on the trees. She wanted to make sure no faeries came charging out at her for daring to step foot in their realm. Not to mention she was concerned there would be a gap she missed if she continued on too quickly.

Then she realized the trees all looked the same. No one was coming out of the forest. And the sun was still in the exact same spot on the horizon that it had been when she first arrived.

Frowning, Freya paused for a moment and looked up at the sparkling light through the leaves. "Curious."

She started forward again. This time, she kept her gaze on the path before her and the faint hint of a shape at the end. A shape that looked suspiciously like another door.

No matter how quickly she moved, the shape stayed in the same spot. A mirage, perhaps.

Freya focused on a tree with a rather distinct curved branch. She watched with rapt attention, forcing herself to stare only at that tree and move forward. But the tree didn't get any closer, no matter how long she ran.

After what felt like hours, she tired herself out. Her legs quivered. Her thighs ached and her stomach twisted into knots. She couldn't take another step forward, but she had gotten nowhere with all the running.

Out of breath, she bent at the waist and braced her hands on her knees. She'd never heard of something like this before. Her mother had mentioned

no spell that stuck a person in the same spot while they ran. Was it even possible?

Looking up at the tree again, she twisted her expression into a snarl. Then she looked at that damned hot sun in the sky. In the same spot as it had been hours ago. “Why aren’t you moving?”

“I could ask the same of you.” The voice came from right beside her, although Freya was certain she had been alone.

She stared down at the creature to her right, and it took awhile to process what was walking beside her. Or who. Actually, she wasn’t sure whether to call it a “who” or an “it”.

It was a dog.

Or something like a dog.

A black and white dog, with a long snout and soulful brown eyes staring up at her. He walked on his back legs with his front paws held at his sides like a person. A red, crushed velvet suit covered his body as though he were human, but a tail with a white tip stuck out of the back.

At least he wasn’t wearing shoes. There was only so much she could handle at the moment.

Clearing her throat, Freya tried to make sense of what was happening. A dog was standing next to her, wearing clothing far finer than any she’d ever touched in her life, and it talked. Because of course that all made sense.

She was losing her mind.

Freya stared straight ahead of them and took a deep breath. “It’s not real, Freya. This is all an illusion. Something to make your mind break.”

The dog nodded its head. “Possible, I suppose, though unlikely. What illusion would be useful to break your mind? Humans are quick to believe they’re mad, and it would be such a waste of magic.”

“That’s exactly what an illusion would say.”

“Or perhaps I’m standing next to you, solid and fully formed. Really, I don’t understand why humans are so quick to explain everything away. Perhaps your eyes aren’t lying at all.”

She stiffened. “Then this is real? You’re real?”

He looked down at himself, then back up at her. “Why wouldn’t I be real?”

A thousand answers played through her thoughts. Because she’d never heard an animal talk. Because the goblins could easily lock her in this place while she babbled away to a dog who wasn’t even real.

A thousand answers, and yet none of them could explain what this little beast was doing.

She reminded herself this was only part of the journey. Esther needed her and abandoning everything at the first talking animal would be ridiculous. She was bound to see a lot stranger things.

“I suppose you’re right,” she replied. “I can see you’re real.”

“Solid as they come.” He thumped a paw to his chest. “Now, why aren’t you moving?”

She didn’t have an answer for that. Obviously, if she could be moving, then she would. Freya frowned down at him. “I don’t know.”

“Ah.” He looked around her down the path. “Well, I suppose that’s just the path then. I wasn’t sure what you were doing.”

“I’m trying to find my sister.”

“A noble quest.” He planted his paws on his hips and the tiny suit stretched across his chest.

She thought perhaps he was some kind of herding breed. In the mortal realm, he would have been working on a farm. Apparently, in the faerie realm, he was a rich dog who could afford red velvet.

The dog snuffled, a sound that was so familiar it made her blink twice before focusing on his words. “If you’re on a quest, then you’ll have to move faster than you are.”

Freya picked her feet up and started walking. Disconcertingly, as she was speeding up her pace, he was standing in the same spot. Not moving, but remaining at her side. Finally, she gave up trying to walk.

Tossing her hands up at her sides, she replied, “See? No movement.”

“Yes, I can see that.” He tapped his chin with an overly large paw. “What a predicament.”

Freya waited again, certain he was going to say something more. A predicament, yes, it was. But he was a magical creature, and surely he’d have an idea that could help her.

She continued staring at him as he tapped his paw.

Finally, the dog heaved a great sigh and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, good luck then.” He started off toward the woods without another word.

Furrowing her brow, she watched him leave before shouting, “Wait a second! Aren’t you going to help me?”

The dog stopped and looked over his shoulder. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

She felt her jaw drop open. Leaves rained down on the dog's shoulders, but he didn't seem to care. All he did was huff out another breath that blew one from his shoulder. When she didn't respond immediately, he turned around and pranced away.

"Wait!" she shouted. "Shouldn't you at least try?"

Again, he paused, although this time he looked rather angry. "Why would I help you?"

"Because I need help?" Freya realized that was a flimsy argument at best. "Because I'm asking. I can't be trapped here for all eternity, I have to save my sister."

"Yes, you said that." The dog wandered close to her again. "What do you have to trade?"

She floundered, trying to understand what he was asking for. Her mother had always said faeries were interested in helping humans, but for a price. She didn't want to make a deal with him or she'd end up in the same place as Esther. But this wasn't a deal. He was asking for a trade.

"I won't make a deal with you," she clarified. "If that's what you're asking."

He waved a paw in the air. "Petty magic. Goblins like making deals, yes, but I've risen above my kind."

"So you're a goblin?" She eyed him again, trying to see some semblance of the creatures she knew. He wasn't human enough for him to be a goblin, or at least in her opinion.

The few goblins she'd gotten a good look at always had some kind of human quality to them. Arms. Legs. Skin that wasn't covered in fur. Sure, this creature wore human clothing, but that didn't mean he wasn't a dog in a velvet suit.

He glared up at her. One side of his mouth lifted into a snarl. "Of course I'm a goblin! What else would I be?"

She didn't know, but they were in the faerie realm, so she supposed he could be all manner of things.

Freya pressed her lips together and eyed him. "I just need someone's help. And you look as though you are the kind of person who knows a thing or two about the place we're in."

"Yes, well—" he started as though he were going to argue more, then paused as her words processed. He planted both his paws on his hips then replied, "I do know a lot about where we are."

“And you seem far more benevolent than any other goblin I’ve met. So I thought it much more likely that you’d be more likely to be a knight in shining armor for a poor woman like myself?”

Freya tried her best to keep the hopeful tones out of her words. Perhaps if she plied him with compliments, then he’d give in. If he could get her out of this forest, then she’d gladly be on her way without him.

He sniffed again. “Yes, I am more giving than the rest. It’s what sets me apart.”

“I can tell.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “My name is Freya of Woolwich. What’s yours?”

He touched a paw over his heart. “Arrow the goblin.”

“Well then, Arrow the goblin. Would you please help me?”

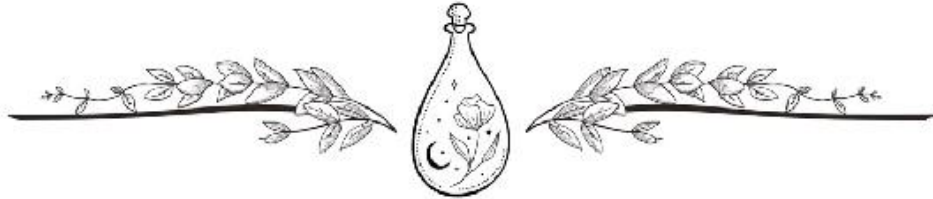
He seemed to mull over her words. If the goblin relented, that was a better start than where she was at. Surely a goblin would at least know a way out. And maybe he’d know how to find her sister.

“What do you have to trade?” he repeated.

She grumbled out a few expletives before she yanked her pack off her back and tossed it at his feet. “Would anything in there suffice?”

He gave her a rather wolfish grin for such a small dog. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

## CHAPTER 6



**F**reya wasn't certain how long they walked. It felt like days, though the sun never moved. She tried to keep up with the goblin dog, but no matter how quickly she walked, she always seemed to tire before him.

At least Arrow wasn't impatient. He paused when she needed to, eyeing her with that dark gaze. Almost as though he were a little disappointed.

Freya didn't know how to prove her worth. She was trying as hard as possible, but she couldn't walk forever. Time passed and her legs quivered. Her back ached. Sweat slicked her skin from head to toe, and still Arrow hadn't given her any guidance on how to get to the end of this path.

Finally, she had to stop. Freya lifted a hand to her sweaty brow, then bent over with her hands on her knees. "I can't," she muttered. "I need to stop for a bit."

"All right, then." Arrow crossed his paws over his chest. "We can stop."

She wanted to grumble he hadn't ever started. The goblin had let her walk and walk and walk while he remained still the entire time. He hadn't lifted a single paw.

With a groan, she allowed herself to sit on the ground. Her butt hit the dirt, and she admitted to herself that she didn't want to be here. She didn't want to sit with a goblin on an impossible path. She certainly didn't want to feel like she was talking to a dog and slowly losing her mind.

But this was the only way to save her sister.

"Damn it, Esther," she muttered. "Why did you take that necklace?"

Arrow settled onto the earth beside her. He laid down just like the animal he looked like, which was disconcerting while he still wore clothing.

“Esther? Is that your sister’s name?”

She nodded.

He put his head on his paws. “It’s a pretty name. I can see why the goblins wanted her. We like pretty names.”

“No, they...” She shook her head. “They had a necklace that looked like something our mother used to wear. She disappeared a few years ago, and Esther was certain it was the same necklace.”

Arrow narrowed his gaze, then shook his head. “Unlikely. We don’t take from the dead. Bad luck, you see.”

Such information was new for her to hear about the goblin kind, and she stored it away for the future. Goblins were afraid of the dead. Or perhaps they just honored those who were no longer with them. Similar to humans, really, although she’d seen people dig through graves for anything that was worth a few coins.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Well, either way. They took her for accepting the gift of the necklace.”

“Ah.” Arrow grumbled out a sound that was eerily similar to a growl. “The fine print. She really should have read the contract a little closer.”

“There’s no contract with goblins.” Freya’s voice snapped through the air like a whip. “They take what they want. Who they want. And this time they took the wrong person. My sister wasn’t for barter.”

The leaves froze. The wind stopped blowing. It appeared the entire path was holding its breath after her outburst.

Even Arrow hesitated before he quietly replied, “Losing family is very difficult.”

“What would you know of that?” She pulled her pack into her lap and rummaged through it. The canteen full of water wouldn’t last much longer, but she couldn’t stand the thickness of her dry tongue.

Only a few bars of honey and dried fruit were left. She still had a full loaf of bread, but that was only one more day’s worth of food. Freya was running out of time and this goblin refused to help her.

Arrow shifted again, standing up and straightening the hem of his velvet coat. “I would know a great deal about that, human child, and I’m offended you think otherwise.”

Freya froze. What had she asked him? What he knew of losing family?

Well, now she felt rotten. She set the pack down on the dirt, cheeks burning. “I’m sorry for your loss.”



“Not everyone has been blessed in life, as it sounds like you are aware.” He looked down at a paw, then back to the path. “My mother’s name was Bow. Father was Fletch. Made sense they would name their children Arrow and Notch.”

Freya held out one bar of fruit and honey. She didn’t think there was anything in it that could hurt him. She never used raisins in her recipe, and that was the only thing she knew dogs were allergic to. At least when it came to dried fruit.

He waved it off, then continued. “They were all like me. Beautiful. Lean. So fast they were in the king’s royal hunting party and together they chased down the greatest of prey.” He pressed a paw to his chest again, as though the memories ached to think of. “They were all killed in a tragic accident, as the king likes to call it. But I have my doubts. I might never have been in the king’s service but I know my family. They tried to save the king but...”

As his words trailed off, Freya reached out a hand for him to take. Delicately, Arrow placed his paw on her palm.

“What a tragic loss,” she replied. “My mother and father are gone, although we do not know if they are dead. My sister has been stolen away by goblins for owing them a debt. I am completely alone in this life and I know how difficult it is to feel strong when no one is standing by your side.”

He nodded sharply. Arrow blinked a little too fast for her to think him unaffected by her words. “Those of us who are alone must stick together, I suppose.”

“That’s why I’m asking for your help. I need to get her back, Arrow.” Freya stared into his eyes and hoped he saw her sincerity. “Maybe we can help each other so neither of us is so alone.”

He huffed out a low grumble, then a growl, and finally took his paw away from her hand. “Fine, fine. What goblin took her and where did they run off to?”

“I don’t know.” But she did. She must.

Freya tried to consider the options. The rat-faced goblin boy might have been the one. After all, he’d given the necklace to her sister. But that seemed wrong. Unbelievable, if she was being honest.

“There was only one goblin there who might have done it,” she murmured. “His skin was like moonlight and he smelled of fresh baked

apple pie.”

Arrow stiffened. His lips curled back and his teeth glinted in the sunlight. “Apples, you say?”

“And cinnamon. When she disappeared, that scent was very strong in the room even long after they had disappeared.”

A low growl erupted from Arrow’s jaws. The snarl on his face expanded into a full out sneer. He might be a medium-sized dog, but he could absolutely do damage with those sharp teeth. “I’m afraid to inform you that the Goblin King was the one who stole your sister. If he wanted her, then she’s gone forever.”

“No.” Freya blurted the word out before she could catch it. “I refuse to believe that. She’s not gone, and she certainly isn’t beyond my reach. No one is that powerful.”

“He is.” Arrow scuffed a paw in the dirt before looking back to the forest. As though he were pondering whether or not he could slip away from her again. “The Goblin King is the only one we’re all afraid of, you see. He’s the High King and has been for a long time.”

“High King?” She shook her head in confusion. “I thought all faeries were the same.”

“Oh, no. We’re all split up into different courts and none of us like each other. That much is for certain. But the Goblin King? He’s the only one to wrangle all the faerie folk under his iron fist, and none of us would go against him.” Arrow started toward the forest with his head ducked low. “Good luck, Freya of Woolwich. I wish you the best.”

She’d had him! Freya knew she had convinced the goblin to help her, and now she’d lost him again just by bringing up a man who smelled like apples.

If his own court was so frightened of him, she couldn’t imagine how a human woman would stop him. But she had to try.

“Wait!” she called out. “Wait, you said you would help me!”

“I said no such thing.”

“You said those of us who were alone had to stick together, and that’s a binding verbal contract.” She didn’t know if it was. Even suggesting such a thing was a stretch, but if the goblins could take her sister over a gift, then perhaps she could convince one to help her over something so silly as the wording of a sentence.

The hackles on Arrow's back rose. She could see the tufts of fur over the collar of his lovely jacket.

He turned with a fearsome snarl on his face. "Semantics, mortal. You're arguing over a dangerous topic. Binding a goblin to you will only end poorly."

"Will it? Or will it force you to help me find my sister?"

He shook his head. Leaves crunched under his paws as he shuffled back and forth. A wind blew between them, ruffling her hair and blowing it in front of her face.

The slight distance from the goblin dog gave him a strange, warped edge to his form. As though magic were what kept him upright and gave him the ability to speak.

Arrow snorted out a breath. "You wish to bind me to help you? Then a deal has to be struck."

"It already has been." She straightened her spine and hoped she was right. "You already said you would help me, and I offered nothing in exchange. Seems to me this is the same situation my sister was in. You offered something freely. I took it. A deal's a deal, goblin."

Perhaps she was right in her assumptions. Arrow's claws dug into the dirt, but he gave her a sharp nod once again. "Fine, then. You want to find your sister, who's in the Goblin King's clutches, you can take that risk. Bind me with a deal, but you're still the one whose head will roll if you mess up."

"I don't care." She did, of course. Her head was rather important in the grand scheme of things, but she wouldn't let this goblin think he had scared her off the battle. "I want my sister back. And you're going to help me get her."

He pointed at her with a paw. "Say it, mortal. If the Goblin King finds us, you're the one who's taking the blame."

"No deal." She swallowed hard, knowing what she was about to say was foolish but refusing again to see reason. "If the Goblin King thinks he can beat me, then he can try his very best. But I will get my sister back and I will break whatever deal she made with him. No Goblin King will stop me."

Arrow's eyes widened in fear just before a crack of thunder split the air. The wind picked up again, catching all the fallen leaves and throwing them

into the air. A swirling dervish of colors surrounded them. The sun disappeared behind sudden storm clouds, black as night and ominous.

Her breath fogged as she exhaled, almost as though all the heat had been sucked from the path in the wake of her words.

The dog goblin panted, tiny clouds forming around him and slowly floating up in the air to join the rest of the oncoming storm. "What have you done?" he asked.

Freya didn't know. Why would any of this happen just because she'd said a few words about defying the Goblin King?

She shook her head. "What did I do? I don't know, Arrow!"

"You challenged the Goblin King!" he shouted.

Laughter floated down the path along with a blast of air that blew her hair away from her face. Leaves slapped at her cheeks, scratching the delicate skin and whipping her neck like tiny whips. She threw up an arm but stared at the end of the path. She could see something there... a tall figure who was almost familiar.

Then the figure lurched forward and she could see the moonlight skin clearly. The strange eyes and pointed ears with tufts of fur. She could see the sharp smile in the darkness.

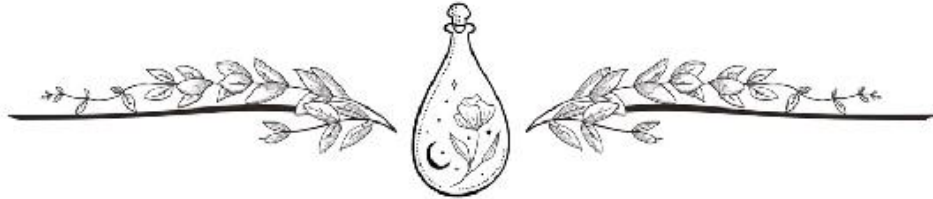
The Goblin King stood there, and he was the one who had taken her sister. Rage burned in her chest.

Without thinking, she leapt toward him. Sprinting with the hope that she could wrap her hands around that pretty long neck and squeeze the truth out of him.

"Freya, no!" Arrow shouted.

This time, she actually moved. Freya struck a wall of magic so hard that it shattered like glass. She plummeted from the path and into darkness so deep it was like she had died.

## CHAPTER 7



**S**he tumbled through the air, somersaulting through starlight and past hanging moons until she struck the ground. All the air in her lungs burst from her lips from the sheer force of impact. Freya wheezed, desperately trying to suck in much needed air before her lungs collapsed.

Once she managed, she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees. She stared down at the polished tile floor. Tiny patterns had been hand painted onto each ceramic square. Little stars and moons, lines connecting them to make constellations she'd never seen or heard of before.

She lifted her gaze, looking up to find herself in some kind of... astrological research center? Or something of the sort.

Mobiles of planets and stars rotated above her head. The contraption that controlled them was impressive, if a bit impossible to believe. The stars were represented by five pointed gold creations that looked sharp as knives. A giant planet stood in the center of the room, gilded and patterned with tiny flowers. Rings of gold surrounded it, rotating with the rest of the planets.

Even the ceiling was covered in gold stars, though it was painted a vivid, deep blue.

There were windows, but they looked out into what appeared to be nothing but stars. Impossible. And yet, everything she'd seen thus far in the faerie realm was impossible.

Movement from behind the largest planet caught her eye. Stairs led up to the base of the spinning globe that was easily six feet tall. Silver skin shifted and a man in a black suit stepped from around the corner.

Now, she knew to call him the Goblin King in her mind. He stared down at something in his hand, not even looking at her, although he must be the one who had brought her here.

Freya frantically stood, backing away until her spine hit one of the pointed stars spinning throughout the room.

At her soft gasp of pain, he looked up. Those dark eyes narrowed and the smile on his face could only show his delight at her fear. "Hello, Freya. You've been rather persistent."

She hated him. Never in her life had she felt such a dark emotion, but it flowed through her veins as though raw power had taken the place of her blood. "What have you done to my sister?"

"Who?" He arched a thin brow. "Why do you persist in believing I care where your sister is?"

"Considering you stole her away from our home in the middle of the night, I'd imagine you care very much." She took a large step to her right and avoided the next star spinning toward her head. "You even went through the trouble of casting a spell to make me fall asleep."

"Is that what you believe?" He tilted his head to the side, watching her with a narrowed gaze. "You think I made you fall asleep when you were obviously exhausted? Perhaps you fell asleep on your own."

"I didn't."

That damned arched brow challenged her.

Freya refused to let him get in her head. He wanted her to think that she was the one at fault here. He wanted her to give up because she was the one who had failed her sister.

No. That wasn't the truth. And she wouldn't let him sew lies into her mind.

She balled her skirts in her fists and took another step away from him. "I didn't," she repeated. "You were the one who took her. A gift is not a deal, and I'm here to prove that."

"Oh, we didn't take her because she took the necklace from that boy." The Goblin King took a step toward her, aggressive and seeming to suck all the air from the room. "But you already know that, don't you? Esther has always been fascinated by our kind. Maybe she wanted more than your boring little life."

"No," she whispered. "My sister knows the rules, and she was happy with me."

His hair slid over his shoulder. The long dark locks shimmered in the starlight as they pooled down his chest. “Indeed, she knows the rules as well as you. But what makes you think she follows them?”

Freya would not fall into this trap either. He was getting too close to her with those intense eyes and that creepy smile. She stepped up the nearest stairs and stood beside a planet painted a deep emerald. The star paintings winked above her, glittering and sparkling with magical light.

“My sister respected what our mother taught.” Freya held onto one of the gold rings surrounding the planet, as if that would give her the stability and courage she needed. “You cannot convince me otherwise with your lies.”

He chuckled. The light glowing from within the planet cast over his features, turning his skin a sickly green. “Esther has always been fascinated by us. She talks to the fae whenever she walks in the woods. About magic, about goblins, about you and your mother. She’s told us a lot of things and none of them required us to stay away.”

That sounded like her sister, but talking to imaginary friends wasn’t making deals. Esther was never far from Freya’s sight, anyway. If she’d been talking to goblins, Freya would have known.

“I don’t have to listen to your lies,” she whispered.

He rounded the corner near her planet, ducking underneath a passing star. His muscles flexed underneath that skin tight, perfectly pressed suit. He looked like a panther stalking his prey, especially when those silver eyes flashed. “They aren’t lies. You remember what your mother taught you. The fae cannot lie, although I will admit we can deceive.”

She tried to back away farther, but hit the wall. Apparently even this room had its limits to allow her escape. “My mother was a pious woman who knew exactly what kind of evil rests in your hearts.”

This close, his beauty overwhelmed her. The smooth texture of his face was like looking at glass. He still smiled with those sharp teeth, but this time she could see the dimples in his cheeks. The sharp edge of his jaw made him far too handsome, while that sweet scent of his skin filled her nose. Even the faint tufts of hair at the tips of his ears weren’t quite so otherworldly.

Gold threads decorated his suit with tiny vines and blooming flowers. His clothing was startling in its luxury. In comparison, she was an ugly weed planted next to a prized rose.

Freya was acutely aware of the poor quality robe she had over her chemise. It wasn't much, just homespun and wool. She also knew she smelled to the high heavens considering how long she'd been running for the past day. Perhaps past two days, she wasn't certain of the passage of time here.

And yet, the Goblin King leaned in and inhaled. "You stink of mortality," he murmured. "And weakness."

"I am not weak."

"Oh, you're not?" He watched her with so much intensity in his gaze that it made her cheeks burn. The silver flecks in his eyes shifted in tight circles, like a whirlpool.

And suddenly, she wondered if he was right. Maybe she was weak.

Hadn't she let her sister get taken? After all the things she'd done to keep her sister alive after their parents disappeared, she hadn't fought to keep Esther by her side. All she'd done was fall asleep in a chair, hugging her shotgun like it was a baby.

She'd done nothing.

She was nothing.

And here she had brought herself to the home of the Goblin King, thinking she could argue for her sister's freedom. Foolish dreams turned people into weaklings who clearly did not know what they'd gotten themselves into.

Freya couldn't yank herself out of the dark place in her mind. She tried to focus on something, anything, in the room that would help her, but the planets kept spinning. The stars kept moving. She was the only thing in the room that was so clearly and thoroughly stuck.

A grey moth fluttered down from the ceiling. It danced through the air, but she could focus on that instead of the constant spinning of the universe. The graceful wings beat at the air until it landed gently on the Goblin King's shoulder.

The dark thoughts parted like the pages of a book. She could see through the magic now. Through him as he had been the one manipulating her mind.

Freya wasn't weak. She had come here when no one else would have dared. She had walked for miles to get to her sister's side, and no Goblin King would change that.

"Huh," he muttered. "Well, that's certainly less fun."



When had he gotten so close to her? If Freya leaned forward at all, she would touch her nose to his. He was peering at her reactions as though she were an experiment he was testing magic upon. And that wouldn't do.

She twisted, ducking underneath his arm and bolting through the planets. She needed space to breathe air that wasn't exhaled from his lips.

Even as she darted away, the sweet scent of him trailed along with her. Not that he wore a masculine scent as she might have thought. Nor even a hint of luxurious perfume, as his clothing would have befit.

"Why do you smell like a bakery?" she snarled as she caught herself on one of the planets. Her lungs heaved for clean air, anything other than the sickly sweet scent.

"A bakery?" He lifted an arm and sniffed the sleeve. "How strange. I don't smell like that to anyone else."

"Impossible."

He shrugged. "I'm the Goblin King. I am designed to charm many people, but temptation comes in many forms. My physicality attracts some. My scent attracts others. Though you might find it hard to believe, some people even enjoy my company for my wit alone."

Freya could hardly believe that. She sneered, the expression twisted and cruel on her face. "Now I know faeries can lie."

He tossed his head back and booming laughter filled the room. "Ah, yes, you are entertaining, madame. I will give you that! I hadn't anticipated you would be quite so quick-witted yourself."

Was this some kind of test? A meeting to decide whether or not she could have her sister back?

Freya looked around the room filled with galaxies and tried to find some clue. Some detail that would suggest he knew where her sister even was. A map. A drawing. Even just a lock of her sister's hair.

The room was pristine and beautiful, but it was void of anything that suggested a mortal had been here. No footprints, not even a finger print on the golden railing she gripped. Nothing but her own.

She released her hold on the metal and fisted her hands at her sides. "I came here to get my sister back, and you will return her to me."

"And here I was thinking you would be easy to send back to the mortal realm." He tapped a long nail against his chin. "But perhaps this game between us would be suited for more attention than a passing afternoon."

"Game?" Freya spat out the word. "This is my sister's life. Not a game."

“Everything is a game, Freya. Haven’t you realized that? Otherwise, life is decidedly boring.” He spread his arms wide and descended the stairs toward her. “I’m always willing to make a deal with a pretty woman.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I won’t make any deals with any goblins. I want my sister back, but I will only get her back the right way. I’m not trading my soul for hers.”

The Goblin King gave her a censuring look. “The only way to get something from a goblin is to make a deal. So you either take the one I’m offering, or kiss your sister goodbye forever.”

Freya shut her mouth with a snap. She supposed he wasn’t lying. Her mother had said the same thing about their kind. Goblins never offered anything for free.

The moth on his shoulder fluttered its wings and took off. She watched it fly up to the ceiling and land in the center of a star.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I want to know that if you fail in this test, you will stay here.” He laughed and the sound was mirthless. “Who wouldn’t want to stay in the goblin kingdom? And you will fail, Freya. No one has ever beat me before.”

“And if I defeat you?” She had to know it was a possibility, not that he was sending her on some impossible trial no one else had survived.

“Then you take your sister home.” He closed his mouth, those sharp teeth disappearing underneath his soft plush lips. “Really, Freya, it’s a simple choice. Play a game with me. Let’s see how entertained we can be before you disappear from this realm forever. That’s all I’m asking.”

He was asking? She couldn’t imagine why he would want the entertainment, but perhaps there was something more happening here that she didn’t understand.

Freya didn’t have a choice. He would send her home if she didn’t take his offer. No matter how many times she fought to return, she would never get her sister back without making a deal.

And the Goblin King knew she had no other choice. Otherwise, he would have waited for her to ask for a deal.

Finally, she grumbled, “What are your terms then, Goblin King?”

The grin returned. Sly and far too knowing, like he had already trapped her, and she didn’t know it yet. “Four gifts. Four meaningful items that represent the courts that follow me. Elves, Fairies, Sprites, and Goblins.

You need to find the essence of their courts and bring them back to me. It's that simple."

"Why do I expect it's not that simple at all?"

He held out his clawed hands for her to take. "Do we have a deal, Freya?"

She eyed his palms. They were just hands, and yet, she knew they were so much more than that. She was as good as signing her life over to him if she took his deal.

The thought made her skin crawl.

Freya reached forward and placed her hands in his. "You have a deal, Goblin King."

Pain surged through her hands as twin spikes pressed into the centers of her palms. She felt them dig through her skin and into the fine, delicate bones. Twisting and grinding through the muscles. Gasping, she fell onto her knees before him, her hands still trapped in his.

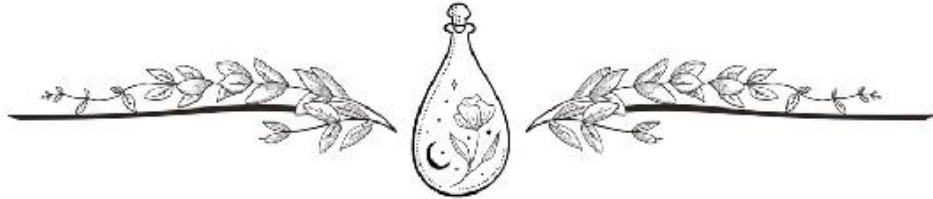
Her jaw fell open as she tried to think through the pain. She tried to breathe, but the spikes made her fingers twitch uncontrollably.

Then he released her, and the blades slid out of her palms. Freya clutched both her hands to her chest, still shaking with pain.

"Oh, please," he muttered. "It's just a little blood."

The Goblin King lifted his hands and she could see the red slicking his palms. He curled his fingers into fists, waved them in the air, and then she felt the floor disappear.

## CHAPTER 8



**S**he landed hard and rocks dug into her knees. Freya dug her fingers into the dirt and growled, “I need to get a better hang of that.”

If they were going to continue dumping her on the ground somewhere new, then she had to find a better way to be teleported somewhere. How dare he toss her away like she was boring?

The holes in her palms still ached. Dirt dug into the wounds, stinging like she’d put her hands in fire. But at least it helped get her head on straight.

She had to do this. Find the essence of... wherever the hell she was and then move on to the next. She had to do this so she could find her sister and they could go home. She could do this.

The mantra was almost believable.

Sitting back on her haunches, she looked around her and tried to get her bearings. The sun shone brightly overhead, and she was at the very end of a path. Perhaps the path she’d been traveling for a very long time.

The horizon was filled with cherry blossom trees, each with petals more beautiful than the last. Lavender fields surrounded the woods, although Freya wasn’t sure she could even call it a wood when it was clearly an orchard. Pinks and lavenders filled her gaze so much that she started getting starry eyed.

Birds chirped overhead, their songs an eerily familiar tune. Were the birds actually singing here?

“I hate this place.” The familiar voice grumbled in her ear, but she already knew it was the goblin dog. Who else would follow her?

“Where did you run off to?” she asked. “I thought you would take the chance to leave.”

“I made a deal, remember? You forced me to do so and goblins can’t break deals.” He stepped in front of her and smoothed a paw down the velvet covering his chest. “But I really do hate this place, so this better be worth my time.”

“Where are we?” She pointed at the orchard. “And what is that?”

“We’re in the Spring Court, of course.” He dropped onto all fours and gave himself a shake. “Nasty lot, but at least they don’t bite like goblins.”

Freya stood and dusted the dirt and grime from her skirts. “We better go see who we can get to help us then.”

She strode away from the path and into the thick, plush grass. Even that was so green it made her eyes water. What exactly was this place? Arrow had called it the Spring Court, and she could easily see why. The entire place reeked of spring. From the colors, to the scent in the air, to the birds who were almost too happy.

Arrow remained on all fours as he trailed along behind her. Every now and then, she could hear him snort out a disgruntled breath.

The sixth time he did it, she spun around with an angry, “What?”

A blue butterfly floated from seemingly nowhere and landed on top of Arrow’s black and white head. It opened and closed its wings while he stared at her with big, sad eyes. “That. That is exactly the reason why I hate the Spring Court.”

Don’t laugh, she told herself. He looked so morose with the pretty blue butterfly on his poor head. How could someone be so sad and so adorable at the same time?

Freya shook herself from such thoughts. He wasn’t a dog, even though it was very easy to forget that. Arrow was very much a goblin, and he wasn’t to be trusted, no matter how much he looked like a border collie.

She waved a hand over his head and shoed the butterfly away. “Better?” she asked.

“Much. But you can’t really fix it until we leave the Spring Court.” He loped ahead of her, sauntering through the fields. “You’d think they would clean this place up, but no, of course not. Sprites have to be in a garden otherwise they burn up.” He snorted again.

So they were also in a kingdom of Sprites. That was a start.

She followed him all the way to the edge of the cherry trees. Beyond the line of pink was a garden more splendid than she'd ever seen in her life.

Each section of the unending garden was bordered by hedge rows that would come up to her waist. Some of these sections showed the beginning growths of vegetables, but most appeared dedicated to a single flower that were all hovering between just blooming or in perfect buds.

A bubbling river separated the garden from the trees, though its waters were far too sapphire to be real. Stone bridges arched over the rivers, and crystal pillars created handrails that glistened in the sun like glass.

Her eyes took in all the details before she saw the creatures drifting through the greenery. Sprites wandered the hedge rows like ghosts of people. They wore moth-eaten clothing, wisps of fabric, covered in scraps of gossamer so light they looked like they were made of spider webs. Each sprite's face glittered in the sunlight, like their cheeks were covered with something sticky, or perhaps glitter. Their arms did the same, although she could see a fine pattern like veins down their skin.

Far in the distance were countless, ornately carved, white pergolas. Freya couldn't guess their usage, unless that was perhaps where the sprites slept.

A sound of awe slipped off her tongue before she could catch it.

"Oh, no," Arrow grumbled. "That's not the sound you should make, Freya."

"And why not?" She couldn't stop staring at the beautiful sprites in the distance. "They're stunning! I thought all faeries looked like... Well..."

He must have caught her looking at him. Arrow's whiskers twitched. "You thought they looked like me? Like animals or goblins?"

