



CHAPTER 2

The fairy stared down at the hand on her wrist, and her thought was not that she was caught, but that someone was touching her.

It had been many years since a living being had touched her. She could not remember how many years. She had almost forgotten that such things were possible—and yet there it was, the solid weight of a palm and four fingers pressed against the underside of her wrist.

“I was going to ask if you were one of the djinn,” said the knight slowly, sitting up. “But they are made of fire, and there is no fire in you.”

She shook her head, still staring at his hand. Her skin looked green and sickly in the moonlight next to his.

“Are you an elf, then?”

It seemed important not to lie. She licked her lips and said, “Something like an elf. Yes.”

“I see.”

She had spoken to him, and he had spoken back. That also had not happened for many years.

He released her wrist. She looked up, startled.

He made a little half bow, more of a nod, still seated. “You have been following me,” he said. “I thought you were something more malign. I did not mean to frighten you.”

His face was serious and polite. The mat dangling by his left ear looked ridiculous.

He was talking to her.

“I was—” The fairy had to stop, as the absurdity of speaking to a person and having them speak back nearly overwhelmed her. If she thought about it for too long, she would start laughing or crying or both. “I wasn’t frightened.”

It occurred to her that she could run away. He was sitting and she was crouched, and she had a good chance of making it to the trees. Once she was in toad shape, she could hide in the leaves.

I should go. I will go.

She did not move.

“Why were you following me?” he asked.

She thought about this. She did not dare tell him all the truth. “This is my place,” she said finally. “You are in it.”

“I apologize for my trespass, madam.”

He moved then, holding up his hands, away from her. “I am going to build up the fire,” he said. “Please stay.”

No one had asked her to do anything since before the tower fell. She took a half-hearted step toward the woods, then stopped. The skin on her wrist rang like an echo.

He laid a log on the fire and stirred it until it crackled. Then he sat down and looked across it at her.

“Does the fire trouble you?” he asked. “Can you sit beside it?”

Troubled by the fire? What manner of creature does he think I am?

Still, perhaps it was not that strange a question. She never lit fires herself. When it was cold or damp, it was easier to take toad shape. Toads were not particularly bothered by

damp, and they sank into a peaceful torpor in winter, beneath the leaves.

She came a little closer, keeping the fire between them. He had asked her to stay, and so she would for a little while, but if he made any move to catch her, she would run.

The silence grew awkward. She lifted her hands to her temples. "Forgive me," she said. "It has been . . . I have not had to talk to anyone . . . It has been a long time." She grimaced. "Are you a . . ." She tried to find the right word from among the half dozen her gift offered. "Saracen?"

His eyebrows shot up. He looked briefly offended, then his face smoothed. "It has been a very long time, I expect," he said. "That word is not used much anymore."

I've said something wrong. That didn't take long. She flushed. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "It is all right. How long *have* you been here?"

Wanting to hurry past the moment, she was more honest than she meant to be. "I don't know. Years. I kept meaning to count the winters, but I would sleep and then I couldn't remember how many I had forgotten." She made a vague gesture with one hand, toward the road. "Before people built that."

His eyebrows went up again.

"There were a lot of people," she said. She could not seem to stop talking, now that she had started. There was some enormous store of words bottled up inside her, it seemed. "Then very strange people, then no one. Then more people again who looked like you, talking about the plague—"

The knight rubbed a hand over his face. "You have been here since before the Death," he said. "God have mercy."

That seemed a very strange thing to say, but the fairy did not want to risk being wrong again. She clasped her hands together and asked, very carefully, “What do you mean by the Death?”

“A great plague,” he said. “Justinian’s third plague. It killed half the world, they say. Perhaps a little less. In the Holy Land, though, they found a cure, and they brought it north to heal those who were left. But so many had died and all the fields were lying fallow.” He held his hands out, palm up. “There are songs about it now. My people came from Anatolia in the east, fleeing a great famine, and they came here and found all this land and hardly anyone left to work it. Of course, nobody wanted their land taken by outsiders, but they also didn’t want it going to weeds and wilderness, and the lords that survived were handing out property left and right, because they’d lost so many serfs, you see. And then the Seljuks were fighting Byzantium and whoever won, they were likely to come calling here next, so there was a land act, I think—maybe two?—and a few minor squabbles over who was in charge of what was left, and then I think the Danes got involved somehow . . . I’m sorry, I can’t remember all of it, or the order it goes in. I might have part of it backward. I like books, but I can’t memorize dates the way some people can.”

