

CHAPTER ONE

After my escape, I swore I'd never set foot inside Faedon again. I arrived last in the clearing in the Enchanted woods, right before the inaudible whispers fell silent, and the shuffling stilled.

More to shield myself against the crisp wind than as a disguise, I turned up the collar of my rawhide coat. Considering I left less scruffy and before having had my first shave, ten years of absence might even be disguise enough. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't hiding. My intention was to leave the same way I had arrived: without notice or fuss.

At the center of the morbid crowd stood a podium, the carvings too intricate to be the work of dwarves. I reckon it was the work of elves; anything delicate, and those long-fingered bastards were sure to be involved. The dwarves probably sold them the red gems used to decorate the delicately etched roses. I'd seen kings with lesser funerals. For a moment, I pondered to myself who was fitting the bill for this occasion. Whatever the cost, it was well worth it. Every gem glinted in the rays of sunlight that snuck through the treetop canopy. A beautiful setting for a last farewell.

Grams would've hated every single thing about it, the extravagance of it all—the podium, the glass coffin, the choir of elves whose main purpose was to stir the crowds' emotions with sorrow filled songs from lands across the sea—but this was the sort of extravagance she deserved.

She had loved this forest, probably as much as she loved Faedon and her family. Scanning the crowd, it seemed to me that half the kingdom and their Similarars had come to show their last respects. I could see bears, wolves, corvidae, geese and a splattering of other forest creatures. And I'd eat my boots if a dragon or two weren't circling high above the treetops. The faint whiff of sulfur on the breeze was a bit of a giveaway.

It was strange to see everyone so civil, making it a rare occasion indeed. That would have pleased her more than the bejeweled roses.

A tall woman, with dark hair, hooded eyes, and plum painted lips, stepped up onto the podium, and the elvish dirge faded into nothing. She wore a long black dress and other than a sapphire sparkling at her throat, I could see no other adornment. With pale, slender fingers, she stroked the lid of the glass coffin as she took her place. She stared out over the crowd, taking in as many faces as possible.

Raven Darkshadow. Leader of the Raven district, head of House Raven—one of the seven houses that governed Faedon—though some would argue that she also ruled over the other six houses.

Some called her the Witch Queen. She was around when the seven houses were founded and the seven districts formed. Her porcelain face had remained unchanged over the last hundred years. After the Evil Queen's defeat, she and other witches had taken up residence in the castle, renamed it Haven, and turned a place of darkness into one of healing and sanctuary.

That being said, she wasn't the only one with a trussed up title. They were simply bestowed upon the leaders of the ruling districts by... well, I'm not sure by whom, really. The inhabitants of Faedon, I guess? All excluding the House of Red, that is—each time I'd asked Grams about it, she'd simply say that the Reds had no time, need nor want for such things. But it is a common fact that before the Evil Queen's demise, only one of the seven had a formal title.

“Rose Red was the best of us.” The Witch Queen was saying. “Every one of us mourns for the House of Red when we should mourn the heart of Faedon.”

She wasn't wrong.

“I invite the other houses to speak.”

A tall elf joined the Witch Queen on the podium. Angular cheekbones, sharp enough that they could cut glass. Violet eyes. His waist length hair, so white it could be mistaken for strands of silver. Where the Queen wore only black, he was engulfed from head to toe in white, as was customary in elvish culture. His melodic voice brought with it a sense of peace.

“I am Padraic,” the elven prince's nightingale voice carried across the crowd. “I speak for the House of Bear...”

His flowery words weren't half as interesting as the scuffle happening alongside the podium. The dwarves were having an argument, which in itself was not unusual. The House of

Dragon was the only house that had more than one leader. Ever since its inception, at least several dwarves were in charge, and squabbling at any given stage. Notorious for not being able to make decisions, the dukes of House Dragon were—rather loudly, I might I add—trying to choose a single speaker.

The elf stopped speaking. This probably had less to do with his somber and well-rehearsed speech being over than it had to do with the spectacle that was the House of Dragon. Prince Padraic, along with everyone else, was now staring at them.

My chuckle received several glares from those standing nearby. I raised my hands in apology, but if I'm being honest, I couldn't care. It's funny, especially knowing that Grams would have found their behavior amusing.

A grumpy-looking dwarf with orange hair and a long orange beard stepped onto the podium. It squeaked beneath his weight.

“Most of you know me as Scowl.” He scrambled to remove his mining helmet, fumbling. Once he had regained control of the errant headgear, he said. “Grandmother Red passed peacefully in her sleep, they say. I suppose those of us her knew her best expected her to go out fighting.” Scowl sniffled. “If you had troubles, her door was always open. Usually with the scent of her famous apple pie wafting in the air.”

His sniff turned into a howl of misery.

Gentle sniffs and sobs joined the pawing and grumblings of the Similar. My ears perked at the cries of a dragon high above us.

Padraic patted the dwarf's shoulder before helping him step down from the podium. Two humans took their place. My heart skipped a little at the sight of them. Well, mainly at the sight of her.

Ruby. The years had done her well. From her brown hair, to her hazel eyes, her curves, and even her gaze, there was a softness about her. She already wore the red riding hood, the Relic that belonged to the House of Red. She opened her mouth to speak, but a line appeared between her brow when no words came out.

By her side was Garrick, with his blue eyes and fair hair, placing a comfortable arm around Ruby's shoulder. I'll be honest, on seeing the two of them, I felt a twinge. Of regret or jealousy, I wouldn't be able to tell you.

And then his eyes found mine.

A tug of a smile before he said, “When the plague found its way to Faedon, I was a mere boy. Like many children, like Ruby and Hunter, I lost my parents. Grams took me in. Took us in. Gave us happy memories during a time we feared setting foot outside. Ruby might be her only living relative, but Rose Red was Grandmother to many of us. And if not Grandmother, she was friend, companion, shoulder, ear, or voice of reason. This is how she will be remembered. This is how she would want to be remembered.”

Garrick always had a way with words. Even as kids, he was the one getting the three of us out of trouble. Depending who you ask, I was always the one getting us into the trouble in the first place.

Only two speakers left. The first being the Crow King. Crows were easily recognizable by their darker features, hypnotic green eyes and brightly multi-colored nomad attire. With all those bells and bangles, they were always the loudest in any room, unless they were nicking something from your trouser pocket.

“The old bat and I never saw eye to eye. She was a feisty one. Willing to put up a fight, and I respected that.” He grinned, a single gold tooth glinting. “And I agree with the dwarf. Bet she gave death an earful when he came for her.” A soft chuckle ran through the crowd. “I invite all of you to join me at the Storyteller, where elf, witch, dwarf and human can drink a toast together in the old dam’s name.”

The last speaker clapped the Crow leader on the back, waiting for the half-hearted cheer to die away. It was my Uncle William. His dark hair and eyes so much like my fathers—like mine. His beard was a little bushier, and his waist a lot wider than when I last saw him. He still wore the same pelt of wolf skin, though. He was pretty much the same else wise, except for the Lupine dagger strapped to his side.

Last time I had seen that dagger, it had been strapped to my grandfather’s side.

“There are too many stories about Rose Red to mention just one. Too many words to choose only a few.” The Lord of House Wolf started. “But the Witch Queen was right when she said we should be mourning the heart of Faedon. And for the first time in history, a Wolf agrees with a Crow. First rounds on me.”

The second round of cheering was a lot more enthusiastic, but not enough to drive the sadness away. Some of the crowd dispersed, but at the same time a long line was forming in front of the podium. I suppose everyone wanted to shed a tear over the glass coffin. I was going

to wait my turn and slip away, but a heavy hand clapping down on my shoulder put an end to that idea.

“Hunter, m’boy!” The jovial voice said. “I see you got my message?”

“Hello Uncle. Yes, I did, but I am still trying to figure how you knew where to find me.” I grinned over my shoulder.

“In that case, m’boy, you were definitely born to the wrong house.” He guffawed loudly at his joke, drawing stares from those waiting. “We are a family of wolves. Of course I know where one of my pack is at all times, even if that member is gallivanting across Darkwell. We can catch up on the way. We best be heading to the pub. Everyone will be there, and after what I said about the first round, Corbin will expect to see some gold.”

“I wasn’t planning on staying that long.”

“Surely you can stick around for one drink, even better, one night.” My uncle tsked, “What’s the worst that could happen?”

I’m not one for superstition, but just in case, I placed the flat of my hand on the nearest tree in an effort to shield his words from the ears of whichever Fate was possibly listening.

Waiting alongside the yellow bricked road, just outside the Enchanted woods, was the smallest of the Lupine carriages.

Even if you are a stranger to Faedon, as long as you could get yourself to this road, you would eventually find yourself in any district of your choosing. Grams always said Faedon was sliced up like a warm apple pie. And the Yellow Brick road went right round.

Dwarves mined and lived in the mountains that lay in the east of the Kingdom, minding their own. It was an odd arrangement, to say the least, as the Dragon district was also home to many humans. To the South-East lay the Enchanted wood belonging to the house of Red, edged in by the neighboring forest to the South West, which formed part of Wolf territory and was also less enchanting. Wolf district was home to mainly hunters and woodsmen. The Gold district lay directly to the West and homed mostly humans. Just like the ruling Spriggins family—including Garrick and the family geese he’d inherited—and as the name intimated, it was shiny and polished. Wedged between geese and Crows, the Bear district was by far the most glamorous. To be fair, everyone looks shabby when next to an elf, even Garrick. And at the center of it all stood Haven. The tall towers were visible from anywhere in the Kingdom.

Not only was Faedon the largest Kingdom in Darkwell by far, it might actually also be one of the richest. Every day carts left the city, laden with foodstuffs and wares that would travel throughout Darkwell. Gems and diamonds from the Dragon district decorated the crowns and jewels of royalty from many kingdoms; apples from Haven's orchards were better than any across the continent, and nobility along with those prone to richer tastes, were always willing to hand over bags of gold for the fine silks and fashions made by the delicate hands of elves, not to mention the gold the Spriggens' geese provided.

Yet on my travels, it was hard to come across someone who actually knew of Faedon. Even those that did recall the name seemed to be plucking the memory from obscurity. Except for the magically inclined, the sick and infirm with little hope, who made their way to Haven as a last resort, Faedon was the not-so-little kingdom people seemed to forget about.

Uncle William checked the horses before climbing upfront.

"You came alone?"

"Gave the household a few days off. The Kingdom is at a standstill. Seen nothing like it before. And the wolves only just stopped howling this morning."

"It was Grams." Taking a seat alongside my uncle, I added. "But that's not what I meant."

"Oh?" William raised a bushy eyebrow. "Whatever do you mean, then?"

Not intentionally, I snorted at my uncle's attempt at feigned coyness. "Knew the rumors of my uncle snatching the heart of a rare and mysterious beauty couldn't be true."