She didn't want to admit that's exactly what she thought. How was she supposed to tell him that she'd been taught all faeries were ugly creatures? That they must all be some kind of unholy mixture of man and beast?

He shook his doggy head, ears slapping against the side of his face. "Ridiculous. Goblins are the only handsome faeries, you should have known that. I thought you said your mother studied us?"

She hadn't said that at all, but if he wanted to consider goblins as the prettiest faeries, then she wouldn't correct him. They were standing before glorious specimens that she hadn't even known could exist. How lovely. How strange!

One of the sprites looked over at them. Bouncy curls framed its perfectly shaped face, but something was off about the features. The creature's eyes had no whites at all. The startling blue orbs caught Freya off guard, so she didn't have time to prepare for the sprite opening its mouth and letting out a loud shriek.

Every single sprite in the garden froze, their hands pressed against their mouths as they stared at her in shock.

"Oh no," she whispered.

Arrow paused, one foot in the air. Slowly, his tail sank between his legs. "Oh no is right. This is my least favorite part."

"What's going to happen?"

"You don't want to know," he grumbled.

Yes, she wanted to know. She absolutely wanted to know what to expect, considering at least ten sprites were now advancing upon them. She took a step back, then another, until both she and Arrow were in the middle of the crystal bridge.

The sprites caught them before they could run. The creatures only came up to about chest height, so they stared up at her with those unusual eyes.

"Hello," the closest one whispered.

Freya assumed this one was female, considering the rather exaggerated roundness of her breasts. Graceful, thin fingers reached up to touch Freya's arm.

She didn't want them touching her, but if that's what it took to get her sister back... Freya swallowed her pride and her fear. "Hello."

Two of the sprites jumped at the sound of her voice. One of them darted away, only to pause and stare back. As if it had thought she would chase the poor thing.

Freya didn't want to frighten them. They were too lovely, too delicate, and obviously one of the weakest faerie species. She couldn't be cruel to something that was so...

The sprites turned away from her, waving their hands over their shoulders for her to follow them. Freya started forward without hesitation. Arrow remained on the bridge with his hackles still raised.

She glanced back, then waited for him. "Aren't you coming?" she hissed so the sprites wouldn't hear her.

"I hate sprites," he muttered. "They're dangerous and they cannot be trusted."

“They look like they’re made of moonbeams and glitter. How dangerous could they possibly be?” Freya glanced over at them one more time. They weren’t all that impressive of a faerie species, and she couldn’t understand the fear in Arrow’s voice.

He shook his head, ears bouncing. “I don’t expect you to understand the ways of the fae. First lesson about my kind, Freya of Woolwich, things are never what they seem.”

Ominous.

She’d take his warning to heart. If he wanted her to be careful around them, then she would focus her energy on finding what they were trying to hide. Because they had to be hiding something for Arrow to be so afraid. They were far too pretty for her to believe them to be dangerous.

As they trailed along behind the sprites, she tried to consider why Arrow would fear them. Their thin bone structures would make them easy to break. They were short, even Freya could have fought them if she needed to. And sure, those strange glittering textures on their skin were odd, but she didn’t think they were poisonous.

The sprite who had spoken to her looked over her shoulder. Those remarkable eyes blinked, and Freya saw a thin membrane slide over the orb of her eye. Like a cat. Or perhaps, like something far more otherworldly.

Once meeting her gaze, the sprite opened her mouth wide and smiled. Freya knew it was meant to be a reassuring expression, but the creature’s mouth was filled with razor-sharp teeth. Each one appeared more jagged than the last.

“Oh,” she whispered, glancing down at Arrow. “Now I see.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Did you really doubt me?”

“I thought maybe you just didn’t like sprites.”

Arrow plodded along beside her on all fours, the white stripe down the center of his head glowing in the muted sunlight. “I fear very little in this world, but sprites?” A dramatic shudder shook his frame. “I’d be happy to never see them again.”

Freya could now assume there was a good reason for that.

They wandered through the gardens, trailing along beside the hedgerows and past sweet-smelling flowers. They approached one of the pergolas, and she saw it was actually a makeshift bedroom. There was a giant mattress in the center, with streamers of lace and chiffon dangling



from the ceiling. A sprite laid in the center of the bed, hands folded over her chest, while tiny bubbles floated around her.

Strange. Freya couldn't even guess what she was doing, unless this was just where they rested.

The other sprites continued on without a glance at the other sprite female. Freya followed them, but craned her neck to stare at the sleeping woman.

A thin fingered hand touched the side of her face. The sprite turned Freya's gaze away from the sleeping faerie. Gentle, but there was a strength to her hand that warned Freya she could make her stop looking if she wanted.

The sprite then pressed a finger to her lips, like she was telling Freya to be quiet.

Why?

Did they not want her to wake up the sleeping sprite? And what would happen if she did?

Freya frowned, looked down at Arrow, and hoped the goblin dog could at least tell her what was going on. But he just shrugged his thin shoulders and continued to follow the troop of sprites.

She noted his tail was still tucked between his legs. And that fear traveled through her as well.

Where were the sprites bringing them, anyway? She noted they were approaching a lake now. Its waters glowed in the sunlight, and tiny sparkles danced on the surface like diamonds. Too pretty. Too beautiful. And the more she stared at it, the more she wanted to leave.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

All the sprites spun around and pressed their fingers to their lips. Freya stopped talking, but she couldn't stop the thundering sound of her heart.

They continued on, past flowers and lakes. pergolas and sleeping sprites. She thought they might have traveled for an entire day until they finally paused before another pergola. This one was painted white with gold leafed carvings spilling from the top.

A sprite lay on the bed in the center, although this one was awake. Her eyes were overly large for her head, and the glitter spread over her entire body. She sat up, stretched her arms over her head and yawned.

"What have you brought me?" she asked the other sprites.

They all fell into deep bows, but did not respond.

Freya awkwardly looked at Arrow, who was looking at her. Together, they dipped into bows as well. She didn't know who this sprite was, but obviously the others thought she was important enough to respect.

Freya stayed in her bow until she heard the pitter patter of feet. The sprite had exited her bed and darted over to Freya's side.

"A human?" she asked. "Oh, I haven't seen a human in years! Stand up! Let me look at you."

This sprite was definitely different. Freya straightened and looked at the creature draped in moth eaten lace. The creature was beautiful, with the tiniest frame she'd ever seen, bright green eyes, and long pointed ears. But there was something very wrong with the sprite.

Every time she moved, a blur followed her hands. As though she were moving too fast for Freya's eyes to see, or perhaps like there was a second version of herself moving slower. It made looking at the sprite rather disorienting and, at times, nauseating.

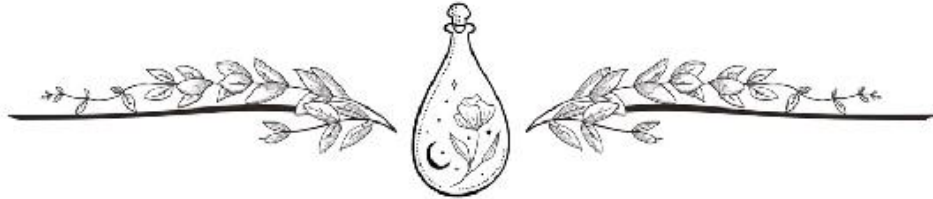
The sprite shifted closer, peering up into Freya's eyes. "I'm the Spring Maiden and I rule the Spring Court. You'll be a wonderful addition to my bed of flowers."

The words sent an electric thrill of fear through her body. Freya swallowed. "Are you going to bury me?" If she wanted to, there was nothing Freya could do to stop her. There were too many sprites for her to fight off, and she'd never been trained for battle.

The Spring Maiden laughed. "Oh no, my dear. I wouldn't do something so dastardly as that. I just want to play with you." She reached up and stroked a finger down Freya's cheek. "Don't you like to play?"

Freya wasn't all that sure she did.

## CHAPTER 9



**T**he sprites made quick work of taking Freya where the Spring Maiden wanted her to go. Two of them grabbed her arms, two more wrapped their arms around her waist, and yet another pair gestured for them all to follow. Freya didn't have a choice. She was locked in place.

Craning her neck to look behind them, she saw Arrow was getting a similar treatment. Although, the goblin was light enough that two sprites could simply lift him up off the ground.

He struggled, whining, "Freya! Don't let them—"

He was silenced long before he could warn her of whatever danger was coming. A sprite held his muzzle closed, smiling at her with those shark-like teeth glinting in the sunlight.

"Oh no," she whispered.

And here she was, thinking the Goblin King's tasks would be easier than this. Instead, she was in this strange place, surrounded by hungry faeries who likely wanted to feed her to their Spring Maiden.

She was in so much trouble, and Freya didn't have the faintest idea how to get out.

At least for now, the sprites didn't seem interested in ending her life. Though the Spring Maiden had said she wanted to add Freya to her bed of flowers, they didn't appear to be preparing an early grave.

She was taken to a pergola near the Spring Maiden's, though this bed was empty. The sprites released her arms, and the ones holding her waist urged her to take a seat on the bed.

What other choice did she have? Freya sat.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“We’re going to make you a flower,” the nearest sprite said. She had fabric clutched in her hands and a rather maniacal expression on her face. “It’s our favorite thing to do, you see. And we haven’t been able to do it for a very long time.”

“Make me a flower?” Another sprite slapped a hand over her mouth, and Freya couldn’t say anything else.

They unraveled her hair from its braid and spread it out over her shoulders. They cooed over the softness and the texture of her hair, but Freya didn’t know if such a thing was a compliment. One sprite set about brushing the tangles from her locks while the next pulled her robe over her head.

“Dresses make humans pretty,” the sprite whispered.

Freya gulped. But she didn’t let the sprite take her chemise off. Not when she didn’t know what they were doing. She clutched the sweaty fabric to her chest and shook her head frantically.

“Yes,” the sprite said, tugging hard. “Off.”

“No,” she replied. “This stays on.”

Though the sprite frowned, at least she released the fabric.

Two of the others tugged an old wooden chest closer. It had seen better days, with worn edges and what looked like teeth marks on the sides. From a dog long ago? Perhaps from an accident when the chest had been dropped? Freya could only hope that was the truth of it, considering the sprite’s teeth were sharp enough to gnaw at wood.

The sprite who had undressed her lifted the lid of the chest. Within were great swaths of fabric. Lace. Velvet. What looked like silk that they shoved aside in a flash. The sprites settled on dragging out a dress made entirely of what looked like very itchy lace.

“Yes,” the sprite said again, drawing out the word until it was a long hiss. “This would look so lovely on the new flower.”

“I’m not a flower,” Freya replied.

The sprite brushing her hair yanked hard. She heard strands snap with the force of the tug.

“Hush,” the sprite said. “We said quiet. Flowers don’t talk.”

She couldn’t argue that flowers talked, but this flower did. She wasn’t a new plaything for them, but apparently, that’s what they thought she was.

The sprites wrestled her into the unusual gown. Lace sleeves fell off her shoulders, and she'd been correct, they were itchy. The bodice was too tight, and the skirt billowed around her as she walked. The scent of moth eaten fabric made her nose burn. She probably looked like some long dead princess who had awoken from her grave.

When the sprites stepped back and looked over their work, they let out sounds of pleasure and delight. "So pretty!" they all said. "How lovely!"

They spread her hair out, brushed too much so the dark locks poofed around her face. Freya didn't need to have a mirror to know what she looked like. Horrific. Tired. Just as she felt.

When they gave her room to breathe, she stepped away and asked, "Now what? Can I please speak with the Spring Maiden?"

Surely the leader of this place would know what the "essence" of spring was. All she needed to get was the information. Then, she had to find Arrow and together, they could figure out how to steal it.

If it was even something she could steal.

Damn it, Freya wished she was more prepared for this world. She'd thought charging into the faerie realm after her sister would be a little easier than this. Not just tossed into the fires of the fae, so to speak.

"Almost done," a sprite said. This one had pretty brown eyes that were as dark as night. She approached Freya with a tiny bottle in her hands. "This is for you."

Freya looked down at the bottle that was clearly meant to be sprayed on her. "Perfume?" she asked.

The sprite nodded and gestured for her to take the glass.

Goodness, if her scent offended them, a bath would be more helpful than a perfume bottle, but she supposed it wouldn't hurt. Freya took the pretty container and used the little balloon to spray a decent amount onto her neck and wrists.

Once finished, she opened her arms wide and said, "Am I sufficient now?"

The sprites watched her with rapt attention. They stared at her face a little too intently. Their eyes were a little too wide. And that was when she realized just how little she knew about the faeries.

Her mother would never have taken something offered like that and just sprayed it on her body. She would have asked what was in the bottle, and

then she would have wanted to know why they needed her to spray it on her skin.

There were a million questions she should have asked, and now Freya could only sit and wonder. But, considering their smiles, she didn't think it was good that she'd sprayed the perfume on herself after all.

The most perfect scent finally reached her nose. It was something like her mother's perfume, an aroma she hadn't smelled in so long. A bit of fir, a mixture of basil and rosemary, and underneath it all, the distinct sweetness of lemon.

Her head swam with the memories of her mother. And how much she'd loved to be held in her arms.

The sprites tucked their hands around her waist and lifted her up from the bed. "Come, come with us."

Yes, of course she would come with them. Why wouldn't she? All she could think of now was her mother and the wonderful things she'd done for Freya over the years. How they had rooted in the garden for the perfect carrot for her soups. How her mother had always crushed basil between her fingers and let Freya smell it.

Why wouldn't she go with the sprites? They had given her these memories back. Memories that were long buried underneath years of sadness and pain.

But there was no sadness or pain associated with these memories anymore. Freya took another deep lungful of air and let it settle into her very soul. Relaxation poured through her muscles as they led her through the gardens.

They strode past a smaller lake, a pond really, with a few wooden boats floating on the top. They were shallow edged, with sprites draped over their edges, their fingers trailing in the sparkling waters. So lovely. So perfect.

"Isn't it nice here?" the Spring Maiden asked.

When had she joined Freya? She didn't remember walking all the way to the other pergola, and yet, here they were. In front of the gilded leaves that seemed to sprinkle more gold into the air.

"It is," Freya whispered. "I didn't know it even existed."

"Most don't." The Spring Maiden reached out a hand for Freya to take. "Mortals never remember that sprites exist, but that's quite all right with us. Sometimes we get lucky and someone stumbles into the Spring Court. Like yourself."

A thought bloomed behind her eyes. What did they do to the mortals, and why hadn't she seen any others? A memory was right on the tip of her tongue, something like adding her to a garden.

The thought was dashed away with another lungful of scented air. This time it smelled like the heat of the fire her father always set in the wood stove. The soup her mother would have on the stove, ready for Esther and Freya to eat when they completed their chores.

She loved that soup. But really, the reason the scent meant so much was because she knew it represented spending time with her family. She loved talking with them. Being with them. Speaking to them. Just having those moments when she could feel the peace of knowing they were all well.

Freya had missed that so much.

"Oh," the Spring Maiden said, her voice breaking through the memories as though she had popped a bubble. "So you were a family girl, then? I wouldn't have picked you for that."

"Yes," Freya replied. "I love my family very much."

She blinked, and the memories faded from sight. She was standing in the middle of a garden. Marble tiles were underneath her feet, and flowers grew on the ceiling overhead. Roses were tangled throughout thick leaves, or perhaps they were hedges considering the greenery created the walls of the room.

Was this a garden? Or was this a palace?

No, that word didn't seem right at all. The Spring Maiden lived in a garden. Freya had seen where she lived with all the pergolas and the beautiful flowers. She'd seen the lakes and ponds with faeries floating in their boats.

That was where the Spring Maiden lived.

She blinked again, and everything faded away with the scent of hay and salted meats from the village. Woolwich was always so lovely in the spring. Everyone came together after the winter months to rejoice in the warmth once again. She loved that time of year, especially when Esther and she could stop eating those awful smoked meats.

Esther.

The name blasted through her mind like a stiff wind. Esther was the reason she was here.

Her sister was... gone?

The magical scent fell away until she could see where they were clearly. A garden in a sense, but more like a room. There was a bed in the center that rivaled all the others. It floated above the ground, suspended by vines covered in white lilies.

The Spring Maiden stood beside the bed, all sharp-toothed smile and wide eyes. “You look sleepy, my dear. Perhaps you would like to lie down?”

Freya was prepared for this, now. She was awake and wide eyed as the rest of them. “No,” she replied. “I don’t think I want to sleep at all.”

“You will.” The smile on the sprite’s face only widened. “Mortals always want to sleep, that’s part of your charm.”

No, she needed to get her information and leave. That was the only option for her.

Freya took a step forward. Her legs were shaking, although she couldn’t imagine why. She hadn’t been walking that far, had she?

Getting her bearings, she said, “The Goblin King has sent me on a quest so I can get my sister back. He said I needed to gather the essence of spring from you. I was hoping you might know what that means?”

Those weren’t the words she meant to say. All she’d done was tell the Spring Maiden exactly why she was here, and the one thing that would allow her to leave. Wasn’t that against everything she should say?

Freya lifted a hand and pressed it to her aching forehead. Everything was going so wrong and she couldn’t figure out why. What spell had they cast upon her?

The bed looked comfortable. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a good night’s sleep. A true, restful relaxation where she didn’t dream or think about missing family members.

Just one night. That’s all she wanted.

She blinked, and the Spring Maiden was right in front of her. The sprite lifted her hands, pressed them to Freya’s cheeks, and exhaled directly into her face.

Freya might have thought it disgusting if the sprite’s breath hadn’t smelled like blueberries freshly picked from the vine. Just like her mother used to gather every year in the fall to bake pies for Esther and Freya.

“Sleep,” the Spring Maiden’s voice filtered through the memory. “You’re such a lovely flower, but so tired. Sleep, little mortal, and when you wake up, you’ll bloom all the prettier.”

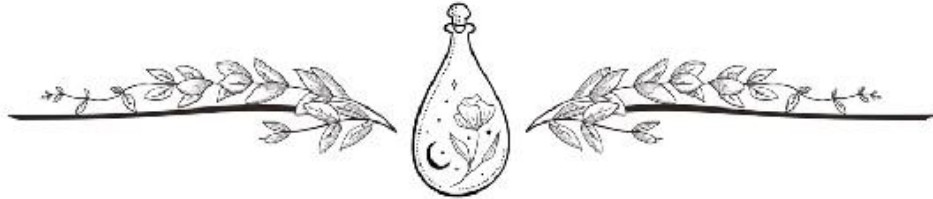


Who was Freya to argue with the sprite when she knew so much? She wanted to sleep. She wanted to fall into the waiting, warm arms of her memories and never wake up again.

Freya was only dimly aware of the Spring Maiden guiding her to the bed in the center of the room. The sway of the mattress shifted as she finally sat down. She felt the sharp prick of the Spring Maiden's nails on the back of her head as the sprite lowered Freya onto the pillows.

She took a deep breath of blueberry scented magic and dreamed.

## CHAPTER 10



**“Y**ou’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen,” the sprite said.

He brushed his fingers through Freya’s hair, and she leaned back into his touch. How long had she been resting in this bed? She didn’t know. The sprites came to visit her often, whenever she wasn’t resting. They asked her to tell stories about what she had done in the mortal realm.

They were particularly interested in the tiny details. What she ate. How the other mortals talked. If she ever rode a horse or worked in a garden.

The stories were what they mostly wanted from her. But sometimes, like this sprite, they just wanted to sit in bed with her and brush her hair. Their whispered compliments made her blush, but if it made them happy to say the words, then she would allow it.

Freya couldn’t really remember her life without them. Of course, she knew what stories to tell them. But the memories felt distant. As though they weren’t her memories, just something she’d read about a long time ago.

The sprite wrapped a strand of hair around his finger and lifted it to his lips. “So coarse,” he muttered. “Like the tail of an animal. How do you take care of it in the mortal realm?”

She leaned her head against his knee. “I just washed it in the river with a bar of soap.”

“A bar of soap?” he chuckled. “And how do you make such a thing?”

“With lye.” She remembered the villagers making it. She remembered her mother taking such care, because lye could burn. Or something like that. It all felt so... faded.

“Well, no wonder your hair feels like wheat then.” He twisted the strands together in a tiny braid by her temple. “We’ll have to help with this. I can make your hair soft as silk. Would you like that?”

“I think so,” she whispered.

Freya stared up at the ceiling of twisted leaves, watching as vines threaded through the emerald. The plants were always moving on the ceiling, like a living tapestry that shifted with the Spring Maiden’s emotions.

The Spring Maiden....

She was supposed to talk with her about something. Something important, but she couldn’t seem to remember what that was. Why couldn’t she remember?

The sprite gave a sharp tug on the strand of hair. “Are you listening to me, mortal?”

“Of course,” she replied with a wince.

But she hadn’t been. She’d been thinking about the Spring Maiden. That gorgeous sprite who seemed to rule all the others with the kindness only an angel could have.

Something twisted deep inside her. A knot that tangled even more because that wasn’t right. She didn’t know why, but the thought made her nauseous.

The sprite tugged her hair again. “Don’t frown like that, you’ll give yourself wrinkles. What is the matter, my darling? You can tell me.”

He smoothed clawed fingers over her forehead. The pointed ends trailed across her skin, a little too sharp, leaving stinging welts in their wake.

Freya’s breathing quickened. She felt as though she was struggling to find something, or perhaps like she was fighting against someone inside her own head. “I think I need to speak with the Spring Maiden,” she whispered.

The sprite’s movements stilled. He tapped his claws on her forehead and then nodded. “You’re more than welcome to visit the Spring Maiden whenever you like, Freya. You know that. She loves your company more than anyone else.”

Yes, of course she did. The Spring Maiden was the one who had brought her here, and she loved mortals. She thought Freya was just the sweetest thing. The loveliest flower. That’s what she always said whenever Freya walked over to her.

“I’d like to see her,” she murmured.

Freya rolled off the bed and onto her feet. Her head spun immediately. She reached out and grabbed onto one of the ropes that suspended the bed, and tried to ease the sudden ache between her eyes. Everything hurt. Her feet, her legs, even her back felt like she'd been laying on rocks.

A whimper vibrated in her throat. Freya could survive this though, because she was going to see the Spring Maiden. She'd make everything better.

Staggering away from the bed and the pergola, she made her way down the steps to the gardens beyond. Her lace dress tangled between her legs. The lace had giant holes in it, and the satin underskirt was yellowed with age. How long had she been here?

Freya kept her arms out at her sides so she didn't fall over. Sounds followed her as she walked. The twinkling call of birds. Bells in the distance, but not the bells she was so used to hearing.

What bells did she remember? She couldn't think of their name.

Someone had once told her to worry about bells. The little spark of fear in her chest warned her of an ill omen. That the sound should make her throat close up and maybe she should run, but she couldn't.

Not yet, at least.

She had to talk to the Spring Maiden first. Then she could run away and do... something that her mind couldn't remember.

The garden path opened up to reveal a makeshift ballroom with marble squares as a floor and roses growing overhead. The petals fell down like a rain shower when Freya walked underneath them. The room was already filled with sprites, although she didn't recognize any of the creatures.

The Spring Maiden walked toward her with her arms outstretched. "My darling girl! Welcome to the ball, I thought you might be joining us."

Ball?

Freya looked around, her brow furrowed again in confusion. The sprite in her bedroom had said she could visit with the Spring Maiden, hadn't he? There had been no mention of a ball. Otherwise, she would have put on different clothing. Not the moth-eaten lace dress that had seen better days.

She looked down at the dress in question, fisting her fingers in the skirts as if that would hide them. But she wasn't wearing the same dress at all. This one was entirely made of pale pink chiffon and floated around her like a cloud.

When had she changed?

Her head ached with the clanging of bells. She looked up and stared into the Spring Maiden's eyes as the sprite pulled her into her arms. "Oh my dear girl, you smell terrible. Would you like more perfume?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I don't think I've put any on today."

"Here." The Spring Maiden pulled out a tiny jar. This was more powerful than the perfume Freya usually wore. Just the scent alone would have overwhelmed her, but she could almost see visions rising off the surface of the solid perfume. "Let me put this on you."

A distant chime said she should worry about that going on her skin. That she should at least try to stop the Spring Maiden from touching her neck. But she desperately wanted to continue smelling fresh baked bread while she remembered her mother singing in the kitchen.

"Freya?"

Though her name should have brought her under the Spring Maiden's spell even deeper, Freya found the sound snapped her out of the trance. Perhaps it was the way the Spring Maiden said it. Just like her sister used to when she wanted something. Or maybe the magic was wearing off.

Whatever it was, the slight break in the spell allowed her to look around the room.

The ballroom wasn't lovely and covered with roses. It was cloying and overwhelming. Sprites wandered the room, but behind them were monstrous creatures. Tall men with bare, broad chests and strong shoulders wearing masks made of vines and thorns. The greenery covered their faces completely. Tiny drops of blood dripped down their necks and chests where thorns were digging into the sides of their heads.

"Who are they?" she asked.

The Spring Maiden followed her gaze to the mask wearing men. "They're our guards, silly. You've seen them before."

No, she hadn't. She would remember seeing such terrifying creatures. There were knives at their hips, clinging onto moth eaten green fabric that made up their pants. Though they weren't much for pants, really. Just basic, plain trousers that did nothing to protect them.

Guards? Why would the Spring Maiden need guards?

The sprite stepped closer and the cloying scent twisted through Freya's lungs. "Come here, silly girl. You still reek of the mortal coil."

But she didn't want to go anywhere. She wanted to take a deep breath of fresh air without feeling as though something were climbing inside her

lungs. She needed to feel like herself again, even though she couldn't remember who she was.

"I think I need some air," she muttered. "Yes, I think that's the best choice right now. If you'll excuse me."

The Spring Maiden side stepped, blocking Freya from leaving the room. "Sweetheart, if you'd just let me put this on you before you leave? I don't want you to insult the other sprites, you see."

The grin on the Spring Maiden's face was all sharp teeth and dark intent. But Freya wouldn't be stopped. Not now that she remembered who she was.

"No, thank you," she replied. "I think I'd like to go outside for a bit on my own. I'll stay away from the other sprites. I just need a moment to myself."

The Spring Maiden looked like she would argue. Her expression shifted to one of pure anger and her cheeks turned bright red. But she didn't stop Freya from leaving. Instead, she snapped her fingers and gestured for one of the guards to approach them. "Stay with her," the Spring Maiden snarled. "You have a few moments, Freya of Woolwich. Then you will be right back here. And you will put on this perfume."

Freya shivered as the sprite's attention diverted from her. She looked at the guard with his eerie mask of vines and thorns. He stared off into the distance, as if he could even see with all that on his face.

"All right," she mumbled. "I guess we're going this way."

Freya didn't look to see if he followed her. She couldn't focus on anything other than putting her feet in front of each other. And when she finally made it out of the ballroom, she darted to the nearest hedgerow and vomited all her nerves into the leaves.

Every heave cleared something inside herself. Some magic was purged in the contents of her stomach. Even as she looked at the puddle of bile, there was something wrong with it. She didn't have any food in her stomach? When had she last eaten? It was all liquid on the ground.

Freya leaned back and wiped her mouth with her hand. Her breath shuddered in and out of her lungs, as if she couldn't quite get enough air no matter how much she gulped. Her lungs actually stung. Like she'd been breathing smoke for too long and now the fresh air hurt to breathe.

"What is happening?" she muttered.

Tunneling her hands into her hair, she stared up at the sky and forced her breathing to slow. In. Out. Three seconds, five seconds, a long break until she was finally inhaling and exhaling at a normal rate. Her stomach still wanted to vomit up more of that liquid, but at least she felt more like herself.

Sweat slicked her brow and made her underarms sticky. She could feel drops sliding between her breasts underneath the many layers of chiffon that made her far too hot. Her hair smelled funny. She lifted an oily lock and sniffed it.

Freya gagged again. She dropped the strand that smelled overwhelmingly like fertilizer and took another step away from the ballroom.

She needed to get out of here. Whatever the sprites were doing to her, it had to stop. She needed to get everything out of her stomach, wash her body for days, and then try her best to figure out why she was even here to begin with.

Then the memory bloomed.

Esther.

She was here to get the essence of spring for the Goblin King and then move on to the next faerie species. She had tasks to complete. Things to do. And she couldn't just stand here being sick.

Her arms were covered in a thick layer of ooze. It smelled like the Spring Maiden's perfume, so she grabbed a fistful of grass and rubbed it against whatever skin she could see. At least that helped the scent dissipate.

"There," she muttered. "That ought to do."

Now, to figure out how to prevent herself from falling back under the spell. Maybe she could grab more of the grass and tuck it into the bodice of her dress. Then she could pull it out and sniff it...

A hand appeared in front of her, holding out a couple seeds on the broad palm.

The guard. How had she forgotten about the guard?

Freya stopped breathing and stiffened. Damn it. She was going to get caught all because she hadn't remembered the thorny creature who lurked behind her.

She let her eyes travel up to the mask. A bead of blood welled on the bottom corner. It dripped onto his neck and traveled down the impressive

muscles, to his pectorals, until it seemed to dry on his skin. So many lines of blood.

Her fingers shook as she took the offered seeds.

“What are these?” she asked.

He flattened one hand, then used his thumb to mime crushing the seed with the other. The little orbs looked as though she could pop them if she wanted to. Maybe even her thumb nail could snap through the thin shell.

“Why?”

He tapped a finger against the thorns where his nose might be.

“Will this help block the perfume she’s using to control me?” she asked.

The guard nodded sharply, then stepped back to the wall. Almost as though he didn’t want anyone to know he’d told her a word. She supposed that made sense.

Freya looked down at the little black seeds, then back at the guard. “Can I ask you a question?”

He didn’t move.

She could only assume that was him saying yes. And if he didn’t want to talk to her anymore, well, she was going to ask anyway. It felt important as her memories slid back into place.

Freya stepped a little closer, just in case anyone was listening in on their conversation. “Does it hurt?” She paused, then added, “That thing on your face?”

He gave her a sharp nod but remained standing strong and straight.

The seeds burned in her fingers. She could easily run inside, get what she needed, and leave. Freya was certain that the essence of spring was that damned solid perfume the Spring Maiden kept with her. It couldn’t be anything else.

But she also didn’t feel right without at least trying to help. She couldn’t save all the men with these thorns pressed into their skin. This one, though... This one she could save.

Freya didn’t care what he’d done to deserve such a punishment. No one deserved to live their lives in constant pain and at the mercy of a sprite like that. Evil spread through time. But kindness spread through actions.

She curled her fingers around the seeds and held her fist up. “I’m going to use these. I need to steal the essence of spring, and I think I know where that is. Once I do that, I’m going out the back door and...” Well she didn’t have a plan after that. Freya licked her lips. “I want you to come with me.”



He tilted his head to the side.

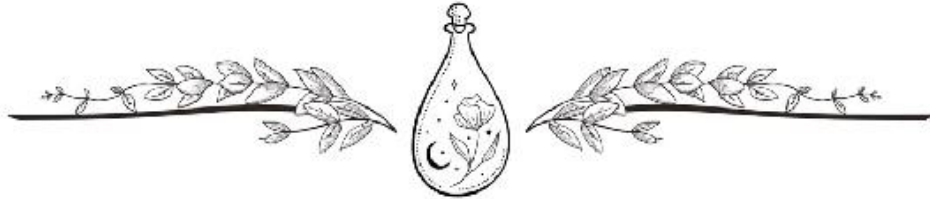
“I can’t leave you here like this.” Freya shook her head. “I won’t. So be ready. Okay?”

The mask watched her, almost as though he could see her. And then the guard gave a sharp nod.

Freya started back into the ballroom, paused, then reiterated, “You’ll be ready?”

At his nod once again, she readied herself for the theft of a lifetime.

## CHAPTER 11



**S**he strode into the ballroom with a plan brewing in her mind. All she had to do was get that perfume out of the Spring Maiden's hands. Freya hadn't ever been particularly good with her hands. She was more the brute force in the family while Esther was the one who played piano and had quick enough fingers to steal from pockets.

But maybe she could talk the Spring Maiden into giving it to her. Perhaps if she got the Maiden to put the perfume on her neck, then Freya could snatch it out of her hands and run for it.

Freya walked into the ballroom with false confidence in the set of her shoulders. At least she could look the part, if she were going to pretend to be the hero in this story.

Except it wasn't a ballroom anymore.

Frowning, she looked at the banquet tables that had been set out all across the marble. Giant glowing chandeliers hung from the ceiling, light bouncing off individual strands of glass beads that draped in looping coils. Giant flower arrangements sat on each deep brown table, and drying flowers were strung between the lights. She brushed one of the bouquets away from her face.

Where was the Spring Maiden?

A sprite caught her hand. "Freya! You're just in time for the feast!"

"The feast?" she repeated. "I thought this was a ball?"

The sprite laughed, and the sound made bubbles that danced through the air. "No, silly! Who told you that?"

She wanted to say the Spring Maiden was the person who had told her that, but Freya feared that would show the sprite she wasn't under the spell

any longer. Even now, the bubbles that floated through the air popped and settled a fine film upon her exposed arms.

The fog already was building in her mind. She had a hard time focusing on what the sprite was saying, because of course it was a banquet. They were going to have a feast and wasn't that lovely?

Freya squeezed her thumbnail into one of the seeds in her hand. She lifted it to her nose, inhaling the awful ammonia scent, and the fog cleared from her mind again.

The banquet was suspicious, but she suspected the plan had changed simply to throw Freya off balance. What better way to control a person's thoughts and mind than by making them feel as though they were mad?

This wasn't right. None of it was right, but she had to play the game for now.

Freya plastered a fake smile on her face and let the sprite draw her to a table. Many sprites were already seated there, each one more lovely than the last. Glitter dusted their arms and bare shoulders.

Now, she wondered if that glitter was part of the reason why she couldn't think. Maybe that was the essence in the air that made people lose their minds around these creatures.

Their blurry movements returned to the frightening state they had when she'd first looked at them. Their sharp smiles made her uncomfortable again. And the state of their clothing only made her wonder why their items were so mistreated. Just like herself.

"Here," the sprite who had guided her to the table said. She pulled out the chair for Freya and patted the hard cushion. "Sit, Freya of Woolwich. We have so longed for your company."

She sat down and stared at the table in front of her, still grinning. Was that what she was supposed to look like? They all watched her with rapt attention, so she assumed it was the right reaction.

And then, even though she remembered telling them a thousand stories, they all looked away from her. Each sprite tucked into the food on their plate and spoke with each other, muttering as though she wasn't even there.

Freya distinctly remembered them all being enthralled with her stories. That was why she'd been so easily trapped. She couldn't remember the last time someone wanted to listen to her speak. Let alone gave her such undivided attention.