She nodded. It all seemed very strange. Half the world dead? Was that possible?

She stared at the fire, thinking of how many people that must be, all of them real, and how she would never be able to hold them all in her head or mourn for each of them. She hoped that there had been someone to mourn properly for them. She did not think she could take on another task and hope to see it done.

“Do elves tell their names to mortals?” asked the knight.

The great Fair Folk did not, but since the fairy had no true name for someone to use against her, it hardly mattered. “Toadling,” she said.

He frowned at her. “It does not seem kind to call you that.”

It was her turn to frown. Had she said something wrong again? No, she had been Toadling for her whole life. The greenteeth had given her the name when she was barely born.

“Toadling,” she said firmly. “It is what I am called.”

“And I am Halim,” he said. “And I apologize for trespassing in your forest.”

Toadling considered this. “It is all right,” she said, “so long as you leave again.”

She felt an odd hitch in her chest as she said it. It had been so long since she had spoken to another person, and she had not come even close to using all the words that she had stored up. She did not want him to leave. She did not want him to stay. She put her hands up to her face.

Halim frowned. “I do not wish to offend you,” he said, “but I cannot leave just yet. There is something here that I wish to see.”

Toadling looked up at his face, startled.

“There is *nothing* here,” she said. Her voice was high and it sounded angry, and Toadling, who had always hated any kind of conflict, wanted to recoil from it immediately. “Nothing!”

“There is at least one thing here,” said Halim, smiling faintly. “A fairy girl that I am looking at right now. That is something.”

Toadling shook her head angrily. “Nothing important,” she said. “You should leave. There is nothing here.”

“If there is nothing here, then why does it matter if I leave?” he asked.

She inhaled sharply, and he held up both hands. “I am sorry,” he said. “That was unkind. You have asked me to leave, and it is hardly the act of a good knight or a good Muslim to stay against a lady’s wishes.”

A lady. Toadling wanted to laugh, but if she started, she would never stop and it would turn to crying almost immediately, she was sure, and everything was already terrible, and that would only make it worse.

“There is a story,” Halim said, watching her closely, “of a beautiful maiden in a tower, enchanted by some terrible magic.”

“There cannot be a story,” said Toadling, almost inaudibly. “Everyone has been dead for so long. There cannot be a story. Who told you such a story?”

She took a deep breath, aware that she had not denied it strongly enough. “There is no tower,” she said. “And no maiden. I tell you, there is nothing here.”

“Then why are you here?” asked Halim.

She was silent too long, she knew, before she said, “I live here.”

“Are you the enchanted maiden?” asked Halim.

Toadling stared at him, and this time, she did begin to laugh.

She tried to choke it off, but she had been right. She kept laughing and it was a horrible barking laugh, like a toad croaking, and then there were black tears on her cheeks.

She heard Halim move and could not bear to look at his face. It would be horror or pity, and she wanted neither. She dropped into toad shape, not caring how it looked, and heard him swear.

At least the change had stopped her laughing. Toads are capable of sarcasm, but their blood runs too cold for hysteria. She scrambled into the leaf litter and away.

He was still there in the morning. Toadling lurked under a log near his campsite, waiting for him to do . . . something.

She had relived their conversation in her head a hundred times over the course of the night and come to the conclusion that she had been foolish. She should have laughed when he said there were stories—laughed and then stopped laughing. If she could not laugh, she should have been grave and serious and told him that he had been misled.

I should have done anything other than what I did. I am a fool and more than a fool.

What remained to be seen was whether he would leave on his own, or whether more words would be required to fix the mess that she had made by speaking in the first place.

