



ONE

AFTER THIRTEEN YEARS OF FALLING LEAVES AND creeping ivy, the clearing still had not changed. Not really. The moss was a little thicker, the trees a little taller.

An anxious wind swept through the high branches of the forest. Pine needles and birch leaves spun to the earth, and the bushes quivered with eager energy. The birds had stopped chirping, and even the insects had ceased their incessant buzzing. An uneasy quiet fell. The forest held its breath.

“Okay,” said Raina, the Queen of the Deep Dark. “Your turn.”

Fable swallowed. “It isn’t going to work. They don’t listen to me.”

“They will.”

“They never do.”

“Try.”

Fable took a deep breath. She scrunched up her eyes and focused on the sound of the leaves. The wind was dying down, and silence was settling over the woods like a blanket.

“Concentrate.”

“I am.”

“Listen.”

“I *am* listening.”

“You’re not listening. You’re trying too hard.”

“You told me to try!”

“Just listen.”

“I’m listening. *They* don’t listen to *me!*”

“Just breathe.”

“I’m breathing.”

“And concentrate.”

“MOTHER, I AM LISTENING AND BREATHING AND CONCENTRATING!”

The entire forest shuddered, and birds erupted into the sky all around them. Like a dam breaking, the myriad

sounds of the Wild Wood rushed back over the clearing. A single bright green leaf spun lazily down to land atop Fable's frizzy curls. She snatched it off her head and tore it up.

"This is stupid." Fable kicked a pinecone across the forest. "Why do we even have to practice listening to stupid trees?"

"Listening is the most important skill a queen must master. When you listen to the trees, they will listen to you."

"The trees don't ever listen to me. The forest doesn't even like me."

"It will. You just haven't gotten your roots in yet. You will grow, like the Grandmother Trees near the forest's four corners. They are pillars of the forest, Fable, just as you will someday be a pillar. They are sturdy, and their roots are deep. They know where they stand, and so no wind can blow them over. You need to feel the roots beneath you and come to know where you stand."

"I know where I'm standing. I'm standing in the middle of your vine circle for the millionth time practicing the same spells as always, even though they never work."

"Magic takes time."

"Not *my* magic! My magic is easy!"

"Fable, please."

"I can transform! I can do slappy sparks!"

“No.” The queen was firm. “You are not practicing spark again until you’ve gotten better at extinguish.”

“Ugh.” Fable rolled her eyes. “I’ve spent hours on extinguish. I can’t do it.”

“You just have to learn to reach—”

“—*reach out for the flame in my mind and grasp it with a hand that cannot be burned,*” Fable recited in her mother’s voice. “I know. You’ve said it a million times. Pretty sure I don’t have the same fireproof brain-hand that you have.”

“You do. The magic is in your veins. But real magic requires discipline.”

“What do you mean *real* magic? I can do *real* magic! Last week I turned a pinecone into a hedgehog!”

“And you were only trying to make it spin! That’s my point! Fable, it’s not enough to have power if you don’t know how to use it, how to do it on purpose—how to *undo* it if necessary.”

“You want me to turn Squidge *back* into a pinecone?” Fable gasped. “But she *loves* being a hedgehog!”

“I don’t want you to do anything to Squidge.” The queen pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “I want you to concentrate on your lessons. What about compel? You’ve made real progress with compel.”

Fable took a deep breath. “You want me to try to make stuff move with my brain again?”

“I prefer to think of it as *strongly encouraging* things to move, but yes. Let’s review first. What sorts of things can you compel?”

“Pretty much nothing,” said Fable. “Because it’s hard and it never works right.”

“What *could* you move,” the queen pressed, “if it *did* work?”

Fable fiddled with a patch of sap in her hair as she echoed the lessons she had been taught for years. “Stones and other minerals are difficult to compel because their energy is stubborn. Wind and water can be compelled more easily by redirecting their natural currents. Plants can also be compelled, because their growth and subtle movements need only be”—she gave her mother a sidelong glance—“*strongly encouraged* to move more quickly or to take on specific shapes.”

“Good,” said the queen. “And . . . ?”

“And living creatures are nearly impossible to compel, although some insects will succumb to suggestion, like ants.”

“That’s right. Not all insects, though. Ladybugs are surprisingly strong-willed.”

“Birds and reptiles and other more complex animals might feel the push, but generally ignore it unless otherwise motivated,” Fable rattled on. “And people cannot be compelled at all.”

“Correct.” The queen gave a nod. “Why not?”

“Something about how a person’s life force is like a rushing current, too strong to be turned from its course.”

“Excellent.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“Tried?” the queen said.

“*Compelling* a person. Have you ever tried?”

“Manipulating a human being against their will would be wrong,” said the queen.

“That means you did! If you hadn’t you would just say *no*.” Fable grinned. “How’d it go?”

The queen pursed her lips. “I would have a much easier time keeping interlopers out of our forest if it had gone well,” she admitted. “You cannot compel a human being. It would require unimaginable power to elicit even the tiniest reaction.”