Had she been in a trance the entire time? Was the whole thing made up in her head?

A cold, wet nose touched her knee. Freya glanced around at the sprites to make sure they weren't paying attention to her. But they looked like they'd forgotten she was here at all.

She wiggled her fingers underneath the tablecloth, then lifted it. A black and white face stared back at her.

Arrow.

She'd forgotten about the goblin who'd been helping her. The one who was in a rather binding deal to help her get her sister. Thank goodness he was still here, and the sprites hadn't killed him.

"Keep quiet," he whispered. "Are you back to yourself yet?"

The fog pressed against her conscious mind. Wiggling one of the seeds to her thumb, she broke through it and waved it underneath her nostril. Then nodded. "Yes."

"Good. We have to get out of here."

"I agree with you." She nodded toward the table where the Spring Maiden was sitting. "But first, I need to get that perfume bottle off her."

Arrow didn't immediately respond. She looked down at him only to see his eyes had widened so much, she could see the white rings all the way around his pupils.

"What?" she asked.

"Are you insane? We need to leave now, or they're going to put that spell back over you and I'm going to have to continue pretending to be a dog for the foreseeable future."

She didn't see the problem with him being a dog. He was one. She hated to point that out, however, when he was so enjoying his play, acting at being a goblin like the others.

Freya reached her hand underneath the table and waggled her fingers. "You said you would help me. We made a deal."

"There should be a clause in that deal about risking our necks," he growled.

"Well, there isn't. So." She leaned slightly to the left so he could see her and lifted an eyebrow. "What's it going to be, goblin? Are you going to help me or am I going to make a huge scene and you'll have to run with me and pray the guards don't snatch you?"

This time, she heard the growl. A few sprites stiffened, but at least none of them looked over at her. “What do you want me to do?” the goblin snarled.

“I’ll distract her. You steal the bottle of perfume when she isn’t looking.”

“Are you sure that’s the essence of spring?” Arrow touched his cold nose to her leg again.

“Wouldn’t you know?” She noted the sprites who stirred at the sound of her voice. Now, they were noticing she wasn’t staring off into the distance as she was supposed to.

“No one knows what the essence of any court is,” Arrow replied. “It’s rumored that no one could ever find all of them.”

Right, so yet another thing the Goblin King had lied about. That rat bastard.

She bared her teeth in an angry snarl. “Just go get the bottle. I have to trust my gut.”

“You’ve got it.”

Arrow disappeared underneath the tables. The white flag tip of his tail waved as he moved between legs, all the way to the head table.

She had to guess that was the right thing. Freya knew she wouldn’t get a second chance at guessing what the essence of this court was. This was her best chance.

Arrow was close to the table now. Thus, the show had to start.

Slapping her hands hard on the table, she stood up. Her chair screamed on the marble floor and every single sprite in the room stopped talking. They all turned as one to stare at the mortal woman who had suddenly woken up.

“Freya?” the Spring Maiden asked. Her voice carried through the room, light as air. “Whatever is the matter, my dear?”

Freya had always been a horrible actress, but she had to try. Arrow was so close now. His tail disappeared underneath the Maiden’s table. She’d only get one shot.

She cleared her throat. “You’ve been keeping me under a spell, Spring Maiden, and I don’t appreciate it.”

“A spell?” the Maiden laughed. “I’ve never heard of a spell that would force you to enjoy our company. My dear girl, you are here under your own

free will. You've asked to stay, and we have accommodated you in every way possible. Do you not appreciate what we've given you?"

Gaslighting. The sprite was trying to make her feel guilty for complaining about the mistreatment.

Freya snapped a seed and inhaled the acrid scent of sulphur. "You are not treating me well. You've kept me trapped here until I don't know what way is up and what way is down. You're a monster."

The other sprites gasped. A few of them pressed their hands to their hearts, and all turned to stare at the Spring Maiden to see how she would respond.

The Spring Maiden's face turned a bright purple. "A monster, you say?"

Arrow's face appeared over the edge of the table. What was the damned goblin doing? Did he really think this was the best time to steal the perfume bottle? At least get the Spring Maiden to stand up first!

"Yes," she shouted, waving her hands in the air dramatically. "I believe you are a monster. You're a horrible, disgusting creature who likes to think she's beautiful. But surrounding yourself with beautiful things doesn't make you pretty. All it does is highlight the ugliness radiating off you."

Maybe that was a little too far. The Spring Maiden's eyes opened wider with every word, and Freya realized she was very much in trouble. Even if Arrow stole that perfume bottle to the Spring Maiden's right, they needed to run no matter what.

"I think you're tired," the Maiden snapped. "You need to go back to sleep."

"I think I've slept enough."

The Spring Maiden slapped her hand down and caught Arrow on the side of the face. The goblin dog yelped horribly. He flew off to the side with the force of the Spring Maiden's strike.

"No!" Freya shouted.

"Did you think a goblin could steal from me? Me?"

Freya blinked, and suddenly the Spring Maiden was right in front of her. The blurred trail of her sprint remained in the air behind her for a few heartbeats, then disappeared. She held the perfume bottle in her hand, then unscrewed the top and stuck the entire thing underneath Freya's nose.

The scent threaded up through the air, into her nostrils, and raked claws through her lungs. It hurt. Oh, how it sent white hot prongs zinging through her entire body.

But Freya was ready this time. Before the magic could set in, she broke the entire fistful of horrible smelling seeds and lifted them to her nose. Smoke filtered between her fingers, overpowering the perfume with its acrid scent.

The Spring Maiden flinched away with a shout. “What is that?”

“A gift from a friend,” she snarled.

Freya threw the seeds at the Spring Maiden with all her might. They bounced off the sprite, but surely left imprints of scent on her skin. A scream erupted from the Spring Maiden’s mouth and made Freya’s ears bleed.

Maybe faeries thought other people would fight with words, just like their kind. Freya was a human, though, and the Spring Maiden had forgotten that.

She pulled her fist back and let it fly. Her knuckles connected with the Spring Maiden’s cheekbone. A sharp crack could be heard, though Freya didn’t know if it was from her own suddenly stinging knuckles or the bone of the Spring Maiden’s face.

Whatever the thing that made the sound, it made the Maiden drop the perfume bottle.

Freya snatched it off the ground and sprinted toward Arrow. They would expect her to run to the door. Not the goblin dog who still laid in a heap where he’d fallen.

Leaning down, she scooped him up in her arms. “Are you all right?”

He shook his furry head and shouted, “Run!”

That’s all she needed to hear. Except there was one more person for her to collect before she finally made her great escape. Freya dodged a sprite’s outstretched hands and searched for the guard with a blood splattered pattern she recognized.

There he was. Standing by the door waiting for the two of them.

Perfect, at least he could follow orders.

“Where are you going?” Arrow growled. “Don’t you see the guard?”

“Yes, I do,” she panted, ducking underneath an outstretched hand. “He’s coming with us.”

“He’s what?” The yelp was so loud her ears rang.

He could argue with her about the decision later. For now, she was going to take the guard with them and regret her choice later. Maybe. Freya sprinted to his side and wrapped a hand around his bicep. “Come on!”

Just like that, the guard ran with them. Together, she sprinted with him out of the ballroom and into the gardens beyond. She hesitated for a brief moment, worried about where she should go next, but the guard seemed to know exactly where to go. She ran after him through the gardens, even as Arrow snarled in her ear.

“He’s leading us into a trap!”

“Or he could be helping us. Didn’t you see the thing on his face?”

“I saw it,” Arrow grunted. “People in pain don’t always make the smartest decisions, Freya. Especially the fae.”

Well, she had to trust someone in this horrible place. Otherwise, she really was on her own. And how would she ever get out?

The guard stopped in the middle of a hedgerow and gestured with his hand. He waved them over, pointing to a strange hollow in the leaves.

“What’s that?” she asked, gasping in air.

Pounding feet followed them. They didn’t have time for clarification, but she’d learned her lesson with the perfume.

Arrow answered for the silent guard. “It’s a portal. We are not going through that.”

She looked at the guard and those horrible thorns. “Will that take us somewhere safe?”

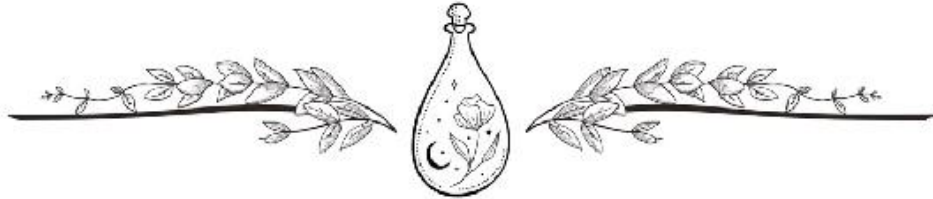
He nodded, firmly.

“Then we’re going through it.”

She didn’t look back at the screaming sprites who were already shouting for her to stop. She didn’t look down at Arrow to see if he thought it was the right choice. Freya leapt through the space in the hedges and hoped it would take her to a place a little less dangerous than this one.



## CHAPTER 12



**F**reya clutched the guard's arm as they plummeted through the portal. Yet again, she felt as though they were falling through open air. How did magic always feel like this? She should at least have something to walk on, some sense of knowing where she was.

Instead, she was free falling through the sky until her feet touched something solid.

She stumbled, holding onto the guard and keeping Arrow hugged tightly against her chest. Then, lights blinked on in the distance. As though someone had lit candles just waiting for them to come and rest.

"Arrow?" she asked. "Is that safety or a trap?"

"I think it's fine to go to them."

She'd heard of will-o'-the-wisps before. Weary travelers could easily be lured off the path if they thought there was light and safety at the other end. Then, they would be consumed by the magical creatures who waited for their prey.

"Are you sure?" she asked again, just to be certain they weren't walking to their demise.

He hesitated long enough to make her heart thump hard in her chest. "I think so. The only way to know for certain is to stand in front of them. Since when were you afraid of anything, anyway?"

She was afraid all the time. Every moment she was here.

Freya tugged on the guard's arm and they all made their way to the lights. The closer they got, the more she realized they weren't will-o'-the-wisps. Tiny lanterns, about the size of her hand, hung from the limbs of a

giant tree. Each one glowed bright yellow and orange, the flames flickering happily on the end of the white candle wicks.

The tree itself was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. The branches were bent, twisted and warped as though a giant had spent years spinning them around each other. Heavy roots lurched through the ground, appearing through the dirt in a graceful arch only to disappear into the soft moss once again.

Her feet touched the emerald moss that surrounded the tree. It squished underneath her bare feet, but wasn't wet. It was plush and soft as velvet.

"What is this place?" She set Arrow down on the ground.

He gave a quick shake of his entire body, ears flapping against the sides of his head. "An in between place, I'd assume. A resting place for travelers who don't want to deal with any of the faeries in the courts. Or goblins. Or worse."

What was worse than a goblin? Freya didn't think she wanted to find out yet. She'd already had to deal with more than she wanted to today.

Gently, she guided the guard to the roots of the tree and settled him into a comfortable nook. "There we are. Now, let's get a look at this mask."

"Don't touch him," Arrow grumbled. "We don't know who he is or what kind of spell the Spring Maiden put on those guards. If you take his mask off, you might kill him."

"He'll die with it on."

"They were doing just fine before you came in and played hero. Leave him alone, Freya. We got him out of the court, now he can figure this out on his own."

That was cruel, even for a goblin.

Freya shook her head and turned back to the guard. He had tilted his head up for her to look at the mask, as though he already knew she wouldn't listen to the goblin dog. Maybe her thoughts were written all over her face.

"May I touch you?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Okay."

She needed to help him, although she didn't know why. Some voice deep in her bones said he needed to get that mask off his face. She had to see who was underneath the thorns and the vines. What man had suffered through the blood and the pain?

Freya reached forward and ran her fingers along the edge of the mask. Every time she bumped a thorn anchoring it into his skin, she felt an answering twitch in his neck. It must have hurt. No matter what she touched, she was somehow hurting him worse than before.

When her fingers reached his chin, she bit her lip and let her hands fall into her lap. “I don’t know how to get it off. It seems like it’s attached to your face now. If I try to take it off, it will only rip your skin more.”

The guard reached up and placed his hands on the mask. He mimicked pulling it off, then pointed to himself, and shook his head.

“You can’t pull it off?”

He nodded.

Freya bit her lip again and frowned. “Can I pull it off?”

He stilled, but then the guard slowly nodded again.

Arrow’s cold nose pressed against her elbow, butting into their conversation with all the grace of a bull. “I wouldn’t do it.”

Freya ground her teeth together and counted to ten. She didn’t understand why the little goblin was so adamant that she shouldn’t help this guard, but it was getting to the point of ridiculous. “And why not?”

“He’s familiar.” Arrow sniffed the air near the guard and then took a large step away from him. “Definitely don’t take that mask off. I know who he is.”

A drop of fresh blood slid down the guard’s shoulder, and Freya knew there wasn’t another choice for her to make. She didn’t care if he was the most terrifying goblin who ever existed. He didn’t deserve to be in pain.

She reached forward and grabbed the edges of the mask. “Good, then you can introduce us once I get this mask off him.”

Leaning back on her heels, she used her weight to jerk the vines and thorns. They dug into her own hands. Sinking through soft flesh and almost all the way into her bones. Freya refused to let go. The magic could try to fight her all it wanted, but she would free this guard from the sprite’s horrible prison.

The guard let out a low groan that made her skin crawl, then the mask slid off his skin with a sickening crunch.

Freya landed on her butt with the mask in her hands. She stared down at the vines and watched in horror as they died. When they withered, they cried out a sound that was eerily similar to a human screaming.

It was awful.

Breathing hard, she looked up at the guard and hoped he wasn't dead. She wanted him to be free, to survive, to leave the clutches of that monster with his head held high.

Freya wasn't certain why she desired that so much, but she did. For once in her life, she wanted to save someone.

But the man leaning against the tree couldn't be real. That moon touched skin was too familiar. The long, hawk-like shape of his nose and the sharp jaw were ones she had seen before. And then he met her stare with those strange, silver eyes.

"You," she coughed out the word like he'd fed her poison. "That's not possible."

The Goblin King cracked his neck to the right, then left, and let out a long sigh. "It's entirely possible. I'm not sure why you insist on disbelieving what's right in front of you."

She didn't believe it was him because he should be ruling from his gilded throne or whatever this insufferable creature did in his spare time. Not gallivanting around, pretending to be a Spring Maiden guard just to... what?

"Were you watching me?" she asked. Though she shouldn't have been surprised, she was stunned he had gone through so much trouble to see what she did after he'd given her this task.

How long had he been there?

The guards were obviously around the entire time she'd been in the Spring Court. She hadn't noticed them while the perfume was altering her impression of the place. He might have been there from the first moment they stepped through the portal.

Was he the one who had made her fall asleep? Was he the guard who laid her into that bed and let her dream away her life?

The Goblin King watched the thoughts play across her face with an expression of rapture on his own. "There it is," he whispered. "You've figured it out, haven't you?"

"Figured what out?"

He leaned forward, planted a hand in the moss, and loomed closer. The fanatic look in his eyes only gleamed all the brighter when she tried to lean away from him. He enjoyed how uncomfortable she was in his presence. How the planes of his chest made her heart beat faster because even now, in this strange place, he was more beautiful than any man she'd ever seen.

He was so close, she could feel his breath on her shoulders. Each inhalation seemed to draw her into the heat of his body.

“You realized I’m invested in this hero’s journey of yours. I want to see how you tick, Freya. And so far, it’s like a clock that hasn’t been wound in a very long time. You find yourself frequently stuck, and when your gut tells you to move, your head tells you to remain where you are.”

“That’s not true,” she whispered, staring into the molten silver of his eyes.

“Yes it is, don’t lie to me.” He reached between them and caught a lock of her dark hair. He smoothed it between his fingers while saying, “What I want to understand is why your heart tells you to save people along the way. A guard, Freya? Really? What a waste of your precious time.”

That wasn’t fair of him. Of course she wanted to help someone in pain. What kind of monster wouldn’t?

She leaned back on her hands, trying to put some distance between them. “I saw someone who needed help, and I offered it.”

“No, that wasn’t why, but I can’t figure out what your plan was just yet. Did you think to find someone who would protect you throughout the courts?” His eyes darted side to side, watching each of her eyes individually before he shook his head. “No, not that.”

“Don’t try to pick apart my thoughts,” she replied. “I don’t appreciate your attempts to climb inside my head.”

He lifted a clawed hand and combed through the hair at her temple. “But it’s such a pretty little head.” He grinned, and those sharp teeth flashed in the lantern light.

His gaze shifted, staring at her lips with a heat that seared through her. He tugged on her hair, not hard, just enough for her to know he could make it hurt if he wanted.

Freya couldn’t force herself to move when he tilted his head to the side. Warm breath fanned over her cheek, spreading a blush wherever it touched. And it burned, god how it burned.

But she still didn’t move.

The Goblin King whispered in her ear, lips gently touching the seashell edges, “And I don’t think you’d mind all that much if I climbed inside it.”

Two paws stamped the ground next to them. “Enough, you two!”

They both turned at the same time to look over at Arrow, who had stood up on his back feet. He crossed his doggy arms over his chest and glared at

them. “You’re not supposed to be here, Goblin King.”

“Yes, well, plans change.” The Goblin King leaned away from her and she could breathe again.

Freya gulped in a deep lungful of air. He sucked all the oxygen out of her body, or perhaps the magnetism of his personality conjured her closer. Whatever the reasoning, she needed to put physical space between them or she’d lose her head just like she had with the perfume.

She scrambled to her feet and took a few steps into the darkness before turning back around.

The Goblin King stood next to Arrow, glaring down at the dog as though he wasn’t supposed to say anything at all. As if Arrow should have known the Goblin King was there.

“Wait,” she said, pointing severely at Arrow. “Didn’t you say you recognized his scent?”

“I did.” Arrow bared his teeth in a snarl. “I’d know the King’s scent anywhere.”

“How?” She found it hard to believe the little goblin would know it just from a few passing moments when they met. “You made it sound like you had never met the king before. That only your family who had sadly passed were in his service.”

“I—” Arrow looked from her and then back to the Goblin King. “Well, I —”

The Goblin King interrupted them with a wave of his hand. “I’m not going to stand here and wait for you two to finish squabbling. Freya, you’ve been wasting more time than you have, anyway.”

She wanted to argue with them both and force them to explain, no matter how long that took. She needed to understand what was going on here, and if Arrow had been working for the Goblin King. But when he said she was wasting time, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“What do you mean I’m wasting time?”

He grinned. “Well, you only have a finite period for this deal to be completed. And you’ve already spent nearly two weeks within the Spring Court.”

She’d been gone that long? Freya couldn’t believe it. Time hadn’t passed so quickly without her realizing... had it?

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” she said, shaking her head in denial. “You said I had to collect items to get my sister back.”

“You did, and you do.” He twirled a finger in the air as if his hand was the face of a clock. “Did I forget to mention all goblin deals have a time constraint? Oh dear. You’ve only got a month to gather all those impossible items, and you’ve spent most of your time in the Spring Court.”

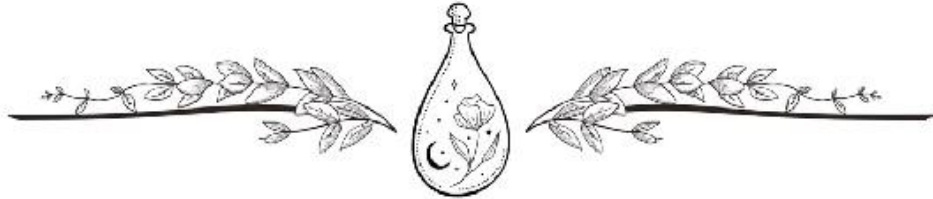
Her heart stopped in her chest and she slowly closed her eyes. Dizziness made her head spin. “Do you mean to say I only have two weeks left?”

When he didn’t immediately respond, Freya opened her eyes.

The Goblin King stood so close she could see the specks of darkness in his gaze. Specks that looked like black holes, ready to swallow her up. “One month, Freya. That was the deal.” He tsked. “I hope you can find her before then.”

And then he disappeared.

## CHAPTER 13



**F**orget the Goblin King and his disappearing act. There was someone else who she needed answers from first.

“You’re working for him, aren’t you?” Freya advanced on Arrow with single-minded intent. She refused to let the Goblin King stop her with an inside man who slowed her process.

Though he was a cute little dog-like creature, her sister was far more important. Arrow had to go. And if she had to chuck him out into the darkness herself, then she would.

He stepped back, balancing on his legs awkwardly as though he had forgotten how to walk. “No! I’m not working with him.”

“From my point of view, it looked like you recognized each other. Far more than just your family having worked for him from a distance.”

“I recognize him!” He swallowed hard. “I doubt the Goblin King remembers I exist all that often. But yes, of course I know him. He’s my king. All goblins know him.”

She didn’t know if she could believe him. And that frustrated her more than knowing he might have betrayed her. Freya wanted someone to trust, anyone, and now the one person she thought might be worthwhile had betrayed her. The knowledge ripped at her very heart.

Freya needed someone on her side. She needed help, and honestly, perhaps that was why she’d tried to save the guard. Maybe the Goblin King had been right about her, and he’d just seen through the lies she was telling herself.

“If you weren’t working with him, then you must have at least known who he was. That he was there the entire time.”



Arrow hung his head. “Yes, I did. But I thought you knew! You were the one who made a deal with the Goblin King. I thought everyone understood that came with certain... well. Certain rules that aren’t normal for a goblin deal.”

“I had no idea.” She stepped around him and sat down in the roots of the tree. “And now I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do. Every decision I make is going to be clouded by him, isn’t it? He’s always going to be there, preventing me from progressing at every turn.”

The goblin dog stepped a little closer, then laid down near her feet. “He will do everything in his power to slow you down. Of course he will. The Goblin King has never lost a deal, not to anyone. And you’ve already gotten through the first step.”

“Too late.” She touched the perfume in her pocket. “I now have three courts to go through in the same amount of time that it took me to get through one. That’s an impossible task.”

“It’s only impossible if you say it is.” Arrow pointed his nose at the glowing lanterns hanging above them. “You’re in the faerie realm now, Freya. I don’t think you understand just how likely impossible things are to happen. There’s no such thing as something that can’t be completed. Or a task that cannot be finished.”

She stared down at her fingers twisting in her lap. She felt a little better. At least Arrow was here with her. And though he might be a spy for the Goblin King, thus slowing her down, at least she had someone here to talk with.

If she’d been alone while searching for her sister, then she didn’t know how long she would last. Though Esther meant the world, it was still difficult for Freya to be in this otherworldly place without support.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she whispered, hoping her words would ring with the truth she felt in her heart. “Even if you might be spying for the Goblin King.”

“There’s no friendship between the two of us, if that’s what you’re implying.” Arrow coiled himself like a cat, tucking his tail underneath his chin and staring out into the darkness. “He’s the reason I’m alone, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Freya leaned back against the trunk of the tree and resolved herself to lose a few moments. What were a few heartbeats to hear a story when she knew how impossible this would be, anyway?

“My mother and father worked for him, like I said. Goblins always work for the king, I suppose, but my family used to sneak through the palace and gather information from the walls. We’re small enough to fit, and most aren’t.” Arrow shook his head. “It all went bad one day and then they were gone. Dead, buried, and he didn’t care at all. He did nothing for the people who’d given him everything. Everything.”

Her heart cracked open at the last word. Repeated with so much emotion and a bone deep ache.

She knew the feeling. She knew what it was like to miss someone so much it felt like she was bleeding from the inside out.

Reaching forward almost unconsciously, she stroked her hand over his doggy head. She wasn’t sure if he would even want to be touched like that. He wasn’t an animal, after all. But Arrow lifted his head to her touch and let out a sigh.

Together, they paused for a few minutes in the dim light of the lanterns. Freya lost herself in memories of her family. Her mother and father would forever be a wound in her soul, wondering how they died, or when. Then she turned her thoughts to her sister and felt her resolve harden. She would save Esther or she would die trying.

In some way, she understood Arrow was also thinking of his family. Of his loss, their end, and the journey forward all by his lonesome.

No matter what species he was, what kind of faerie he had been born as, at least they both shared this understanding. He’d experienced a similar life journey. She respected that.

Freya swiped her fingers underneath her eyes—when had they gotten so watery?—and stood up. “Come on, then. We don’t have any time to waste if I’ve only got two weeks to get through the faerie courts.”

“I know a way into the Summer Court.” Arrow stood as well, shook himself, then lurched up onto his back feet. “I can also get myself some clothes there. Damned sprites are always trying to make me into a dog.”

Freya coughed into her hand and tried very hard to keep a straight face. The sprites weren’t the only ones who had tried to make him into a dog, but it was hard not to.

“Where is the way into the Summer Court?” she paused, then asked another question. “And what should I be expecting?”

“In what way?” Arrow snuffled into his paw, wiping his runny nose. Then her real question seemed to dawn on him. “Ah. You mean what kind

of fae are going to be there?”

“Yes.”

Freya needed to know what to expect and how to protect herself around them. The sprites had taught her a very valuable lesson. The fae would stop at nothing to control her, or manipulate the way she thought. She couldn't afford another two weeks pressed beneath their thumb.

“Well, at least this time the Summer Court is filled with elves. They aren't as mean as sprites, but they will try to distract you.” He frowned. “I can't say you won't be in danger, but it will be a different kind of danger.”

“That's not helpful, Arrow. Be a little more specific.” She knew it was against his ways to dance around with minced words and pretty sounds, but she needed the truth.

“Elves are vain. They want to make everything as pretty as they are, and that's the end of it. They're going to look at you and see that you're mortal. Mortals are not pretty nor saveable. To blend in, you must be as noble as them.” Arrow stuck out his tongue. It was an expression that would have been funny on a human, but made him look like he was panting. “And they all consider themselves to be nobility.”

Freya hadn't heard the term in such a long time. Of course, they were all taught about the nobles when they were little. She remembered learning about their stations and how the teachers had always spoken of them in revered tones. She assumed they were still around, but how would she ever know? Freya wouldn't be the one interacting with them.

“Nobility?” she asked. “How am I supposed to fit in with them?”

“Gesture with your hands a lot.” He shrugged, then strode around the other side of the tree. “Honestly, it's not very hard to make yourself seem like you're an important person. All you have to do is never answer a question.”

She could do that. She hoped.

Freya followed him around the tree with a frown on her face. “So all I have to do is just... what? Pretend I'm a noble as well?”

“They know nothing about mortals. You could say you were the queen of where you came from and they would assume you were. Keep your chin up a little higher, straighten your shoulders, and lie through your teeth.” Arrow stopped on the opposite side of the tree and gave her an unimpressed look. “Humans can lie, after all. The fae can't.”

That wasn't the first time she'd heard about the bindings on a fae tongue. But Freya thought they weren't giving themselves enough credit. She absolutely had heard them lie, although they might not have thought of it that way.

Twisting words, telling stories, manipulating the way a person thought... It was all just a different way to lie.

Arrow pointed at the tree with a paw. "That's the way into the Summer Court."

The tree?

Freya frowned and stared at the bark. She'd seen nothing different about the tree at all. It was still just bark. Still the same thing she'd seen from the moment she stepped through the portal. Just a tree. A few lanterns. Nothing all that different from what she might have expected in a forest.

Except... There was something different. All she had to do was look a little closer.

Nestled deep into the bark of the tree was a tiny door. It was about the same size as her hand and surrounded with white mushrooms embedded in the moss. Tiny stairs had been set into the roots, little stones that only a person the size of her thumb could have climbed.

"What is this?" she asked.

"The door into the Summer Court, of course."

Freya could make that connection on her own. Arrow wasn't making the connection of why she would hesitate so thoroughly.

She pointed at the door and then back at herself. "Do you not see the problem?"

"No. It's a door. Doors open and close, people go through them. That's how they work."

The sarcasm that oozed from this dog was ridiculous. Goblin, she corrected herself. She really had to stop thinking of him as an animal or she would make the mistake of calling him one to his face.

Again, she pointed at the door. "There's only one thing standing between us and the Summer Court then."

He looked at the door, then back at her. "Which is?"

"Neither of us is small enough to fit, Arrow. How do you expect me to get through something the size of my hand?" She gestured up and down her body. "I'm not magical. I don't know how to shrink."

The goblin tilted his head back and let out a booming laugh. The barking sound echoed through the darkness, almost as though they weren't out in the wilderness but were kept within a tiny box. "What did I tell you about impossible things?"

"That they're possible here."

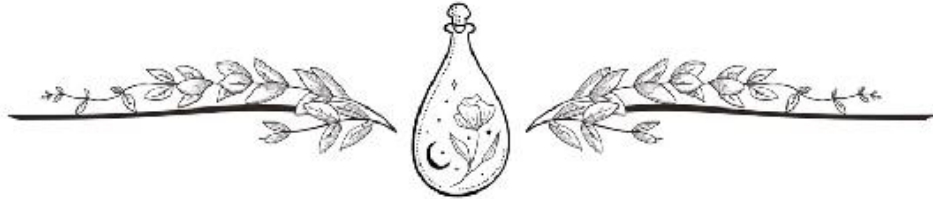
"Yes, Freya of Woolwich. So all you have to do is open the door."

Make the impossible, possible. She ironically wondered whether the door would even open for her, a human who hadn't ever considered walking through a door the size of her hand.

But she wouldn't question him. Not when her sister's life was at stake.

So, without too much hesitation, but with plenty of concern, Freya reached forward and opened the door.

## CHAPTER 14



**F**reya wasn't sure how she'd become so comfortable with the faerie realm this fast. Perhaps it was because her mother had talked about it so much during Freya's childhood. She'd known faeries existed. She'd seen drawings of goblins and heard their bells her entire life.

Maybe if someone else was in her shoes who'd known nothing about the fae, they might have struggled with the ideologies. Freya accepted their kind, their stories, and their magic.

There was always the chance that she would wake up from this entire experience and Esther would be in bed beside her. All of this could be some sort of fever dream, or a night after a foul meal of fermented fish.

This world was too real, however. And when she opened the door to the Summer Court, she had the strange sensation of stretching. It was the wrong feeling entirely, considering the door was much smaller than she was. But that was the only way she could describe the sensation that poured over her form and forced her to change.

Freya watched the tree grow larger. Arrow moved along with her, changing his form at the same speed, and the door grew ever larger with the tree. Belatedly, she realized her perspective was backward. The tree wasn't getting any bigger at all.

She was getting smaller.

When the process was complete, she stood at the foot of the stone stairs grown into the massive tree and stared up at the door she had just opened. Light poured from the opening, warm and glowing with the promise of summer. She could almost feel its heat on her skin.

Oh, she missed summer so much. She missed the scent in the air, like the plants were calling out to everyone. Come outside. Lay in the grass and feel the sun on your skin. It was time to grow.

Arrow lifted his nose in the air and inhaled deeply. “Ah, the Summer Court. It’s always so lovely this time of year.”

“Wouldn’t it be lovely all the time? Constant sunshine sounds like the ideal place to live.” Freya started up the steps to the door.

“You are correct. It is always summer for the elves.” He snorted. “The elves always have it best.”

Freya supposed she was about to see why the goblin thought that. Together, they walked all the way up to the doorway and she peered inside.

She stared into a greenhouse with a grey and white marble pool in the center. White and pink lily pads floated on top of the azure blue waters. Rows on either side were filled with every vegetable imaginable and so green the leaves looked fake. The glass walls arched above her head into a lovely point. The entire thing was immaculate and screamed wealth.

Thin hedges framed the end of the greenhouse, each one trimmed carefully into different shapes. One was a dolphin, another a unicorn. She noted a few otters twisting around each other. The topiaries were far more detailed than any she’d ever seen before.

“Wow,” she muttered. “Would you look at that?”

“It gets even worse outside of the greenhouse,” Arrow muttered as he waltzed in. “This is the safest place to enter the court. Most of the time you end up in the palace, or at the very least in the courtyard.”

Well, she was glad they had decided to go this way. At least a greenhouse wasn’t so overwhelming as a palace.

Freya strode into the blast of hot air and immediately felt her hair frizz. The humidity stuck to her skin and clung to the delicate spider web fabric on her body. By the time they made it to the greenhouse entrance, her dress was plastered to her skin like a wet rag.

She paused with her hand on the glass doorknob. “Is this going to suit if they’re all... noble?”

Arrow looked her up and down, then sighed. “We’re going to have to spin a good story for that.”

Of course they were. She pushed open the door with a heavy sigh.

The gardens continued past the greenhouse and out into a rich landscape of wild plants. Wide palm trees with branches higher than ten men tall

created a canopy over their heads. So much lush greenery filled every corner her eyes could see, other than a thin stone path that led past a small wrought iron seating area, and then disappeared around a bed.

It was so green here. So warm. Birds sang over head and she swore there was a call from a monkey she'd once seen in a passing circus.

Teeth dug into her skirt and yanked her to the side. Freya had her bearings enough to not shout, and dove into the bushes with Arrow as two people strode into view.

They were taller than most mortals, even taller than her father had been. Their lithe bodies moved with grace beneath silken fabric that showed more skin than it hid. Their faces were covered with elaborately painted masks. One was a butterfly. The other a wave.

They spoke in quiet tones that were impossible to decipher, but lovely all the same. She mused that it was like listening to someone sing a song from her childhood, though she couldn't put her finger on what it was.

"What are those?" she whispered in Arrow's ear.

"Elves," he grumbled. "It's always elves."

The red silk fabrics on the one with the butterfly mask were held together by a clasp between her breasts. A large portion of her torso was exposed, and she wore billowing pants that were translucent other than a small triangle at the apex of her thighs. Jewelry covered the rest of her body and hung from her neck, shoulders, and waist. The gold chains danced with even the slightest movement.

The other, a man she assumed although she didn't know why, wore similar clothing. His top was bunched at his shoulder, his pants clung to his skin, and the fabric was bright blue.

He turned toward the female and reached for her mask, stroking her cheek before he pulled it off.

There was nothing underneath it.

Freya pressed her hands to her mouth to still her gasp. She had always heard elves were beautiful. Her mother had told stories about magical beings, revered and honored by both mortals and the fae. They were the most attractive of all the fae creatures. And yet, these beings were completely faceless. There was nothing underneath their mask but a flat surface where features should have been.

"Steady," Arrow muttered. "Elves are beautiful only because they reflect what is around them. With no mortals around, they have nothing to



reflect. That's why they always wear the mask."