William guffawed, clapping me on the back good-naturedly, any harder, and I would have ended up on the back of the horse pulling the carriage.

"How did you hear?"

Trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, I shrugged and said, "A wolf always knows what's happening in his pack."

I glanced back at the Enchanted wood. I'd spent more than one night under a tree since my leaving, but never had I missed any woods as I had these. My uncle nudged the horses forward, and I found myself turning in my seat as to keep them in sight.

So much was the same. The sound of the carriage wheels against the yellow stone. The occasional dragon gliding low enough to ruffle your hair. Folk going about their day as they ambled towards whichever district, and carts pulled by horses or the occasional bear.

But today didn't quite match up to my memory. It wasn't just the downcast faces and the general mood that was as chilly as the air. It was the trees. The trees from the Enchanted wood, that stayed the same shade of green no matter the season, seemed lackluster.

We passed many folks on the road. Most were heading to the Crow District. Besides the bazaars that were always good for a hagggle, there were also more than enough establishments for those who prefer to forget.

The trees alongside the road were soon replaced with rocky hills as we passed the Dragon District. Sitting back, I listened to Uncle William go on about his new wife. According to him, Canina was even more beautiful than the rumors spoke of, and cunning enough to be a Lupine, even if she wasn't born in Faedon, let alone to the Wolf district.

"There is something else, Hunter. A reason she didn't attend the funeral." If he beamed any brighter, he could put the sun to shame. "In a few moons, we will have another pack member."

Realizing what my uncle meant, a dwarf's weight lifted from my shoulders. I was free. Free to leave, and never return if I so chose. Unlike the leaders of the seven districts, bound by magic to stay within the walls of Faedon. A consequence of the magic used to defeat the Evil Queen.

It was supposed to be me next. Actually, it was meant to be my father's responsibility first, being the eldest of the Lupine sons. That all changed when the plague came, taking both my parents with it. I thought I had no choice in the matter, but when my grandfather died, my Uncle William stepped in and gave me that choice. While Grandfather Lupine might have been a stickler for rules and traditions, Uncle William was not, and the witches had confirmed that the spell protecting the kingdom would remain intact, no matter which next of kin took the mantle. He told me to think about it, and I left Faedon before the next sunrise.

A niece or nephew meant I was off the hook. Permanently.

The Storyteller was deep in Crow territory, and the most popular tavern in Faedon. Jumping down from the carriage, the merriment and uncoordinated singing and cheers from inside beckoned.

"Hunter, there is something I have to tell you."

"You can't tell me inside?"

“It’s about Grams.” This drew my attention. Not his words, but the worry behind them. “Something doesn’t sit right in my gut.”

He fell silent as an eager crowd pushed past us in a rush to reach the swinging wooden doors that stood between them and a pint. Glancing around, he made sure no one was in earshot before saying. “Some of the Houses were showing interest in the book.”

The book. The Evil Queens book that was left in the care of the House of Red. Only they knew its location. A very powerful item.

“Can’t be the first time.”

“It wasn’t, but apparently some of them were getting a tad pushy on the subject.” Uncle leaned in. “Grams was talking about the old guard, how some of them might be needed again.”

“She was contemplating Wolves?” Faedon have a new guard, but if you asked me, the Sheriff and his merry idiots couldn’t protect an apple tree. “For herself, or for the book?”

“I don’t know. Then, in the middle of the night, a raven appears with a note from her.”

“What did it say?”

“Storm brewing. Nothing else. Just the two words.”

“Planned to go round at first light, maybe grab some pie for breakfast and find out what’s what. Found poor Ruby weeping on the doorstep to the cottage, realized I was too late.” Uncle William said. “My gut tells me something is off, so I asked the Witch Queen about it, the raven being her Similar and all, but she knew nothing of it.”

Uncle William tilted his head, listening to something. I followed his lead and picked up the sound of angry voices. One male, one female.

“Who is that?” I asked.

He motioned me to follow him round the side of the building, down a dank alley littered with wooden crates, empty bottles, and broken glass.

“We had an arrangement.” The Crow King was saying.

“What we had was a discussion.”

Ten years or a thousand, it didn’t matter. I would know that voice anywhere.

“You do not wish to cross me, little one —”

“Do you think I scare that easily?” She said. “You will need to do more than squawk, bird.”

The Crow King raised his hand. With a look of defiance, Ruby lifted her cheek, as though daring him to follow through. I took this as my cue and took a swift step forward.

“Strange meeting place, don’t you think, Uncle?”

“Agreed. Corbin, my friend,” Uncle William addressed the Crow, keeping his voice light and friendly, as he said, “even you must admit that this looks most suspicious.”

“Stay out of this, William.” Corbin grabbed the disputant by the wrist. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I had one of my blades against the Crow King’s throat before he could blink. He wisely released his grip on Ruby.

“That wasn’t too smart.” I muttered in his ear.

“Threatening a crow in his own nest isn’t too smart, either.”

A sharp whistle was followed by a lightening pain across my cheek and a sharp stabbing one to the hand holding the blade. Instead of my knife falling to the ground, a pair of black wings carried the weapon upwards. An actual crow. A Similar. Two of them, I realize as they settled on opposite shoulders of a girl.

“Good job, Karone, but next time go for the eyes.”

I cursed under my breath. How had I not seen her on the lip of the roof? A Crow girl with short hair and slanted eyes. In one hand, she held a crossbow aimed at my head. The other was holding my blade. An amateur would have spotted her on entering the alley. I’d allowed my focus to be consumed by Ruby.

“Very nice, Karasu.” Her grin revealed a row of small, pearly white teeth. “He always brings me the nicest gifts.”

“Don’t get too attached.” Not that I didn’t have a few dozen more of the same blades hidden in the folds of my coat, slipped down the sides of my boots, and not to mention the multiples homed by the leather jerkin hidden under my coat. Call it an occupational hazard. Still, it was irksome that a slip of a girl had gotten the better of me.

“What’s going on here?” It was Sheriff Tom Nightan. His cavalier hat not quite hiding a shock of red hair that clashed with his silver and blue uniform. Still wearing that same scowl as the last time I’d seen him. And I can’t explain why, but I felt a bubble of satisfaction as Nightan’s scowl deepened on seeing me.

“Hunter Lupine.”

“Sheriff.” My hands were already outstretched in innocence. “It’s been too long.”

“Not long enough. And you can wipe that smug grin off your face, pup.”

“Now, now, Tom.” Uncle William said, wrapping a heavy arm around the Nightan’s shoulders.

“I’ll have no trouble, William. Especially not from someone belonging to a ruling house.”

“Just a misunderstanding between friends, I assure you.”

“What sort of misunderstanding?”

“Business matters.” It was Corbin, his smile less reassuring than Uncle William’s.

“Nothing law enforcement need to concern themselves with.”

“Business matters that can surely wait till after a day of mourning.” Uncle William said as he locked eyes with the Crow. “I’m sure we can all agree.”

“Of course. How rude I am being,” His voice greasy enough I could almost taste the lard. Corbin turned to Ruby. “Perhaps I will come by your cottage tomorrow, and we can continue this conversation.”

“Hunter won’t mind escorting Miss Red, will you lad?” His meaningful gaze now directed at me.

“Sure, just let me get my...” I looked up, but the girl, her crows, and my dagger were long gone.

Ruby brushed past me. Uncle William and Nightan separated, allowing her to escape the alley. Sighing to myself, I followed the fluttering red cape that wasn’t going into the Storyteller. I had been so looking forward to that drink.

Catching up to her, I reached for the first question that sprang to mind. “So, which carriage is yours?”

Not my best line, not my worst either, if I am being honest.

Her eyebrow curved, almost disappearing into her hairline, but she pointedly avoided looking at me. “The house of Red doesn’t have a carriage, remember?”

“If you want, I could always ask Uncle—”

“I prefer to walk.”

“I remember.”

All I got was a derivative snort as she hastened her pace. Dismayed, I did the only thing I could: trail behind her. To be fair, I wasn't used to dealing with someone who was immune to my charms. It was different with her. There was a time we had done everything together, shared everything, even trouble. Especially trouble.

"Rubes, I'm sorry."

Spinning round so fast that her long hair whipped across my face, I breathed in the smell of my childhood: vanilla, cinnamon and apples. If only the look on her face was as sweet.

"Don't you dare apologize for leaving." She said.

"Then what should I be apologizing for?"

She answered me with a glare. I was smart enough to know when I deserved worse.

"Come on Rubes," I lessened my grip, but didn't relinquish it. "If not me leaving, then what?"

The look that flashed across her face caused me to wince as though slapped.

"You didn't just leave, Hunter," she whispered. "You left me behind. And didn't even bother saying goodbye."

It might have been better if she had slapped me. And it's not that I had planned on leaving without a goodbye, but I couldn't tell her that.

"Grams wouldn't even talk about it." Ruby added. Her cheeks reddened as she pulled her hand from my grip. She stomped off, yelling. "And don't you dare follow me."

Of course, I followed her. As tempting as I was to turn and head straight back to the Storyteller, I was under no illusion that Uncle William would have my head on a pike if I turned back now. Still, I let her put some distance between us. After all, there was no need for her to be in my line of sight. Being a Wolf came with a keen sense of sight, sound and smell. A significant advantage when tracking or hunting, or in this case, simply following. So, I kept a safe distance from her wrath, yet staying close enough that she was never too far out of sight.

At the Yellow Brick Road, she crossed over and into Raven district, straight into the apple orchards that surrounded Haven. While this shortcut saved us time, when we crossed the Yellow Brick Road for a second time, reentering into the Enchanted wood, the afternoon heat was already fading.

By now, there was a chill in the wind that was making its way into every bone I ever broke. My feet ached. My stomach growled. Still, just the average day for me. Except, I normally got

paid for my tracking skills, and it was usually monsters I tracked. The metaphorical as well as the literal ones.

Knowing that she was almost at the place I once called home, I sped up in time to see the wooden door slam shut.

So much for a second attempt at an apology. At least I got to see the place again before leaving, I thought, because I was still intent on leaving. Not even memories could delay that.

Speaking of, the Red cottage was exactly as he remembered it. Every crevice of the layered stone and mud walls. The small wooden shutters. The chimney that looked as though it was about to topple over, but never did. The thatched roof draped in ivy and decorated with abandoned birds' nests.

As I turn to leave, I heard the door open.

It was like old times, except with apple cider instead of apple pie. There was pie too, but that was long since finished. A roaring fire in the background warmed the room, but not nearly as much as her laughter.

“Do you remember how angry Sheriff Nightan got—”

Already ahead of her, I interjected. “The wild pig?”

Ruby had found the creature trapped in a shed near Lupine Manor.

She continued laughing into her cup, before taking another gulp she added. “That was terrible. You really shouldn't have done that.”