“What about dead people?”

“Fable!”

“What? I’m not gonna *do* it.”

“We do not meddle with that manner of magic. Not ever. When you cast a spell over something, you enter into an exchange. For a short time, you share your energy—you welcome in the essence of the subject you are compelling. When you compel a tree, you *become* the tree, and the tree becomes you.”

“So compelling dead stuff would make me part dead?”

The queen’s expression was dark. “More or less,” she answered. “Let’s try something lighter, shall we? What do we call it when we compel the wind?”

“Gale,” said Fable without enthusiasm. “But you know gale is one of my worst spells. I’m not going to be able to do it.”

“You will. Just take a deep breath through your lungs and let it out on the breeze.”

Fable took a deep breath in, and blew it out again.

“Try again.”

Another deep breath.

“That’s it. Now let it out on the breeze.”

Fable’s face began to turn red. “Ugh!” she finally burst. “There’s only two ways air comes out of me, Mama. The front way and the back way—and you never think the back way is as funny as I do.”

“You’ll get it. You just have to develop a bond with the forest first. You need to connect with it.”

A pinecone sailed down from the canopy above them and caught Fable hard on the head.

“Ow!” She glowered at the trees. They swayed innocently above her. “See?” she demanded. “This is dumb! Nature is dumb! Just open the wild-wall so I can go.”

The queen sighed. “One more time.”

“No! I don’t want to *listen* or *breathe* or *concentrate*. I don’t want to become a pillar like the stupid Grandmother Trees. And I don’t want to talk to your jerk forest. You said I could visit Tinn and Cole today.”

The queen frowned. “Yes. I did. I think perhaps that was a mistake. You have been spending a lot of time—”

“No take-backs!”

Fable stomped up to the wall of foliage her mother had grown all around them for privacy. It was easy for her mother. The plants listened to the queen. The animals listened to the queen. Everybody listened to the queen. Nobody listened to Fable. With each practice session she had suffered, her mother’s wall of greenery had felt less and less like a protection and more and more like a prison.

“One more time first,” the queen pressed.

“Why? One more time to feel stupid? One more time to get it wrong?”

“Yes. We learn more from how we get it wrong—”

“—*than we learn from getting it right*,” Fable droned. “You *always* say that, but I still haven’t learned *anything*. Just open the bushes, Mama.”

“Why don’t you open them?” the queen prompted. “Just try. Compel the vines. You’re strong enough. I know you are.”

Fable clenched her fists. “You’re right,” she said. “I am strong enough.” And with that, she spun on her heel, and where a girl had stood moments before now perched a bear cub, balancing on its hind legs.

The queen pursed her lips. “Fable, no.”

The cub narrowed her eyes. The queen sighed. Fable would not be her little cub much longer. Already the child was growing into her flank, her paws looking less adorably overlarge and more suited to her size every day.

In a flurry of motion, the cub shredded the branches in front of her until they were nothing but ragged splinters, and then she stormed off through the gap.

“Violence is not the same thing as strength!” the queen called after her. Fable did not respond. The queen sagged. “She will learn,” she told herself.

The leaves rustled skeptically above her.

Footsteps crunched toward the tattered gap in the foliage. The queen looked up. “Fable?”

The face that peered around the corner was neither human nor cub.

“I take it today didn’a go any better’n yesterday, eh, witchy?” The drab green goblin removed his battered top hat as he stepped into the clearing. Nudd, High Chief of the Hollowcliff Horde, was half the queen’s height, but he

bore himself with all the confidence of his regal station. He had come alone. He always came alone.

“My family’s concerns are none of yours, Thief King,” the queen answered coldly.

“Ya know as well as I do that that child is a concern of every last creature in the Wild Wood.”

The queen did not reply.

“Otch. I didn’a come ta hassle ya, Raina. We’re on the same side. Tell me—is she learning ta control it at all?”

The queen hesitated before she spoke. “She will. She just has too much of her mother in her.”

Nudd smirked. “Aye, that’s the truth. An’ a good thing, too. She’ll need plenty o’ that if she’s ta last long in this forest. But ’tis the *something else* she’s got inside o’ her that has me twitchy.”

The queen took a deep breath. She should never have told Nudd. It was her story—hers and Fable’s and no one else’s—but there was no un-telling a story once it had been told.

“They taught me how to control it,” she said. “I will teach my daughter.”

“Ah, but you were just a wee human lass with a bit o’ magic under yer skin. Yer daughter is something else—she’s a part o’ *them*, through an’ through.”

“My daughter is human.”

“Human *plus* . . .” Nudd said. “That’s dangerous magic, theirs. Stronger’n the Wild Wood is used to. ’Twas yer own mother who taught these trees ta trust neither humans nor fair folk—an’ yer wee Fable is both. Dangerous combination, that. The forest hasn’a decided what ta do with her yet.”

The queen’s brow furrowed. “Fable is not a danger to the Wild Wood.”