She hoped not. *It has been too long. I have forgotten how to make words do what I wish.*

He did not leave. Instead, he carefully dressed, boiled tea, and then rose to his feet.

He walked to the edge of the woods and cleared his throat.

“Mistress Toadling, I wish to apologize. I spoke poorly to you last night, and I regret it.”

He was facing away from her and clearly had no idea where she was. Toadling lifted a back leg and scratched the side of her head.

“I particularly should not have cursed. I am sorry. It was unworthy of me. I know that my presence here is unwelcome, and my wish is not to impose.”

He turned partway, running a hand through his hair. She noted that he had cut out the mass of elf-knots.

“Please, Mistress Toadling, you owe me nothing, but I would be grateful if you would speak to me again.”

In profile, his face was almost handsome and very grave. He stood for a moment with his lips pressed together, resolute, and then ruined the effect completely by sighing and muttering, “*Dammit*. I don’t even know if she’s listening.”

Toadling surprised herself by standing up, shedding her toad skin, and saying, “I’m listening.”

Halim jumped but composed himself quickly, she’d give him that. “Mistress Toadling!”

He inclined his head politely, though even that was more courtesy than Toadling was used to. She rubbed the back of her neck.

“I am sorry,” he said again. “I have handled this very badly from first to last. I began by laying hands on you and then by arguing with you. I am not the best of knights.”

Toadling shrugged. “Will you leave?” she asked.

Halim frowned. “I am not sure I should,” he said.

This was not the answer that she was expecting. She clasped her hands together. “You should,” she said. “You most certainly should. There is no reason for you to stay.”

Halim sat down beside the fire. After a moment, Toadling crouched on her heels on the other side.

“I have come because of a story,” he said. “You were right that everyone who might have told it is dead. I read it in a book. Several books.”

Toadling felt her stomach drop. *Books*.

Books were terribly expensive. Surely . . . surely no one would have thought that her father’s kingdom was important enough to write down in a book.

She clutched her temples. "Where did you read such a book?" she asked. "Who would have written it down? I cannot believe . . ."

She was supposed to be saying that there was no tower. She was failing at this again. He had surprised her, and she could not think fast enough. She had been a toad too long; her blood was sluggish with it . . .

"It was an old book," he admitted, "where I found it first. It named a kingdom that I had never heard of, and I was half-mad with boredom and looking for something to do." He smiled faintly. "There is not a great deal of use for younger sons of poor noble families, you know. My mother thought I might become an alim, but I had no inclination at all, and so I was an overeducated young knight who could barely afford his own arms and armor."

"I did not know that . . . ah . . ." Toadling tried to think of a word that was not *Saracen*. "That . . . Mussulmen? . . . Became knights."

"Muslim," said Halim. "And not a terribly devout one, if you must know. My mother was devout enough for the whole family, so we left her to it." He poked at the fire. "It has been over two hundred years since the plague, mistress. I suspect you would find the world very different now."

Two hundred years!

It was immense—unthinkable—and ultimately meant nothing at all.

Two years or two hundred or two thousand. The magic endures. Toadling sighed.

"It does not matter," she said. "I will not be going out in it, so long as it leaves my little wood alone."

It was Halim's turn to sigh. "The world rarely leaves anyone alone," he said. He poked at the fire again. "Well. In

answer to your question, you will find that there are Muslims and Christians and people who have gone back to the old gods, and an order of knights for each of them. Being a knight isn't about being religious, you know, so much as it is to figure out what to do with your extra sons so they don't tear up the family seat. Every now and then someone gets the idea we should start chopping each other's heads off, but in practice, the Pope squats in Rome like a spider and the caliphs glare at one another over their walls, and the rest of us get along as best we can with each other." He smiled faintly. "I found the references to the tower and the princess in the library of a Benedictine monastery, in fact. The Brother Librarian was a good man and glad of someone to talk to."

Toadling shook her head, dismayed. That the world had changed did not surprise her, but that somewhere a monastery had a book with the story of the tower in it . . .

"It was not true," she said, but her voice sounded unconvincing even to herself.