I half choked on my cider before saying, “Madam, I would like to remind you that the idea belonged to our dear friend, Master Spriggins, and it was you who suggested the location of the release. I just did the dirty work.”

“That's right! I remember now... To be fair, I didn't think it was going to cause such havoc when I suggested it.”

“And to be honest, I prodded the animal with a hot poker.”

Eyes round with surprised, Ruby clapped a hand over her mouth as she stifled a giggle.

Eventually, stories and laughter lapsed into a silence. Just when I thought it wouldn't break, Ruby spoke.

“Grams and I fought the night she died.”

“What about?”

After a minute spent staring into the flames, she said, “Something that seems so insignificant and petty when I think about it. In the morning, she was dead.”

“Rubes, I’m sorry.”

“I can’t leave, you know.” She pointed to the red riding hood that hung from a hook on the back of the door. “I tried leaving the next day. I can’t get past the gates. It’s not like I didn’t know. I just think part of me never realized what it truly meant, being head of the House of Red. Being trapped here.”

Sipping deeply from my own cup, I searched for something to say. It was tough to find comforting words when all I felt was relief that I had gotten out.

“It’s getting late.” Ruby stood up, already heading to the door.

I finished the last of my drink as I got to my feet and grabbed my coat. She twisted the doorknob and held the door open as she waited for me to leave.

“It was good seeing you again, Hunter.”

Ruby didn’t look up when I faced her.

“Try not to stay away for so long this time.” She said to my chest.

I said. “I’ll do my best.”

Even to my ears, the words sounded empty.

Hesitantly, she placed her palm on my chest. I wondered if she was paying attention to the heartbeat underneath, beating to a guilty rhythm. Giving her a swift peck on the cheek, I left, and when the door closed softly behind me, I was surprised by the level of disappointed I felt.

There was still one more person I needed to see.

The wind was icy for this time of year. Diving my hands deep into my pockets, I made my way back through the Enchanted wood, back to where Grams lay in her glass coffin.

I could almost hear the echoes of my childhood rustling in the leaves. Even in darkness, I found my way back to the clearing without trouble. Rays of moonlight peeped through the darkened tree tops, basking her coffin in an eerie light. I climbed the steps of the podium and swallowed hard before looking down at her.

“Kept your secret.” I whispered into the darkness. “Didn’t tell Ruby that I came to take her with me that night, or that it was you who told me to go on without her. Perhaps it’s best if we keep that between ourselves, and let her be angry at me a little while longer. What you think?”

Had I agreed with her choice at the time? No. But Grams had her reasons. She always did.

Sitting down, I leaned back against the glass coffin. My eyelids were suddenly heavy, and I realized I might have overdone the apple cider some. Probably should have headed over to the Lupine estate, where a warm bed was most likely waiting. Still, there was no harm in resting here.

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The sound of wood creaking woke me. I didn't need to open my eyes to know that more than one someone was staring down, hovering over me. The sticky sweetness lining my mouth made it difficult to swallow. Had I really drank that much? The pounding in my head was difficult to argue with.

From above, someone cleared their throat impatiently. No mistaking who the impatience belonged. Despite how I felt, there is a part of me that wanted to chuckle.

"Good morning, Sheriff." I squinted up at Nightan, who stood shoulder to shoulder between two bullish constables. Knowing full well that my cheeriness was misplaced, I continued by saying. "What can I do you fine fellows for on this chilly morning?"

"Hunter Lupine," Nightan said, while the two constables pulled me unceremoniously to my feet. "I am hereby placing you under arrest."

"Arrest?" Cold steel bracelets clamp around my wrists. "What in Darkwell's name for?"

"For the murder of Corbin Corvus, the King of the Crows."

CHAPTER TWO

The windowless, drab gray walls and slab they called a bed, were not much different from similar, albeit distant, jail cells that I'd seen over the years. The jailor had removed all my blades from my person prior to incarceration. Or at least that's what they thought. Good thing too, else I would have had a right time trying to slice the apple I nicked from the guard on his departure. One slice was enough to wash away the taste of yesterday.

Admittedly, it was strange being on this side of the bars. First, I was dragged to the Gold district, then summarily locked up with no explanation. That being said, I didn't ask, nor was I worried. Despite my curiosity as to the alleged evidence that Sheriff Tom Nightan and his outfit of idiots had found, the Sheriff's obvious frustration at my silence made it easy to fake being nonplussed.

Faedon didn't always have a sheriff or peace officers. Until the end of the Evil Queen's reign, hunters, including the Lupines were in charge of enforcing the peace. After the Evil Queen's fall, they agreed that not one of the houses should be in charge of law and order, so the newly appointed leaders left it to the people of Faedon to decide instead.

This minor fact had always made me wonder how Nightan even got the job in the first place. Though I suppose a murder was the most exciting thing that happened to Faedon in this past century. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say that the only folks who ever saw the inside of this place were drunkards that needed a place to sleep it off.

And did I mention my current lodgings were at the heart of the Gold district? As far as events went in Faedon, nothing and no one ever went unnoticed in the Gold district. Proof of this was when the dulcet sounds of my Uncle William's rage reached my ears, and a few moments later, the sound of approaching footsteps, along with the distinct rattle of keys.

The footsteps belonged to Nightan. His gaze couldn't have been more sour unless you gave him a lemon. His countenance wasn't improved by me popping another slice of apple into my mouth—no blade in sight. With a sigh, Nightan placed a silver key in the lock and turned it.

"Kicking me out so soon?" I quipped.

"Don't you worry." Nightan held the door open. "You'll be back in time for lunch, pup."

Nightan led us down the narrow corridor to a larger and equally depressing room. The only difference between this place and the jail cell was the simple wooden table and chairs, two of which were already occupied. One of them by my Uncle William. Garrick Spriggins sprang from his seat, a wide grin plastered to his face.

“Getting into trouble without me?”

“Off the prisoner, Spriggins!” Nightan snapped.

Besides Ruby, Garrick was my eldest friend. Raised in the same house, we were practically brothers. He was flamboyant and boyishly charming. At thirteen we both returned to our districts—me to finish my training in the Lupine ways of hunting, tracking, killing and being leader to the Wolves; Garrick to learn about running the Spriggins family business, dealing with magical geese and gold.

Garrick stepped back, rolling his eyes as he said. “Come now, Sheriff, you cannot truly believe that Hunter would murder a district leader? Or murder anyone or any creature, for that matter.”

I did my best not to groan. After all, Garrick was pleading my case.

It was my uncle who said, “What proof do you have that Hunter is the one who done Corbin in?”

Nightan placed one of my appropriated silver throwing knives on the table, a replica of its sibling still hidden my boot.

“That knife is mine.” I stated simply.

“I know it is. You had enough of these on you I could arm all of Faedon with one.”

The sheriff tended to be a bit melodramatic at times.

“And?” I queried.

“Except we didn’t take this one off of you.” He said. “This one I found next to the deceased’s body.”

Images of a Crow girl sitting on the roof of the Storyteller flashed through my mind.

“As you pointed out, Sheriff, I have multiples of the same blade; I seem to have a bad habit of losing them, you see.”

“And there was a witness who saw you threatening him.” He was almost sputtering by now.

“If you are talking about the girl from the pub, I assure you she is nothing more than a Crow thief.”

“I would advise you to not go around leveling random accusations, pup.”

Did I detect a threat in his voice?

“You really should stop calling me that.”

“ENOUGH!” Uncle William banged his fist solidly down on the table. “Now let’s all sit down and mind ourselves to keep a civil tongue. Sit, or I may forget that I am a lord and a gentleman.”

Even Nightan took his seat opposite me without as much as a grumble.

Many things could be, and have been, said about my Uncle William. He had a bit of a wild streak in him, but there was never any question who the alpha male was when he was in a room.

“Now, Tom, what happened in the alley behind the Storyteller was nothing more than a misunderstanding.”

“So, I didn’t see your nephew holding a dagger to the Crow King’s throat?”

“Hunter intervened—perhaps a tad too harshly—only because Corbin was getting a little rough with Miss Red.”

“Wait, Ruby and Corbin were fighting?” Garrick’s brow furrowed at the news. “What about?”

“We didn’t ask.” It had occurred to me, before I reminded myself that Faedon’s business was no longer my business. “It seemed the impolite thing to do.”

“What happened after?”

It was so surreal to be on this side of the questioning. “I walked Ruby home straight after, stayed for a few drinks and some pie. I left and went to give my last respects to Grams. After that, I fell asleep exactly where you found me.”

“Sorry to say, but an old, dead woman doesn’t really count as an alibi.”

“Careful.” Garrick said without his usual charm. The House of Red had never claimed a title like the other houses, but Grams deserved the respect of one.

The Sherriff held up his hands in apology.

“How did he die?”

“They found him outside the Storyteller,” He said, shifting in his seat, “both hands cut off.”

Blood drained from my face, and I wasn't the only one affected by his words. The *Thief's Death*. A punishment not used since the Evil Queen's reign. It was the duty of the hunters, under the Queen's command, to carry out such punishments.

"There is something else." Nightan took a deep breath before saying. "His hands were nowhere to be found."

That was a strange trophy.

"I would like to point out that if I was the guilty party, you would have found me covered in blood, or perhaps too clean and in a fresh pair of clothes. And I do not own any blade that could have done that."

There was something I couldn't understand. That's such a busy area. How is it possible no one heard or saw a thing? Getting your mittens chopped off is not exactly a quiet way to die.

"There is no way Hunter could have done such a thing, Tom." Uncle William shook his head. "You must see reason."

"Until I have another suspect, it's out of my hands, Lupine. Can't go having folks thinking that district leaders and their kin are above the law."

"The witches!" Garrick slapped his knee. "They have a truth-seeker. Parsnip or something of the sort. The Witch Queen hardly goes anywhere without her. She can set this straight. She's even helped you out once or twice, hasn't she, Sheriff?"

Nightan groaned. "You must mean Penelope Parsley."

"That's it!"

Uncle William was still shaking his head, this time at Garrick. "The dwarves took Rose Red into the catacombs. The Witch Queen is with them. If what you say is true, this truth-seeker is with them and will only emerge with them tomorrow earliest."

It would seem that Fate would have me remain in Faedon one more night.

It was some time before I once again heard Nightan's footsteps approaching my cell, and this time, a much lighter tread accompanied them. Still, I only lifted my head when the waft of cinnamon and apple reached me. Ruby had come to visit.

Carrying a woven basket, its contents hidden beneath a small checkered blanket, Ruby waved at me from the other side of the bars. Who needed windows and sunlight with a smile like that?

“I brought you something to eat.” Ruby turned to Nightan. “Would you mind?”

Nightan narrowed his eyes for a moment before sighing in surrender. There were some perks to belonging to one of the houses... even when you were suspected of murder.

Tom slipped the key into the lock and held the door open for Ruby.