“Na?” Nudd countered. “There’s plenty would say that *you’re* the most dangerous thing in these woods, an’ she’s already more powerful than you are. Least you can control yourself.”

“She is not more powerful than I am.” But even as the queen said it, she pulled the bearskin cloak tighter around herself. She could take animal form, but only through the magic of the cloak. Fable had been able to transform at will since she was barely able to walk. Spark had been one of the most difficult spells Raina had learned to cast in her childhood. Snuffing a flame had been relatively easy—but creating one out of nothing had taken years to master. Little Fable had worked out how to do it when she was five. By seven she had nearly set the Wild Wood on fire a dozen times. Wild, unruly magic had always been effortless to Fable, yet structured magic—courtly magic—the queen’s magic—remained a brick wall to her. “She will learn.”

“When?” Nudd’s eyebrows rose. The pale scar that ran through one brow and down his cheek wrinkled. “Yer wee witchling was, what, twelve last summer when she tussled with the fabric o’ the universe itself? And *won*?”

The queen swallowed.

“She still makin’ flowers turn inta butterflies by accident?”

The queen said nothing.

“Mm-hm. What clever trick will she stumble into when she’s sixteen? Twenty? I’m na blind, witchy. I can see she’s gettin’ stronger. So can the rest o’ the forest folk. What will happen when she’s na some wee thing any-more? What will happen when her mother’s na around ta look after her—when the forest becomes hers ta protect? Or do ya think she’ll handle that moment smoothly when it comes?”

The queen said nothing.

Nudd relented, and the two of them listened wordlessly to the birds bickering and squawking at one another for a few minutes.

“She is a good lass, Raina,” the chief said at last, more gently. “She does have a lot of her mother in her.”

The queen nodded.

“We’re having the boy over,” the chief added, more lightly. “The changeling, Tinn. Poor lad doesn’a know the

first thing about his own kind. Got ta learn about his heritage somehow.”

The queen arched an eyebrow. “Does he, though?” Tinn had been raised by humans his entire life—he looked human, acted human, thought of himself as human—but he was not human. A goblin named Kull had tried to steal a baby from town by swapping it for a goblin changeling, but he had botched the whole affair, leaving both human and changeling behind. The boys had grown up as twins, made indistinguishable by the ancient magic. Not even the boys had known for sure which of them was the doppelgänger until last summer.

“Course he does.” Nudd nodded. “He’ll be spendin’ his first night with the horde this week’s end. Kull is just about sick, he’s so excited for it.”

“Very brave of Annie to relinquish her son for the night.”

“Oh, aye. She’s put the horde on pain of death iff he comes back in fewer pieces than she lent him.” Nudd chuckled. “Ya know,” he added in the careful tone of one who wishes to appear as though an idea he has been carrying for days has only just occurred to him, “we could take the girl, too.”

The queen raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe yer witchy way just isn’a what the lass needs right now. She’s na what you were, Raina. We goblins may na be fair folk, but we do know our own way around magic. Be right honored ta tutor the future Queen o’ the Deep Dark.”

The queen regarded Nudd for several seconds. “Thank you, Thief King. But I trust that you will understand when I say no child of mine will ever be taken by goblins without bloodshed.”

Nudd’s lips cracked open in a full, broad grin—his jagged teeth parting as he cackled. “Ha! Yer mother would be right proud ta hear ya say it. Sound just like her. You’ve got more’n a little of her in you, too, ya know. I see it most when yer threatenin’ my life. It’s in the eyes, I think. Fine woman, she was. Fine woman. She could cuss like poetry.”

The queen allowed herself a smile.

“Well, the offer stands, iffing ya change yer mind.” Nudd pulled the top hat back down over his floppy ears. “Ya know where ta find me, Raina.”

“Never forget that I do, Thief King.”

Nudd gave the woman a wink and clambered back out over the ruined shrubbery. The queen watched him go before sitting down against a coil of mossy roots. The chief was not wrong. Ever since the night of the Veil Moon—the night Fable had reached inside the gap between

realities—the girl’s powers had gotten more unpredictable. She was still the same Fable, for better or worse, but lately the universe had begun responding.

Last week, Fable had slept poorly and had yelled at a chirruping jay in the early hours of the morning. The bird-song had ended abruptly—not because the bird had stopped singing, but because it had stopped being a bird. An exceptionally confused iguana had had fallen out of the tree where the jay had been. It had taken the queen all morning to unravel the spell, and the bird that had flown away in the end still looked rather greener than it should have.

More troubling still had been when the queen asked Fable to help pull the withered, black brambles from between the Oddmire and the gully. It was a task that should have taken all day, wrenching the dead things from the earth and burning them all in careful piles. By mid-morning they were gone. Just gone. The vines had been unmade. Not that the queen had any interest in restoring the wretched plants, but it unnerved her that she could not have done so even if she tried. There was no spell to unravel. They had simply been dismissed from reality, and Fable didn’t seem to realize what she had done.

The queen closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Fable *was* a good girl. She just had to learn control.

Beneath the queen, the earth trembled.