Heavens above, no wonder everyone thought elves were beautiful. They would change for whatever was attractive to the person they had met, but they were vacant themselves. Completely devoid of anything that would set them apart.

No wonder they wore masks. What a horrific way to live.

Freya kept her fingers pressed against her mouth until the elves moved on. Only then did she drop her hand and let out a croaked sound. "They really look like that?"

"They do." Arrow stood and struggled to get out of the bushes. "And they're quite sensitive about it, so don't bring it up when we meet them."

"We're meeting them?" She furrowed her brows so deeply, she could almost feel them touch. "Why would we ever want to meet them? Can't we just steal the essence of summer and no one would be the wiser?"

"You have to play the game, Freya. That means meeting people."

She freed herself from the snare of thorns and branches, jerking the fabric of her dress until it ripped. "No. I don't want to play the game. I want to get in and out as quickly as possible."

"Unfortunately, we are in the Summer Court and the game must be played or you will be sent back to where you came from." Arrow strode in front of her, his little bottom wiggling as he went. "The elves are more kindly than the sprites though, so you don't have to worry about them trying to make you a pet. At least if you disappoint these fae, they'll just send you back to the mortal realm and forget you ever existed."

That wasn't better.

Arguably, that was even worse. She didn't want to lose the chance to get her sister, and somehow at least staying with the sprites had given her more of a chance than being back home. She didn't even know if she could get back through the same portal.

Sighing, she nodded. "Okay, then. What do I need to do?"

Arrow walked around a corner and suddenly the entire world seemed to open up. No more forest. No more overwhelming greenery. The seaside cliff had a hundred screaming seagulls circling a palace that looked like it was made of seashells. The abalone sheen on the outside gave a pearlescent appearance that she was certain could never be replicated in the mortal realm.

The spires twisted like seashells as well, jutting out of the main part of the castle and into the sky. Beams of rainbows reflected wherever the sun touched.

Elves strode around the palace. Each one wore more lovely clothing than the last, and the masks on their faces differed greatly. Wings, flowers, seashells, images depicting the elements. She noticed that very few wore animal masks. Some of them were wearing insects. Butterflies, moths, even a few dragonfly-like wings.

But none of them were dressed as animals.

She exhaled a low breath and stood at the edge of the gardens with Arrow. "Do we go in?"

"I suspect that's the next step for us. I don't have any idea what the essence of summer might be. Is it safe to assume the Goblin King didn't share that detail with you?"

She shook her head. "He didn't think it was necessary that I know what I was required to gather before I got them."

"Of course not. Otherwise, it would be too easy of a goblin deal." Arrow shook his head, then twisted to cover his chest with his paws. "I feel horribly exposed. We both need to get in outfits that represent our status, otherwise, they'll eat us alive."

A couple of elves approached, although Freya didn't think they had seen the two strangers standing on the edge of their lush greenery. She assumed the two of them were so plain looking, so unremarkable compared to the elves, that one of the creatures would have to quite literally stumble upon them to realize that Arrow and Freya were even there.

She tugged Arrow back toward the undergrowth. "I think we should wait until it's night time then."

"Why in the world would we do that?" He couldn't stop her from moving him, but he did point enthusiastically at the palace. "There's an abundance of clothing inside those walls! We could sneak in, get some clothes, and then they'd think we were a visiting king and queen."

"How are we going to get in without being seen?" She gave one last shove and pushed him underneath an elephant-sized leaf, hiding them from the passing elves.

Just as she suspected, they didn't react. The pair meandered by the two strangers, never the wiser that there were eyes on them at all.

At least the Spring Maiden had guards who didn't let anyone get close to her or her sprites. These people apparently assumed no one would ever attack an elf, and if they even thought of it, surely they wouldn't go through with such an embarrassing plan.

Freya fell onto her knees beside Arrow and shifted a leaf to the side, watching the elves as they walked around the palace.

The goblin remained quiet for a few moments before he muttered, "Well, I look like a dog. I could just walk in and get us items of clothing."

"I'm sure no one would notice a dog leaving with mouthfuls of skirts." She let the leaf fall back in place. "We'll wait until nightfall and then grab what we need. It's easy as that, Arrow. Then no one will see us."

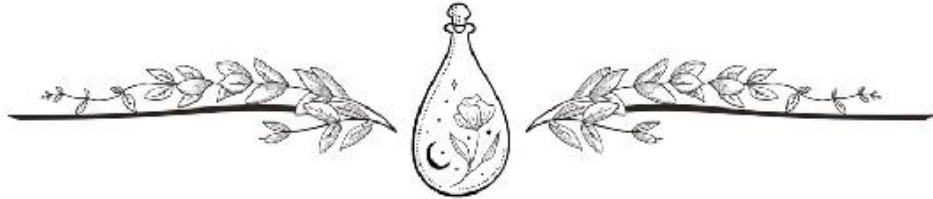
"I don't think they'd notice me," he continued to argue. "But if you're so adamant."

The goblin curled up into a ball and promptly fell asleep. His deep breathing lulled her into a sense of security, but Freya couldn't stop lifting the leaves and observing the elves as they passed by. They really were beautiful, if a little eerie.

And she kept her eyes on the palace. Within those walls was the secret to this court.

All she had to do was find it.

## CHAPTER 15



**U**nder the cover of nightfall, they moved through the gardens to the Summer Court palace. Freya tried so hard to stay quiet, even through the gravel on the path. Her foot stepped on a particularly sharp-edged stone, and when she picked it out between her toes, she realized they were walking on crushed seashells.

What a lovely place if it wasn't filled with deadly creatures missing their faces.

She glanced down at the dog beside her. "And to think, I never wanted to meet any fae creature in my life."

Arrow poked his head around the corner of a hedge, peering through the darkness for any sign of elves. "Why would anyone want to go through their life without some kind of fae around?"

"Whatever could you possibly mean?"

He slipped around the corner with a snort. "Life must be terribly boring with no magic in it, is all. And the fae are the only ones with magic."

Freya followed him across the path and into an open area where they would have to move fast. As they darted through the shadows, she realized he was right. She had been so bored back home, but she hadn't realized that was the feeling tearing her up inside.

She had gone through her life as though in a dream. Dazed and numb, she did all the things she was supposed to do. Keep the house clean. Garden. Go to the market and keep her head down when there was conflict.

Maybe someday she would have met a quiet village boy, and still could. They would have started a family of their own and lived in a hut by the forest. Or perhaps he would have convinced her to live closer to town,

where her soul would have slowly leaked out of her. A slow bleed, but a wound that could kill all the same.

Seashells crunched under her feet as she raced past a pool filled with glowing fish. One jumped into the air, and the thin membrane of its tail glowed so brightly it cast her shadow in stark relief against the wall of the palace.

Freya hit the abalone wall and pressed her back firmly against it. Lungs heaving, she closed her eyes and tried to still her breath. They needed to be quiet and gasping for air was not that.

The goblin dog snuffled next to her, his nose in the air, before he gave a sharp nod. "This is as far as I can go."

"Excuse me?"

"Here's the thing. Elves hate goblins." He patted his paws on his chest, then swept his hand up and down his body. "I can't go in like this. They'd take one look at me and know what I am, and then who knows what they'd do to someone like me."

"You were the one arguing you should sneak in and get the clothing."

His eyes widened and his nose twitched. "Well, I thought you'd tell me not to go. And you did. You see? It all works out in the end."

She wanted to snarl that he was a slimy little bastard, but there was no time to argue with the ridiculous creature. He wanted her to sneak into the palace by herself? Fine. She would.

Freya wasn't afraid of these elves, or at least, she had survived through worse. She growled, then said, "What do I need to get and how do I find it?"

"Clothing, for both of us. Perhaps a mask." He leaned around the edge of the palace and nodded firmly. "They don't appear to be out and wandering anymore. So you should be able to pick any random room and grab whatever clothing you need."

"And then just walk out?" She already knew panic was written all over her features. Her eyes were too wide. Her hands were shaking. And she could already smell the distinct scent of panic sweat.

Arrow gave her a bright grin. "Don't forget your path through the meandering halls, Freya of Woolwich. You'll make it out just fine."

And then he scampered off with the faint hint of a laugh floating in the wind.

She was going to wring that dog's neck the next time she saw him. Rolling her shoulders back, Freya prepared herself to step once again into danger. She could do this. No one would know she was here. All she had to do was be quiet.

She stalled for as long as she could before darting around the corner. There was an open door right into the palace, which was surprising considering the elves didn't appear to have guards. She supposed there might be some magic that she didn't know about. But nothing stopped her from rushing into the palace and skidding to a stop on the gorgeous stone floors.

Freya barely contained the startled, "Wow," that pressed against her lips.

The room was splendid. Marble floors were lit by a thousand candles leading to a grand stairwell. The railings were covered with all manners of flowers and vines, draping over the edges and dangling to the floor. Candelabras were placed between the plants to cascade their light over every glowing petal.

Freya stared, open mouthed, at the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and casting shadows with blue flickering flames. The light illuminated a giant mural on the ceiling that was a painting of a thousand elves waltzing in a dance she could almost hear. The entire room hung in suspended silence, as though it were holding its breath.

Why did this feel like a trap?

Freya kept her back turned to the wall and carefully picked her way through the room. She didn't think walking up the stairwell was the right choice, not yet at least. That looked a little too formal, and even as she thought maybe she should try the upper rooms, a warning chimed in her head.

The first rule of magic was to trust her gut. She might not be able to cast spells or knew anything about magic at all. But she knew her body would react to it the right way.

So she headed down a side hallway instead.

It appeared to be the servants' quarters, though there was no one here right now. A long hallway with doors on either side stretched out before her. This floor was dark, like polished obsidian, though the walls still gleamed with unnatural light.

She pressed her ear to the nearest door and listened intently. Faintly, she could hear rustling as someone moved in their bed.

Onto the next.

She continued down the hall, pressing her ear to each vibrantly painted door. This wasn't getting her anywhere, though. Every room had an occupant. And she would not walk into a room when someone could wake up at any moment.

At the end of the hallway, all the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. They only did that when her sister Esther was trying to sneak up on her. Esther had never been successful because Freya always knew when someone was watching her.

She turned around, whipping so quickly her dark hair blew in front of her face. But there wasn't anyone in the hallway. No faceless elf staring at her. No goblin dog pitter-pattering across the marble floors.

All she felt was a strange wind that touched her face with a chilly hand. Magic, she supposed, although she didn't know what it felt like just yet. Letting out a long, low breath, she palmed the door and stepped out into an indoor garden.

The Summer Court sure did like their plants. This room was full of moss with a glass domed ceiling sparkling with stars. A strange structure stood in the center. She might have thought it was meant to be a room, but spiral stairs stretched out of the mossy ground to a small platform at the top. Columns carved with flowers and birds arched over it, creating a space where walls might once have been.

Considering the amount of moss and what looked like algae growing on the pillars, the building likely wasn't traversed often.

The clouds parted and a spear of moonlight illuminated a small chest at the top of the stairs. Freya's gut told her to go. To look within the chest and see if perhaps that would suit. After all, the elves seemed to be a rather strange race. Maybe this was where they kept hidden clothing.

She shouldn't. She should continue on and look within a closet like a normal person.

But her feet moved on their own. The open air around the pillars called to her. Warm breezes darted between the mossy stone and moonlight cast her shadow in a dizzying dance. As though it moved on its own and she was merely watching it traverse the strange pavilion.

Freya reached the peak and touched a hand to a column. She couldn't quite center herself, not yet anyway. The feeling of her stomach falling out of her body made her need to hold on to something. The stairs were far higher than she'd thought.

No walls. No gates. Nothing prevented her from tumbling over the edge, and it was a long way down. She also didn't know how old this platform was or if it would simply give way beneath her weight.

She shifted to the center slowly, feeling out the floor to ensure it wouldn't break.

The chest was quite lovely. Mahogany wood with golden clasps and filigree embellishments that looked like fish darting across the surface.

Surely there was a dress within. She might not find something for Arrow to wear, but the goblin could pretend to be her very loyal dog for all she cared. Let the elves think he was a pet. Maybe that would make him think twice about forcing her to put herself in danger alone again.

She sank onto her knees before the chest and smoothed her hands along the wood. Stealing from the elves felt like a bad idea. What if they knew what she had done? What if they could sense that someone was taking something that wasn't theirs, and they cursed her?

The hairs on the back of her neck lifted again. Someone was watching her. No, not watching. Someone was standing right behind her. So close she could feel their warm breath shifting her hair and shimmying down her neck.

With a sharp gasp, she turned around and pressed her back against the chest. Freya was terrified she'd see a faceless person standing behind her, or worse, a grinning mask that somehow was far more horrifying than a face without features.

Instead, all she saw was shadows, darkness, and smelled the distinct scent of apples.

"You," she whispered. "I know you're here. How is that even possible?"

No Goblin King responded to her, but she would not let him get away with this. Not when she'd discovered him so easily. He had no right to trail her, to startle her, to make her feel so afraid.

Freya stood up and planted her hands firmly on her hips. "Goblin King. I know you're here."

Shadows near the left column beside the stairs peeled away from the marble. He stepped out of the darkness as though he were made of it. A

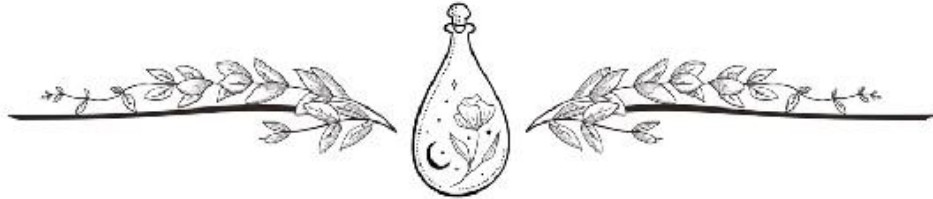


white poet's shirt billowed around his chest and arms, unbuttoned and showing too much of that smooth, moonlight grey skin. Tight black pants covered his legs, while knee-high boots clipped the ground as he strode toward her.

The Goblin King stopped a breath away from her, his chest nearly touching hers. The heat from him billowed and slicked her skin with a fine layer of sudden dew.

He lifted a hand, those delicate claws almost touching her cheek. "Hello, Freya."

## CHAPTER 16



“**W**hat are you doing here?” she asked, breathless with surprise.

She didn’t sound like herself at all. Freya’s voice was watery. Thin, as though he had sucked all the air from the room. Maybe he had. Just standing this close to him was so overwhelming. She could almost taste apple crisp on her tongue. She knew he was grinning at her like the lunatic he was.

That knowledge came with the realization she didn’t have to look at him to know exactly what he was thinking. Or, at least, what he looked like.

His dastardly smirk was difficult to forget, no matter how hard she tried. The pointed teeth had been branded into her mind, seeping into her dreams, moving through the fog of her memories until the inky darkness blotted out all other thoughts.

She tried to take a step away from him, but the chest was directly behind her. She caught a heel on the edge and began to fall. The edge of the pavilion was so close, she knew she was about to tumble a hundred feet to her death.

The Goblin King caught her around the waist, tugging her against his chest with a firm arm wrapped around her. His heart thundered against her palms where she had slapped them to steady herself.

This close, she could see how molten his eyes were. The silver within them swirled, constantly moving with unnatural light. His pupils were slitted like a cat’s.

He stared down at her and the sharp edge of his jaw bounced. Maybe he was as affected as she was, although Freya thought perhaps she felt this way

because she'd never hated someone so much in her life.

Hate and infatuation were sometimes hard to tell apart.

His chest muscles flexed underneath her palms. "Careful, Freya. The game isn't over yet, and I won't have you tumbling to your death when there's still so much left to be done."

"Whatever do you mean?" she whispered. "Wouldn't you love to win that easily?"

"It's not winning if I don't get the best of you." He released her sharply, spinning her into the center of the pavilion and away from the edge. "You're a very worthy opponent, I'm finding. This has already been greatly entertaining."

"Is that so?" She pointed toward the chest. "The goblin you sent to help me thinks I need clothing to speak with the Summer Court. A king, I assume?"

"Now why would you think that?"

"A palace like this would only be built by a man." Although that was a lie. The beauty of this place was haunting and had a familiar feminine touch to the design.

His eyes trailed up and down her body, lingering on the softness of her curves. Slowly, the Goblin King licked his lips.

Freya crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly very aware that the dress she wore was plastered to her like a second skin. She wanted to get out of this tattered lace. Even compared to the Goblin King in his lax outfit, she still felt like a moth who had flown into a garden full of butterflies. Lesser. And not quite as impressive as she should have been.

"Ah, Freya." Her name on his tongue sounded like a sonnet. "You cannot wander elven halls and think they will find you noble simply because of the way you dress."

"I'm mortal, remember? We're quite adept at lying." She didn't know if she was all that good, however.

Esther was better at pretending to be something she wasn't. Even in the village, her sister could fit in with any crowd of people she waltzed up to. Like the elves, Esther had worn many faces and could easily slip into another character. Those she met always thought she was the same as them, shared the same thoughts, even moved the same way.

Freya wasn't good at pretenses. All she could hope was that she could be convincing enough that people didn't notice her presence.

The Goblin King raised an eyebrow, almost as though he knew the thoughts running through her head. “We’ll see just how convincing a theatrical show you can put on, then.”

“Why are you even here?” she snapped. His words stung. Did he already think she was going to fail? She had come this far!

“I also have to speak with the Summer Lord.” He tilted his head toward her, acknowledging that she’d only been partially correct. “My presence has nothing to do with you being here, although I’m surprised you’re going in order. Did you think the elves would be easier than the sprites?”

“Arrow said they were less dangerous.”

“Oh no, my dear. Pretty things are always dangerous, no matter if they are elegant rather than delicate.” He turned around and opened the chest she’d planned to steal from.

He pulled out a gorgeous gown of cerulean fabric. He gave it a hefty snap and suddenly the dress unfurled, then bloomed. Many layers of lapis chiffon were cinched in at the corset and decorated with lovely silver thread. Vines crawled up the corset and ended in chiffon plumes that would fall off the shoulders with lovely grace.

The Goblin King turned around with the dress in his hands. “This will suit you, Freya of Woolwich.”

Good lord, he thought that dress would look nice on her? What compliments this Goblin King let fall from his lips.

She took a step forward, reaching for the gown. “I suppose it would. Doesn’t matter though, it’s only going to be worn to prove a point.”

He tugged it away from her reach. “What point is that?”

“That I can blend in with the elves if needed.” She tried to snatch it from his hands, but he moved again. Why wasn’t he letting her have the dress?

The Goblin King released one shoulder of the dress and gestured with his finger for her to turn around. “Clearly you’ve never put on a corset before. You can’t do it yourself. Turn around, Hero of Woolwich.”

“That’s not what I am,” she whispered, her voice carrying through the moonlight.

“Isn’t that what you’ve made yourself? You’re the hero in this story, Freya.”

She could feel her heart beating against her ribs with the pounding sound of drums. “Wouldn’t that make you the villain?”

The moonlight disappeared and cast his figure into shadows. "I'll be your villain soon enough. But not right now."

She couldn't let him touch her, could she? He asked to help dress her, and she knew for a fact that was too far. He had stolen her sister away. This was the man who prevented Esther from returning home to the only family she'd ever had.

He'd made a deal with a little girl who had little concept of consequences. And sure, maybe the Goblin King hadn't made the deal himself. He had the final say in anything to do with his court. He might not have been the one who had taken Esther, but he was the one to blame.

Freya turned around all the same. She scooped her hair over one shoulder, baring her back to his gaze with a soft, shuddering sigh. "Fine, then."

His claws ghosted over the ragged edges of her lace dress. Rather than unbuttoning the back, he ran the sharp tips beside the buttons, slicing through the thin strands holding the dress onto her body. She felt each pop vibrate through her ribs and belly.

The lace slithered to the marble floor, snagging on her chemise that had seen better days. He didn't move to rush the lace off her body. Neither did she. They both let it fall on its own accord with a hushed sound against the smooth floor.

Her heart raced. Her throat closed up because she didn't know what to say. How did one acknowledge the villain, as he called himself, helping her into a ball gown?

Gorgeous layers of chiffon landed at her feet. The dress glowed like magic made the colors more vivid. He'd unlaced the corset, she realized. It gaped open, waiting for her to step into the dress and allow him to ease it up her body.

She couldn't do this. She'd faint or fall over or—

"Freya." His voice broke through her worries. "Step into the gown, my dear."

She straightened her spine, stared forward into the darkness, and stepped into the dress. The chiffon was so light against her toes she wasn't certain she'd actually touched it. But he eased it up and over her hips, smoothing his palms along the outside and settling the layers flat.

"Arms," he murmured.

Freya lifted them, and he eased the corset into place. The sleeves fell down over her shoulders, as they were meant to, but her neck suddenly felt very bare. Her collar bone was exposed for anyone to touch. So exposed she could feel his breath on the back of her shoulder.

“You’ve never worn a corset before, I take it?” he asked, fingers moving behind her as he began the lacing process.

“No, never.”

“Why not?”

“No peasant ever sees reason to wear a corset.” What should she do with her hands? Did she leave them at her side? “I can’t imagine working in the fields with a binding constricting my chest.”

“I imagine you’d faint.” There was the faintest hint of amusement in his voice. “Peasant. I find it funny the mortals still use the word.”

The first tug surprised her. She wheezed with the second and realized very quickly why she would have fainted. Good lord, he was going to break her ribs if he made it that tight. Although, she supposed he would also know the appropriate way to wear a corset.

A voice in the back of her head wondered why she was trusting him to touch her at all. This could be a magical corset that would slowly squeeze her chest until the bones broke.

But another voice whispered that he wouldn’t want to win this game like that. Hadn’t he said so himself? The Goblin King was entertained by their back and forth. He wouldn’t cheat when he could continue to watch her and see what choices she would make.

“Of course, we still use the word,” she hissed out a long breath with a particularly sharp sound. “What else would we use?”

“Woolwich, I suspect, would use nothing. Nobles left there centuries ago if I remember right.” He remained quiet for a long time before asking her another question. “Is there still a salt mine there?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“No important reason, I suppose.” He tugged harder and her ribs creaked in response. “I used to know the people who lived there. Back when mortals understood the fae aren’t all bad.”

“You were in Woolwich,” Freya reminded him. “I saw you in the cart, you know. You were the first goblin I’ve looked at in years.”

“Ah, yes. Your mother had a big voice claiming if mortals looked upon a goblin that we would tempt them into oblivion.” He chuckled. “I always

thought that was funny, you know. If we could tempt a human just with our looks, you'd think we would be a little prettier."

She placed her hands on the corset and held onto the boning. The shadows shifted around them. She wondered if there were goblins watching them even now. Did they follow him around? Or did he travel alone?

"She was right." Freya didn't know where the words came from. Maybe the corset was squeezing them out of her. "Even if you all wear animal features, you're still so tempting to mortals."

His fingers stilled between her shoulder blades. Heat spread from his fingertips, sinking into her skin like a brand. "Do I tempt you?"

More than he'd ever know.

With every breath she inhaled.

The idea of the Goblin King was enough to make her mind whirl and yes, of course he tempted her.

Freya turned around and met his gaze. "No, Goblin King. You don't."

His eyes squeezed just the slightest bit, narrowing on her as he searched her gaze for the lie. Freya thought she managed quite well to hide her inner thoughts, but then he grinned and those sharp teeth glinted in the moonlight.

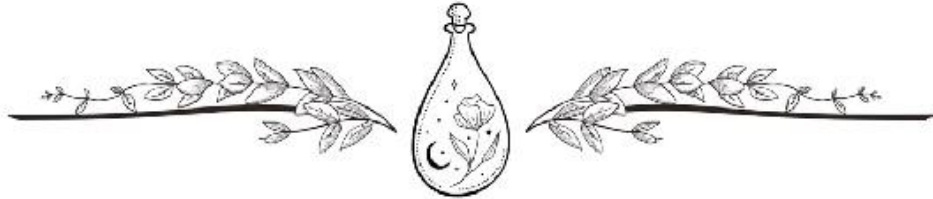
"Yes, you are," he growled. "And what a pity that you're tempted by a monster, my dear. Stories like those never end well."

His hands lifted between them and she stared down into a midnight blue mask shaped like twin blooming flowers. Freya took the offered mask and held it loosely in her hands.

"Goblin King," she murmured. She should tell him that she had lied. She didn't know why she'd said such a horrible thing.

But when she looked up, he was gone.

## CHAPTER 17



“Pull yourself together, Freya,” she whispered, as though the words might snap her out of the dumbfounded stupor.

The Goblin King had dressed her. The gown was far more magnificent than anything that had ever been on her body.

And the Goblin King had dressed her.

Clearing her throat, she noted the sun appearing on the horizon. She hadn’t realized so much time had passed, but it appeared she would enter the Summer Court while everyone was waking up.

That was great. What a wonderful thing to happen when she was trying to sneak around and figure out what the essence of summer even was, how she was going to steal it, and how she was going to get it away from the Summer Lord.

At least she knew the elf leader was a Lord. That was the first step closer to whatever she needed to steal.

Twitching her skirts to the side, she placed the mask on her face. Small hooks on either end clung to her ears, and strangely the mask wasn’t heavy. It adhered to her skin like it was meant to stick, or like someone had lathered glue on the back. She hoped she’d be able to get it off.

Freya raced down the stairs and back to the mossy floor where she could enter the rest of the palace. Taking a deep breath, she pressed her hand against the surface of the door. She could do this. All she had to do was play pretend.

Shoving the door open, she walked out into the hall filled with elves. This was what she had expected when she’d come into the palace in the middle of the night. A hundred different dresses in every color of the



rainbow, a myriad of masks, and so many eyes on her that she could hardly tell who or what she was supposed to be doing.

An elf grabbed her arm. This one wore a mask shaped like a sunflower. “Are you ready?”

She supposed she couldn’t ask for clarification on what she should be ready for. Such words would only give away her not belonging, and that she had no idea where she was.

Freya gave a quick nod, and the elf pulled her through the halls. They raced away from the pavilion where the Goblin King had stolen her breath, and out to the stairwell covered in flowers.

Sunlight made it even more grand. She stared up at the mural and tried to square her shoulders more. Lift her chin up to the sky, like Arrow had said. She needed to pretend she was one of them, and no one would give her a second glance. It would be that easy.

The elf holding onto her arm gave her a quick shake. “Are you ready?”

Again that question. Freya frowned beneath the mask but nodded again. This time, they raced up the stairs, down a hallway lined with blue flowers that crept horizontally along the walls, and then out into a raised courtyard.

The entire courtyard had been set like there was about to be a ball. Sure, there were a few tables here and there, laden with food and drink. But the black-and-white checkered floor couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than a dance floor. Vines hung from lines that were strung above their heads, and multi colored petals rained down with every passing wind. Already there were quite a few elves tangled in each other’s arms, gracefully swirling to music she couldn’t hear.

The sunflower elf released Freya’s arm to clap her hands. “My goodness, it’s so beautiful! Did you ever think you’d see something so beautiful in your life?”

Freya’s stomach churned at the thought this elf might already know she was human. “No,” she replied carefully. “I don’t think it’s possible for anything to be more beautiful. It’s existence would burn the eyes of any beholder.”

“Quite right!” The elf pointed excitedly to two thrones far away from them. “And the Goblin King is here! Did you know he was coming? I certainly didn’t.”

Two men occupied the golden thrones, both as handsome as they were opposite. The Goblin King had changed. His dark suit was finely pressed and silver threads sparkled in the sunlight. She couldn't tell what pattern they were from where she stood, but she guessed they were likely tiny flowers.

The Summer Lord was seated beside him in a white suit. Dangerous, considering how much dirt and earth surrounded them. His skin was dark as midnight and had an otherworldly sheen that gave him a pearlescent glow. The crown on his head was made of corals that had been polished, or perhaps metal poured to appear as though it had once been alive.

Freya watched the sunflower elf run from her side and sprint off to the others. They were all standing in lines, preparing themselves to dance. Unfortunately, Freya had no idea what they were dancing to or what the steps were. She couldn't even hear the music.

Another elf strode by her, wearing a mask like the sun. He paused for a moment, then looked over his shoulder and held out his hand for her to take. "Shall we?"

Oh no.

This was the moment they found out she wasn't who she was pretending to be. Their graceful movements were so beyond her knowledge, and worse, if she was too close to an elf, would he be able to smell her? To know she was mortal and therefore deserved to go home?

That's what Arrow said. They could smell a goblin a mile away. They must be able to smell mortality as well.

The elf was waiting. He waved his hand again, as though maybe she hadn't seen him holding it out for her to take. What was she going to do? Her heart rapidly beat faster and faster until she was certain the elf could hear it.

"Summer Lord!" the Goblin King's shout echoed across the dance floor. Everyone paused in their soundless dance, staring at the king who had visited them.

Freya held her breath. She couldn't imagine what he was up to now.

The Summer Lord turned his head to stare, his eyes narrowed. "What is it, Goblin King? You have been invited to my court and now you have all the loveliest of the elven women laid out before you like a banquet. What more could you possibly want?"

Was there a hint of disgust in his tones? Freya assumed there must be. Arrow had made it very clear they didn't like goblins, although she honestly wasn't certain the Goblin King was actually one of their own species.

He looked more... Well. A combination of sprite and elf, more than he looked like a goblin. Perhaps those claws, the tipped ears, and his sharpened teeth came from his goblin lineage, however.

Strange, she never considered he might not be a full-blooded goblin. And the thought felt as though it were very important indeed.

The Goblin King tossed a leg over the arm of his throne and reclined. "Dancing is no longer enjoyable for me. Bad knees, you see. But I do think a stroll through your maze would be quite... entertaining."

"Ah, of course." The Summer Lord sagely nodded his head. "The maze is quite entertaining, and you love to feel something more than just apathy if I remember correctly."

"You do."

They spoke as if they had known each other for a very long time. Perhaps they had. If she peered at their mannerisms hard enough, Freya could even convince herself they might once have been friends. There was a certain comfort to the way they sat with each other.

Although, she also noticed a stiffness in their shoulders. They may have once been friends, but the Summer Lord and the Goblin King no longer enjoyed each other's company.

The Summer Lord opened his arms wide and gestured to all the surrounding elves. "You have your pick, Goblin King. Any of my elves would be honored to be in your presence. Take them to the maze. Discover the secrets at the center, and perhaps you will find someone who captures your fancy."

Freya bristled at the suggestion. Captured his fancy? None of the women could hold a candle to what the Goblin King was. His grey, shimmering skin was like stars in the night sky. His eyes were molten silver and a woman who only mirrored beauty couldn't maintain a relationship with such a king.

Why was she even thinking thoughts like that?

Freya wanted to slap herself. And if she had been alone, she might have. The Goblin King was not an attractive man, nor was he interesting to her in any way, shape, or form.

“I can have my pick?” the Goblin King asked. His voice rang out over the entire ballroom and then some. She swore he almost shouted the words.

A few elves near her bristled. They didn’t seem to be interested in being chosen at all. In fact, she would have thought they wanted to get as far away from the Goblin King as they could. Even though they had raced to be here.

Perhaps they hadn’t expected their own Lord would offer them up so easily.

The Summer Lord bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile. “Yes, Goblin King. Take your pick of any seashell that catches your eye. They will serve you until you grow tired of them.”

Freya frowned beneath her mask. She no longer doubted that the Summer Lord didn’t like the Goblin King at all. What she didn’t understand was why he’d allowed the King to be in his court at all if they didn’t get along.

The Goblin King stood from his throne. He smoothed a hand down the embroidered jacket covering his chest. The tails whipped behind him, trailing almost to his knees as he stepped onto the checkered floor. His knee high boot heels clicked on the floor.

Had he not changed? She narrowed her eyes and Freya realized he hadn’t. The Goblin King had just thrown on a jacket over what she’d seen him in before, and somehow he appeared to be ready for such an occasion.

He even stood out from all the elves, no matter how stunning they all were. The Goblin King wandered through them like this was his own court. He smiled. He nodded. Once, he even reached for an elf’s hand, twirled her in a circle, and then left her standing alone in the center of the floor.

What was he up to?

Freya tried to piece together his plan, but realized what it was too late. The Goblin King was only a few feet away from her when she knew he was about to choose her. That calculating mind had already caught her in a new web.

She should have guessed he would do this to her. Of course, he placed her in a pretty gown and lulled her into a false sense of security before he made the entire castle crumble to the ground.

He reached for her hand and bent over it. The heat of his breath filtered through her fingers, and then he pressed his heated lips to each of her fingers. The Goblin King took his time worshipping her hand before he looked up at her with mischief dancing in his eyes. “My lady. You are the

prettiest seashell here. Dare I say, perhaps more like sea glass than a mere common shell.”

An elf nearby gasped. Another pressed a hand to her chest and looked away, as though the words were an insult directed at her.

Freya’s mouth went dry. “What are you doing?”

“I’d like to journey through the gardens with you. To meander, as the Summer Lord enjoys calling it. We’ll sit in the sun together. Enjoy an elven afternoon. Together.”

She swallowed hard. She couldn’t say no. Then the Summer Lord and all the other elves would know something was wrong. But she also didn’t want to be alone with the Goblin King for any longer than she needed to.

This was a trick.

A well played trick, she’d admit, but it was obviously another distraction.

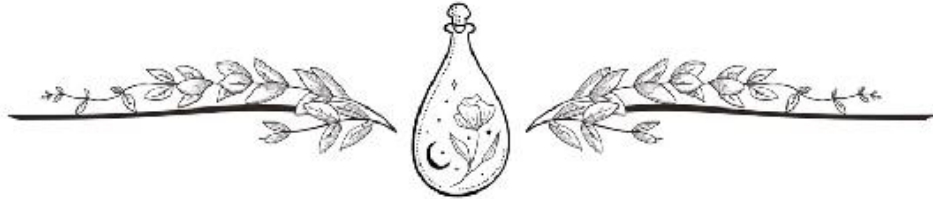
“You know I don’t have time for this,” she hissed.

“Precisely,” he whispered in return. “Why else would I ask for your time?” The Goblin King spun around and lifted their hands above his head. “I’ve made my choice, Summer Lord!”

The man in question waved a hand like he didn’t care. “Good. Now out of off my ballroom so we can all enjoy the dance.”

The Goblin King didn’t waste any time. He tugged on her wrist, hard, and they fled the dance floor toward the gardens beyond.

## CHAPTER 18



**T**he Goblin King's grip on her arm was firm. He forced her to move, not giving her any chance to shift away from him until she let out a grumbling, "Are you going to let me walk on my own or am I going to be dragged into the maze?"