Over her shoulder Ruby said, “I will call when I wish to leave, Sheriff.”

The moment of hesitation between locking the door and leaving didn't go unnoticed. We remained still for a few moments longer.

“Is he gone?” Ruby whispered before sitting down next to me. “Your hearing was always so much better than mine.”

“It's a Wolf thing, remember?”

Tilting my head, I listened to the slow shuffling footsteps that was finally cut off by a distant door being slammed.

“He's gone, but I doubt he's very happy about leaving you alone with a suspected murderer.”

Ruby rolled her eyes before busying herself with the basket.

“Ham sandwich?”

The soft bread and sweetmeat brought about a groan of satisfaction, first from my stomach and then from my lips.

“I baked the bread this morning.”

“Would that be apple pie I am smelling, and not just you?” I sniffed the air several times. “It's you, isn't it?”

Her tinkling laughter echoed throughout the bleak establishment. As an answer, Ruby retrieved an apple pie from the basket.

“A kind deity must've sent you to show mercy on my blackened spirit.”

Another tinkle of laughter, the sound sweeter than any pie.

“I brought some fresh apples. Keep those for later.” As if an afterthought, she added. “I know you didn't do it.”

Accepting a spoon, I asked, “What were you and the Crow King arguing about?”

Her cheeks flushed dark as my spoon breaks the golden sugared crust, my mouth already watering in anticipation of the tart fruit and warm spices.

Staring at the spoon in her hand, Ruby said, “Corbin showed interested in purchasing the book.”

“He wasn’t the only one, so I heard.”

Ruby shook her head. “He was the most persistent, though.”

“Who told you?”

“Uncle William mentioned something along that line.” I said. “Would you ever consider making a deal with him?”

“Of course not.” She said before putting her spoon to good use.

We chewed in comfortable silence. Each growing lost in our own thoughts. Mine were about her.

It was still so strange seeing her in the red hood. The House of Red’s Relic. As the new guardian of the book, Ruby would wear the cloak almost everywhere now. The color looked good on her.

“Is it as terrifying as we imagined when we were children?”

“The book?” She shrugged. “Not really, it’s just a book.”

She bit her lip.

“What is it?”

“The night Grams died, I knocked it over, and it fell open.” She seemed hesitant, whispering despite us being alone. “I thought my heart would stop with fear. The strange thing is, it’s empty. Every page.”

“Go on, what happened?”

“I closed it, but before I did, I went cold all over, and even though I had plenty of light, everything went dim.” Ruby shook her head, as though trying to rid herself of the memory. In a more cheerful tone, she said. “You will never guess where it’s hidden. Right there, in the cottage. In the Enchanted Wood.”

It had always been a great mystery. As children, we could never figure out where Grams disappeared to when she was tending the book. Even with my nose and ears, and the curiosity of three stubborn children, she eluded us every time.

“You’ll have to show me sometime.” I winked.

“If you stayed, I might oblige.”

“With accommodation such as this, who am I to refuse?”

“Is it so bad in Faedon?” Her bottom lip jutted out in childlike displeasure.

“Coming from the girl who only ever talked about wanting to leave this place?”

“But I can’t leave anymore, can I?” Her eyes were now focused on the next scoop of pie. “With you home again, it’s not all that terrible.”

I kept my wavering thoughts quiet with another mouthful.

“At least stay for the Blue moon festival?” She licked the back of the spoon clean before returning it to the now empty basket. “It’s only a few days away.”

It was under a blue moon that the Evil Queen had been defeated, and so Faedon celebrated their freedom from her rule with a festival every blue moon since.

“The elves are hosting it this year, so they are sure to go all out as usual.”

“Will there be more pie?” I teased.

“Yes. Apple, amongst others.” She laughed. “Speaking of, it’s another trip to the orchard, followed by an afternoon in front of the oven.”

Ruby called, and it wasn’t long before a guard appeared.

“I do hope you will think about it. The festival. It will be like old times.” She smiled, the red from her cheeks spreading to her ears and neck. “Except different.” Covering her head with the hood, Ruby added. “Think about it?”

“I’ll think about it.” I promised.

I was still smiling long after her scent no longer lingered. Ruby was right about one thing: the Blue Moon Festival was a guaranteed good time.

And I do still have business with that Crow girl who stole my blade, and who was most likely responsible for my accusation.

None of this mattered if I was still locked up in here. Lying back with arms folded beneath my head, I stared up at the ceiling and found comfort in the fact that if I really wanted to, I could escape this place with little difficulty.

Sleep had come as easy as always. If it weren’t for the fervent voices coming from somewhere down the hall, I’d be asleep still. Without a window, it was impossible to say if night had passed. There was no reason to get up yet, except I wasn’t alone. I sniffed the air. Not a smell I recognized. Allowing my head to roll to the side, I opened one of my eyes, taking in the small figure that sat cross-legged, face pressed up against the bars.

Skin so fair it could be mistaken for a pale shade of blue. Round eyes so green it looked otherworldly. And was that herbage woven into her clothes? She wore no shoes and the hem of her moss colored dress was covered in dirt.

“And who exactly are you?”

“Penelope Parsley.” She said.

“Here to ask if I did it?”

“I already know you didn’t.”

“Then why am I still in here then?”

“A difference of opinion. Between my mistress and Sheriff Nightan.” The angry voices from down the hall fell silent, only to be replaced by a clack-clack sound. “That will be her.”

The heels of the Witch Queen’s boots against the dirty floor grew louder with each step towards my cell. I got to my feet, running fingers through sleep-knotted hair.

Wearing the darkest shades of blue and a look of disgust, the Witch Queen said, “I forget how arrogant humans can be.” She peeled the silk gloves from her hands. “Miss Parsley, do me a favor and go keep Nightan company while I have a quick chat with Master Lupine.”

“What shall I discuss with him?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps entertain him with the truth about what an idiot he is.”

Penelope jumped up, apparently happy with the answer, and flounced off.

“It would seem you have gotten yourself into a speck of trouble, Master Lupine.”

“For once it wasn’t of my own doing, Majesty.”

Her plum lips stretched into a smile.

“I have a proposition for you.” With a flick of her wrist, the cell door unlocked and swung open. “Your freedom, in exchange for your skills...as a hunter.”

It wasn’t the first time a beautiful woman asked for my services in exchange for something I wanted or needed, instead of my normal fees, which were usually paid in gold. It just seemed too easy.

“Afraid you will have to pay a visit to The Three Pigs if it’s dinner you are interested in.”

Ignoring my attempt at humor, she said. “We both know that is not what I meant.”

I knew what she meant. “Despite the House I was born to, I don’t hunt.”

It had been a lifetime since those from the Wolf district used their skills for more than filling butcher’s windows.

“A hunter who does not hunt? Seems I misunderstood your uncle when he mentioned your doings outside of Faedon.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m a tracker. I track things down, not kill them.”

Not to say I hadn’t. Sometimes the outcome is inevitable. But never had I taken a job where murder was part of the deal.

“So be it.” She bowed her head ever so slightly in defeat. “In that case, I will settle for your tracking skills. Whatever your regular fee is, you can triple it.”

I considered the Witch Queen for a moment, from the wide smile on her plum painted lips to her hands held open in a gesture of peace and openness.

It sounded like a reasonable request, more than reasonable, so much so that I couldn’t help but feel hoodwinked.

“I shouldn’t need to exchange my freedom for anything.” I pointed out. “Even your truth seeker says I’m innocent.”

“Then consider it a way of showing your gratitude, Master Lupine.” She said, her tone belying the harshness of her words. “Miss Parsley did indeed see your innocence. But her ability is not infallible. Nor does it tell us the identity of the monster responsible. For this reason, Sheriff Nightan is still reluctant to let you go.”

I could tell her why.

“And I have you to thank for convincing him otherwise?”

“I made an agreement with him that I would stay out of his affairs and allow him to investigate this murder with no interference from myself.” The Witch Queen said. “Would you prefer to wait here while our dear sheriff finds the actual killer?”

That on its own was a persuasive argument, and I was curious.

“Let’s say I accept your offer,” I said. “What exactly would I be tracking?”

“The Thief’s Coin.”

“The House of Crow’s relic?” I chuckled, “Let me guess, it was stolen?”

“According to Corbin’s successor, it is missing. There is reason to believe it was taken by the same person who murdered the King of Crows.”

Not the answer I had expected. “Not sure the Sheriff would be too happy with that.”

“I’m in no ways asking you find a murderer, and therefore I am not breaking my word. All I’m asking is for you to find me a thief.”

I'll admit, this appealed to me for several reasons. The least of them being Tom Nightan's distress.

I took a step back, sitting back down on the bed. Not a good idea to show my eagerness. Especially when she hadn't shown her full hand yet. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"With the festival approaching, I will not have this shadow hanging over Faedon. That is where you come in."

That wasn't it. 'Try again, your Majesty.'

There always was.

Her brow curved upwards. "So mistrusting for someone so young."

"The coin must be worth something."

"Not really. Doubt you could buy an apple with it. On its own, it's nothing more than an ancient coin. It is a symbol of our history, one I would very much like to see it in the right hands." Her expression softened. "Rose always spoke very highly of you, as she did all her charges, but she believed you to be something special. I came to you because I believe I can trust you."

I considered her for a moment before asking. "If I find the coin, I find the killer, then I will be free to leave Faedon?"

"When your innocence is proven, you need never return, if that's your wish."

*

My uncle banged his tankard on the dining hall table, and I added this luncheon to the short list of happy memories I had of this place. My time spent at the Lupine Manor was relatively short, but that has little to do with the reason for the dismal list.

You already know that Grams took me in. If I'm honest, I don't remember the house me and my parents lived in all that well.

There is one memory that stands out, the one where the dragons set it ablaze. The entire time I stood there watching, all the while Ruby held my hand, comforting me even though the same thing was happening to her home. That always stuck with me.

To me, the Lupine Manor had always been as cold and hard as dear old Grandfather Lupine. Yet something about this place had changed.

And Canina—already filling Uncle’s tankard—was everything the rumors had said. The contrast of her yellow eyes and honey colored hair against skin darker than any Crow I had ever met was striking. Yet it wasn’t her unusual beauty, but her candor and dogged manner that held my attention. She was a good fit for the house of Lupine, and for my uncle.

From somewhere, a bell tinkled.

“We weren’t expecting anyone else.” Canina frowned. “Start without me. I’ll be but a moment.”

Uncle William grabbed the carving knife and set to work on the roast pig that centered the feast. I sipped my wine, inspecting the gray walls, covered in paintings of family members long since gone. The wolves that lay in front of the empty fireplace, gnawing on cold bones. Every brick, beam, and rug was the same. I still couldn’t put my finger on it.

