

CHAPTER 4: NORWAY

On the other side of the world, in an elaborately furnished cavern a few meters below the rock and ice of the second-tallest mountain in Northern Europe, a Faerie waited. The Norwegian mountain, Glittertind, used to be a challenger for the title of Northern Europe's tallest mountain, but when global warming had caused its topmost glacier to shrink, it had been pushed out by Galdhøpiggen. The Faerie used to be the King of the entire Underside and the ruler of a mighty race of magical people, but now, it seemed, he was only the King of, well, this mountain. He'd been pushed out by politics.

The *Ard Rí*, as the Faerie King was still called, at least ceremoniously, had been waiting in his home in the mountain for a long time, even by Faerie standards. He'd been waiting for so long, he'd forgotten what he was waiting for. Of course that was just an expression; the Faerie King knew exactly what he was waiting for. And the longer he waited, the more agitated he became, which was very unfortunate for his servants, who had a hard enough time keeping His Highness contented when he wasn't agitated.

Just last week, for example, the *Ard Rí* had had his Chief Warrior, Foxglove, tear the wings off a petite cook for serving a cucumber salad, which the King did not like, and he distinctly remembered telling the tiny woman so forty years prior. The four translucent wings were now mounted on the wall of the Faerie King's library among the stuffed heads of six different endangered predator species and a pair of crossed femur bones that looked disturbingly human. The cook had been given a day off to recover from the trauma.

The *Ard Rí* typically avoided participating in violence himself, but Foxglove had such a knack for it. The powerfully-built Faerie Warrior had a mop of coarse, black hair, a shaggy salt-and-pepper beard, and an affinity for modern war films in which the cinematic effects made the

death scenes look so gruesome and real that he could smell the blood. He was also a great deal smarter than he looked.

This morning, Foxglove was smart enough to recognize a rhetorical question when he heard one. He entered the library, a vast, octagonal room with thousands of books lining nearly every wall from floor to vaulted ceiling, to find the *Ard Rí* standing behind his massive antique mahogany desk holding a letter with one hand and massaging his temple with the other. “Am I stupid, Foxglove?” asked the King calmly without looking up from the letter. He had spoken in the musical language of the Fae, which, when coming from the King, always sounded a little more rasping and snakelike than it should. “Am I a complete imbecile?”

Foxglove, his determined stride across the stone floor never wavering, ignored the question. “Your Highness,” he said as he approached the desk. “Larkspur and Gomphus have returned from France. They have information regarding Amanita.”

The *Ard Rí* slowly lowered the letter to the desk and lifted his gaze. His ancient, black eyes stared fiercely into Foxglove’s golden ones, and the Chief Warrior shrank a little from the effect. The King had the air of always towering over whomever he was facing, even Foxglove, who had at least a four-inch advantage. The King’s pale skin flushed red under a tangle of winding white scars, and he said, “What did you call her?”

“Forgive me, Highness,” replied Foxglove quickly. “I meant—”

The King did not let him finish. “She is no longer a warrior, Foxglove, or am I mistaken?”

Another rhetorical question that Foxglove smartly avoided answering.

“She cannot, therefore, carry a warrior name. Amanita is no more, and you will refer to the traitor only as The Traitor, or in the case of needing to distinguish between multiple traitors, you may refer to her by her civilian name, Ethne.”

“Of course, Highness,” said Foxglove with a respectful nod. “A momentary lapse.”

The King sighed and flared his nostrils. “Well? What is the information?”

Foxglove swallowed, hoping beyond hope that the message would present as good news.

“The Traitor Ethne is in America.”