He released his hold on her, but it felt a little reluctant. "You have a habit of slipping away under surprising circumstances. I'm merely ensuring you don't this time."

"Why would I slip away from you? Where would I go?" She rubbed the wrist he'd been holding, her fingertips white from lack of blood. "Damn, you're stronger than you look."

His eyes dipped down to her hand, then back up to her eyes. A light flickered in his own gaze, and if she hadn't known better, she might have thought that light was sadness.

"My apologies, Freya of Woolwich."

She didn't want his apologies. She wanted her sister back.

Rubbing her wrist, she walked around him to peer at the maze unfurling before them. It was large. The hedges were two men high. Perfectly trimmed and a bright, lovely green. The entrance was framed by two marble statues of women pouring water out of urns.

"Pretty," she muttered. "But then again, isn't everything here pretty?"

The Goblin King strode past her, snagging her mask on his way to stand beside the right statue. He held the flowered creation in his hands and looked down at it, turning the stiff leather. "Sure. Everything is so lovely and pretty and far more impressive to your mortal eyes than it is to mine."

Freya had about enough of this. He didn't get to be melancholy, leaning against the statue with one leg raised. As if he were a poet reciting sonnets to a woman who wanted to hear them.

She was not that woman.

"Why are you doing this?" she blurted. "I don't understand why you're helping me, or not helping me. I don't understand why you would take my sister in the first place for something so simple as the gift of a necklace. I don't understand why you were even at Woolwich to begin with, when there are so many other places for you to prey on mortals."

"I don't expect you to understand any of that."

"Well, you certainly expect something from me." She crossed her arms firmly over her chest and cocked her hip out to the side. "Out with it. Why are you kidnapping people? Why steal children and then send their loved ones on impossible quests to get them back? None of this makes sense."

He dropped her mask onto the ground and lifted his hands in a shrug. Mischief curled the corners of his lips, but the motion didn't reach his eyes. "Eternity is boring."

She didn't care if that was a half-hearted attempt at a joke. Freya let out a choked sound and said with disbelief, "You're doing all this because you're bored?"

"How many years have you lived?" Then heat flashed in his eyes. Not something of interest or even passion, but feverish anger. "A few decades? Twenty years? You couldn't possibly understand the constant turning of the sun and how long eternity really is. I have lived through war and conquest. Through countless kings and queens. They all fight, fuck, and feast. Then they die. Horribly, but in the end, you notice patterns in the way mortals live."

She refused to fall into this trap of pitying the poor immortal Goblin King. Freya shook her head again. "How dare you try to make this about your long life? Should I pity your immortality?"

"Pitying any of the fae is absurd." His hands curled into fists at his sides. "But you should know you're the first human to surprise me in a very long time. Obviously, I want to see where this goes. What you will do next."

An angry retort balanced on the tip of her tongue. Freya didn't care what he wanted. She didn't care that he was interested in seeing where this went, because the end would remain the same whether or not he liked it.

She would get her sister. They would return home to their safe life at the edge of the forest. No matter how long that took.

Freya took a deep breath, stilling the anger that burned in her chest. “I’m glad I could be of some entertainment, but I don’t have time for this right now.”

Let him try to stop her. She turned around and walked back toward the Summer Lord. She didn’t know what the essence of summer might be, but someone had to know. Maybe if she found Arrow and got him to sneak through the crowd at a safe distance, he’d overhear someone mentioning it. All she had to do was be patient.

“Freya.”

No, she refused to listen to him. She wouldn’t turn around, nor would she listen to whatever venom he was about to spout.

“Freya!” he called out again. “How about we strike another deal?”

Was he insane? She wheeled around with a fist lifted into the air. “Are you joking, Goblin King? I sincerely hope so. Another deal? Why would I ever agree to another deal with you?”

The Goblin King opened his hands wide, apparently showing her he had nothing up his sleeves. “No tricks this time, Freya. If you make it to the center of the maze before me, I’ll tell you where the essence of Summer is. What it is.”

She shouldn’t. She should go back and find Arrow, because he could help her where the Goblin King probably couldn’t. This was just another trick to waste her time.

But if it wasn’t a trick... This would speed up her time here far more than wandering through the crowds, hoping someone was talking about something they shouldn’t. Even though Arrow was small and his hearing was much better than hers, it would take time to even convince him to wander through the elves.

She shouldn’t, Freya repeated the thought. She knew just how much of a trickster he was.

The temptation called to her, though, and Freya knew this was the only chance she would get. A few moments running through a maze wouldn’t waste too much time.

Turning on her heel, she crossed her arms over her chest. “And if I lose?”



“Nothing happens.” He held up his hands again, turning them front and back. “No tricks. No rules you aren’t aware of.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why would you offer me this chance to learn anything about the Summer Court when this could all end now?”

The Goblin King’s eyes darkened and twin furrows appeared between his brows. “Perhaps I’m not yet ready for this to end, Freya.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.” A wind brushed past her, stirring her skirts and twisting the light fabric through her legs. “But no matter how hard I argue, you won’t give me the truth, will you?”

“The fae cannot lie.” He hopped up onto the edge of the statue, seated just below the water pouring from the urn. “Deal or not?”

She didn’t have a choice, did she? Was there ever a choice here?

Freya let her arms drop to her sides in defeat. “Fine. You have a deal, Goblin King.”

He tilted his head back and let out a sound that was eerily similar to a moan. She almost felt it this time. The deal fell around her neck like a chain of magic that pushed down upon her shoulders. She could feel the power, and that was as horrifying as it was shocking.

She’d thought it would make her skin crawl. Having his magic inside her should have been the worst feeling she’d ever felt. And yet, the magic was soft in her veins. Quiet and calming, like she’d had a glass of wine.

She shook off the strange thoughts. “When do we begin?”

He nodded toward the maze. “Now. Run along, hero. Let’s see how quickly you can figure out the famed maze of the Summer Court.”

Freya didn’t need to be told twice. She took off between the statues, stones crunching underneath her feet. Her father had taught her how to get through mazes when she was very little. Pick a side, left or right, and never let your hand come off the edge.

So that’s what she did. She stuck out her right hand and let the leaves play along her fingertips. She didn’t care if a few thorns scraped at her palms, they would heal. Besides, the plants she grew at home were tougher. Hell, even cucumbers bit more than these hedges.

The interior of the maze was a dirt path that was almost too dark for her to believe it was still soil. The walls were remarkably the same, with no markers to remember. Unsurprising, considering the entire point of a maze was for it to be difficult. But the farther she entered, the more the hedges grew taller around her head.

They grew until they were three men high. Four men high. So tall she wondered if magic made them appear bigger than they actually were.

Breathing hard, Freya turned a corner only to see him. The Goblin King's dark suit was hard to miss, but how was he in front of her when she'd entered the maze first?

She hadn't taken another turn or doubled back. At least, she didn't think she had. It was impossible for him to have run past her without her knowing. And as far as her mother's studies had proven, goblins couldn't turn themselves invisible to the mortal eye.

"How did you do that?" she muttered under her breath.

Freya darted around another corner and came to a stop before a wall of vines. Frowning, she peered closer to the tendrils that differed greatly from the hedge walls of the maze.

This wasn't right at all. The hedge was very clearly marked. Green leaves, obviously growing and trimmed by gardeners regularly. The vines in front of her were wild and unruly, almost as though they had grown without the touch of a single person.

That made little sense.

Keeping her hand on the wall, she turned and looked back the way she had come. Three forks were behind her. Three paths she could take if she wanted to waste the time investigating where they led.

Or, she could look at this vine wall as an opportunity. The mere idea of cheating had her teeth grinding together.

But would the Goblin King play fair? She was certain he wouldn't at all. Goblins never played fair.

Freya touched her hand to the vines and pushed them aside. She stepped out onto the next path of the maze and saw the Goblin King leaning against one side. "You learn fast," he said.

She wanted to slap the grin off his face. "And what exactly did I learn?"

"Faeries never play fair. And if a maze confuses people, then we'll do our best to make sure they get stuck in the maze forever." He lifted a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. "Most people won't break the rules, Freya. Apparently, you are not most people."

"I could have told you that myself." She looked side to side, not sure where to go now that she'd removed her hand from the wall.

To the right, there appeared to be a small fountain with water burbling out of a fish's mouth. To the left, the maze opened like the mouth of an

animal. Neither appeared to be the right way.

The Goblin King had said the maze was meant to confuse people, so she supposed it didn't matter which way she went. Turning toward the open maw, she left him leaning against the hedge and raced into the clear space in the maze.

Apparently, that wasn't the right choice. The opening was just a circular portion of the maze with ten new passages that revealed themselves. Each one had a unique symbol above the path, but none of them made sense. A fish. A flower. A woman's comb. She didn't know what was at the center and therefore had no idea what she should or should not be looking for.

Frustrated, she spun around, looking at all the clues, before steadying herself.

"A maze meant to confuse," she muttered. "Breaking the rules is the right decision in this case."

What rules were in a maze? Obviously she was supposed to go down one path. The circular space had a hedgerow up to her waist that encircled a small bench at the center. Maybe...

She approached the middle of the maze. The bench was made of twisted silver, pretty metal flowers blooming in the sunlight. But something was off about the ground at the base. Twin lines were scratched where someone had moved the bench before.

"There you are." Freya grabbed the bench and yanked it to the side. The metal screeched on the ground, proving she was correct. This was no ordinary bench, and it didn't lead somewhere normal at all.

The popping sound of magic snapped by her ear. Warm breath touched the back of her neck. "Look at you," the Goblin King murmured. "So few mortals would ever consider that a maze might not be one dimensional."

"Who said mazes only go left and right?" Freya brushed aside dust. A trap door with a metal handle had been hidden underneath the bench, perfectly concealed from sight.

"Who said life isn't the same?" The Goblin King melted away, but his voice remained in her ear. "Hurry up, Freya. Or I'm going to beat you."

She threw the trap door open. Stone steps disappeared into the darkness, but she would not hesitate. She darted into the blackness and threw herself down the stairs. Every step was closer to the center, she just knew it. Every ragged breath brought her that much closer to beating him.

And she realized that was why she wanted to finish this maze. It had nothing to do with her sister anymore. This was entirely about beating the Goblin King at his own game.

With one last push, she burst out into bright sunlight and skidded to a stop. Freya threw an arm over her face so her eyes could adjust, then peered at the splendor with her mouth gaping open.

“Wow,” she whispered.

The cliff edge was still far away from her, but it plunged toward a calm sea. Tiny dots of islands decorated the horizon while birds with ten foot long tails floated overhead. Their songs rivaled the most lovely of ballads, and their colors were every hue of the rainbow.

Her breath caught in her throat. The azure sea was so calm it looked like glass. As though some artist had spun an impossible scene and painted it before her, glimmering in the distance. Close enough to marvel at, but never near enough to touch.

Tears built in her eyes because she had the sudden realization that she would never see something so beautiful again. When she returned to the mortal realm, she would also return to the mundane life that had trapped her since she was a child.

This place. This beauty. It was fleeting, and she needed to absorb it through her eyes for as long as she possibly could.

Footsteps approached and the Goblin King paused beside her, hands clasped behind his back. “It is lovely, isn’t it?”

“Did I beat you?” she risked a glance behind them. “This is just the end, not the center.”

“Really, the center of anything is the perception of the person looking. This may be the center, because there is a world out there neither of us has ever set foot upon.” He gestured toward the ocean. “If we were more daring, perhaps we would climb down these cliffs, get into a boat, and sail toward the sun. The maze continues out there, we just haven’t seen it yet.”

“Philosophy,” she muttered. “From the Goblin King himself.”

“Everything is a matter of philosophy, Freya of Woolwich.” He turned to face her, then sank into a low bow. “I will make good on my word. You beat me to the center.”

Freya bit her lip. “Only because you let me.”

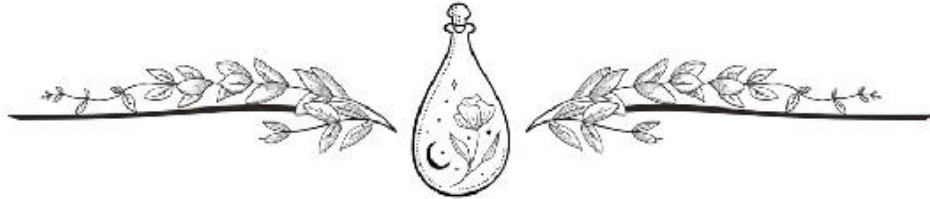
“Oh no, I would never.” But the sparkle in his eyes said otherwise. “The Summer Lord is fond of potions. He always keeps his lucky charm around

his neck. I'd highly advise you to consider stealing that from him."

"What?" Freya's own eyes widened in shock as the Goblin King dissolved in front of her. "Why would you tell me that so easily?"

His chuckle floated through the air like bubbles. "Because I don't think you'll be able to get out of the maze."

## CHAPTER 19



**H**e was wrong, of course. But Freya thought he might have known that even as he mocked her. The Goblin King might try to get in her head and tell her that she couldn't do certain things, but Freya knew she could get out of the maze.

After all, she remembered every detail required to retrace her steps.

She strode away from the beautiful coastline and back to the bench. She even took care to make sure the metal legs were back in their spots, so whoever tried to go through the maze after her wouldn't find it so easily.

Then, she just had to remember the symbols she had seen before. There was one that was obviously not in her memory, which was the symbol of a sun. That was the path she had to take all the way to the hanging vines, and then it was just swapping hands.

Sure, it took her a while. Longer than she might have hoped. Even running, the sun set long before she had planned on returning to the ballroom. Thankfully, it appeared the elves hadn't noticed. Or if they had, they didn't care.

Many of them were so far into their cups, the dance had turned rather sloppy. As she caught her breath, one elf tripped over their own feet and landed hard at hers.

The elf looked up at Freya and started laughing, pointing to her face. "What kind of mask is that? I've never seen it before!"

Shit.

Freya reached up and pressed her fingers to her face, but the damage was already done. The Goblin King had taken her mask. She was the foolish one who hadn't insisted on carrying it with her through the maze.

She lowered her hand, hoping that the elves were drunk enough that they would continue to think her actual face was just an elaborate mask. “You’ve never seen one?” she replied, a little breathless. “The mortal masks are going to be all the rage. You should have heard about them by now. What a pity.”

The elf’s face fell in disappointment, but at least he didn’t know what was really going on. The expression meant he believed her lies, and that was a good enough start for Freya to sneak past.

“Excuse me,” she muttered and slid through the crowd.

She tried to keep her face down turned so they might not notice she shouldn’t be here. Of course, there were a few elves who stopped what they were doing and stared as she snuck by. These were the ones who didn’t look like they were drunk. Their eyes narrowed and grew calculating.

All she had to do was get the potion bottle from around the Summer Lord’s neck. That was it. Then she could run away, find Arrow, and they could sneak off to the next court with little to no issue.

Sure. Easy.

Freya pressed her back against the stone of the castle, far away from the rest of the elves. She needed to get her bearings in the room. After all, stealing the Summer Lord’s potion would be a lot easier if she knew where he was.

Casting her gaze through the crowd of magical beings, she froze when she felt a cold, wet nose press against the back of her leg.

“There you are,” she said under her breath, monitoring the elves she hoped wouldn’t suddenly smell him.

“You were taking too long,” Arrow grumbled from underneath her skirts. “Hopefully there are enough layers to keep my scent away from their unnatural noses. What have you found out?”

“Well,” she cleared her throat. “I know it’s the Summer Lord’s potion we need. He wears it around his neck.”

“Get him drunk.” She felt the nose touch her leg again and what sounded like a chuckle. “Or more drunk, as it were. The man can hold his drink, but he’s really putting the drinks away today.”

Freya looked to her right, where the gathering of elves was the thickest. The crowd parted to reveal the Summer Lord in the midst of all those people. And yes, his cheeks were bright red and his laughter a little too loud. He tried to stand, then stumbled.

It was unusual to see any of the fae stumble. They were graceful as a default, so she assumed this was entirely because of the drink.

“How did you know he was drunk?” she asked.

“I can smell him from here.” Arrow took a deep inhale, and the exhale blasted against her calves. “Also, I might have been keeping an eye on you. From afar.”

Of course he had been. She would have expected nothing less from the sneaky goblin. And though a part of her soul twisted at the knowledge, he’d been watching her, another part was relieved she hadn’t been alone after all.

How strange it was to start trusting a goblin. Of all things.

“Thank you,” she said. “Are you ready to move?”

“How are you going to get the Summer Lord drunk enough for us to steal the potion?” Arrow shifted with her, staying between her legs with every step. “I can’t imagine he’s going to enjoy looking at a human without a mask. They don’t like your kind any more than they like goblins.”

“I’ll come up with something.” She didn’t have much of a choice otherwise.

The elves parted like water before her. They moved out of her way with either laughter or startled expressions. Those who were drunk thought she wore an elaborate mask. Those who were still sober were certain a mortal had walked into their midst. Freya could hear every word they whispered as they speculated who she was.

“The Summer Lord hasn’t gone soft, has he? He wouldn’t let a mortal into the court.”

“No. That’s a new mask. No one would dare walk into the faerie realm as a mortal, and they certainly wouldn’t test the kindness of the elves.”

“If that is a human, she’s about to understand why the elves are the most feared of the faerie courts.”

Freya swallowed hard, but kept walking. They wouldn’t scare her into running. She had to get her sister.

She didn’t stop walking until she stood directly before the Summer Lord. He’d spilled a glass of wine down the front of his pristine white suit, but he didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he continually pointed out the stain to a few elves near him, while laughing.

“Summer Lord?” Freya asked, but her voice was perhaps a little too quiet.

He ignored her. Gesturing to another elf to refill his cup.



Freya could see the potion bottle hanging around his neck. It contained a single sprig of a plant, perhaps lavender, although she didn't have a clue what that would be for. Her mother always used to use lavender to help them sleep when they were little. A king would likely have a lot of things disturbing his sleep, so perhaps she could use that to her advantage.

Without thinking, Freya snatched the fresh glass of wine out of an elf's hand and passed it to the Summer Lord. "You wanted another drink?"

He saw her then. The Summer Lord narrowed his dark eyes. Furrows appeared on his brow and around his mouth. "Who are you?"

"Freya of Woolwich." She curtseyed low, nearly sitting on Arrow's head. "It's an honor to meet you. I've heard a great many things about your court."

The Summer Lord snorted, then drained the glass of wine in one hefty gulp. "Of course you've heard about us. All mortals find the elves to be interesting. What exactly are you doing here though?"

She leaned away from him as he shifted closer. "I needed to speak with you."

"No, that's not why you're here. You would have run by now if that's the only reason you wanted to see me." He leaned back into his throne, the now empty goblet dangling from his fingers. "So what is it then? A mortal walking into the Summer Court isn't anything I've ever seen before. You obviously have some kind of statement to make. Out with it."

No, this wasn't the way she wanted this conversation to go. Obviously he wasn't drunk enough. He needed to get more wine in him, or perhaps something stronger, and then she could steal that potion around his neck.

"I want to make a deal with you," she said. Her words carried across the dance floor and suddenly, all the sound disappeared. Not a single bird in the sky dared to sing, nor wind dared to brush through the thick fabric of skirts.

A mortal had just tried to make a deal with the Summer Lord. Freya assumed she might be the first one to do so in a very long time.

The Summer Lord's eyes narrowed again, but this time she saw the calculating expression. He was smarter than he looked, she'd give him that. For all he had drunk, he knew a trick when he saw one. Perhaps he saw something of the Goblin King in her.

"What kind of deal?"

"I want that potion around your neck." She pointed at it. "I will not tell you why."

“No one gets this potion.”

“A simple deal, if you fear losing to a mortal.” Freya smiled her best goblin smile. “Are you afraid, Summer Lord?”

A few elves near her bristled at her tone. They reached into their pockets and she could see the imprints of their knuckles against the fabric as they wrapped their hands around hidden weapons. She knew she was taking a great risk. They could easily kill her, but she had hope.

The Goblin King and the Spring Maiden had shared a similar personality trait. They had to be the best. And to know that someone else had defeated them was the greatest ruin they could face.

But they also wanted to tempt their fate. Their greed and arrogance required them to prove over and over that they were the best out there.

Freya could only hope the Summer Lord was the same as his counterparts.

He watched her too closely, with eyes that saw far too much. But then he smiled, and she knew she had him.

The Summer Lord opened his hands wide, then gestured up and down her body. “What deal were you thinking, Freya of Woolwich? There’s very few things a mortal can best me at. Would you like a contest at riddling? Perhaps you’d like for me to read your future or predict your past? What impossible task would you have me defeat you in?”

How adorable. Just like the other faerie leaders, he had underestimated her. Freya knew how to use this to her advantage.

“Oh no,” she replied. “I want something far more simple than that. I want to make a deal that if I beat you in a drinking contest, then I get the potion around your neck.”

He choked. Rocking forward, he pressed his fist to his mouth while an elf pounded on his back. Once he stopped coughing, the Summer Lord replied, “You realize faerie wine is far stronger than that piss water mortals drink?”

She shrugged her shoulders as if that didn’t bother her at all. “I’ve heard that before.”

“And you still want to make this deal?”

“Absolutely.”

The Summer Lord pulled the chain over his head and returned to his throne. He set the glass vial on the armrest beside his right hand. Then, the Summer Lord gestured for the surrounding elves to move and they all burst

into action. One brought a chair for Freya to sit in. Another brought a table. Soon, they were surrounded by so many bottles of wine, she wasn't sure she could move if she wanted to.

He even poured her glass himself, filling the goblet with wine so red it looked like blood. "I don't even mind that you waited until I was a bit more in my cups than you, Freya. I think this will be entertaining."

Ah yes, the fae loved that word. Entertaining.

She felt a cold nose touch her leg before a hissed whisper, "You can't drink him under the table, you foolish girl! What on earth are you thinking?"

Freya took a deep sip of the faerie wine, but that was all she planned on consuming this evening. Just like the Goblin King had said, there were rules to this game she played with the Summer Lord. But she didn't plan on following any of them.

A deal, apparently, had no requirements that either party remain truthful or honest.

The Summer Lord was already grinning and laughing with his friends. He nudged the elf beside him and muttered, "I'll have this done in two glasses." Then he chugged his wine.

"Would you like another already?" she asked.

"You haven't finished yours."

Freya nodded, then frowned. "Wasn't the Goblin King here? I thought he left, but I swear I just saw him behind you."

Without missing a beat, the Summer Lord exclaimed, "You damned goblin, I told you to get out when you were done!"

It was all the moment she needed to dump the rest of her wine underneath the table. It immediately soaked into the grass and no one would ever be the wiser. Before the Summer Lord turned around, she set the glass against her lips so it appeared she had drunk the liquid. When he turned back to her, she was already wiping her mouth.

"There," she said. "Now we're even. Shall I pour you another glass?"

He nodded, but watched her every move with suspicion. Watching as though she were going to pour less into his glass than her own. Unfortunately for him, he was looking in the wrong places.

"Why the masks?" she asked, purposefully slurring her words. "I don't understand why any of you would wear masks when you're supposedly the most beautiful of all the fae."

The Summer Lord removed the cream colored leather covering his face. Underneath was the smooth visage she'd already grown so used to. "Still think we're beautiful?"

Freya tilted her head to the side, squinted her eyes, then nodded. "If I make my eyes go a little blurry, sure. You're still passable. Now, what other masks do you have?"

He turned and gestured for an elf to run off and get more of his masks. While the others watched the elf run, she leaned forward and poured half her own glass back into the Summer Lord's.

And so it continued. They chatted about the Summer Lord's kingdom, because apparently compliments made him look at other elves for reassurance. Every time he looked away, Freya would either dump some of her wine on the ground, never the entire glass, or pour some into his own cup.

Eventually, he was blinking like he was trying to clear something out of his eyes. The Summer Lord lifted his hand and pointed beside her, "When did another mortal get here?"

"When I wanted them to."

He wrinkled his nose, then shook his head. "That's not possible. I would have known if someone came into my kingdom."

This was her chance. He was so well and thoroughly drunk that he wouldn't be able to stop her if he tried. And the other elves could do nothing, because they weren't the ones who had made the deal.

At least, she hoped.

Freya planted her hands on either side of the small table and leaned dangerously close. "You, sir, have been bested. Now I'm real sorry I have to take this from you, and I hope someday to return it. I understand the potion is yours, and I hope you can still sleep without it."

"What?" He tried to grab her hand before she snatched the potion, but his aim was way off. Maybe he thought she was the mortal on the right, not the one directly in front of him.

Either way, she grabbed the potion, turned on a dime, and sprinted through the crowd. No elf tried to touch her, thank goodness, but she heard the growls of anger.

"Goblin!" one of them shouted. "I smell a goblin!"

Arrow darted out of her skirts and raced ahead of her. "This way, Freya! Hurry!"

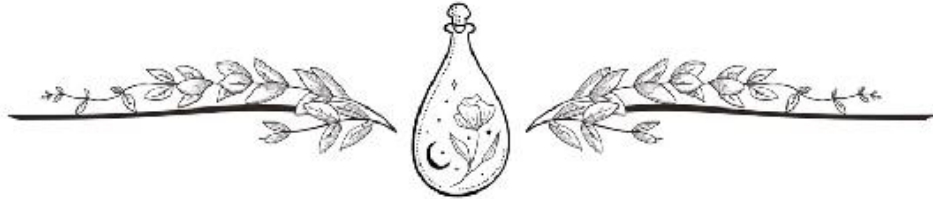
She lifted her skirts and ran after him so quickly she thought she would trip. A horde of elves chased after them, but they had enough of a head start.

Slamming into the greenhouse door hard, she heaved it open and shoved Arrow through. Together, they raced to the back where the small door waited for them.

“Ready?” she asked, breathless with adrenaline.

“Am I ever!” Arrow nudged the door with his nose and they both disappeared through the portal.

## CHAPTER 20



**T**hey tumbled out into the warm lights surrounding the old tree. Breathing hard, Freya fell onto her hands and knees in the dirt. Who cared about the dress? She had managed to steal from the Summer Lord!

“Did you get it?” Arrow asked, his own voice warped with stress. “Please tell me you got it.”

Freya reached out her hand and let her fingers unfurl like a flower. The potion bottle rested in her palm.

Now that she could inspect it, she was surprised at how plain it was. The cork was old. The lavender sprig within seemed to hover in the air. Sure, there were a bit of magical qualities to it, but she hadn’t expected the bottle to look like anything else she might have found in the mortal realm.

“Wow,” she muttered. “This isn’t what I expected at all.”

“No,” Arrow replied with his tiny brows furrowed. “It’s not what I thought it would look like either.”

Freya reached into the pocket of her chemise and pulled out the little perfume tin. While the first was short and squat, the potion bottle was long and flimsy. She placed them both side by side in the roots of the tree, then sat back to stare at them.

A furry butt plonked down next to her. They both turned their heads to the side and watched the two essences of faerie courts in hopes something would happen. Anything. Maybe a magic explosion, or the two items would fuse together. Maybe they would both disappear and leave clues in their wake.

But nothing happened. The perfume tin remained where it was. The potion bottle didn't move or shift. They were just items that she could have found anywhere.

"It's curious," she said.

"Yes, indeed."

"Why do you think these are the particular items I needed to gather for the Goblin King?" She looked over at the furry goblin. "Any idea at all?"

He shrugged his thin shoulders. "I haven't got the faintest idea. They make little sense."

And therein lay the problem. She felt like there was some glaring red flag waving in front of her face and she just couldn't see it. Something along the lines of why the Goblin King was making this easier on her, when he should have been trying to make it even more difficult.

Nothing made sense here. And she didn't know how to process that.

Arrow nudged her arm with his nose. "So what's going on with you and the Goblin King?"

She continued staring at the tin and the bottle. "I'm trying to beat him in this entire charade, and I think he's trying to pull the wool over my eyes."

"No, I mean..." Arrow moved to stand in front of her, then wagged his tail. "You two were in that maze for a very long time is all I'm saying. And when you came out, maskless might I add, you were bright red in the face. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing." She frowned, trying to clear her mind of the current issue and then understand what he was talking about. "Are you insinuating I might have some girlish interest in the Goblin King?"

"I think it's more than girlish." His tongue lolled out of his mouth. "It sure looked to me like you were interested in finding out what he had to say about your dress. The corset is laced quite tight, I might add. Impossible for a woman to do herself. Did an elf dress you? I doubt one did."

She wasn't having this conversation. "Absolutely not, Arrow. Go to bed."

"Oh, we're sleeping now? I thought you wanted to get your sister back as quickly as possible?"

No, he wouldn't goad her that easily. She got up and circled the tree to the opposite side, just underneath one of the bright lanterns. "Good night, Arrow!"

“Seems odd that you want to sleep now that I bring up your infatuation, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Nothing is going on between myself and the Goblin King,” she spat. “I can’t stand being near him.”

“Is that why you make eyes at him?”

“I’m not making eyes!” She thumped the tree hard, showering leaves down around the both of them to make a point.

The Goblin King was the last person she would ever be interested in. Period. No questions. No ifs, ands, or buts.

Arrow chuckled and replied, “You keep telling yourself that, Freya. You wouldn’t be the first person to fall for his charms.”

As if he had any charms at all. The goblin dog had sorely mistaken her reactions, and she wouldn’t argue this any more. She had nothing to prove. Not even in the slightest.

Freya leaned back against the tree with her arms crossed over her chest. She closed her eyes, but was so angry she couldn’t fall asleep. Why would Arrow ever think there was something going on? She hadn’t been flirting with the Goblin King. She’d made another deal, sure, but that was just so she could get more information out of him.

And yes, she’d taken his advice and cheated when she made another deal with the Summer Lord.

She was making a lot of deals with the fae, lately. She needed to stop doing that. Her poor mother was likely rolling over in her mossy grave.

Drifting into sleep was easier here than back home. She hardly even noticed, but when she opened her eyes, Freya knew she was dreaming. This place wasn’t right. The forest had opened up into a shimmering light that slowly focused until she could see them.

Them.

Esther stood facing Freya, laughing so hard tears were streaming down her face. She had her hands pressed against her belly and was pointing at the young man standing with his back to Freya.

She already knew who the young man was. She’d seen his rat face when he’d given the necklace to Esther. Her blood boiled.

How dare that goblin boy still be around her sister! What new poison was he whispering in Esther’s ear? Did he think all those lies would convince Esther to stay with him? Them? The goblins weren’t her family. They couldn’t have her.



The vision sharpened again. She could see the rat boy clearly now. He had a thick tail that wrapped around his leg, almost as though he were holding it there to keep it still. His ears were wrong as well, big and circular, though they looked soft as velvet.

She shuddered in disgust. The goblins weren't right, that was for certain. They weren't human, and her sister shouldn't be around them when she had other family who loved her.

In other words, she should have chosen Freya over this rat-faced goblin boy.

"I know what you're thinking." The Goblin King's smooth voice interrupted her thoughts and sent a shiver down her spine. "Goblins are ugly, aren't they? Of all the faerie creatures your sister could have chosen, why did she pick a goblin?"

"I don't understand why you're in my dream." She turned her head and met his unnatural gaze. "Let me have this moment with my sister without ruining it, please."

"You think this is a dream?" He materialized out of the shadows, stepping into view. His perfectly pressed suit with metallic silver vines sewn into the edges was immaculate. His hair fell around his face like a dark waterfall, and those silver eyes watched her every reaction. "Or perhaps this is a premonition?"

He would not get into her head that easily. "I don't have a drop of magic in my blood," she snarled. "Premonitions are for witches, and there's never been one in my family."

"But your mother was obsessed with the fae." The Goblin King stepped closer with his hands clasped behind his back. "You never wondered why she was so interested in our kind? Perhaps she was looking for something. Proof, perhaps, of her own magic."

"It's a hilarious thought, but you know as well as I that it's impossible." She tried to gesture at her body, but realized sleep paralyzed her. Freya settled for looking down at her legs, then back at him. "You've seen me. You've worked close enough to know that I'm not magical. Not at all."

He frowned. "Yes, you are quite ordinary, and unfortunately, that only makes everything more complicated."

"Does it?" She told herself not to feel the sting of his words.

Ordinary. As though her not having any magical blood was disappointing. He acted as though he would have liked her more if there

was, and perhaps he would. After all, a magical creature must want to surround himself with people of his own likeness.

Mortals must be so boring to him. Less entertaining, and that posed a problem.

Once he was bored with her, would he make this entire deal even more difficult? Would he cast her aside and then she would be forced to flounder in this god forsaken realm?

Before she could open her mouth, he pointed toward her sister. "You're so worried about her well being, but Esther very much enjoys being with our kind."

"She doesn't know what she wants." Freya swallowed the panic his words incited. "She's only sixteen. There's so much of the world she hasn't seen or experienced."

"You're right." He watched her sister and the goblin boy with a soft expression on his face. Almost as though he enjoyed seeing them together. "An entire faerie realm and all she's seen is where I placed her with the goblin boy you so hate. Why are you accepting of Arrow but not of my rat-faced little friend?"

"Because he took my sister." She spat the words out as though they were flames she could burn him with. "He had no right."

"And you have no right to control her. She's her own person, and sixteen is many years."

"Not nearly enough to decide to leave her family forever." Freya refused to believe sixteen was old enough for that. Though she might only be a few years older, she knew that wasn't the right time. Esther would pick a life of adventure and magic.

But then she would regret it for the rest of her life.

The Goblin King shook his head in denial of her words, or disappointment at her stance. "Oh, Freya. I think, someday, you'll learn that your sister is much more intelligent than you give her credit for."

"I give her all the credit in the world. She's the most kind, talented, and giving young woman I've ever met in my life." She struggled against the grips of sleep, wanting to slap the Goblin King so hard he saw stars. "Don't you ever question my love or dedication to my sister."

"I'm not questioning that at all." Again, he pointed to Esther. "All I'm saying is that you're running out of precious time."

Freya looked again and watched as Esther turned around. She walked away with the goblin boy, but something was different about her sister. She'd ripped her skirt in the back so a long tail could poke out of it. A tail with fur as white as snow that waved like a flag behind her.

"No," Freya whispered. Her cheeks grew cold and she could feel her heart thundering in her chest. "It's not possible."

"I'm afraid it is."

Her mother had never mentioned that people could turn into goblins. Goblins were born that way because they were faeries. Mortals couldn't turn into a goblin, and goblins couldn't turn into people. She knew that.

"No," she repeated. "It isn't possible at all. Humans can't become fae."

"I never said she was becoming a goblin." He looked down at his claws, then spread them wide as though inspecting their sharpness. "Magic does strange things to people, especially when you're around it for a long time."