“It’s Canina.” Uncle William answered, as though hearing my thoughts. “She brings with her a sunshine brighter than her eyes. You should have seen how quick the pack took to her. Speaking of womenfolk.” Wiggling his eyebrows in a lurid manner, he said, “I heard you had a visit from a young lady in a particularly recognizable red cloak yesterday.”

“Ruby?” I rolled eyes. “She brought me something more edible than what Sheriff Nightan planned on serving.”

“And she cooks!” Uncle William pointed with the carving knife, sending bits of meat flying.

“You know I am not staying forever, Uncle.” A whine from below drew our attention. A tawny wolf pup, barely knee height with feet and ears too big. I jumped at the opportunity to change the topic. “Who’s this little fella?”

“The runt of Leala’s last littler.”

Leala was Uncle William’s Similar. While most of the Wolves picked a single Similar on coming of age, the Lupine house had a pack of wolves. A pup from the Lupine pack was always the most sort after. The relationship between Similar and companion or master differed from House to House.

Each elf received a bear cub as a child. The Dragons, Crows and the Ravens were gifted a hatching egg at birth. While the Spiggens family each had a goose—or multiple—that provided golden eggs or feathers, most of the folks from the Gold district had all other sorts of Similar. Usually forest creatures like squirrels or hares or mice. And just as the House of Red had no

people to govern, none had ever had a Similar. Instead, the Enchanted woods belonged solely to the House of Red.

“You are long overdue for a Similar of your own. And she seems to have taken a liking to you.”

“Is that how it works?” My eyebrow raised in skepticism. “Grandfather always made it sound like a whole ordeal.”

“That’s because the old man made an ordeal out of everything.” Uncle William snorted. “Wolves bond easy. If you feel a kinship, she’s yours.”

Lifting the pup up, I stared into its eyes. “You willing to leave this place for adventure and keep me company in between?”

Tail wagging, the pup gave a small bark.

“Good answer.”

“What will you name her?”

Putting the pup down, I fed her a small scrap of meat from the table. I considered it for a moment. “Nakia.”

“We have more company.” Canina had returned with a broad smile and her arm hooked through Garrick’s. “You must share a meal with us.”

“How can I refuse such an offer?” He kissed her hand and took a seat across from me. “You’re a tough one to keep track of, but glad to see the witches came through.”

I thanked Canina, who had taken it upon herself to dish mountainous heaps of food onto my plate.

“As far as witches go, that Penelope Parsley is a bit of an odd one.”

“Was this Parsley girl able to provide some clue as to Corbin’s murderer?” Canina asked.

I shook my head. “Nightan was less than thrilled.”

“Just stay out of his sights till this is all over.”

“That’s going to be tough, considering the Witch Queen offered me a horse cart of gold to find the coin our killer stole.”

Uncle William clapped his thigh in delight at the Witch Queen’s guile.

I avoided any questions by chewing my too big a mouthful of food with as much slowness as I could muster.

“Surely it must have been another Crow.” Garrick reasoned. “We know how they are.”

“How they used to be.” Uncle William corrected. “Corbin put a stop to all of that when he was crowned King of the Crows.”

“You mean when Corbin killed his own father and took his place as next in line?”

“That was just rumor...”

Canina insisted on a change of conversation to go with the meal. Plates emptied as several minutes passed before Garrick found one.

“Quite excited about the Blue moon festival, if I say so myself. Heard tell that Padraic is on a secret mission to outdo the Dwarves. Many folks are still talking about last year’s festival.”

“What did the House of Dragon do last year?” I asked.

“The dragons did this wonderful coordinated flying thing,” Garrick tried explaining, “and there was fire... They lit up the night sky. And lots of mead. Can’t remember much else, if I’m being honest.”

They reminisced over past Blue moon festivals. Garrick enthralled Camina with a memory of his own about a mishap with the geese and several golden eggs. Uncle William leaned closer.

“Any idea where you were going to start your search?”

“Thinking about tracking down the girl who stole my blade. Finding out what she knows about my stolen knife landing up next to a dead King.”

“What girl?”

“From the alley. She was on the roof.”

“Didn’t get a good look myself, but if she be a Crow, someone at the Storyteller will have a name,” Frowning, he continued, “but your first stop should be the Enchanted woods.”

That was going to be my first stop. Not because of the job. It was easy to guess Uncle William’s reasoning.

“This is about the note Grams sent you.” I said. “You wonder if Ruby knows anything.”

“Miss Red might not even know she knows something.” He pointed out.

From his pocket Uncle Willam pulled out a rolled up parchment that was about the length of my thumb. He unrolled it before passing it to me. Beside the two words there was a smudge of ink. That was odd. Grams was a stickler for perfection. The Grams I remembered would have torn the note up and jotted down a new one, tutting all the time about wasted ink.

“You said a raven brought it?”

“The Witch Queen’s familiar.” Uncle William explained. “Seems they had some arrangement. Started when Grams showed signs of slowing down. She couldn’t always send Ruby around delivering messages and all them pies.”

“Are we talking about Ruby? That’s actually why I came looking for you.” Garrick wiped his mouth with a napkin before saying. “I went by Ms. Hubburd’s house today. According to her, Grams made several promises about pies and other apple-related items. All for the upcoming festival. A lot more than usual.”

And Grams, no longer being around, left Ruby on her own to keep those promises.

“Ms. Hubburd went by this morning to collect her apple bread, and she thinks the poor girl might be in over her head. With the festival tomorrow, I thought we might make a turn there by the cottage. Help with the baking like we did when we were kids.”

If peeling barrels of apples followed by all the cleaning is considered helping, then yes, we helped. The rewards of our labors were always worth it.

I looked at the table, still laden with food, and said to Camina. “Think you could pack me a basket to go?”

*

Refusing to stay behind, but not fast enough to keep up with the horses, Nakia was a sleeping bundle of warmth inside the leather satchel that hung around my neck. Garrick carried the basket of food. He asked about my travels, so I regaled him with the few waggish tales I had. And in return Garrick obliged with a few of his own, most of them somehow involving geese.

“It’s good to have you back, Hunter. Even if it is only for a few days.”

“You sure?”

Garrick rolled his eyes. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I just left.”

“And?” Garrick shrugged. “I didn’t have an uncle who could take my place as the head of House Gold. Well, there is this cousin, but I wouldn’t trust him with a candlestick.”

I raised my brow.

“So maybe that’s not completely true.” He admitted. “But I do understand. Your Grandfather made my Grandpa Jack look like a saint.”

“Your Grandpa Jack was a saint.” I snorted.

The canopy above thinned and the surrounding trees changed as we crossed from Wolf to Red district.

We were close to the cottage when I admitted, “After I left, I thought you and Ruby might...” I let my words fade to nothing.

Garrick’s eyebrows scrunched together, and he shook his head. “That would be like kissing my little sister, or you.” He teased. “I was a little surprised that you didn’t try take her with you.”

“It was better that way.”

“For you or for her?”

Before I could answer, a scream sent my heart racing. I urged my horse forward, landing on unsteady footing when I couldn’t wait for the animal to come to a full stop. Barging through the cottage door with my hand already reaching for a blade and Garrick at my side, my eyes found Ruby.

Kneeling on the floor, encircled by bits of pastry, filling, apple peels and cores, she looked up at us, her face speckled with flour and confusion.

“What in Darkwell’s name are the two of you doing?”

“What are we doing?” Garrick sounded offended enough for the both of us. “What was all that screaming?”

“This,” waving her hands over the mess on the floor, she said, “and I burned myself.”

Kneeling down, I examined the scalding red marks that marred her lean pale forearms, wrists, and palms.

“Losing about a dozen pies in the process.” Sounding a bit sulky, she added. “Suppose I’ll be working through the night again.”

Helping Ruby to her feet, I navigated us out of the mess.

“We heard things were a little rough this side. Garrick thought you could use some help.”

“That would be an understatement.”

Nakia chose this moment to stir; she was a deeper sleeper than me. The wolf pup wriggled around, freeing her head from the confines of the pouch.

“Is that a wolf?”

“Meet Nakia.” I had almost forgotten she was there in all the excitement. On hearing her name, her puppy-like energy returned with vigor as she licked Ruby’s cheek. “She’s here to help too, if you’ll have us.”

“But first...” Garrick held up the basket.

While Ruby pecked at the basket’s contents, Garrick put the broom and dustpan to use. Nakia scampered between his feet, entertaining both Garrick and Ruby with her antics. I was mixing a paste. Some of the ingredients I’d bought from outside. One I’d retrieved from a coat pocket.

“What is that?” Ruby asked with a wrinkled nose.

“Chickweed leaves, mud, ash and a dash of well water.” Sitting next to her, I smeared the concoction across one of her burns.

“It’s cold.” She sounded surprised.

“A few hours and there won’t even be a scar.” Frowning, I corrected myself. “Except for this one.” More livid and twice the size of the other burns, talking up most of her palm. “That one might take longer. It’s worse than the others, and a day or two older. What happened?”

Retrieving her arm from my scrutiny, she muttered, “It was a really big pie.”

“Speaking of, I don’t think I have ever seen you drop a single pie, let alone an entire tray of them. You doing alright?”

It wasn’t just the pies. She looked pale, and the rings under her eyes had deepened since I last saw her.

“It’s different without Grams.” Ruby admitted. “Not sure I’m going to get everything done the right way. Definitely not in time for the festival.”

“You have us now!” Garrick said with enough enthusiasm that he spilled the contents of the dustpan. “Sorry about that... I’ll get it. What I was saying is that now you can boss us around the way Grams used to when we were kids.”

It was good to see her smile. I hated taking it away.

“Rubes, speaking of Gram...” I huffed before pushing through, “Did she say anything to you the night she died? Anything strange?”

Ruby frowned. “Why are you asking, Hunter?”

I explained about the strange note my uncle had received.

“Could have been about our fight? She must have sent the letter after.” Her shoulders slumped. “You think she knew something bad was going to happen?”

“I don’t think anything yet.”

It could have been the fight, I reasoned. Grams might have been worried, but enough to send a raven in the middle of the night?

“How did Grams have access to the Witch Queen’s raven so late at night?”

“Been that way for a few years now. Whenever Grams needs to send a note or a letter, the bird just appears at her window. Why are asking me all this?”

From across the room Garrick answered, “The Witch Queen has tasked Hunter with tracking down who killed the Crow King.”

“Really?”

“Something like that.”

“What aren’t you saying?”

When I hesitated, Garrick jumped in. “You might as well tell us, because you know nothing remains a secret in Faedon for too long. Besides, we want to help.”

“Not sure that’s appropriate.”

“Tosh!” Garrick declared. “One last adventure before you leave Faedon again.”

There was obviously no arguing with him, and Ruby was already nodding her head in avid agreement. Besides, what could it hurt?

“It seems our killer has stolen the King of Crow’s golden coin.”

“The Thief’s coin?” Ruby asked. “Why ever would they steal that?”