"There was a stone keep here," Halim said. "Five or six hundred years ago, at least. I found it in the old land records. And I have ridden over the country for forty leagues in every direction, and the only place that it could have been is—there."

He pointed into the woods, directly at the hidden tower. Toadling tried not to flinch.

"Now," he said, when it became obvious that she was not going to say any more, "it is possible that the story was false, and there was never a maiden in the tower and never a wall of thorns. It is a good story, and perhaps whoever wrote it down simply put the name of an old castle to it, to make it seem more realistic."

Toadling twined her fingers together. She felt like he was setting a trap, and anything she said was going to set it off.

“My brothers would say that I am being very foolish, wasting my time on stories,” said Halim. “They would tell me to work on my swordplay instead, so that I can finally win a tourney. But I do not particularly enjoy tourneys, and I do like stories. And I would still like to get into that old keep, if God wills it, and see if there is a tower. Perhaps there is no maiden sleeping in it after all. But there is a great deal of magic in the world, and I will not dismiss the possibility.”

“There is no maiden,” said Toadling. “Your brothers were right.”

Halim put his chin in his hand. “Perhaps you are the enchanter,” he said.

Toadling went very still.

“Or if you aren’t the enchanter, you might be enchanted yourself. Should I be trying to break the curse on you?”

Toadling blinked at him, aware that she was goggling like a startled frog. “*What?*”

“Is there a curse on you?” he asked, leaning forward. “Oh my! Is that it?”

“No . . . ?” The conversation was moving too fast for her again. “I’m not cursed!”

“Which is exactly what you’d say if you were,” he pointed out.

“But it’s exactly what I’d say if I wasn’t!”

“Well, that’s true.” He considered. “Suppose that I go inside the keep and look around. If you’re cursed, maybe I’ll figure out how to break it, and if not, then I’ll leave you in peace.”

“I’d rather you just left!” she said. “You won’t find anything inside!”

He pounced on that. “So there *is* a keep, then!”

Toadling opened her mouth, closed it, then let out a single furious sob.

His grin of triumph died instantly. He made a move toward her, then stopped himself. “Mistress Toadling—gah. I did not mean to cause you pain. I talk too much. I’m sorry.”

Apologies made it worse. She had long experience with unkindness, but apologies undid her. Her eyes prickled and she dashed blue-black tears away. Her face would look as if she had been beaten again. *Damn.*

“Go away,” she said miserably. “Go away, go away! You’re only going to make a mess of things!”

She put her face in her hands. A moment later, there was a pressure on her shoulder, and it occurred to her that he had put a hand there, very lightly.

“Please don’t cry,” he said. “I’m sorry. If I go, will you come with me?”

Toadling stared up at him. She knew that her face was a mask of ink, but for a moment she was too surprised to care. “Come with you? Where?”

“Anywhere you like,” he said. “You’ve been here a long time. The world is different. It might be better. You could see for yourself.”

Leave? Leave here?

For a moment, she wanted it so badly that she could taste it.

No. No. I can’t go. If I go, even if it gets him away, even if I can somehow keep the spell up from a distance, sooner or later there will be another prince, another knight, someone who reads that book . . . Someone will come.

And if they get inside, she can get out.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Why not?” he asked. “There are so many things to see. If you don’t trust me—and who can blame you?—I will take you to my mother. She’ll be a little surprised to have an elf about the house, but she is the kindest woman imaginable.”

“I can’t.” She shook her head. “Not won’t. *Can’t*. I would, but I can’t leave. I—I’m sorry.”

“Is there some magic that keeps you here?” he asked. He patted her shoulder very carefully.

“Yes,” she said, grateful for the out. “That’s . . . that’s the best way to explain it. Your offer is very kind. I wish I could take you up on it. Truly. But I can’t.”

Halim nodded. “In that case,” he said, taking his hand away and giving her an odd little half bow, “then, Mistress Toadling, I will go.”

She sagged, partly with relief, partly with disappointment. The moment caught in her throat like pain.

“And I will return,” said Halim, “before too much longer, and find a way to free you from that magic.”