"Then why aren't I changing?"

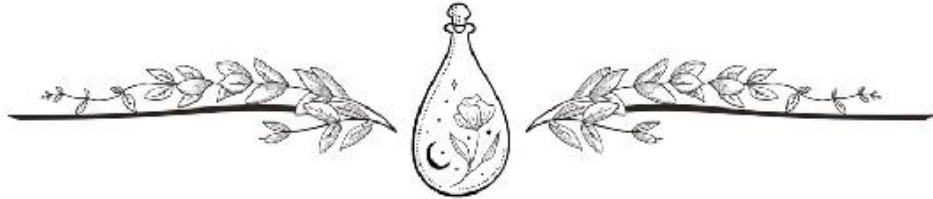
He looked at her with those molten silver eyes, narrowed with frustration. "That's the question, isn't it? Why aren't you changing, Freya? Or perhaps you're changing more than either of us realize."

She refused to believe it. She wouldn't change here. Freya of Woolwich was a mortal, and she would accept no other option.

She shook her head in denial once again, but the grin on the Goblin King's face made her shiver.

"It's time to wake up," he said. "You don't have much time left."

## CHAPTER 21



**F**reya rolled out of the dream like she was going to war. She planted her palms on the ground with a growl that sounded far more like an animal than any goblin she'd heard thus far.

How dare he?

How dare the Goblin King try to intimidate her with a vision of what was clearly a lie? Her sister couldn't be turning into a goblin. Esther wasn't warped by magic, and she certainly wasn't making friends with the creatures who had kidnapped her.

Esther was smarter than that. She was an intelligent young woman with a heart of gold, but she would not give her life away for another. Especially not a goblin.

Crawling around the tree, she approached Arrow with single-minded intent. She'd gotten enough sleep. He needed to get up as well and take her to the next court. She didn't know how they were going to get there, but surely he did. That was why he was helping her. He knew how to get around the faerie courts, and that was enough to keep him around.

Arrow had curled up in the base of the tree with last year's leaves all around him. He looked rather fox-like with his tail over his nose and ears drooping down in repose. However adorable a picture he made, she refused to let him sleep any longer.

"Arrow," she hissed.

He didn't move.

"Arrow," Freya tried again. She reached out this time and nudged him with her hand.

Still, he didn't move. In fact, she was certain he burrowed deeper into his mountain of leaves that he was using as a makeshift bed.

The little brat. She knew he was awake now, and he was just ignoring her. What he didn't know was that she'd grown up with a little sister who loved to sleep in and parents who expected Freya to help out around the house.

Scooping her hands underneath Arrow, she lifted him up with a great heaving motion and set him on his feet. He wasn't expecting that. He listed to the side, stumbled, and then fell onto his face.

"What the hell?" he snarled. "What did you do that for?"

"We don't have time to be sleeping. We have to get to the next court, and we have to get there now." She nudged him again, forcing the goblin dog to stand. "Up, please. You must know how to get to the Autumn Court."

He plopped down onto his butt and blearily stared up at her. "Why do I have to know how to get there?"

She could feel the anxiety building in her chest. It rose from her stomach and pressed against her throat, threatening to spill out of her body like poisonous bile.

Freya inhaled deeply, but the sound was shuddering and stuttered. "You have to know," she repeated. "You just have to."

Arrow looked her over with a knowing gaze before he sighed. "Fine, then. Come on."

He took off into the darkness as though nothing had happened. Just disappeared into the shadows.

"What?" she whispered, standing still at the tree. "Where are you going?"

His voice floated in the air on a wind that brushed against her shoulders. "You wanted to go to the Autumn Court, didn't you? Waking me up so early wasn't nice, by the way. Come on, now! Hurry up."

Was he expecting her to walk into the shadows without fear? She expected there to be a portal out there somewhere, but she couldn't see in the dark. She couldn't find the portal or him without light.

Freya looked up at the nearest lantern, but some deep seated worry in her chest made her pause. She looked at the tree, back at the lantern, and then asked, "Do you mind if I take this?"

The tree seemed to lean closer and offer the lantern to her. Almost as though it were alive.

“Thank you.” She hesitantly took the light that would allow her to find the wayward goblin. “I’ll bring it right back.”

She heard the deep groan of a tree shifting back into place, but refused to look at the movement. Her feet crunched through more leaves and then she stepped into the darkness with the light in her hand.

There was a path, she realized. It had been difficult to see because it was covered in autumn leaves. The dirt path had the markings of many feet, and it looked like it was used rather often.

She frowned and continued forward. “Arrow?”

A dark shape darted out of the shadows and sprinted toward her. Freya let out a gasp of horror and fear, then threw the lantern in front of her face. She barely held onto it as it wildly swung. But the metal box was the only weapon she had to protect her against whatever faerie beast was trying to attack her.

The faint sound of a tail thumping against the ground shifted through the leaves.

Letting out a grumble, she lowered the lantern and stared down at the goblin at her feet. “Why would you run at me like that?”

“Because it’s fun.” He gestured over his shoulder with a paw. “It’s not that far. Just need to get out of the tree’s magic and then we’ll be there.”

She wanted to continue forward, but something pressed against her shoulders. A realization that made her so frustrated her feet felt like they’d sprouted roots. “Are you telling me that we’ve been in the Autumn Court this whole time?”

Arrow shrugged. “Well, yes. That’s the only place I knew would be safe for the two of us.”

“So we could have gone to the Autumn Court at any point?”

He heaved a sigh. “If we’re going to argue about this, we might as well do it while we’re walking. I’d very much like to get home, you know. There’s a lot for me to do and I’ve been wandering around the entire world with you.”

Freya would have thrown him into the darkness and marched away if she didn’t need him around. Seething, she stomped after him while grinding her teeth so hard her jaw ached.

They were in the Autumn Court.

She had slept in the Autumn Court.

Anyone could have come out of the darkness and grabbed them. And he hadn't even warned her. She'd been sleeping on the complete opposite side of the tree!

"Arrow," she snarled. "What kind of fae live in the Autumn Court?"

"Goblins," he replied. The light from the lantern reached him again, and his shadow was ten times larger than him. "Though I suspect you already knew that."

But that meant... "Is my sister here, then?"

Maybe she could beat the Goblin King at his own game. If she could find Esther, steal her away, then they could both run back to the mortal realm and be done with this entire ordeal. And she was certain she could find Esther. All she would have to do was...

"No," Arrow replied. "This isn't where the mortals are brought."

All her sudden inspiration deflated. "Where are they brought then?"

"I don't know." Arrow suddenly disappeared.

Where did he go? She peered around in the darkness but couldn't find him at all. The path just... ended. The light wouldn't break through the shadows no matter how high she lifted it over her head.

Maybe this was the end of the path then.

Freya set the lantern down on the ground. "Thank you again," she said. "If you can take it from here, then I'll leave it. Otherwise, I'll bring it back once I return."

The ground rolled under her feet, and she took that as the tree understood. Then, she stepped off the path and through the thick film of darkness.

Sunlight blasted through the leaves overhead. It was eerily silent here, but so beautiful. Everywhere she looked was filled with bright colors of yellow, orange, and red. The leaves that were still on the trees looked like they were on fire. And the leaves on the ground were so vivid, she wondered if they had just fallen from the branches.

She took a few steps forward, the crunching sound of her steps ringing through the forest. There was no path here. Just trees that were oddly spaced, growing in an orderly fashion that defied logic.

But then again, magic built the forests of the faerie realm. Maybe this was how trees were meant to grow in the Autumn Court.

Arrow stepped out from behind a thick trunk, straightening a new black velvet suit. “There we go,” he said while smoothing his paws down the surface. “I feel so much more like myself.”

“Where—” Freya shook her head. “Never mind. Who are we going to meet here? What king or queen, duke or duchess rules this place?”

Then she remembered that there was already a Goblin King. She’d met him many times, and he obviously had something for her to steal. But that would be impossible because he was the one who had made the deal with her.

“Damn it,” Freya muttered. “This was his plan all along, wasn’t it? I can’t steal anything from the Goblin King because he knows I’m coming.”

Arrow strode up and waved a paw in her face. “You don’t have to. The Goblin King is the king of all the courts. Not the Autumn Court.”

She blinked. “Care to explain that in a little more detail?”

“The Goblin King is separate from the courts. He’s the one who keeps the other leaders in line. His kingdom is...” He shuddered. “Not talking about that. The person we’re here to see is the madame Autumn Thief.”

Now, that wasn’t the name she was expecting to hear. All the other leaders of the courts had some kind of ostentatious name. Even Spring Maiden made it sound as though she were something ephemeral and untouchable. She hadn’t expected to hear the Autumn Thief as the leader of this place.

“Really?” she asked. “And she leads even with a name like that?”

“Sort of,” Arrow replied with a chuckle. “Her name precedes her, of course. If you were wondering what she does, well, she does exactly what the title says.”

So she was expected to steal something from the woman who had titled herself after doing exactly that? Great. Just great. And here Freya had been hoping this one would be a little easier because she had a goblin by her side.

Leaning down, she grabbed handfuls of her overly impressive gown for a forest and then nodded. “Fine. Lead the way, then. Let’s steal from the Queen of Thieves. Sounds like an amazing idea.”

“Oh, don’t be so glum.” There was a distinct bounce to Arrow’s step as he stepped between the trees and skipped through the leaves. “You might like her, you know. You remind me of her.”



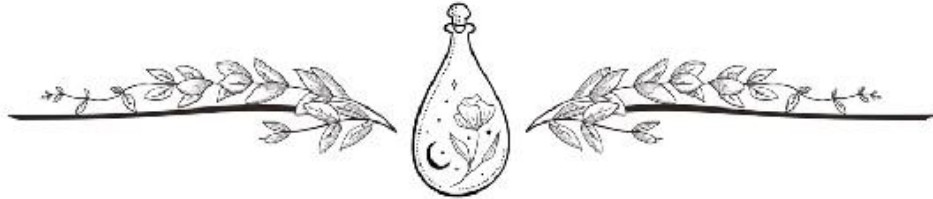
“I remind you of a goblin?” The corset around her chest was too tight, that was the only reason she felt something twinge in her chest at the comparison.

It wasn't because the goblin had almost made it seem as though he were fond of her. And it wasn't because she was a little fond of him.

No, she would never let herself stoop so low.

Arrow stepped around a tree, then opened his paws wide. “Here we are, my dear! Freya of Woolwich, feast your eyes upon the Autumn Court.” He looked back and winked. “Or perhaps I should say, the goblin court.”

## CHAPTER 22



**F**reya couldn't believe her eyes. She knew what goblins looked like. They were monstrous creatures who were deformed, ugly, and they were evil to the core. That was why they looked so horrid. The darkness within them spread throughout their bodies until they were... well. Grotesque.

But these creatures weren't ugly at all.

They were strange. Perhaps even uncomfortable to look at. But most of these creatures were wondrous. They wore black velvet suits, just like Arrow. At least the men did. Their bodies were lean and hard with years of labor behind them. Broad shoulders, thick thighs, biceps that bulged as they moved.

Some of them had rather human faces with pointed ears, but then they would turn around and she'd see a tail waving behind them. Most were animalistic in nature. A gentleman walked past her, his suit a crushed deep purple. She couldn't stop staring at the owl's head that sat atop his shoulders where a normal human face should have been. His head turned completely around, then he met her gaze, bowed, and then continued walking through the forest as though he had somewhere to be.

A young woman strode past her. This one wore a velvet gown, though the front edge ended at her knees and a long train trailed behind her. She was vaguely human in shape, but her ears were long, soft rabbit ears that rested on top of her collarbone.

Freya should have been disgusted by how horrible they looked. But these people moved with an unnatural grace that made her pause and wonder if she'd been wrong all these years.

They weren't human or even slightly mortal in their beauty. They were animalistic and terrifying, with fangs and talons that could rip and tear through her soft flesh.

Fear had sunk its claws into her shoulders for too long, however. Freya felt those shackles slip off her shoulders as Arrow waltzed through the forest and called out to a few goblins by name.

“Lark! Maple!”

Two goblins approached them with wide grins. One was dressed very differently from the others, and Freya eyed the woman's clothing with no small amount of jealousy.

Lark had a beak instead of a mouth and nose, though it was a rather pretty pale beak that she'd painted with tiny flowers. Her blonde hair fell over her shoulders all the way to her waist, accentuating the gold edged corset around her torso. Her skirt was at least black crushed velvet, but it was very short and revealed red and black striped socks.

The other, Maple she could only assume, had leaves threaded through his curly dark hair cropped close to his skull. His suit had the faint hint of a pattern to it, almost like paisley, although the swirls were a little different. When he reached forward to shake her hand, she noted the backs of his hands were covered with a fine dusting of pale fur.

“Arrow,” Maple said with a warm grin. “We haven't seen you home in a long time. We wondered when the avenging hero would return.”

Avenging hero? Freya stared down at him with a frown. “You didn't tell me anything about being a local hero.”

Maple waved his hand for her to shake and only stopped moving when she reluctantly allowed him to hold on to her fingers. “Arrow is a rather shy local hero, if that's what you wish to call him.” The goblin bent over her hand and ghosted his lips across her skin. “But when he brings a beauty like you to the Autumn Court, we can forgive him for such flaws.”

Freya waited for her skin to crawl. She waited for the discomfort and fear that he would curse her. But it never came. That feeling was something that had guided her for her entire life, and just a couple weeks in the faerie realm had given her more perspective.

The goblins in front of her weren't going to attack. They weren't interested in making deals with her or stealing her away, although they certainly had stolen her sister.

Confused and already starting to panic, she looked back down at Arrow who watched her with a calculating gaze. “Didn’t you say we were going to meet the Autumn Thief?”

Lark snorted. “What do you want with her?”

“A great many things,” Arrow replied. He placed a paw on the back of Freya’s thigh and shoved her between the two goblins he’d called over. “Wouldn’t you like to know? Sorry to dash. Important information for the Thief, but only for her ears. You know how it goes.”

Freya let herself be thrust through the crowd of staring goblins. She gave Arrow a few minutes to get them far from listening distance before she asked, “What was all that about? You’re a hero?”

“Far from it,” he grumbled. His ears were flat to his skull. “It’s a bit of a running joke. After my parents gave their lives for the Goblin King, people like to say I came from a heroic lineage. So far, I’ve done nothing to earn the title. That is, of course, until you.”

She couldn’t take that praise. He wasn’t doing anything that would make him a hero with her. She was just getting her sister back and wasn’t that going against everything that was goblin?

“Arrow,” she whispered as they weaved around a group of cat-like goblins. Their whiskers twitched at the sound of her voice, and their ears swiveled to follow them. “I don’t think this is all that heroic, is it? My sister and I are going back to the mortal realm. Shouldn’t you be helping stop me if you want to be heroic to these creatures?”

“These creatures are the same as me,” he muttered, pushing against her leg with a paw and moving her to the right. “And no. A deal is a deal. Altering it in any way is considered heroic here. It’s the game that matters, Freya, not who wins.”

None of this ever made any sense. Why would the goblins want to make a deal they might lose? Wasn’t that counter productive to what they wanted?

She opened her mouth to ask more questions, only to stop when a creature stepped around a tree. No, not a creature. She had to stop thinking of them as animals when they were far more than that.

Freya didn’t think a single person could mistake the Autumn Thief for anyone but the leader of this court. The woman had cloven hooves, her legs ending in delicate deer feet illuminated by a spear of sunlight as she moved. Her legs were clothed in tight leather leggings that led up to a flowing white

peasant shirt. A furred, narrow chest was decorated with various lengths golden necklaces. Her face was human, delicate and lovely. Black kohl winged her eyes into sharp points, red curls tangled around her shoulders, and an impressive set of antlers stretched up over her head.

Lovely. Heavens above, this creature was like looking at a goddess who had stepped out of a story book.

Freya immediately dropped into a low bow. For the first time since she'd come to the faerie realm, she didn't know what to do.

The Spring Maiden was an impressive creature, but she had been terrifying. Something about the woman had given Freya shivers of fear and discomfort.

The Summer Lord was strong and powerful, but he had seemed foolish. He was too wrapped up in his own court and revelries to recognize that he was losing at his own game.

This creature? The Autumn Thief stood out from the others. Though this was perhaps a more ugly being, less beautiful and more connected to the earth, Freya could feel power emanating from every inch of the Thief.

"What a polite mortal you've brought to our court," the Autumn Thief said. Her voice was deep and powerful, rumbling like the sound of drums in the distance. "I don't think I've had a mortal bow to me in centuries."

Centuries? Freya hadn't known they could live that long. Why hadn't her mother ever told her that these creatures were immortal?

Arrow bowed as well, sinking onto all four of his feet and placing his head on the ground. "I thought you'd like to see her."

"Why?"

"Because she is looking to save her sister from the Goblin King." Arrow shifted his head back and forth in the leaves. "A dubious deal was struck to take her sister away, and the Goblin King made his own deal with this woman. She seeks representation from each court and then will defeat him at his own game. Thus, winning back her sister."

Hooved feet stepped in front of Freya's vision. She didn't dare look up at the Thief, though she could feel the goblin's eyes staring down at her.

"How interesting," the Autumn Thief breathed. "So you believe you can defeat the Goblin King?"

"I know I can," Freya replied.

"You're an unusual mortal to have made it this far. I'll give you that." The Autumn Thief reached down a hand for Freya to take. "Stand up. What

is your name?"

She didn't know if she should take the offered hand, but she did anyway. Freya straightened, then said, "Freya of Woolwich."

"It's a pretty name, Freya." The Autumn Thief's eyes were strange. Big and round in her skull, and shaped just like a deer. Those were eyes anyone could get lost in for days without realizing they'd been staring into an abyss.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice growing quieter by the minute as she lost herself in the darkness of the orbs staring into her soul. "I need to find my sister."

"And you thought to steal from me?" The sun caught in her antlers. They were covered in a fine dusting of down.

"If that's what it took, yes I would steal from you." Freya didn't know why she was telling the Autumn Thief everything. She should have been keeping this a secret. Why was she still talking? "I will stop at nothing to get Esther back."

The Autumn Thief blinked, and suddenly the spell broke.

Freya stumbled back, taking five enormous steps away from the arresting creature who had trapped her without Freya even realizing what was happening. Yes, this creature was far more powerful than any of the others. She pressed a hand to her chest and tried to control her panting breaths.

The Autumn Thief smiled at Arrow, though the expression was cold. "You did the right thing bringing her here. I was wondering why the Goblin King tried to enter my court without permission. Now, I know why."

"He's a bit obsessed with her at the moment." Arrow stood back up on his hind legs and shrugged. "I think there's something going on between the two of them that neither is willing to admit. But what do I know about affection?"

Though her breathing was still ragged, she gasped, "I am not interested in the Goblin King."

Both goblins looked at her with unimpressed expressions that clearly stated they didn't believe her.

"What?" Freya added. "I hate the man. He stole my sister away from me, and he has been dogging every single step I have taken thus far. He's a horrible creature with monstrous intent. Why would I ever have any interest in such a being?"

They both looked at each other, then back at her.

The Autumn Thief replied, "Because you haven't had a challenge like him in your entire life. You've always lived in a sheltered mortal world, where nothing can touch you but the hardship of merely being alive. The Goblin King answered your deepest desire of becoming the hero in your own story. You wanted adventure and something more than just farming, making babies, and watching the years go by."

"No." Freya took another step back. "No, that's not at all what I want. I want the simple life my mother and father had."

"But your mother and father didn't live simple lives, did they?" The Autumn Thief followed her. Hooves thumped hard against the ground, and the trees seemed to shake with the force of her movement. "They were obsessed with goblins and magic. Perhaps that obsession runs in your blood."

"It doesn't." Her voice shook. Maybe it ran in Esther's blood, but not hers. "I only want my sister back, and then I will leave this place."

The goblin stared her down before replying, "I don't think you will. Regardless, come with me. Let's get you settled with food and drink. Then we'll talk more about your predicament. I've never been one to pass up the chance to best the Goblin King, and I think you have a rather good chance at succeeding."

The Autumn Thief turned around like they hadn't just shared an intense moment. Freya felt her lungs fill with air once again, before sighing and looking down at Arrow.

He too appeared to be affected by his leader. His tongue lolled out of his mouth and he panted in deep breaths of air. Finally, he looked up at her and met her gaze. "What?"

"I thought only male deer had antlers," she muttered before following the Autumn Thief through the forest.

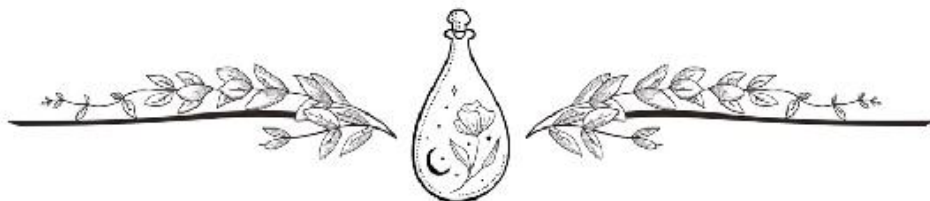
"Only males, yes." Arrow crunched through the leaves to get to her side, trotting at a steady pace. "But whatever she was born as is no longer what she is."

"Ah." Freya nodded and felt a knot ease in her stomach. At least she'd solved one mystery. "Then where do you think she's bringing us?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

Why did that sound so ominous?

## CHAPTER 23



**S**he followed the goblins to a small glade where the trees had been cleared away. A large table stood in the middle, surrounded by goblins that were far more familiar to her eyes. Little things, tall enough to hit chest height, with furry faces, odd tails, and claw tipped fingers that reached for the mounds of food on the wooden table.

She knew these kinds of goblins, and she knew just how dangerous they were.

Leaning down, she asked Arrow, “Are any of these creatures the ones who took my sister?”

Arrow sighed. “When are you going to stop calling them creatures? Freya! They’re just children. Leave them alone.”

Children?

Never in her life had she considered that goblins weren’t born adult monsters who roamed the mortal realm looking for unsuspecting mortals to trap. She hadn’t thought they might have babies, let alone that the ones she had always seen were young. She’d assumed goblins were short and stout monsters.

Now, looking over their antics and comparing them to the adults she had seen in their fancy clothing, she realized it should have been painfully obvious. The goblin children shouted and clamored for attention. They weren’t mature. And of course they were curious about the mortal realm. Too curious.

She would have been in their position.

A dog-faced goblin child hopped up onto the table and brandished a spoon at another with feathers on his face. “Say that again about my mother,



and I will boil your teeth in my morning tea!”

The feathered child was not going to be bested. He also leapt onto the table with a stick in his hand. “I’ll say whatever I want! Try to stop me and I’ll wear your toes as a necklace!”

The other children jumped into the fray, everyone shouting and gesturing wildly with sticks, utensils, and some with only their claws. Freya could hardly understand what they were saying, but she could pick out a few random insults.

“I’ll eat your hair like spaghetti!”

“I’ll suck your nerves right out of your spine!”

“I’ll squeeze your kneecaps so hard they pop right out of your leg!”

She glanced down at Arrow with an amused smile on her face. “Is this what goblins consider to be insults?”

“They’re threats, Freya.” He grinned as well though, the sides of his mouth lifting in mirth. “You’re supposed to be terrified of them, remember? You certainly were only a few weeks ago.”

“Perhaps,” she replied. She watched the Autumn Thief wander into the mass of goblin children and started tossing them apart. “But if they’re only children, then that makes them a lot less terrifying.”

“Well, children are rarely scary. We never understood why mortals were always so hesitant to speak with them. After all, goblin children go to sell the wares they made themselves.”

She frowned, then looked at the little ones with sudden understanding dawning in her mind. “They make the jewelry they sell?”

“Or harvest the vegetables and fruits. Some of them are tinkerers who like to help fix broken things, and mortals have more objects than goblins. We’re a lot more gentle on our items.” He cleared his throat and shuffled his feet in the leaves. “You can go see them, if you’d like.”

“I think I’d rather have the Autumn Thief calm them down first.”

“They don’t bite, you know.”

She looked down into his big, wide eyes, and realized he needed her to do this for him. He needed to see that she wasn’t afraid of goblins anymore. Perhaps because he wanted proof that she was no longer afraid of him.

“No more than you do, I assume?” She grinned, then moved to help the Autumn Thief.

Freya squared her shoulders and grabbed a smaller goblin child covered in snakeskin. “That’s enough of that, thank you very much.”

The child fought initially, then realized who was holding him. His mouth fell open in awe, slitted eyes growing wide, and then he went limp in her grip. Freya deposited him onto a chair with a gentle pat on the head.

She continued pulling all the goblin children away from each other until she met the Autumn Thief in the middle. Freya ducked low underneath the wild swing of the goblin's head. "There we go," she said with a triumphant grin. "I think we settled all the children."

"Good." The Autumn Thief planted her hands on her hips and shook her head. "I'm sure we gave the Goblin King quite a show. You surprised me yet again, Freya of Woolwich. I cannot wait to hear your story."

"The Goblin King?"

At her surprised tone, the Autumn Thief shifted to the side and revealed a strange barrier in the forest. It warped everything beyond a wall of magic, almost like she was looking through glass that hadn't been poured entirely flat. On the other side, she could see the watery image of the Goblin King pacing back and forth.

She gasped, pressing a hand against her mouth for a moment before she let her shaking fingers drop back to her sides. "What is he doing here?"

"He can't come into the court without my permission, if that's what you're asking." The Autumn Thief shook her head, lips curled in disgust. "He gave me too much power long ago, and I'm certain he regrets it now."

He looked like a caged lion. His broad shoulders swayed back and forth with every aggressive movement. Even his face was twisted in a snarl as he watched her with those molten silver eyes.

"He can't come through the barrier?" she confirmed.

"No," the Autumn Thief replied. "Not in the slightest. He gave that ability to me when he gave up being the Autumn Thief himself."

She glanced sharply at the goblin beside her. "He was once... you?"

The other woman laughed, the throaty sound sending birds flying up from the red trees surrounding them. "In a sense, I suppose you could say that. We were very different people then, and we are very different now. He had a higher calling in life, so it seems. Thus, the Autumn Thief became the Goblin King."

He called out to her like some kind of siren from a myth. Freya walked away from the others and toward the barrier that kept the Goblin King away from her. She stopped just in front of the strange magical wall.

Reaching out, she placed her hand on the glass. It was cool to the touch, so perhaps she'd been wrong. This wasn't glass at all.

It was ice.

He watched her with a strange expression on his face. Brows furrowed, teeth bared, but eyes trying to portray some question that she couldn't fathom. He wanted her to say something, perhaps. Or maybe he merely wanted her to walk through the barrier so he could stop her from talking with the Autumn Thief.

His dark hair fell in front of his eyes. He blew out a breath that fogged the glass, then placed his hand opposite hers. She marveled at how much larger it was than her own. His long, lean fingers would have encompassed hers. The claws at the tips left marks in the ice wall between them.

"Wasn't this what you wanted?" she asked. "This was the game you wanted to play. I'm playing it, just better than you thought I could."

The Goblin King watched her mouth with rapt attention, and she felt her lips burn. He never took his gaze off her, even when she stopped talking. And he never said a word in response.

Her hand slid off the glass, and she turned her back to the Goblin King. The others were watching her. Their eyes wide. Some even had their mouths open, as though they couldn't believe she'd taunted the Goblin King.

The Autumn Thief stood with Arrow by her side, both of them watching her with wide eyes filled with horror.

She couldn't imagine why they would be so worried. The Goblin King was behind the wall and they claimed he couldn't enter no matter how hard he tried.

Freya had forgotten all the other goblins stood behind her while she watched their strange king. As though he were some animal in a zoo she could peer at and try to understand.

What was she becoming? Freya knew to be afraid of their kind. She knew better than to even look at them. And here she was, buried neck deep in a deal that would decide the fate of her life and her sister's.

She blew out a long breath, then walked back to the goblins. "Why are you all looking at me?"

Even the children had stopped their crazed banter. Instead, they stared at her with their mouths open and food dropping off the tips of the utensils.

The Autumn Thief took a deep breath, opened her mouth as though she had something to say, then closed it again. She put her hands on the back of a chair and pulled it away from the table. "I think you better have a seat," she breathed. "Why don't you tell me everything that has happened from start to finish and then perhaps we can figure out where to go from here."

"Where to go?" Freya sat in the offered chair. "I need to gather something from this court that is the essence of Autumn, that's all I know."

"And I don't think I can help you without knowing the whole truth of it." The Autumn Thief rounded the table and sat across from her. She braced her elbows on the table and then gestured for Freya to start.

She didn't know how much she should tell the goblin, so she started at the beginning. Freya let the entire story spill from her lips in a deluge of words, sounds, and raw fear that rocked through her body. She even told the Autumn Thief about her strange dream and how she feared her sister was being affected by magic.

Freya hadn't realized how exhausting this all would be to tell someone. She was breathing hard by the end of it, and the words still pushed at her throat. There was more to say. More to make the Autumn Thief understand and yet, she didn't have the right words.

Finally, she stopped talking. Freya took one deep breath, then another, then nodded at the two goblins across the table. "That's it, I suppose. Unless I missed anything, Arrow?"

He shook his head.

She watched as the Autumn Thief and Arrow shared a look between the two of them. What were they thinking? She knew her own thoughts after rattling off the story was that she really was a foolish girl who had gotten in over her head. Esther would be lost forever, and she didn't stand a chance at getting her sister back.

The Autumn Thief frowned, then met her gaze. "So that's why he's fascinated with you."

"Why?" Freya growled. "I've been trying to figure it out since I got here, but you already know? Tell me."

"The Goblin King likes a fight. But no mortal has ever walked into any of the courts and succeeded. I suspect when you first entered the Spring Court, he knew you were going to fall under the Spring Maiden's spell. Every mortal does. You were the first in a very long time to break free of it."

Freya supposed that made sense. She leaned her own elbows on the table to get closer to the Autumn Thief. “You think he’s just fascinated because I’ve done something he didn’t think was possible?”

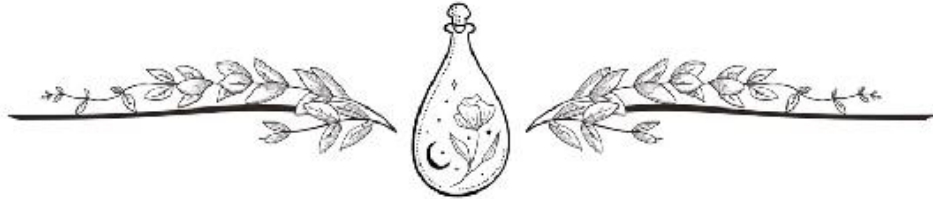
“I think he doesn’t understand you. And for someone as old as him, that’s downright odd. He’s seen a million mortals. He’s seen kingdoms fall and kings die. But you surprised him.” The Autumn Thief blinked and those eyes seemed to change in color. Darker, then lighter, then red like the leaves above their head. “I don’t think you’ll find what you seek here, Freya of Woolwich. I can show you the essence of autumn. And you might save your sister. But neither is what you’re actually looking for.”

That was wrong. All she wanted was to find her sister and get out of this place. Freya refused to even think about the wonders she’d seen. The magic that ate away at her soul, making her stronger and more herself than she’d ever felt.

“I’d like to see the essence of autumn, please.” She swallowed her emotions and turned an icy gaze to the goblins before her. “And then I’d like you to give it to me.”

The Autumn Thief watched her closely, then sighed. “As you wish.”

## CHAPTER 24



**F**reya followed the Autumn Thief away from the table and down a path she hadn't noticed before. All the leaves were swept to the side and every time one fell onto the dirt path, a wind brushed it away. They reached a wooden bridge with twisted, gnarled roots as railings.

The Autumn Thief gestured for Freya to go first. "Go. I'll join you on the other side, but I'm afraid this is where you must say goodbye to your friend."

Freya wouldn't be saying goodbye to anyone. She looked at Arrow, then back at the Autumn Thief. "No. We have a deal. He comes where I go. He's with me in this until the end."

"And so he shall be. But where I am taking you is for your eyes alone, not his. I appreciate your dedication to one of my very best goblins, Freya. However, I won't allow him into this part of the court. No one but myself can enter." She paused, then nodded. "And now, you as well."

Was that supposed to make her feel better? Freya's entire soul shook at the idea of leaving Arrow behind. She worried about his well being, as he hadn't been treated kindly by his own kind in the past.

"I—"

Arrow waved a paw over his mouth as though he were telling her to be quiet.

Maybe this was another test. Maybe she needed to simply go along with it and he'd join her whether the Autumn Thief wanted him there or not. As he had in the Summer Court.

She gave him a sharp nod, then turned around and walked down the bridge. It swayed with each step, although it was only a few feet above the

ground. She couldn't imagine why they even needed a bridge.

Then, the ending of the bridge warped. Shifting so the wooden slats turned into something like golden marble. Freya was so busy staring at the stone steps, she didn't notice until it was too late how the air shimmered at the end. As though what she was looking at wasn't really there.

She stepped off the bridge and into a very long hallway. The golden marble stones on the floor gleamed as though freshly polished. The warm wooden walls were decorated with hundreds of portraits that stretched down the hallway that never seemed to end. She could see so far that eventually the hall disappeared into darkness.

The Autumn Thief stepped into the room with her. "Here we are."

"Where exactly is here?"

"The Hall of Portraits, and it is the only place I would assume the essence of autumn is." The Thief scratched the base of her antlers. "Although I don't know why he'd want you to steal the essence of each court. It's not very helpful or useful."

"That's another question I've been trying to figure out," she murmured.

"The hardest part of any deal is understanding the why of it all." The Autumn Thief pointed down the hall, arm open wide for Freya to follow her. "Shall we?"

Freya moved forward without another thought. She wanted to see what was at the end of this place, although she couldn't imagine what the item from this court might be. After all, the others had been rather small things. She still had them in her pocket.

Reaching into the folds of the once lovely dress, she palmed the two items. The perfume tin was still there, vibrating with magic that wanted to twist her mind. And the potion bottle remained silent, calming, easy to hold in her hand. Almost comforting, in a way, but perhaps that was the magic of summer.

Would autumn be something similar? A little glass figurine perhaps, or hard syrup shaped like a maple leaf? She could only guess at the thousands of possibilities.

The Autumn Thief strode beside her, hands tucked behind her back and eyes on the walls. "Do you have any idea why he might have sent you to collect things from each court? Did he give you any hope of understanding?"

“No,” she replied. “We were in this strange room. Like he was tracking the stars, or perhaps the planets. He wanted to make a deal for my sister and I would do anything for her, so I didn’t ask questions.”