“According to the Witch Queen, the coin on its own is nothing more than a symbol for the House of Crow. Either way, she wants it found and in the hands of its newest owner before anyone else finds out it’s missing.”

“You’re the expert in tracking.” Garrick said. “Where do we start?”

“The Storyteller. I need to have a word with the new King of Crows about one of his flock.”

Garrick clapped his hands together, rubbing them together in gleeful preparation. “First several rounds on me, then?”

“I could do with a few rounds myself.” Ruby admitted. “I’d need a little time to clean myself up...”

She glanced from the empty oven to the dustpan full of crumbs and remnants of hard work. Probably reconsidering her former statement.

“There will be more than enough time for both of you to pretty yourselves up. But first...” Reaching across the table, I grabbed an apple. “How many need peeling?”

*

As far as taverns went, this one was nicer than most. And it was my best bet at having a word with the new King of Crows. Except it seemed every Crow was blind to my presence and deaf to my questions. But the girl had definitely been here. Recently. Her scent was everywhere.

Movement from above caught my eye and for the seventh time I cast a surreptitious glance upwards at the beams laden with crows, their shadows dancing as they hopped and fluttered about.

“The rumor of my innocence doesn’t seem to have reached the ears of anyone here.”

I sat down next to Ruby, preferring to have my back against the wall. People were less inclined to stare if you stared back. Though it might not be me they were staring at.

“You two could have been less obvious.”

“Your problem is that you don’t know how to talk to people.” Garrick said as he showed us the golden egg that was almost too big to hold with one hand. He held it above his head for less than a second when a scarred man wearing a grubby apron and an eyepatch appeared. Garrick lowered the egg.

To no one in particular, he said, “Did you know we collect the pure gold shells after the goslings’ hatch? But without a gander, the goose will produce only solid gold eggs. Like this one.”

Garrick tossed the egg in the air. The barkeep caught it, his mouth agape.

“Two tankards of your finest mead, and some Puckerbush Pomace wine for the lady.” Garrick hinted that another egg might be the barkeep’s future if he could advise us on arranging a meeting with the new King of Crows.

When the man shifted, I interjected, “How about something a little simpler? I would settle on some information about a girl. A Crow girl.” I described the girl from the roof before adding, “She took something of mine. I’m just here to get it back.”

He blinked several times at me with that one watery eye before chuckling, “I’ll see what I can do.”

He turned away from us, still chuckling as he left to fetch us our drinks. I wondered what was so amusing.

“You sure you didn’t see her?” I asked Ruby.

“I wasn’t looking up.” In a softer voice, Ruby said, “You think this girl could be the killer?”

I shrugged. In the alley, it seemed her loyalties to the Crow King were clear. If she wasn’t guilty, she might have seen something. Heck, if I was very lucky, the girl might even know who the killer was, and who stole the coin. But if that were the case, why hadn’t she come forward? And why leave my dagger by his corpse?

The barkeep appeared and plunked a tray down on the table. On it, a goblet brimming to the rim with the deep dark cider made from red apples, and three tankards of mead.

“We only asked for two.” Garrick pointed at the tankards.

Someone dropped into the seat across from me, and next to Garrick. At the same moment, I felt Ruby twitch with fright. Garrick—looking up at the rafters from which the girl had dropped—tossed a second golden egg for the barkeep to catch.

“It’s you.”

“Do Wolves only look up when the moon is full?” She laughed at her own joke. “Heard you were looking for me.” Reaching for the third tankard on the tray, she said to the barkeep.

“Don’t suppose you got a spare bone for the dog under the table?”

“She’s a wolf.”

“Same thing, isn’t it?” She waved me off, “And if this is a date, I admit you have taste. So which one is for me? Blondie here, or little Miss Red? Speaking of…” The Crow leaned towards Ruby. “Do you have to wear that cloak everywhere?”

My patience was waning, but I suspected that any aggression on our part would bring a flock of Crows down on us. I doubted Garrick or Ruby had even noticed the furtive glances thrown their way. Or how the noise level from the closest tables had dimmed somewhat.

“Enough.” I growled.

“I’m only joking.” She rolled her eyes. “No need to raise your hackles, wolf. I wouldn’t have fallen straight into your lap if I wasn’t intending on answering both your questions.” It must

have been something about my expression that made her add. “Your friends were being chatty while you were asking around about me.”

The barkeep arrived with a bone laden tray. Nakia’s tail kept smacking against my shin as it wagged back and forth in anticipation. Swallowing my frustrated sigh, I gave the barkeep a small nod, and he pushed the tray under the table before leaving.

“So go on then.” I said.

“First off, I didn’t frame you.”

Holding up one finger to stave off questions, she lifted the tankard to her lips and set neither down until it was empty.

“Second, the coin ain’t missing.” She belched. “And I can prove both.”

Garrick chuckled as he signaled the barkeep for another round. “This one is feisty, Hunter. I think I like her.”

No one was this conceited unless they knew they had the upper hand. And I was very aware that most of the surrounding tables were now quieter than a whisper. Almost every Crow in the Storyteller was watching our table out the corner of their eyes.

“Who are you?”

“Until recently, I only went by Robin.”

“And most recently?”

Robin leaned closer. “The King of Crows.”

CHAPTER THREE

Behind the sticky tavern counter, guarded by the heavy foot of the barman and the watchful eyes of every Crow sitting on a bar stool drinking ale, was a trapdoor. At the bottom of several creaking stairs, Robin lit the first of several oil lanterns. My eyes adjusted to the gloom, and I appreciated the new surroundings. Pots and open chests, their contents glinting in the light. Piles of gold and silver pieces lay scattered across the floor.

“I thought thieves kept their treasures inside of enchanted caverns?”

Robin snorted, “Not when the Dwarves have run of all the caves. Not to mention those dragons. They think any treasure they find is perfect for decorating their nests. Try telling a giant fire breathing lizard off for nicking what’s not his.”

“You mean for nicking what was nicked in the first place?”

Her eyes widened in mock horror, “Why Master Lupine, I has no idea as to what you could be referring to.”

“Hunter, please.”

Ruby squealed as something darted past her, coming to land on Robin’s shoulder.

“I thought you had two of those?”

The corners of her mouth turned downwards. “Karone was my father’s Similar. I haven’t seen him since his death. But we are not here to discuss Similars.” She approached the large writing desk at the far end of the room and stepped behind it.

She pulled open the topmost drawer. Robin lifted the silver blade, handling it with ease, twirling it between her fingers before presenting it to me.

“Seems I owe you an apology.”

It was worrisome. Despite whatever impression I gave Sheriff Nightan, I wasn't inclined to lose them.

I slipped the blade up my sleeve. It was now the only weapon I had on me. Everything else was in the safe keeping of the barman above.

Robin invited me to join her on the other side of the desk. "Come see what else I got in here."

I walked round and inspected the contents of the drawer. It was empty, except for the Thief's Coin nestled on a small red velvet pillow. I picked it up and held it for Garrick and Ruby to see.

"Seems it's not missing after all." Garrick said.

"Of course it ain't missing."

"Then why does the Witch Queen think otherwise?" I asked.

Robin rolled her eyes. "The Witch Queen thinks it's missing because that's what I told her when she asked after it. Mystery solved."

"Not quite."

"How so?"

"Was hoping it would lead me to whoever murdered your father and tried pinning it on me." I frowned. "If not for the coin, why would someone want to kill your father?"

"I thought that was obvious." Her eyes narrowed. Disgust tugged at her lip. "You should look at the House of Dragon. The dwarves wanted that blasted book even more than my father."

"The book?" Ruby said. "You mean the Evil Queens book?"

It made no sense.

"Even if it were true, everyone knows the House of Red would never give up possession of the book. Killing your father doesn't change that."

"You sure about that?"

A low guttural noise drew our attention to Nakia. Her fur stood on end.

"Is your Similar growling at us?"

"I think she's growling at something behind us."

"Look out!" Ruby yelled.

I spun round, armed with my only blade. Robin slammed her fist on the writing desk. I heard the clunk of a mechanism as something fell out from underneath.

When Robin turned, she was armed with a crossbow, bolts already loaded. “What in Darkwell?”

I had been wondering the same thing.

A shadow loomed over us. Except, it was more than a shadow. More solid. The blade left my hand, leaving a trail of silver where it grazed the creature’s upper arm. Behind us, Ruby screamed. The shadow struck back with a back-handed blow that sent me flying over the desk and leaving me sprawled between the piles of silver and gold. I looked up in time to see Robin, who had been quick enough to duck, let the bolts fly, along with a string of colorful curse words. But unlike my blade, the arrows went straight through the target. The shadow did not even flinch.

The shadow dove at Robin. Already getting to my feet, I called for her move but Robin stood her ground. Garrick came barreling from the side. I could hear her breath knocked from her body as Garrick tackled her out of the way. The writing desk was thrown across the room, the wood splintering as it landed. The shadow stooped low, picking up the copper coin with slender fingers. Palmed by a shadow hand, the coin disappeared.

The creature moved across the room towards the trapdoor. Now only Ruby stood between it and the foot of the stairs. Her chest heaving, eyes round, a rabbit facing its predator. It halted in front of her, staring down at its prey.

Grabbing a handful of silver coins from the floor, I hurled them at the creature. The rain of coins brought forth an owl-like screech that clawed at my ears and caused Ruby to shriek with fright once more.

The flames of the oil lanterns went out, and the room plunged into sudden darkness. For several seconds, the only sound was that of Ruby breathing, followed by flint against steel as Robin relit a lantern.

Four humans and a wolf pup. No shadow.

“Is everyone alright?”

“I’m far from bloody alright.” Robin stepped in front of me, a dagger pointed at my throat.

“Who sent you?”

“No one sent me.”

“Liar.” She cawed. “The Witch Queen hired you to find my father’s killer, even if she didn’t say it in so many words. Was in the rafters, remember? So don’t bother denying it.”

“The Witch Queen might have me in her employ, but I came to the Storyteller to find the Crow who took my blade.” With slow movements, I pushed the tip of her weapon away and downwards.

“You thought I did the murder, then set you up.” Robin snorted.

The trap door swung open, and a voice said, “Mistress?” Before moving aside, allowing Ruby to escape the confines of the room.

Robin yelled, “About bloody time!”

Stepping past Robin, I took the stairs two at a time. Above ground, nothing had changed. Singing. Drinking. Laughter. Ruby reached the swinging doors, slipping behind a few of the other leaving patrons. A crowd obscured my vision for a moment, and she was gone. I pushed through the drunkards in an attempt to follow.

Outside, the icy wind carried with it debris. Nothing else moved. I sniffed the air, but there was no trace of the apple cinnamon smell. The doors of the Storyteller swung again, and Garrick and Robin joined me outside.

“She’s gone. Just don’t know how I lost her.” To Robin I added, “Think you could ask your men which way she went?”

“Who says I got little birds stationed out here?”