After he left, Toadling found herself at loose ends. She did not miss the strange knight, exactly. To miss someone, or not miss them, seemed to require that there be some relationship beyond two brief meetings. She had more right to miss the wagtails that had once run across the grass around the tower.

It was more as if time had divided itself in half around him, falling into two separate pieces—the time before she spoke to him, and the time after.

Normally, when she took on toad skin, she also took on toad thoughts and spent her days in contemplation of nothing more complicated than earthworms and millipedes

moving under the leaves. Time would pass over her head and she would hardly notice, unless some human activity required human thoughts.

Now, however . . . now she found herself thinking un-toad-like thoughts. She would snap up a fat worm and think in the next instant about leaving, about hopping to the edge of the road and taking on human form and simply walking *away*.

Which was madness. Which she could not do.

“This is ridiculous,” Toadling muttered to herself, taking human form again—and she was muttering out loud again, a habit that she thought she had shed long ago. “This is absurd. The worms won’t be different anywhere else. He spoke to me for a few moments. He stayed for two days. Why am I still thinking about this?”

Nevertheless, she was. She worried at the memory in her head, the words she had said, the ones she hadn’t said, the ones that she should not have said at all.

Half the world had died of the plague and made less impact on her than a few moments of conversation.

After a week—was it a week? She had gotten out of the habit of marking time. It seemed like a long time, but only because she was thinking so much—she came to a decision.

“I should check,” she said. “I should make sure. In case . . . in case something has happened.”

(She did not even dare think to herself that the sleeper might be dead. The relief might kill her if it were true.)

For the first time in many years, Toadling entered the keep.

In the beginning, she had visited the keep daily, to reassure herself that the sleeper was still there. Then, slowly,

the need to check had faded. She had gone back every few weeks, then once a year, then not at all.

It was easier that way. The sleeper became restless if she visited too often.

The thorn hedge, which was so inaccessible to a human, was far different when one was the size of a toad. The brambles became a series of highways, pounded down by the feet of mice and the long bodies of snakes.

Toadling hopped through the thorn hedge. The thorns were as large as roof timbers to a toad, and as easily avoided. She reached the stones of the keep itself and slipped easily through a drainage hole. The far end was plugged with wet leaves, but nothing she could not force her way through.

The walls around the central courtyard were still standing. The thorns had pulled a few stones from the walls, but that was all. It was the south tower where the plants had concentrated, sending long whips up the walls and covering it in a riot of green.

She stood up, out of toad shape, and walked the courtyard. Her fingers trailed over moss and lichen. Trees grew thickly inside the walls, a small unlikely forest.

The main hall had lost its roof long ago, and an oak tree had grown up inside it. Toadling had no interest in it, or in the squat north tower. If she walked there, she risked waking too many memories.

She went to the base of the south tower and stood, looking up.

The magic was concentrated near the top of the remains of the tower, but she could feel it from here. It was like stepping into a warm rain. Individual droplets of magic beaded

invisibly against her skin, and she brushed them away with her hands.

It was her own magic, but it had been separated from her for so long that it felt unfamiliar, like returning to a childhood nursery when one was grown.

A skilled climber might have been able to get up the outside of the tower, but that was a long, difficult way. Instead, Toadling pulled herself up to one of the narrow windows, took toad shape again, and slipped inside.

The interior was dark. She felt her way up the steps on human hands and knees. The magic was stronger here—witness the fact that the steps had not fallen apart over the centuries—and she had to wipe it away from her face as she climbed.

The drops became a stream, became a torrent, and then Toadling was swimming in the magic, surrounded by it.

She came to the landing at the top of the tower.

The doorway was open. The door had been torn off its hinges, and Toadling did not have the skill to replace it. The roof was gone, but the vines clustered so thickly overhead that they made a ceiling the color of knotted veins.

Dried leaves crunched under her feet as she entered the bedroom.

And there she was, curled up on the bed. Her golden hair fanned out around her. Her chest rose and fell, and she had a slight smile on her lips.

Toadling stood over the maiden that she had enchanted and let out a long, long sigh.