“Classic mortal folly,” the Autumn Thief replied, clicking her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “The next time you make a deal, be sure you understand the why of it all. A goblin can’t take advantage of you that way.”

Something wriggled in the back of Freya’s mind. A question that pushed at her senses without rational thought.

All the other leaders of the courts had worked against her. They had wanted nothing to do with the mortal who quested to best the Goblin King. In fact, they had stopped at nothing to keep her in their court or at the very least slow her down.

“Why are you helping me?” she asked. “Arrow, I understand because he’s made a deal that he can’t get out of. But you? This doesn’t make sense that you would walk me down a hall so easily. All I had to do was tell you my story. And then... that’s it?”

The Autumn Thief shrugged, but her dark eyes widened just a little. “The Goblin King and I share no pleasant opinions of each other. He was in my place before I was and I had to spend centuries proving to all the other goblins that I was worthy of his position.”

“I still don’t understand how that’s possible.”

“The courts are simple.” The Autumn Thief pointed to a portrait of a man standing with leaves in his hair, a red suit plastered to his body as he leaned against a pillar with an ornate metal box on top. “Those who rule are given the power of the element. The season, if you will. It doesn’t matter who or what you are, the powers still transfer. So when the Goblin King decided he wanted to vacate this throne, I was the one who stepped up to take it.”

“Ah.” That still made little sense. The Goblin King’s position was too confusing.

The courts each had their own ruler already. She could see how dedicated the people of each court were to their own individual ruler, so it made little sense that there would also be this mythical king figure who did... what?

She scratched the back of her neck, sighed, and continued down the hall while shaking her head. “The court system here is so strange. I’m used to a



tiered monarchy who leaves the peasants alone and the only people who have any say in the country is those with power.”

“That’s also accurate here.”

“No, it’s not.” She stopped in front of another portrait and stared up at the man.

This one had a barn owl’s head. His hands were warped claws holding onto a crystal clear orb that had a single sprig of lavender floating within it. The blue velvet suit he’d been painted into was quite lovely and yes, the man looked ridiculously handsome even though he was clearly a goblin.

Why did she find them handsome now? It hadn’t been that long but...

“The Goblin King said magic can change a person,” she whispered. “Is that true?”

Silence rang through the hall. It ate away at Freya’s sanity until she felt like there were butterflies in her stomach, fluttering up to her head where they popped behind her eyes.

She didn’t want to know if her sister might be one of them now. Although, she supposed that wasn’t the right thought in the long run. Her sister wasn’t a goblin. She might be a mortal changed by magic, but she would always be Freya’s sister.

If only Freya could accept that magic came with a price.

The Autumn Thief nodded. “Yes, of course. Magic changes everything it touches, and I’m certain that your sister has experienced the same thing you have.”

“Oh, no, I was asking for my sister. Like in the dream I told you, I saw she had grown a tail.” Freya opened her arms wide. “As you can see, I remain unchanged.”

The dress had seen better days. Mud stained the lovely azure fabric, and the edges were a little frayed. One panel of the skirt had caught on a branch at some point and she hadn’t realized it, so that fabric was ripped and hanging from a thread. Not to mention the goblin children had placed a few sticky handprints on her sides while she had been pulling them off each other.

It was a shame. She had felt so beautiful wearing the gown.

“But you have changed,” the Autumn Thief replied. “Haven’t you?”

“No.” Freya spun in a circle with her arms lifted. “I’m still very much a mortal.”

“Not like that. Your sister changed physically because that’s what she wanted. Esther has never been all that comfortable with the way she looked. Mortal form isn’t for your sister, and that’s perfectly all right.” Those dark eyes widened, turning a deep green with the Thief’s emotions. “But you? You were never happy in your life in the mortal realm, but there were blocks in your mind, like the ice wall that keeps the Goblin King at bay.”

“No,” she whispered again, taking a step away from the intensity of the Thief’s gaze. “You’re wrong. I enjoyed my life because that is what I’ve always wanted. A simple life on the edge of the forest, away from people.”

“You wanted so much more than that.” The Thief advanced on her, pushing Freya down the hall with nothing more than her burning gaze. “You wanted to see the world. You wanted to experience magic, and all those years of someone else pouring their hatred into you had turned your mind away from us. Hatred for goblins. Fear of power. Anxiety every time you heard the bells, not because you thought we were dangerous but because they called out to you.”

Her argument stuck in her throat. Freya still shook her head in denial, but she couldn’t say a single word in her own defense.

The Autumn Thief pointed with a fur covered finger. “The portraits in this hall only speak the truth. Look at the centuries of Goblin Kings, Freya, and see what it is you truly seek.”

She stared up at the portrait they stood beside and flinched as she saw the Goblin King she recognized. He stared down at her with a wry grin, so realistic he looked as though he could step right out of the painting. She knew that moonlight shimmering skin and those molten, star-like eyes. His gaze was so powerful, even the portrait artist must have spent hours detailing every little perfection in those orbs.

And then she saw something in the painting that didn’t seem right. Frowning, she peered closer and realized it was another portrait. There was a painting directly behind him, just like the one she was looking at.

What had the first portrait had in it? A metal box, silver and ornate.

Freya reached into her pocket again and touched the perfume tin that had seen better days, but perhaps wasn’t always a small tin.

The second portrait she’d seen had a glass orb with a sprig inside it. She shifted her fingers and touched the potion bottle with its essence of lavender still floating within.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up at the painting before her again. “They’re not symbols of the court at all, are they?” she whispered. “They’re symbols of the people.”

“In a way. They’re symbols of who we become as leaders of this place, and perhaps what we desire most.” The Autumn Thief leaned against the wall, placing a shoulder against the slatted wood. “Spring always wants to get away from responsibility, so they search for sleep in dust, powder, or perfume. Summer desires nothing more than comfort, thus, you’ll see a Summer Lord or Lady with potions. Autumn only wants to know what other people desire. All the gifts came from the Goblin Kings, long ago.”

Those dark eyes widened again, inflamed with a passion for knowledge. Freya had the sudden feeling that if she had given the Thief the chance, this creature would have ripped her open just to look through every part of her body for clues.

“So that’s why he wants so badly to watch as I go through every step of this deal,” she replied. “Natural curiosity comes with leading the Autumn Court, is that it?”

“Yes. And the Goblin King is still part of this court, or at least, some of his soul is. Though I lead it, he came from this place and someday will return. A king has more responsibilities than just a single court, and he has much to do.” The Thief pointed back to the painting. “Now, what is it that you want?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Look at the painting again, Freya of Woolwich. Tell me what you see.” Something had shifted in the way the Thief held herself. There was an aggression in her stance. A movement that made Freya gulp and do exactly what she said.

She stared at the portrait and before her eyes, the image shifted. Warping, changing until she frowned deeply.

“What do you see?”

Herself. Standing beside the Goblin King in a gown as blue as the sea. She had a small circlet around her head that looked like a thousand stars had been set into silver metal. But that wasn’t what she wanted. She refused to believe it.

“No,” she replied. “I need to get my sister.”

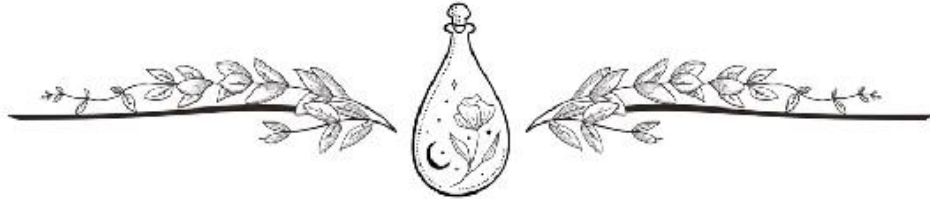
“What do you see?”

If the portrait was the essence of this court, then so be it. Freya reached up and split it from the frame. The canvas ripped with a horrible sound that echoed down the hall. Each of the paintings suddenly moved. The inhabitants pounded their fists against their frames and screamed in anger that she would dare remove a king from his rightful place on the wall.

Freya bolted back the way they came, rolling the portrait as she went.

The Autumn Thief's voice chased after her. "You can run as far as you want, Freya! But the Goblin King will always find you!"

## CHAPTER 25



**T**he portrait had been wrong. The magic wanted her to see a possible future, but it didn't know her truest desires. It couldn't. Because magic couldn't get into her mind and read what she wanted before she had come to the conclusion herself.

Freya burst out onto the wooden bridge and caught herself on the gnarled railings.

Why had she seen herself in the painting? What could it possibly mean other than she wanted to...

No, she refused. That wasn't the train of thought she was going to encourage. She refused to let the goblins get into her head any more than they already were. This was not the life she had chosen, nor was it the life she wanted. They could tell her all manner of wonderful things, and she would still be certain she needed to take her sister back home with her.

The goblins were getting into her head. That was all.

A voice filtered through the wind, one that was so wonderful and peaceful that it made her turn around. The scent of freshly baked apple pie hit her nose, and she knew, *she knew*, she should run.

But she didn't.

The Goblin King stood behind her, framed by that warm, wooden hallway with all the portraits of the kings who had come before him. The kings who appeared to all be goblins and the best of their kind.

"Now you have seen the truth," he said. The silver in his eyes darkened to a deep sterling. His brows were furrowed, almost as though he feared what she would say next. "What do you think?"

“What truth did I see?” She lifted a hand and let it flutter in the air like a dying bird. “That’s a hallway of Goblin Kings. I can see that there’s something special about everything you told me to get, but I have no idea what you’re going to do with any of these. Nothing makes sense. Nothing at all!”

“You haven’t put it together yet, and that’s all right. I have every faith that you will understand in due time.” He took a step closer to her. The velvet of his suit followed the movement of his muscles, highlighting the strength of his body and the unnatural glow to his skin. “You’re so much more intelligent than the others, Freya. All you have to do is try a little harder.”

“Try harder? I have been fighting for weeks to get my sister back, and all you have to say is do more?” Her face heated with anger and she could feel a heartbeat in her cheeks. “You’ve sent me on an impossible quest. I want my sister back, Goblin King. And I want her now.”

“We had a deal, and I won’t give her back before this is done.” He took another step closer.

The shimmering swirl in his eyes grew wild and turbulent. It was so lovely, so enthralling that she almost lost herself in that gaze. But not this time. Freya had learned about the faeries’ tricks. She knew damn well how to keep her head around them.

“Stop it,” she snarled. “I only have one thing left to gather and then I will get my sister from you and we will leave this cursed place.”

“Will you?” He tilted his head to the side, a dark swath of hair falling over his shoulder like a waterfall. “No one has told you about the Winter Court, have they?”

She felt an icy chill trail down her spine. “No.”

The Goblin King stepped so close their chests nearly touched. He lifted a clawed hand and raked those deadly points through her dark hair. The long lengths tangled on the ends like spiderwebs.

His lips pressed against her ear and he whispered roughly, “Poor Freya. The last part of the game is the hardest.”

With a gasp of shock and heat, she wrenched away from him.

He looked down at his fingers. A few dark strands remained in his grasp. “Everyone in the Winter Court is dead, you know. They have been for a long time. Good luck finding someone there to help you.”

He melted out of view and she had to wonder if he was ever really there at all. The Autumn Thief had seemed so confident that he couldn't just walk into the Autumn Court whenever he wanted to, and yet, there he was.

Blood boiling, she darted across the bridge and back to the burning forest. Why did every single person she met in this realm want to control her? Everyone had their own opinion of what she should do.

The Spring Maiden wanted her to sleep, while the Summer Lord wanted her to drink.

Arrow wanted her to help him avenge his family, and the Autumn Thief wanted her to accept that she had been looking for this realm her entire life.

The Goblin King wanted her to beat him, or maybe he wanted her to lose. And Esther?

She didn't know what Esther would want from her. That was the largest problem of all. Esther might want to stay here when Freya had gone through all this trouble to get her back. What would she do if she saved her sister and Esther refused to go home?

Her mind was spinning into something that felt eerily similar to panic, and then Arrow stepped into the sunlight with a worried expression on his face. His movements were hesitant.

"Did you find it?" he asked.

"Yes." She brandished the rolled up oil painting. "I think so. Now there's just one left."

"Oh." He rubbed his paws together. "And then you'll be going, I guess?"

"I don't see any reason why I'd stay."

The hurt look on his face made her want to rip the painting in half. She wanted to go home. She was so tired of these new feelings that made little sense in her mind.

Freya had always been the good, dutiful daughter. She listened to her mother's advice and the teachings about the goblins. No one could have convinced her to change her mind, not in a million years. And yet, here she was, looking at this goblin with compassion in her heart rather than hatred or fear.

This wasn't right. She was supposed to listen to what her parents had said. She was supposed to learn from the notes her mother had taken and then move forward from that. But making her own decisions? That wasn't allowed.

Her heart squeezed painfully and her throat closed up. Why couldn't she breathe? Was this another spell?

The ground shifted underneath her feet, tilting to the side. Or maybe that was her head as she reached out to balance herself on a nearby tree. Taking a deep breath through her nose, she felt her lungs expand all the way, but it still wasn't enough air. Almost as though her lungs had shrunk.

Arrow took another step closer and cleared his throat. "Miss Freya, are you all right?"

That was the first time he'd ever called her that name before. Miss Freya. Like she was no longer just a mortal, and he had reason to respect her name.

What was it that he called her all those weeks ago? A woman who wanted to be a hero?

She didn't want the responsibility of being the hero in this story. She couldn't take it anymore because her heart was going to pop in her chest and her head was going to crack open like an egg.

Freya squeezed her hand on the bark of the tree. Time, that's all she needed. Just a few moments to herself where she could get her thoughts back in order. They weren't right. Maybe if she could get back home, then she could paw through her mother's books and see what information lay within those. Maybe her mother had already dealt with something like this.

"Miss Freya?" Arrow asked again. "You don't look so good."

"I don't feel good," she snapped, whirling around. "I know you don't understand it because you've lived here your entire life. But I don't like being in the Autumn Court. I don't like being around goblins. This isn't my place and I want to go back to my own damn home."

"But you have to find your sister." He paused in the middle of the forest and she noted the picture he made.

A dog, standing on his back legs. The fine pressed black suit that fit his form perfectly. The face that was all too human and eyes that saw too much.

He was so intelligent. So kind. If he'd been a human, they might have been the best of friends. She had seen him do more for her than any other mortal. And even though he'd done all those things just because of a deal they'd struck, it had comforted her to pretend he'd helped because she was a friend.

Now, she realized that goblins weren't friends with humans.



They were just like the other faeries she'd met, only better at hiding the horrific side of themselves. They wore their ugliness on their exterior to hide the ugliness in their souls.

She'd fallen for it, so this was partly her own fault. She had really, truly believed that the goblins weren't trying to manipulate her mind. That Arrow was here to help her.

"Thank you for getting me this far," she whispered. "Can you open the portal to the Winter Court?"

"What?" Arrow held his paws up for her to look at. "I can't do magic. We have to find a way into the Winter Court."

She thought maybe he was lying. Now that she'd seen so much, Arrow was surprisingly incapable of magic compared to all the other fae who seemed to live and breathe it. She wasn't all that sure he was just a dog after all.

Panic rose in her throat even more. She tried to breathe in deeply, but all she could manage were gentle pants.

She had to get out of here. And the sick feeling in her stomach was proof enough that Arrow was likely lying. The thoughts repeated in her head until she could hear nothing other than her own voice screaming in her head.

"I will release you from our deal if you open a portal right now." Her muttered words were filled with venom and disappointment. "All you have to do is let me go."

"But... Miss Freya." Arrow took another large step. If he had reached out, he could have touched her with one of his big, speckled paws. "I made a deal with you to help you get your sister. I intend to keep that promise."

"It wasn't a promise, though, was it?" Freya laughed, but the sound was bitter and angry. "I trapped you into helping me, and for that, I'm sorry. But you've been twisting the truth the entire time, and now I don't know who to believe."

No, that wasn't right. She knew she couldn't believe any of them. Trust any of them. And she'd known that from the beginning, but everything had gotten so twisted up in her head because she had been so afraid of being alone.

She only had one more court to go through, and then she'd have her sister back. Then they could return home where they both belonged.

“Open the portal,” she said again. “And I will release you from any deal we made now and in the future.”

Arrow replied, “Are you sure you really want this? You’ll be alone, and you don’t know the Winter Court at all.”

“I’ve been alone the whole time, haven’t I?” She met his gaze head on, refusing to be upset by the knowledge that she was in the right. He couldn’t even look at her. Arrow stared over her shoulder with silence radiating between them.

“You don’t have to save the day with me,” Freya whispered. “You don’t even have to save my sister. All I’m asking for this one last time is to go into the Winter Court by myself.”

“You could die.” Arrow shuffled his feet in the leaves. “I haven’t been entirely truthful about the Winter Court. I knew it would come to this, but I didn’t want you to not still believe this was possible. You can still save your sister, even though the faeries in the Winter Court have been frozen for centuries. It’s possible.”

“The Goblin King didn’t think so. But it also made everything so much clearer.” She kept her eyes straight ahead. “You’ve been enjoying this game between us by keeping me in the dark. I needed to know everything, and you fed me the smallest amounts of details, waiting to see when I would fail. Just do it, Arrow. Put us both out of our misery.”

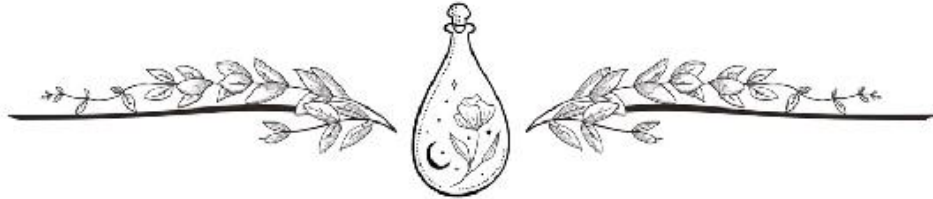
“As you wish,” he muttered.

Arrow turned around and lifted his paws. The air shifted, shivered, and then split open. Like he’d pulled aside a curtain and suddenly she could see a wintry landscape with a wide open tundra.

“Be careful, Freya.” He stepped away from the portal to allow her to walk through. “You’re so close to beating him.”

“We’ll see.” She stepped through into the winter storm without looking back.

## CHAPTER 26



**T**he silence of the Winter Court was startling after her argument with Arrow. She was prepared for howling winds and a storm that would blow the very skin from her bones. But that wasn't how the Winter Court raged.

Instead, silence louder than any she'd experienced before filled the air. Soft snowflakes drifted from the sky. There was no massive storm. No thunder in the distance, and certainly no creatures attacking her from within the frigid mounds.

This place was quiet as death.

In the distance, she saw a small river winding through the snow. No ice had built upon it, and tendrils of fog rose from the surface. She assumed it was a natural hot spring.

Shivering already, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. If she got close enough to the river, without getting wet, then she might be able to warm herself for a time. A river had to mean civilization somewhere.

She trudged through the snow. Her toes already were aching with the icy shards, and she worried about frostbite. But she made it numb feet and all.

Lifting her skirts, she stepped into the scalding water. Immediately her toes began to burn, aching and coming back to life where the snow had previously paralyzed them. The entire process was far more painful than she'd expected, but at least it warmed her for the moment. She had a long way to go, and wasn't wearing anywhere near as many layers as she needed to be.

Freya turned left, then right. Neither way gave her any clues at what might be the correct direction. Both were merely snow. A white horizon with snowflakes the size of her thumb falling from the sky in lazy, meandering paths.

The steam from the river clung to her skin. It wet down the fabric of her dress until it was nothing more than a sodden mess. The heat was welcome for the first few moments, but then turned cold and clammy. She couldn't stay by the river or she'd only get more wet. She couldn't leave without freezing.

"What a wasteland," she said. The words fell dull and quiet in the windless evening.

She had to assume it was evening. Freya started her trudging journey to the right and tried to piece together any clues from what the Goblin King and Arrow had said. The Winter Court was dead. All who inhabited it were gone.

No, not gone, she corrected herself. They were dead. Had been for centuries.

And yet the Goblin King had made it very clear that nothing was impossible here. The uncertainty of dead or deathless was a rather complex topic to consider in times like these. Perhaps they weren't really dead, or if they were, then they weren't dead forever. If impossible was possible in the faerie realm, then she had something to work with.

The warmth of the mud sank into her toes, but her shoulders shivered as the steam turned to icy droplets. She needed to find something more than just this dress to wear. Something that wasn't quite so...

Flimsy.

Freya didn't know how long she trudged through the mud and the snow. Sometimes the river disappeared underneath the ground and she would have to forge her way through the mounds of snow that piled up all the way to her thighs. These were the moments she was certain she would lose a limb, or perhaps even worse. Maybe she would just lay down in the snow and no one would find her. Just like the creatures who had lived in this court.

But the river always appeared again, rising out of the earth like a welcoming embrace. Her toes would thaw and Freya leaned down to touch her hands to the warm, life giving water. At least she had this. At least.

Then, out of the snow, a monolith of a castle arose. It was a beautiful building with spires made of glass and ice. It looked like something out of a

storybook, one she would have read as a little girl and pretended to be the presiding princess.

Her father had encouraged such thoughts when she was so little. He thought it was grand to have a child who wanted to be the hero in a story. And now that she had her opportunity to do so, Freya wasn't all that certain that she enjoyed the feeling. The responsibilities piled up on her shoulders and now she feared she'd take the wrong step and the glass castle would shatter.

The castle was a chance to get out of the cold, however far it was.

She would have to break away from the river, though. And that posed a problem.

Freya eyed the distance between herself and the doors, then prayed it wasn't so long that she'd freeze to death. The river didn't go anywhere near the castle, and she didn't have any boots.

"Please let me keep my feet," she whispered.

Though it was a price she would pay to get her sister back in her arms, she also knew it was unlikely that she could get Esther back without the important appendages.

Taking a deep breath, she plunged into the mounds of snow and charged toward the castle with single minded intent. If the inhabitants were dead, maybe there was still someone left. A servant. Another type of fae creature that had taken over in the absence of whatever things were meant to be here. Someone had to still live within the castle walls.

Didn't they?

The snow was so cold her feet burned. And then, just before she reached the doors, she couldn't feel them at all. She dragged them through the snow, but she wasn't all that certain she was actually stepping on them right. She didn't know where her toes were, or even if she was stepping on the flat surface of her feet.

Hissing out a breath, she caught herself on the handle of the front door to the castle. The icy metal stung her hands.

She needed to get inside. And fast.

Freya heaved the door open inch by inch through the snow until she could step through and into the safety beyond. At least it wouldn't be so bitterly cold within. Right?

She was very wrong.

The stillness inside the castle made her hands shake. Snow had blown through the broken windows and covered everything in the greeting room with snow drifts. The furniture looked white now that a fine layer of snow turned them soft around the edges. The chandeliers from the ceiling dripped with sparkling ice. The drifts made it impossible to know where the walls were or perhaps where partitions had been set up to allow courting couples' privacy from their keepers.

A lone chair was in the middle of the room, its back turned completely to ice. But next to the chair was a small chest. White powder covered it in a fine layer of sparkling diamonds. But it was her only hope.

Freya stumbled to the chest and fell onto her knees before it.

"Please," she whispered. "Please have something warm."

She slid her fingers along the lid, but it was hard to find where the clasp was. Ice had wiggled underneath the lip, nearly freezing the entire box shut. But she managed, even with fingers that were slowly turning purple.

Freya opened it with a frustrated grunt and then peered inside.

If she could have thought of anything besides the cold, she might have wondered where the contents came from. A pair of boots, just big enough to slide her feet into. Three pairs of woolen socks, a heavy brocade dress with wool underthings and a cloak. All laid out for her to slip into at the moment she needed them.

But Freya wasn't thinking about who might be helping her or what the fae had in mind. She yanked up her sodden skirts and immediately put all three layers of socks onto her feet. The first pair was hot to the touch, almost as though someone had warmed them already by a fire.

Yanking the boots on, she then tugged her clothing off in one fell swoop. Though shaking, she dressed herself in the woolen underthings before really looking at the heavy over layer.

It had been embroidered with a thousand tiny diamonds. All up and down the hems were patterns of little snowflakes, hardly the size of a thimble. On the larger panels were much bigger snowflakes. All of them were individual, perfectly created, and without a single sign of age.

The cloak had been given a similar treatment, although the inside was lined with a thick layer of pure white sheepskin.

Once all the layers were on her body, Freya felt better. She felt herself warming up, although she still needed to...

She peered into the box and there, at the very bottom, was a bundle of sticks, flint and steel, and a small note. Now, she knew someone was helping her. The Goblin King? Again?

No, she couldn't imagine he would be so bold. She was too close to beating him, and if he was helping her now, then she would assume he was fighting against himself. He didn't want her to win, he'd made that very clear. So this wasn't the king.

Hesitating, she reached into the box and picked up the note.

*Whoever finds this crate, I hope it helped you in an hour of need. The fireplace is magical. I'm not certain that will help anyone in the long run, but if you start a fire within it, then it won't go out until you press the button above it. The Winter Court is not without its comforts. Please, make yourself at home. There is light reading provided in the nearby bookshelf, or much darker reading within the side table.*

Darker reading?

Freya turned the piece of paper back and forth, as though she thought more words might appear if she rotated it. Who would leave a note like this? It was almost as though they had known they would die and that someone would come into the castle looking for them.

She had no time to ponder.

Grabbing the flint, steel, and tinder, she rushed to the wide fireplace in the back of the room. The edges were carved with elk and bears chasing each other from top to bottom. White marble so lovingly cared for that it was obvious someone had once loved this place.

Steel struck flint, and the tinder burst into blue flames. With that, the entire fireplace came alive and light poured through the room. Heat blasted and melted the snow nearby.

"Darker reading," she whispered.

Though she still shivered and was terrified about what she would have to do in the morning, she also wanted to pass the time until she could rest. Freya opened the drawer in the small end table, the ice thawing at her touch.

The tiny book was bound in black leather with gold caps on each corner. The fine filigree made her pause. Somehow, the strange pattern was familiar. She couldn't hear herself think past the chattering of her teeth, thus the pattern didn't immediately dawn on her.

Sitting as close to the fire as she dared, she thumbed the first page open and read it aloud.

“The history of the Goblin King,” she murmured, stroking the edges of the pages. “What Goblin King?”

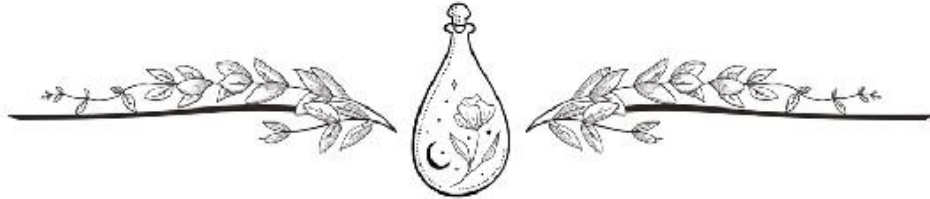
But she already knew. There was only one man who wore a dark suit with gilded edges. Only one man who could have filled an entire book with his secrets to be recorded for centuries to come.

Only one.

She leaned against the edge of the fireplace and resolved herself to a long evening discovering all the Goblin King’s secrets. All she had to do was stay awake.



## CHAPTER 27



**T**he story told in the little book was one she couldn't reconcile with the Goblin King she'd met. It was written in his hand, telling of a war between the courts that spilled across the land. Though the tale wasn't kind to the other fae creatures, it showed how much he believed in his own people. The Goblin King didn't want them to fight, but he had fought on their behalf. He'd chosen to support another fae who he thought would end this madness.

And when the fae didn't, the Goblin King had taken matters into his own hands. Such was his life. Such was his legacy.

But the kindness written onto the page, looped with graceful handwriting.... surely that couldn't be the Goblin King she knew. These were the words of a hardened soldier, a man who knew what to do and what it would take.

The Goblin King in her mind wasn't that person. He didn't have a care in the world other than stealing little girls away from their families and then seeing what deal he could get out of it. The bargain of a mortal life for entertainment was the work of a man who had no morals whatsoever.

Except, this book claimed he was so much more than that.

Freya wondered just how much she'd learned about the man who led the courts. She knew the others weren't as simple either. In her journey across the faerie lands, she had only scratched the surface of who they were, what they had done, and the madness that lay within their hearts.

It was the last line of the little book that caught her eye the most. The last line with a flourish that gave her information about the Goblin King.

Freya stroked her finger over the single word and said it out loud. “Eldridge,” she whispered. “Is that your name?”

The word filled her with a sense of power. Like she had finally gotten a secret out of the Goblin King that was hers and hers alone. He’d probably never told anyone his real name. No one had referred to him by it that she’d met thus far.

He was a mystery to all who knew him. A mystery to all the people who called him king. Now, she had something to hold above him. Something more important than just a deal or magic that would change the fabric of time.

Leaning back in her chair, she put the little black book back in its drawer and stared into the fire.

Freya had to do something. Sitting in this castle while reading about the Goblin King was getting her nowhere. She had to move forward.

Perhaps there would be details within the castle that might give her a clue about the creatures who had once lived here. Maybe there was a gathering spot. A holy relic. Something that would turn her in the right direction so she could defeat the Goblin King.

Still, her first priority was to get her sister back.

A stiff wind blew through the nearest cracked window and with it, a voice.

“I told you they were all dead,” he whispered. His voice was light but filled with disappointment. “Why did you still come?”

“Are they dead forever?” Freya stood up and placed her hands on her hips. She searched the shadows for him, where she knew he was likely hiding. “Or are you just saying that to prevent me from moving any farther? I’ve almost beaten you, Goblin King.”

“You haven’t beaten me yet, and I don’t think you ever will.” His voice was already drifting away from her. “You’d have to be someone else entirely to defeat the Goblin King.”

“Oh, I think I’m capable of doing what you least expect.” The fire warmed her back and gave her courage. “How far are you willing to go to win this game?”

“As far as it takes.”

Was the voice drifting down the hall? That’s what it sounded like, although she still couldn’t see him. She frowned and followed the sound of his voice.

The halls were very similar to the rest of the castle. Snow drifts made it difficult to tell where the walls and the floors met. It made the entire place look smaller than she had expected a castle to feel. It was, after all, supposed to be home to an entire court.

She watched the chandeliers swing in the wind. Snowflakes drifted down from the ceiling and rested on her shoulders. She could feel their cold touch like little kisses through the thick woolen cloak.

This impossible place had finally convinced her not to question the extraordinary. She would just accept that sometimes, she wouldn't understand what was going on.

And that was all right.

Just like she was following a voice down a hall. A voice that laughed when she peered into rooms, hoping to see the visage of the Goblin King.

"I know your name!" she called out, her words ringing through the ice.

"Is that supposed to frighten me, Freya of Woolwich?" His warm breath brushed the side of her neck. The heat of him lifted the hairs there. "I know your name, too."

She whipped around and stared into the blank space behind her. No one stood close enough to breathe on her, let alone be visible for her to see. But she could still feel him. He was there, and yet not.

Freya shook her head and refused to allow him to intimidate her. This was not how their story would go, and she would rewrite the pages if she had to.

Straightening her back and squaring her shoulders, she ground her teeth and hissed, "You won't stop me. I will get my sister back."

"I have no doubt that is your plan," he replied. Again, from behind her. Like the magic he was using was attached to her back.

Freya heard him at all the times when she least expected it. Maybe he was following her around, holding onto her neck and twisting her head to see the things he wanted her to see. Maybe she had only completed this quest because he wanted her to.

"I will not stop," she repeated, as though the words were more important than anything she'd ever said in her life.

"I'd be disappointed if you did, Freya. But you don't know where to go anymore."

Perhaps she was a little stuck, but that had never prevented her from moving forward before. She might not have Arrow. But she didn't need a

guide to find her way through the faerie courts. She had found the castle, hadn't she?

Freya wandered through the halls to the back entrance where she stood staring at a wall of broken windows. A snow filled garden was dotted with stone statues of people and creatures that didn't look real at all. Women in ball gowns that were larger than life. Wings stretched from their backs like giant butterflies, so big she didn't know how they'd carry such appendages.

They were beautiful and carefully carved, so anyone walking through those gardens would have to stop and stare at the masterpieces.

Where to?

Somewhere in this castle was a hidden secret that the Goblin King had hidden. The last piece of this puzzle that would save her sister. Freya could find it, even if she doubted herself.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and listened. There, on the wind, was the faint sound of goblin bells.

It was all she needed. Freya lifted her booted foot and stepped out of the castle. Her feet crunched through the hard layer of ice on top of the snow with an audible crack. Flakes still fell from the sky, dancing gently as they went.

Though she could feel a slight wind on her face, it stirred nothing in the garden. The statues remained still. The snowflakes fell calmly in meandering paths. And all was silent as death in the garden of the Winter Court.

She stepped closer to the nearest statue and stared up into its face.

With a gasp, Freya realized these weren't statues at all. This was the Winter Court. The man she stared up at had once been alive and handsome as the sun. Frost spread in patterns over his cheeks and dusted his eyelashes with white glitter.

He didn't move. He didn't breathe. The wide wings like a lunar moth spread out behind him with their edges dipped in ice that melted down over his shoulders.

She reached up and placed a hand on his cool cheek. "This is a cruel way to die," she whispered. "I'm sorry it had to be like this for you."

Compassion told her to move. She wandered through the garden, pausing at each of the people who had died where they stood. Not a single one wore an expression of fear or anger. They all looked like they'd fallen asleep. Beautiful and yet eerie.

Who did this to an entire court of faeries? Who would have harmed so many people who were unaware that an attack was coming?

She only knew of one person who was capable of such cruelty, although now she wasn't certain. The Goblin King wasn't what she had expected.

Freya thought about the little book, the one where he had fought a war and still felt guilty for the death he had wrought. How hard he had fought to keep his soul through something that ripped and tore at the goodness in a person's heart.

Eldridge. The Goblin King.

Freya held tight to the name and continued through the garden until she stood in the very center. The frozen creatures here all stood in a circle. They held their hands over their hearts, as though they were praying in the moment they had frozen.

She stepped to the side of one, placing her hand on its back to steady herself. The woman's eyes were closed as well. Her features serene at the end of her time.

At the very heart of the garden, a single glass snowflake rested on top of an altar. She thought the stone statue that held the Winter Court's most precious possession aloft had been granite, although snow and ice had taken away much of the beauty in the stone. The glass snowflake itself was delicate and devoid of any snow or ice. She worried if she touched it, then the entire thing would fall apart in her hands.

And there it was. The end of her journey and the easiest thing to just reach out and take. Freya should have snatched it immediately and crowed to the heavens that she'd beaten the Goblin King at his own game.