I raised my brow, but didn’t justify that with a response. It was to be expected after what happened to their last king. And then there was the smell...

With a huff, Robin said to no one. “Anyone see which way the girl with the red hood went?”

“Didn’t see her leave, mistress.” said a small voice.

“But she might have been hiding between the huddle of dwarves that just left.” said another voice.

“With which case, they were headed toward the yellow brick road.” said the first.

“I have to go after her.”

“Oh, no you don’t” Robin countered. “You have some ‘splaining to do.”

“I’ll go.” A pale Garrick offered. “She can’t be that far.”

“Get her home?”

With a nod, he left, and I focused my attention on the King of Crows.

“You know why this place is called the Storyteller?” She said. “Crows love stories. Crows will stand around a single one of their kind, and listen. The single crow will tell his story, hoping everyone listening approves.”

“And if they don’t approve?”

“They kill him.” She said with no humor in her smile. “So let’s head back inside. I’ll buy the drinks and you get to tell me a story. It better be a good one.”

There was no need for the several armed and probably very menacing looking Crows to step out of the darkness to make her point; my keen ears were very aware of the sudden grumbling and shuffling of heavy feet and weapons.

“Only an idiot turns down a drink with a king.” I said.

Leading the way, I held the tavern door open for Robin. As she passed, I noticed the markings beneath my hand. Patterns and swirls carved into the wood. Something about it was so familiar.

“Oi!” Robin barked. “You coming or not? This king doesn’t have all night.”

I let the door swing shut, “Right behind you, Highness.”

A sleeping Nakia was curled up under my chair. After a word from Robin, the tables closest had emptied. I swallowed the last dregs of my ale. With all the Knucklebones laid out on the table, there was much to think about. The first being the blade pinning me to the murder.

How had they gotten their hands on it in the first place? A pick-pocket? I would have noticed. Did I drop it? That would be a first. There was another possibility: Sheriff Nightan.

Robin didn’t remember seeing a blade, but shock did blind people. Surely the Sheriff didn’t despise me that much. Or did he? He could have taken one of the confiscated blades and claimed it to be evidence. However, this went against everything I remembered about Tom Nightan. He was as painful as a toothache with the personality of tree bark, but a stickler for the rules. And besides, he’d never shown a proclivity for magic. He didn’t even have a Similar.

That brought me back to the Witch Queen. It was too coincidental that the moment I found the *missing* coin, a monster appears to steal it from under my nose. Was I followed here, to be set up for a second time since returning to Faedon?

Robin sat down across from me and placed in front of us two small spindly crystal glasses. With her teeth, she pulled the cork from a bottle; the contents glowing green.

“Thought we might need something a little stronger.” She explained. “This is an Elvish drink, made from fennel, wormwood, and honey.”

“Villina Noir. I know of it.”

“What I heard is that they sell the watered down stuff to the rest of us. According to the elves, the rest of us can’t handle the real deal.”

With a smooth hand, Robin filled both glasses to the brim before pushing one towards me. I raised my glass in thanks before swallowing the mouthful of dark, earthy contents.

Getting straight to business, she said, “Do you think that shadow daemon killed my father?”

Snapping her fingers, she signaled something to the barkeep. With her other hand, she pushed her glass and the bottle towards me.

“Would be one of several strange coincidences otherwise.” I poured us another round.

The barkeep returned and placed a tray in front of Robin. No drinks this time. Instead, a slender green smoking pipe, a lit candle, a few thin strips of wood and two bowls—one filled with herbs, the other with dried mushrooms. I recognized these smells, too.

Pressing a pinch of each into the bottom of the pipe’s green bowl, she said, “Should I worry about you mentioning this to our dear Sheriff Nightan?”

Chuckling, I shook my head.

“Apparently, I was too quick to accuse the dwarves.” She stuck the tip of a wooded strip into the candle flame before using the wood strip to light the contents of her pipe. “Who do you think that was?”

“*What* it was.” I corrected. “And I don’t know, but there is definitely a face behind the magic we saw back there.”

“You think that was magic we saw?”

“Either conjured or summoned would be my guess. Never seen or heard of a creature like this before, which tells me it was brought here. From where I don’t know, but that means magic.”

She leaned forward before whispering, “Witches?”

“Not necessarily.” I declined the pipe but accepted a fourth round of the Villina Noir. “Witches aren’t the only ones who have magic. Elves for one. Based on how many Sorcerers I met outside of Faedon’s walls means we cannot dismiss anyone.”

Robin leaned back, biting down on the pipe, sending several plumes of smoke into the air before saying, "I wish to hire you."

"To do what, exactly?"

"I've been outside the walls of Faedon. Few years less than you, but I saw Darkwell."

Robin said, "I know what it is bounty hunters do."

"I'm not a bounty hunter, only a tracker."

"Then I hire you to track down my father's killer."

I pointed out that I was already in the Witch Queen's employ.

"And if it turns out she is the guilty one, you are stuck with no payment." With a wink, Robin added, "If the Witch Queen is innocent, you get paid twice."

That was something to consider.

"As part of the arrangement, you will let me help you."

Should have guessed that there was a catch.

"What makes you think I need your help?"

"Because I can make sure that the tail Sheriff Nightan put on you gets distracted. Or even better, lost." She winked. "Like the fellas who tried following you in here."

"Much appreciated." I said. "Should I ask?"

"My men took care of it. Don't look at me like that. He'll wake up with a raging headache in the morning, but else unharmed and a little confused." Robin snickered. "I have more spies in Faedon than the Sheriff does, and less love for him than you do."

I busied myself by pouring another round and drinking it. Anything to delay responding.

"You trust little Miss Red and Sir Goldilocks, but you don't trust me?"

"The three of us grew up together." I pointed out, but left out the part where I prefer to work alone. If I could have foreseen tonight's complications, I wouldn't have brought those two along in the first place.

By the look on her face, I could tell she wasn't about to give up. Wrong answer and she could make my life difficult, and without the coin, my escape from Faedon wasn't happening tonight. The simplest plan would be to solve this mess before the Crow King involved herself too much.

I sighed. "Fine, but this is my spoor, so you follow my lead."

"Fair enough."

“Which includes answering some questions.” I leaned back in my chair. “Why was your father so interested in the book?”

“He never said.” Her brow furrowed and her lips pressed together in disapproval before she added. “My father never showed a lick of interest in magic. Wanted nothing to do with it either.”

Rifling through the history lessons Grandfather Lupine was so fond of giving, it was easy to assume that most Crows felt this way. The first Crows were captured from their homeland in the South—a desert of black sand their people called Temek—and brought here as slaves. A gift to the Evil Queen.

“Your best guess?”

“Best guess would be that he wanted to add it to the treasure hiding under this floor.”

An easy enough explanation. I’d never met a Crow who could resist the urge to collect things. But would someone murder him for it? Could he have been trying to keep it away from someone? One of the other Houses, perhaps?

“And the coin?”

“The Thief’s Coin?” Robin thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. “It’s just a coin.”

That went with what the Witch Queen had said.

“So, why did you come back to Faedon?”

She cast me a queer look, as though the answer was an obvious one.

“Isn’t that part of the curse? We can never really leave this place.”

*

From somewhere above, the harsh cry of a bird. Head pounding, I cursed the feeling of leaves and dirt instead of a soft bed covers, beneath my fingers.

A quick sniff of the morning air confirmed three things. The first was that I’d made it out of Crow territory. Second, I was in the Lupine forest. And thirdly...

“Here to pin another murder on me, Sheriff?”

“Why is it that whenever there is trouble, I find you?” Nightan stared down at me from a reddish brown mare.

“Doesn’t seem to be any trouble.” With bleary eyes, I scanned the vicinity to be certain. “And don’t know if you noticed, but we’re in Wolf territory now. Lupine land, to be specific. So I think I should be the one asking why you are here, Sheriff?”

“We are on the outskirts of the Wolf district.” The Sheriff corrected, “Take a few steps that way and you’ll find yourself back in the Enchanted wood.”

I didn’t need him to tell me that.

“Either way, still Wolf territory. How many others are you bringing through here?”

I could hear them. At least two more on horseback. As it turned out, they weren’t here for the Sheriff.

“Now I feel like the girl at the ball everyone wants to dance with. How did you two find me?”

Brighter than the early morning sun, Garrick said, “Thought I would find you at the Manor when I ran into Robin. She was kind enough to inform me I was going the wrong way.”

“And how did you know where to find me?”

Karasu landed on Robin’s shoulder and I remembered the caw that woke me.

Feeding the bird a treat, she said, “I have my tricks. Would love to know what Sheriff Nightan’s trick is, though. He always seems to have ears everywhere. Impressive for someone with no Similar and men about as smart as the dirt.”

“Excited about the festival?” Garrick stepped in, “Very busy day for everyone. The elves have been quite hard at work, I hear.” He looked at Robin. “That’s why we’re here, remember?”

“Exactly.” said Robin, catching on. “We thought Hunter could do with a good... bathe... before things get started.”

If it didn’t feel like a bunch of dwarves were stomping around my head with pickaxes, I might have laughed. Probably a good thing, though, derision might not help our cause.

“I expect all of you to stay out of trouble.”

He looked straight at me when he said that.

The Sheriff turned, but his furtive glance towards the Enchanted woods before he left didn’t go unnoticed. I made a mental note to look into that.

A whine alerted me to Nakia’s presence. The whine turned into yapping, aimed at a small red squirrel in a nearby tree.

“Was wondering where she had gotten,” I called off the wolf pups’ attack on the out-of-reach rodent. “Hope she wasn’t too much of a hassle.”

“I think she had at every bone in the Crow district.” Robin smiled. “So where to first?”

“Witches.” I mumbled, getting to my feet. “Did you find Rubes?”

“She got home fine, if that’s what you are asking. Except for a few scratches from a wickerberry bush that snagged her in the dark.” Garrick said. “She’s alright. Just a little shaken. That shadow beastie gave us all quite the fright.”

“Off to Haven then.” I grumbled.

“Hang on.” Robin wrinkled her nose. “Wasn’t kidding when I said you needed a bath...”

Wet hair slicked back, and clothes still slightly damp, we stood in the entrance of Haven. Unlike other castles, you wouldn’t find guards manning the entrances. Anyone was welcome to come and go as they pleased. It wasn’t only witches roaming the halls. A glance revealed humans, a few elves, and even a Viperae from Serapen, not to mention a few beings I couldn’t place.

Then a voice in my ear said. “Hope you weren’t waiting too long.”

Standing behind me, chin on my shoulder, was Penelope Parsley. “You knew I was coming?”

“I didn’t.” She admitted. “We have a werecat visiting from Kaa. His nose is quite sensitive to dogs and wolves. Think he will be relieved to hear this one is just a pup...”