She could hear the ticking of time, as though he'd placed a clock against her ear, so she knew just how long she had before her sister was lost to her forever.

Freya had not the faintest idea why she hesitated. She stared at the glass snowflake, the spires that branched off each other, and the delicate way the dim light played on each pronged tip. She stared at the piece that would end all of this.

Instead of rushing to grab it off the ground, to peel it off the altar and steal what was rightfully hers, Freya sank down into the snow beside the nearest figure. She placed her hands over her heart, feeling the rapid beat underneath the many layers keeping her warm.

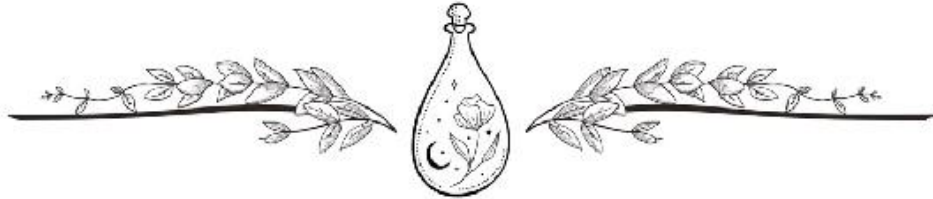
She sat.

She stared.

And she wondered why she couldn't take it. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't take that snowflake. Not yet.

Then Freya realized she was waiting for something. Though she didn't know what she was waiting for, she knew it was not yet time to end this game.

## CHAPTER 28



**S**he wasn't sure how long she sat in the snow, staring at the center of the garden with the other faeries. Her mind wandered through all the things that could have happened here. All the horrors these people must have felt as the cold closed in on their bodies and froze their hands in place.

The snowflake was magical. She was certain of that. Light played within the glass even when the dim morning light wasn't hitting it. The colors changed, moving like there was something alive inside the magical object.

The Goblin King's words played in her mind. Everything he said long ago, just now, and then the words in the book which she'd never heard him say but could still hear in her mind. The handsome goblin had made it very clear that his kind was different. That he was different. And she still had a sick feeling in her stomach that she had missed something.

This deal was too easy to beat. Too simple for a mortal like herself, although she was proud of the tiny details she'd noticed. Sure, she had defeated the Spring Maiden, but not on her own.

She had discovered the Summer Lord's secret and bested him, but the Goblin King had given her the details on how to start.

The Autumn Thief was kind to her, but only because she wanted to get back at the Goblin King.

And now?

Who was helping her now, when she had yet to go through a court without a faerie guiding her?

The worry locked her in place until she knew the truth of it all. Until she was certain this court wasn't hiding something from her. Not any longer, at least.

The book had been the first clue. Why would the Goblin King allow a journal of his own to be in a table, lost within the Winter Court, but with a note for someone to find and read it? That made little sense.

Then, of course, his voice in her ear. He had always followed her to see what she would do, but that didn't mean he was so vocal in every place where she'd been. He usually wanted to hide, not guide.

And lastly, the goblin bells. She couldn't see any bells here, and it wasn't right for her to hear that chiming without a goblin to sell his wares. That could only mean the Goblin King was here, or at the very least, that he was trying to hide something from her.

Goblins. Bells. Frozen courts. None of it added up.

Freya was smart enough to know when she was being played, and he was taking advantage of this moment. Perhaps the time had already run out. She didn't know how long she'd been traveling or how quickly time moved in the faerie courts.

Her time might have been up long before she even accepted his deal, and all of this had been some elaborate plan to reveal it at the very end. When she had lost all hope.

She stared at the snowflake and tucked her hands deeper into the cloak. The cold wasn't seeping into her skin. She worried that might be because she had such progressed frostbite that she was incapable of even feeling the cold any longer. Her fingers were still pink, though. Her hands still moved in finite, difficult movements that should have been impossible if she was frozen.

"Eldridge," she called out. Her voice danced across the gardens in a soft hush, like skirts swaying to music she couldn't hear. "I want you to come out, now. I'm finished playing this game."

No one responded to her at first. Maybe he was trying to see just how truthful she was being. Perhaps he thought he could convince her otherwise if only he waited her out.

Freya had all the time in the world. This deal didn't feel right. Her sister wasn't even here, not in the Winter Court at least. And the reality was that Freya didn't know if she could ever get her sister back.



If the Goblin King was being honest, then Esther already had a tail. She already was affected by the magic in this place, and maybe returning to the mortal realm was a foolish thing to ask. What kind of life would her sister have in the mortal realm now?

Esther would have to hide in the forest for the rest of her days. She would never marry. If a husband found out about that tail, then she'd burn on a pyre. The villagers would call her a witch. A servant of the devil who wore his mark rather obviously.

Freya couldn't allow that to happen.

She supposed they could cut the tail off, but what amount of pain would that cause? It was a magical change in her sister's form, and such a curse was dangerous to deal with. The wound might never heal.

"Eldridge," she called out again, this time with a sharp crack to her voice. "I said I'm finished."

Though he didn't materialize in front of her, his voice still moved through the garden. Slithering through the snowflakes like a snake hidden in the grass. "You can't give up now, Freya. Not after everything you've done."

"I'm not giving up." She stared at the altar as though his voice came from within the glass artifact. "I wouldn't ever give up when it comes to my sister's life. But I know this game doesn't make sense. The rules have changed too many times. There is too much for me to understand, and I think you have been lying to me."

"Lying?" he murmured in her ear. "It's impossible for a fae to lie."

"No, I don't think it is. I think you can twist words until a person can't tell the truth from story. You told me that the impossible was possible in this place, and yet..." Freya pulled her fingers from her cloak and stared down at the warm digits. "I don't know what's real anymore."

"Everything is real here. All your desires, your dreams, all the things you craved from the mortal realm that could give you nothing." Shadows moved behind one of the frozen faeries. "You have found so much here, Freya. All you have to do is see the magic for what it is."

"And what is it?" She shifted into a crouch, ready to tackle him when he moved around the frozen fae.

"A gift." His voice tickled her right ear. "My gift to you."

"That's a twisted way of looking at it." She watched the shadows slide down the arm of the frozen faerie. The touch was almost sensual.

Except, the more she watched, the more she felt the touch on her own body. His clawed fingers slid down her arm, scraping her skin as it went. But that wasn't possible either. She had on so many layers of clothing. She couldn't feel him touching her.

And yet, she could. More impossible things, proven to be entirely and utterly possible in this unusual place.

"Freya," he whispered. "You are so close to finishing this."

The magic within the snowflake glowed, chipping away at her resolve.

A blast of heat struck her back. She stumbled, reaching out a hand to catch herself. An arm caught her around the waist and tugged her against an invisible, solid chest. "Why are you hesitating? Do you not want to save your sister?"

"You know I want to save her more than anything."

"The last piece of the puzzle is right in front of you. And yet, you refuse to take it. Almost like you want this game between us to continue. If I didn't know you better, I'd be flattered." He released her with a sudden shove that sent her stumbling toward the snowflake. "End it, Freya."

It was right there. So close her breath fogged the glass edges, crystalizing in spidery frost that stretched over the surface. In the reflection, she could see the Goblin King.

He stood in a tight black suit, as always, with his white billowing shirt revealing the solid planes of his colorless chest. His eyes watched her with an intensity that made her blood heat.

He wanted her to take the snowflake. Why? Why did he want to be beaten at his own game?

She watched those strange, swirling eyes turn dark.

"How are you still waiting?" he asked. "Take it. For the faerie realm, damn it, Freya! Take the damn charm and this will all be over!"

Something clicked into place in her mind. Some truth that had been just out of reach the whole time he shouted and tried to convince her that this was the only choice. She lifted her hand, hovering it above the glass surface, watching him for any reaction.

He jolted forward, almost like he was waiting for something to happen. Then he froze in place when he realized she hadn't touched it yet.

"So that's the truth of it, then," she said. Freya turned around and faced him even though she could no longer see the Goblin King. "This isn't the last charm. The snowflake has nothing to do with any of this, does it?"

He remained silent. A wind touched the snow at both of their feet, shifting it around his invisible heels.

She couldn't quite see him, but that didn't matter. Freya knew she had understood what this whole game was about. She pointed at the snowflake and said it again, "That is not the way to get my sister."

Finally, he relented. "And yet again, you have surprised me, Freya of Woolwich."

"Is that what turned all the faeries here to ice?" She looked at the poor souls who were frozen for eternity. Trapped in the same place they were the moment they fell under the Goblin King's spell and touched something that wasn't theirs. Something that should have remained a secret. "Were you going to freeze me like all the others?"

The snow stirred and footprints approached her. Whatever magic had hidden him melted away like he had shaken off a cloak.

The Goblin King stood before her with sadness in his eyes. He lifted a hand and palmed her cheek, his skin so cold to the touch it was like she had pressed her skin to ice. "It's not a bad way to end this story," he murmured. "They have no idea what has happened to them. They live in a world where they see their own happy memories, played over and over again. I promise, they're not in any pain."

"I don't want to relive my memories." She should have pulled away from his touch, but she didn't. Freya soaked in the smooth texture of his palm and the dangerous thrill of his claws touching the side of her neck. "I want to live new experiences. To see new things and to find adventure around every corner."

"And that's something you found here, isn't it? You were just Freya of Woolwich before the faerie realm. A young woman content to live on the edge of the forest with danger so close you could almost touch it. But never did." He stroked his thumb over her cheekbone. "Until now."

"Until you," she agreed. "Now, I want my sister back."

"I can't give her to you." The wind ruffled the dark locks of his hair and the dim light played across the shimmering surface of his skin.

He was otherworldly. So strange it made her heart race, but the way he was looking at her almost made her want to lean forward and press her lips to his. Just to see if a man so dangerous could taste like apples on her tongue.

“You told me to end this,” she whispered. “And I want to more than anything else. But I know that snowflake is not the correct essence of the Winter Court.”

“Then you have to find it.”

“I already did.” It was a long shot, but she guessed what was the real essence of Winter. “I think it’s you.”

His eyes widened. In shock or surprise, she didn’t know which.

He still released his hold on her and took a step away. “I told you, the essences of the courts are items.”

“No, you never said that.” She followed his steps in retreat, forcing him to look at her. “You said to collect them. And I think, considering all the impossible things that you taught me were possible, you’re the essence of this court. You were the one who put the snowflake here. You were the one to freeze them and end their lives. Perhaps, in that moment, you became more than just the Goblin King. You became tied to this court for all eternity.”

“That is madness.” He swallowed hard, eyes darting side to side as he searched for an escape. “No one would ever dare accuse me of being a court’s—”

She interrupted him. “You are. And I am claiming you like I claimed all the others. I defeated you, Goblin King. Now, you must return my sister to me.”

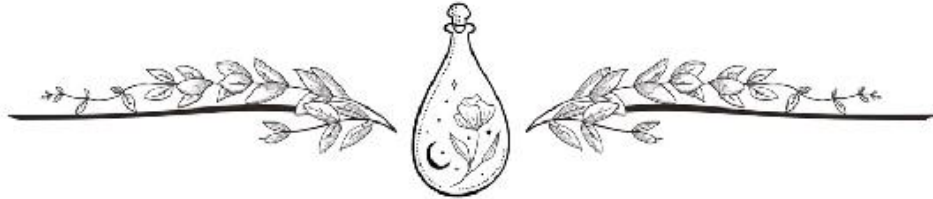
His wide, horrified eyes watched her approach him. He didn’t move when Freya reached out and cupped his face. Just as he had done to her.

The Goblin King sighed, closed his eyes, and tilted his cheek into the warmth of her touch. “Ah, Freya. I didn’t deserve you or this challenge. But yes, you have bested me.”

“And my sister?”

His hand lifted between them. He covered her eyes with his palm and replied, “It’s time to end our story.”

## CHAPTER 29



**T**he Goblin King lifted his hand from her eyes and she could see only darkness at first. Then, tiny pinpricks of light appeared. Blinking into existence like a thousand stars just waking up.

He stepped away from her and a few more lights bloomed. They cast a silver glow over the room, similar to the first one she'd seen him in. Still filled with stars. Still so thoroughly strange with floating orbs representing planets. These were more like giant glass balls, however. Not at all like the metal ones she'd seen before.

It was beautiful here, but cold, vacant, and vast. She couldn't imagine living here, in this dark place, for longer than a few days. Let alone an eternity.

And she feared the Goblin King had been here for a very long time.

Speaking of the strange man, where had he disappeared to? Turning around in a circle, she tried to see where he had gone. But she couldn't make him out in the darkness.

Then, with a blinking crackle of light, everything fizzled into view. A thousand stars all burning so brightly they lit up the entire room and the man standing in the center.

The Goblin King wore his black suit with gold edges. His hands were held loose at his sides. Even his posture was less straight than normal. It appeared that he was preparing himself for the defeat she was about to give him.

She should have felt triumphant. And yet, she almost felt sorry for him. He was afraid, and for that, guilt ruined the moment.

"My sister?" she asked, clearing her throat.

“Even now, after all the things I’ve shown you, the only person you’re interested in talking to is that little brat of a girl who doesn’t care where you are.” He held his arms open, not as if waiting for an embrace, but perhaps as though he were questioning Freya’s sanity. “I have given you everything you ever desired, and yet you still wish to leave this place.”

“What are you talking about?” Her mouth gaped open in surprise. “Given me everything I’ve ever desired? What?”

“You think I did all this for your sister?” The darkness warped behind him, shifting and changing until she saw herself. Freya could see the Spring Court, Summer, and Autumn. She watched as she struggled and the vision of herself, embarrassing as it was, defeated them time and time again. “You think I would go through all this trouble just to keep a mortal girl?”

“You were the one who kidnapped my sister for a necklace,” she snarled.

How dare he try to turn this around on her? As if she was the one in the wrong, or she should be thankful for him providing this adventure. Her sister was turning into a goblin, for heaven’s sake!

He tilted his head to the side and watched the emotions playing across her features. She didn’t hide them. Let him see how angry she was. How much his words wriggled their way underneath her skin.

And yet, the Goblin King still smiled. He still watched her with those strange eyes, as if he were hoping she would piece together the final bit of their story. “Come on,” he said, his voice guttural and deep. “Surely you’ve put it together by now.”

“Goblins kidnap people for making deals,” she replied. “That’s what you do. Why would I ever consider there was any other reason?”

“Because of what I’ve done for you!” he snarled.

For the first time, she saw the visage drop from his face. Anger rocketed through him and sparks of magic flew from his hands. Rage changed his entire form, shifting him from Goblin King to a creature of madness and strife.

Freya didn’t know how to respond. All that he’d done for her?

The Goblin King had done nothing to help Freya. Sure, he’d guided her throughout the faerie courts, but that didn’t mean he was helping. He was self serving and the only reason he was intervening was to tilt her back onto the road he wanted to watch. None of that was for her.

The more she thought about it, the more angry Freya became.

“For me?” she growled in response. “What have you ever done for me?”

He lunged forward, hands outstretched to cup her jaw again. Except this time, he wasn't nearly as gentle. The tips of his claws dug into her neck in tiny pricks of pain.

Freya winced and tried to pull herself from his grip. But he wouldn't release her. Not this time.

The Goblin King's eyes flashed bright silver, like the very moon itself was glaring at her. He bared his teeth in an angry snarl. “How dare you not see everything I have done! When I first saw you in that glade, I thought you were just a meager little cockroach like the rest of humanity. Skittering through the walls of the world to spread disease wherever you went. But then, you challenged me. That fire in your eyes was the first clue you were unhappy in your cottage by the wood, surrounded by people who would never understand you.”

“That's not true.” She jerked her chin, but his claws scraped deeper.

“Oh, it's very true and you know how honest I am.” He forced her to look up into his eyes. Those flashing eyes burned. “I watched you for hours and I knew you wanted more out of your life. You were dying in that pathetic little hovel you call a home. All your potential rotting away as worms ate through to your core. I saw you for who you were and you were begging me to turn your life upside down.”

No. He was wrong. She was happy living with Esther in their parent's house. Freya wanted nothing more than to go back to that time and that place, with no goblins to bother them again.

She was.

But why did her stomach twist when she even thought about returning to that mundane life?

He squeezed her jaw one final time, then released her from his grip. “You see?” he asked. “Now you understand the thrill of the hunt and the chase is in your blood. You are like me, Freya. You heard the call of the goblin bells and while you refused us for so long, finally you have answered.”

This time, her own anger burned in her chest. Damn him and the beauty of this place. Damn the stars in the sky that he wrapped around him like a cloak, and damn the golden planets spinning wildly around him.

He could pull all the stars from the sky and she would never bend a knee.

Freya lifted a hand and pointed at him with a jab. “You are wrong. And now that I have defeated you, I can say that without question. I have proof. I am here. I bested you. And now I want my sister back. Stop stalling.”

He froze in place, and it almost seemed like tears cast a sheen over his eyes.

The Goblin King returned to her, standing so close she could feel the heat of his body. He didn’t touch her this time, but he didn’t have to. All her attention was captivated by the red stain of his lips, spread across his mouth like he’d kissed someone with blood red lipstick. Pointed teeth worried at a thick bottom lip, and his heart thundered in the pulse at his neck.

The long column of muscle worked in a deep swallow. He stared down at her with misty eyes, as though she’d said something that would forever change the future. As though she had forsaken him.

But she had no ties to the Goblin King. Freya was a mortal woman with mortal desires, and she needed to go home.

Anger still burning in her chest, she closed the gap between them until she could feel his breath on her lips. “Give me back my sister, Goblin King.”

“I am offering you the world,” he whispered. “You wanted a villain for your story, so I became one. You wanted to fight for your sister, so I made it more difficult for you. And when you stepped off the path, I guided you back to it.”

“I want the mortal realm.”

“When will you admit that you desire the bright-fire barberries?” He lifted his hand then, curling his fingers around the notch of her hip and tugging her into his arms. “I’ve seen you ache for fresh grapes from the vine, rare citrons from the south, and figs that burst on your tongue. You never bought from the goblin market, but you stared every day. Esther saw it too. Or did you think she wandered off on her own?”

“Such evil gifts would harm us.” The words felt flimsy now that she’d seen the entire realm of the faeries.

He reached up and caught a lock of her hair. He wrapped it once, twice, thrice around his finger. “I know what they say about me and my kind. Beware of goblin men, who march through haunted glen. For the Goblin King has no heart, and heartless things cannot offer what they do not have to give. But I am no monster, Freya of Woolwich. The man standing before you is real and wise. I have lived a thousand years, and now I am the one



begging you. Use your common sense. Stay here with me in the goblin realm where impossible is a word that will never leave your lips again.”

How was she to say no to that? The Goblin King himself was begging her to stay. The only thing he hadn't done was get onto his knees and press his hands together in prayer.

Freya didn't understand why he was so adamant. She didn't know why he wanted her to stay. And all the problems that might arise when she returned home bubbled back into her mind.

Esther would have to hide.

Freya would have to take care of everything from now on.

The wards still weren't built.

The goblins would still peddle their wares, except now she knew they were children.

Her mind was forever changed by this place, and she feared the boredom of life would soon overtake her again. Would she return to that strange door in the wood? Would she ask for the Goblin King to make her another deal?

She opened her mouth and almost thought she would say yes. But the words she said were, “No. I want my sister back and I want to go home.”

The Goblin King flinched away from her, squeezing his eyes shut as though in pain. “I should have made a deal for a lock of your hair, but I underestimated you.”

“Yes, you did.”

He took a deep, steadying breath, then opened those strange eyes. He leaned so close she could see the stars inside the silver. “I will not make a deal with you again. If I have to lose, then I will enjoy this last moment between us.”

The Goblin King tugged on her waist, then pressed his lips to hers. His lips were soft as velvet, brushing against her own in a sensuous slide of lips and tongue. He exhaled into her lungs, sparks of magic that took root in her very soul.

His fingers flexed against her ribs, dangerously clutching her with claws raking at the cloak that cushioned his grip. He tugged her ever closer, devouring all the air in her lungs and yet still demanding more.

She broke the kiss first, desperately inhaling a deep breath.

The Goblin King snarled a short, “I'm not finished with you yet,” before he palmed the back of her head and drew her in for a second kiss that

seared her flesh from bone.

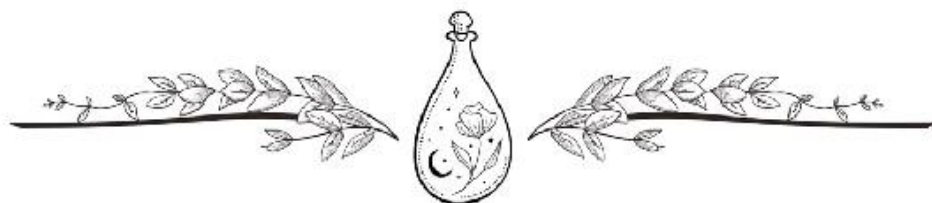
He kissed her as though his life depended on it, then released her with a sudden shove that sent her careening back.

“I accept defeat,” he said. His breathing ragged, his eyes wide and wild. “Get your sister, Freya of Woolwich. Thank you for the memories.”

“What?” She felt the magic before it pulled her into a portal.

The last thing she saw of the Goblin King was him turning away from her and holding his head in his hands.

## CHAPTER 30



**F**reya ran through the dark tunnel of the portal like the hounds of hell were on her heels. She didn't want to think about the sadness in the Goblin King's eyes. She didn't want to think about how horrible it made her feel, or how her gut twisted into a knot.

All she wanted was to get her sister and get out of this place. The Goblin King wasn't someone she had to save.

He had stolen her sister.

He had forced her to make a deal that he thought he wouldn't lose.

Whatever he was feeling was his fault. Not hers.

The Goblin King would not get into her head and change her thoughts like that. Goblins were bad, monstrous creatures who lured little girls and boys into the forest where they could turn them into creatures like themselves.

They weren't children who ate like animals at dinner. They certainly weren't the little dog faced creatures who helped her throughout the entire realm and were dear, wonderful friends. They weren't Autumn Thieves with hearts of gold but a darkness hidden underneath their skin, a pain that was soul deep and couldn't be healed no matter how hard they tried.

She slowed as she reached the end of the tunnel. Light split through the darkness of the universe and showed her where Esther was.

Her sister sat in the middle of a meadow with the rat-faced goblin laying at her side. Esther hugged her knees to her chest, tilted her head back, and laughed at something the goblin boy said. He was lying on his stomach, feet in the air, that ugly tail waving as though he had been good. Like a dog.

This was over. She didn't care what Esther had to say. This was all over and they were going home.

She burst out of the portal and stepped onto the emerald green grass that filled the meadow. Breathing hard and already swearing, she charged toward her sister like a woman possessed.

Esther turned around and crab walked into the goblin boy. He threw a protective arm around her shoulders and bared his pointed teeth.

"Who are you?" he snarled.

"I'm her sister." Freya reached for Esther's arm, tugging at her to stand up. The goblin boy rose onto his feet as well, but he didn't try to stop her. "Come on, we're leaving."

She'd thought Esther wouldn't fight. Sure, maybe her sister would argue a bit while they walked away. But that was fine. She had known Esther was a little softer than most, and she'd be unlikely to insult the goblins by leaving immediately.

Instead, Esther ripped her hand out of Freya's and stumbled back into the goblin boy's arms. "What are you doing here, Freya?"

She looked down at her empty hand, then back at her sister. "I thought it was rather obvious what I was doing here. You made a deal you shouldn't have. I came after you."

Esther's eyes widened with every word. She looked at the goblin boy, then at Freya, then back to the goblin again. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know she'd follow me all the way here. If I had—"

He smiled and touched his furry forehead to Esther's. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Talk with your sister, I'm sure this is all some misunderstanding."

Misunderstanding?

Freya's cheeks heated with more anger than she'd felt in years. This rat-faced goblin thought he knew her sister more than her? That they could just talk with Freya as if she was the one who was losing her mind?

Absolutely not. This wasn't a situation they could talk through. Esther was coming with her. Now.

She reached for her sister's hand again, only for Esther to yank it out of her reach once more. Esther glared at her, and for the first time in her sister's short life, Esther put her foot down.

"Freya!" Esther snapped. "I'm not going back with you. I don't know why you would ever think I'd want to return to the woods in that stupid

little town we grew up in, but I made this choice. I wanted to go with the goblins, and I did. You will not change my mind.”

Any retort she might have had dried up on her tongue. She'd never heard her sister argue before. Esther was the amiable one. The sister who rarely talked back to anyone and would help any person who asked.

Esther arguing with Freya was enough, but to know that Esther was arguing on behalf of a goblin? That gave Freya pause.

She slowly reached forward for Esther's arm one last time and then stopped when her sister flinched away. Again, the goblin boy wrapped his arm around Esther's waist and tucked her into the waiting haven of his arms.

Freya looked between the two of them, frowning. “You want to stay here? With the goblins?”

A long, plush tail curved around her sister's waist and touched her opposite knee. “I don't think I have a choice anymore. Do you?”

And there it was. The permanent changes her sister had experienced and what would keep her out of the mortal realm forever.

All the blood drained from Freya's face. She was light headed, weaving where she stood, staring at the white tail her sister had grown. “No,” she whispered. “I guess you can't come home after all.”

Esther laid her hand on top of the goblin boy's at her waist. They looked every bit the couple who were wonderfully in love. Who was Freya to break that up?

A part of her had known this might be possible. She should have been aware that such things could have happened in the time she'd been gone.

And she didn't know how long it had been for Esther since they had seen each other. Time seemed to be nothing more than an idea here in the faerie courts. It might have been years for Esther to develop a relationship with this young man.

After all the goblins she'd met along the way, she couldn't think of him as a monster. Or a creature. Or even as anything less than human.

He was a goblin boy, certainly. But he wasn't a monster.

Freya sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Sweat trickled between her shoulder blades as the sun warmed her. While she pawed through her thoughts, Freya reached up and unclasped the beautifully beaded cloak. It fell to the ground with a heavy thud, and that was the end of it.

She opened her eyes and sighed. “Okay,” she whispered. “I won’t make you leave. I just wanted you to come home if you wanted to and I... I defeated the Goblin King for you. I hope that proves how much I love you. And how much I’ll miss you.”

Both Esther and the goblin boy froze. They looked at each other, then back at her. “You what?”

Considering they both said the words with equal parts horror and fear, she worried that wasn’t the right thing to say. Freya crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “I beat the Goblin King. He made a deal with me that if I could collect an essence from each of the Courts, then I could take you home. I did it.”

“But...” Esther looked at the goblin boy as if she was making sure her words were correct. “I didn’t make a deal with the goblins. I could have gone home whenever I wanted.”

So she could have just asked Esther to come home? At any point?

Freya’s blood boiled. That lying, cruel, horrible... “That rat bastard,” she swore. She sheepishly glanced at the goblin boy and added, “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, I understand the turn of phrase.” His whiskers twitched. “I’m sorry to make you repeat yourself, but did you say you beat the Goblin King in a deal?”

“Yes, is that so surprising?”

“But he can’t be beaten.” The goblin released her sister and took a worried step forward. “He can’t.”

“Well, I did.” Why was that so hard for everyone to believe? Even a king could be defeated, no matter how much they revered him.

“No, no, he just can’t—” The goblin boy didn’t have time to finish explaining anything to her.

A sudden rumble shook the ground they stood on. And in the distance, Freya realized there was the faint outline of a castle. Dark and ominous, it hid in the tree line as though it were part of the forest itself. A plume of smoke rose from the walls and another echoing boom rocked the glen they stood in.

The goblin boy reached for Esther’s hand and clasped it tight. “We have to run.”

“I know,” she whispered. Then she looked over at Freya. “The Goblin King can’t be beaten. Once he is, he has to give up the throne. That means

someone else will take his place, and he'll be locked away for the rest of time."

Freya again felt her entire body list to the side. That couldn't be right. He wouldn't have helped her defeat him if he was going to pay the price. Why would he do that?

She supposed the right question was why the Goblin King ever did anything. He never made a lick of sense, and it had only gotten worse the deeper she dug into his past or who he was.

Her sister and the goblin boy turned as the ground shook underneath their feet. A great rumble rose from the very earth itself and suddenly, everything was falling. All the trees pulled up at the roots. Were they running as well? They were certainly moving as though they were.

Freya darted after her sibling and they all raced away from the castle. She risked a glance behind them and saw a dark cloud was spreading across the land. It reached forward with dark tentacles that slithered through the leaves, searching for whatever it could find.

"Freya!" Esther shouted. "Watch out!"

She faced forward at the last second. A tree was falling onto its side where it had jostled with another. The great trunk wasn't going to stop until it struck the dirt.

With a shriek, she fell onto her hip and slid beneath it. The leaves caught at her hair and beads ripped as she rolled across the ground, but she made it just in time. The sound of the tree striking the earth made her ears ring and for a moment, she was completely disoriented.

Dust and dirt flew up in the air and it took a while to settle. She didn't know which way Esther and the goblin boy had gone, but if she was going to find them, then she needed to get moving. She knew that. But her head hurt so badly.

A hand appeared out of the dust and latched onto her arm.

Esther.

She hauled Freya up, coughing and pulling her out of the wreckage. Together, the sisters raced through the forest to the goblin boy's side.

He held out his hand for Esther to take. "Come on! This way!"

Freya had no idea how long they ran, but they skidded to a stop before a small door in the ground. Like a trap door, really, although she didn't know where it would lead.

The goblin boy wasn't looking at the door. He was staring back at the castle with tears in his eyes. "Oh no."

Freya shouldn't look. This wasn't her fault. The Goblin King had done everything in his power to ensure she won, and of course she was going to. She wouldn't trade Esther's life for the Goblin King's, especially when it was all a lie.

But she did turn around. She looked at the rubble of the castle and the black smoke that surrounded it like an ominous cloud.

"What happened?" she asked. "What happened to the king?"

The goblin boy held both his hands over his heart and shook his head. "The king is gone," he whispered. "Long live the queen."

"The queen?"

He met Freya's horrified gaze with one of his own. "What have you done?"



## EPILOGUE

**F**reya followed her sister and the goblin boy into the trapdoor. It led to a series of dirt tunnels, lit by torches dug into the walls. She had no idea where he was bringing them, but she did trust that he wouldn't hurt them.

But most importantly, she held onto Esther's hand the whole time.

How long had it been since they held hands like this? They must have been children, although she couldn't think of the particular moment. It was like they suddenly just stopped holding hands at one point and never realized they wouldn't do it again. Until now.

She squeezed Esther's fingers. "What does it mean for the fae if the Goblin King is no longer in control?"

Esther shook her head. "I don't know. They waited for him to rule for a very long time. They like him a lot, you know. He's a wonderful king, and he keeps the courts under control far more than anyone else ever has."

Well, that made her feel even worse. Freya knew she shouldn't take this on herself, but somehow, it still felt like it was her fault. If she had realized that Esther couldn't have made a deal, no matter how much the Goblin King said she had, then all of this could have been avoided.

"It wasn't your fault," Esther said, as though she could look into her sister's mind. "If the Goblin King wanted you to beat him, then nothing would have changed his mind. He's a good man, and perhaps a little too manipulative for his own good. You couldn't have known."

No, she supposed not. But that didn't make her feel any better.

She needed a distraction and fast. Freya nodded at the goblin boy. "So what's the story with him?"

Esther tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I know I wasn't supposed to talk with them, but I did. Even before the time you saw me. He and I have been friends for a long time, but then we realized we wanted it to be more. He's kind, Freya. So much kinder than any human man I've ever talked with."

The rat-faced boy turned a corner, then peered around it, waiting for them to catch up. She watched his eyes as he looked at her sister. And yes, they were kind. He looked at Esther as though she were all the stars in the sky combined into one person.

Love. She'd only seen the emotion in one man's eyes, and that was her father's. He had doted on their mother just as this goblin boy looked at her sister.

Esther tugged on Freya's hand. She wore a worried expression on her face. "Are you okay with this? I didn't want to tell you, and I probably should have. I just... I knew how much you hated goblins. Maybe you still do, I'm not sure."

"No," Freya replied. She smiled softly and tugged her sister closer so she could wrap an arm around Esther's shoulders. "I don't hate the goblins anymore. I never should have. That was wrong of me."

And how strange it was to admit that. She should have known better than to even be here. Their mother would have shouted until their eardrums bled.

But this was such a lovely place. The people were so strange, and the world was so much bigger than she was used to.

"Damn it," she whispered under her breath. "I suppose the Goblin King was right, after all."

They caught up to the goblin boy, whose ears twisted in her direction. "What was he right about?"

She took a deep breath and let it all pour out of her. "That I was unhappy living in the mortal realm, and I would have done anything to experience at least a little adventure in my life. I would have rotted in that cottage by the wood, and no one could have convinced me there was a better life than that. Not until now."

"We've all been there," the goblin boy replied. He grinned and pointed above them. "We're going up if the two of you are ready."

Freya flicked a clod of dirt off her shoulder. "Am I ever."

The goblin went first, clambering up the wall with his claws sunk deep into the earth. He flipped another trap door up and then tossed down a rope ladder for the two of them to climb up.

Esther climbed up the rope rungs, talking as she went. "What are you going to do now, Freya? Are you going to go home then?"

"I don't think I can." She waited until her sister pulled herself out of the earth before Freya started up the rungs. "I feel a certain responsibility to get the Goblin King back, although I wouldn't have the faintest clue where to start. I don't even know if he's still in the castle."

She caught the trap door and hauled herself out of the tunnel. They were in a warm, earthbound house. A fire crackled in the corner, the stone fireplace billowing heat. A small table with carved animals on the legs stood to her right, and a tiny cot about the size of a child's bed was to her left. A brightly colored quilt was draped at the foot.

"How quaint," she said. "Is this yours?"

Except, when she looked at the goblin boy, there was a new person standing next to him. A small black and white dog with his ears pressed flat to his skull.

Freya was nearly dumbstruck. But she managed to stutter, "Arrow?"

"Hello, Miss Freya." He wrung his paws. "It's nice to see you."

"Oh, it's so good to see you too, my friend." She dropped onto her knees and drew him into her arms for a tight hug. "I'm so sorry for what I said when I left. It was cruel, and you deserve better."

He hesitated before he laid his head on her shoulder. "All is forgiven. Besides, I think I can help you."

"You can?" She drew back and stared into his dark eyes.

"I know where to find the king."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Hamm is a small town girl on a blueberry field in Maine. She writes stories that remind her of home, of fairytales, and of myths and legends that make her mind wander.

She can be found by the fireplace with a cup of tea and her two Maine Coon cats dipping their paws into the water without her knowing.

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