“You have my word that Nakia will not be chasing any creatures. Especially after being scolded for pestering a squirrel earlier. Am I right, Nakia?”

Her answer was a whine followed by a wag of the tail.

Penelope bent down and patted Nakia on the head. “And I have a message for you, from a visiting Viperean seer who saw you enter.”

“Go on then.”

“*Beware the wolf in sheep’s clothing.*”

“Don’t suppose this seer elaborated any?”

“They never do.”

That seemed about right.

“Penelope, I need to speak with the Witch Queen.”

“That I can help you with.” Penelope cast a glance at Garrick and then focused on Robin before saying. “The Queen will be most pleased. She is tending a tree in the orchard.” With a skip and she was standing in front of Garrick. “You’re the head to the House of Golden Goose?”

“We did away with the goose part, and as House of Grouse sound a little vulgar, it’s just House of Gold now.” He winked.

“Where is your goose?”

“I have a goose, a few actually. I don’t bring them everywhere with me, quite a mess...”

Locking arms with Garrick, Penelope led the way. Robin and I fell in behind.

“So, what happened to you last night?” She asked.

“I’m more interested in what the Sheriff was doing lurking in the woods this morning.” I responded.

“Seems to me he might have been paying House of Red a visit.” Hesitantly, Robin added. “Little Miss Red could be reporting back to him.”

It wasn’t even something worth considering. The very idea was ludicrous.

“That girl’s trouble, if you ask me.”

“What would you know?”

“I’m a Crow, that’s all my people know.”

“Your people also know loyalty.” I said. “And Ruby would never spy for that man.”

Robin shrugged. “Spy or not, I think she’s hiding something.”

We entered the orchard. The clouds above were gathering. If the weather continued, Faedon might celebrate the Blue Moon festival in the rain.

Kneeling on the grass was the Witch Queen, the mauve robes spread out around her, matching the fallen apples from the branches above her. A woven basket stood between her and the only gnarled tree in the orchard.

This tree stood a little way away from the others with perfectly straight trunks, branches laden with crisp greens, sunshine yellows, reds, and pinks that put roses to shame. Encircling this tree was a ring of mushrooms, a reminder and a warning.

This tree and its fruit didn’t smell like the rest. The putrid sweetness made my nose wrinkle.

“I thought that tree was poisonous?”

“If used correctly, its fruit has other properties. Sleeping draughts mainly. But they are deadly.” Packing apples into the basket, the Witch Queen said, “The Evil Queen poisoned more than one person with these. For those reasons, I am the only one permitted to pluck, gather, and use them.” The Witch Queen looked up and smiled. “This is a surprise. Good morning Master Lupine, Master Spriggens. Hello, Robin.”

“Mother.”

“Mother?”

“What of it?” She snapped back at me.

“Why would you lie to your mother about the coin being missing?”

“You have the coin?” The genuine surprise in the Witch Queen’s voice would mean a different line of questioning.

“Perhaps if she had asked in person instead of sending that strange bird of hers.”

Holding up my hand to silence Robin, I said, “Robin might have lied about the coin, but last night, it was taken.” Watching for a reaction, I added, “A shadow took it.”

She blinked. “That’s not possible.”

“The four of us saw it. We even tried fighting it. The only thing that seemed to have any effect was silver—”

“I believe you, Master Lupine,” The Witch Queen interrupted. “But the truth itself makes little sense.”

“Why?”

“What you are describing is called a Shade. It is a being of pure magic. Shadow magic. Brought here from the Never realm. The Evil Queen was the only person I have ever known that could wield one, in a sense.”

“She manipulated them into doing her bidding?”

“Not manipulation, Master Lupine. My sister did not control them using magic, nor were they in her employ. Yet they yielded all they were and all their power to her. You said the four of you?”

“Ruby Red was with us.” I frowned. “Did you just say the Evil Queen was your sister?”

Don’t remember my grandfather ever mentioning that.

“And what of the coin? You said it is nothing more than a symbol.”

“On its own, yes, it’s just a coin.”

“And not on its own?”

We locked eyes.

“Did this Shade show an interest in anything besides the coin?”

The image of the Ruby standing in the Shade’s path, and the creature staring down at her— what if Shade’s hesitation wasn’t the path being blocked, but the girl blocking it?

“Get to the cottage.” I said to Garrick. “Don’t leave Ruby’s side till I get there. And take Robin with you.”

“I have questions.”

Whether this statement was aimed at the Queen or me, I didn’t care.

“This is my spoor, and you will follow my lead.” I reminded her with a growl. We didn’t have time for this. “Or you might as well head back to the Storyteller now.”

Robin squared her jaw, but she grunted with reluctant consensus.

“I could send you with magic—”

But Robin was already shaking her head, “Not for me, thanks.”

“Then at least Penelope will go with you.” A puff of gray smoke and a bow appeared in the Witch Queen’s hands. She offered it to Robin. “This will work against shadow magic.”

Robin stared at it for a few moments before reaching for it.

“It’s light.” She admitted. “Needs a string.”

“You won’t need that. Or arrows.”

“Come on.” Garrick called over his shoulder. Without a thank you, Robin ran after them.

“Nakia, go with them.” I instructed.

It was difficult to push aside the sudden ominous feeling that was urging me to follow. The Witch Queen’s behavior was doing little to put my mind at ease. Small things. The twitch of the mouth, a tug at the center point between her brows, the slight narrowing of her eyes. Minute cracks in her facade.

“Seems like you and I need to talk, Majesty.”

“It would seem so.” She placed one more apple in the basket. “Where would you like to begin?”

“You said shadow magic was from another world.”

“Not world, realm. The Never realm. A place ruled by the shadows of orphans and magic too dark for our world to comprehend.”

A white raven landed on her shoulder, not long after, a smaller bird landed on the opposite one.

“I recognize that crow.”

“Karone arrived here a short time after Corbin’s death.”

Was that sadness or regret that clouded her voice?

“He sought Reine’s company.”

“Reine?”

“My raven Similar. Speaking of, congratulations on the wolf. She looked to be a fine specimen.”

“I trust there is a good reason neither you nor Robin mentioned your relationship.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, Master Lupine, there was not much to tell.”

The Witch Queen reached out, and I offered my hand as she got to her feet. There was no doubt she would have looked just as graceful without my help. The basket lifted from the ground. The Witch Queen hooked her arm through the handle before stepping smartly over the mushroom circle.

“As neither of us are suspects, Master Lupine, I didn’t see the relevance.”

“Please, call me Hunter, Majesty.”

She nodded.

“Walk with me, Hunter.” she said and this time I offered her the crook of my arm. Instead of heading back to Haven, we walked deeper into the orchard.

“When my initial plan to defeat my sister Gwenore failed, she had my entire coven slaughtered.” The Witch Queen began. “She had me thrown in the dungeons. But that decision would be her greatest mistake, for I wasn’t alone. There was a Crow, several dwarves, Padraic and three children. Two boys and a girl.”

The ones would eventually become the Heads to the seven Houses.

“Do you know why we were placed in that dungeon, Hunter?”

“You refused to bow.”

“In part,” she nodded, “Each of us had something Evil Queen wanted.”

“Magic and secrets.” That’s what my grandfather had said.

“In my case, it was my heart, which she promised to rip from my chest.” The Witch Queen continued, as though speaking of a petulant child who had threatened to ruin the mood with a tantrum. “So I reworked the spell. Each of us gave an object. The most valuable possession we had. Something I could attach their sacrifice to.”

I knew this part of the story very well. Those items would become known as the Relics.

“The Crow gave you his coin.”

The Witch Queen nodded.

“What did the Crow sacrifice?”

“The Crows referred to it as the Hand of Glory.”

“What did it do?”

“From what I understood, it was something a thief would use, a way to find treasure.” The Witch Queen added, “My sister would pick spells from people’s heads the way you and I fruit from a tree, but it didn’t work on everyone. So dungeons, torture and threats were how she handled that problem. In the end, we gave her a taste of her own poison, sealing her along with everything she coveted inside that dreadful book.”

We walked in silence for a bit as I added this information to what I already knew.

“So if someone had the coin and the book, could they somehow claim this Crow magic for themselves?”

“Brilliant, Hunter. It is just a theory, one I only began pondering a few weeks ago. To be honest, it was, in part, the reason I tasked you to find the coin.”

“Who else did you mention this theory to?”

“I might have mentioned it in passing to Rose last time I visited. We are talking about complicated magic here. With all that has happened, I haven’t even had much time to think more about it. Thought the little I did think on it, the less I believe it to be possible.”

“Not at all?”

“Unless one considers using dark magic.” She admitted. “I can’t think of a safe way.”

“Could Corbin have figured it out? It would be a good reason for his sudden intent notion of buying the book.”

The Witch Queen stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face me.

“What do you mean?”

“Robin said her father offered Ruby Red her weight in jewels and treasure, in exchange for the book. Perhaps he figured out a way to extract the magic.” I hazarded. The Witch Queen’s expression made me ask. “You didn’t know, did you?”

“Corbin had no interest in magic. And he couldn’t have known—as I said, I’m not even sure it could work.”

The Witch Queen looked ruffled; the news about Corbin had struck some sort of nerve.

“That book cannot be allowed out into the world. Crow magic—most magic, for that matter—is not evil, but the book corrupts.”

“Like it did to your sister?”

There was a flash of something behind her eyes.

“Exactly like it did to my sister. Which is another reason I haven’t put too much thought into this theory of mine.”

The Witch Queen stepped in close, her nose almost touching mine.

“We have no idea what that book has done to the magic locked inside of it, nor what will happen if that magic is ever released.”

There it was, for a moment the mask fell away, and all that remained was fear.

“That’s not your only reason, is it, Majesty?”

“The integrity of the curse we cast all those years ago cannot be compromised. Not for a moment.” Her words were hurried. “And never will there be a reason to risk doing so. Not even for magic and secrets.”

“I’ll find who took the coin before anyone gets near it.” I reassured. “Besides, the book is hidden.”

“This is true.” The Witch Queen stepped back, the cracks no longer visible, the mask of serenity and plum lips perfectly returned. “That knowledge alone will allow me to enjoy the Blue Moon festival tonight.”

*

Nakia, who had been sleeping under a nearby tree, lifted her head and yapped a greeting. The cottage door was off its hinges. Karasu pecked at the glass laying scattered across the grass.

Raven sat in the cottage doorway, polishing her new bow with the tenderness of a lover. Apparently, I missed quite the shindig.

“What happened?”

“We weren’t the first ones here.”

“Another Shade?” I didn’t wait for her to finish nodding before asking. “What about Ruby?”

“Spriggens is trying to talk to her, but she looked alright.” Raven chuckled. “Quite a voice on that one. Must have screamed loud enough that the djinn of Temek heard. Good thing too. The Shade didn’t hear us come in. Got a shot at it, would have hit it square in the back too if it hadn’t moved last second.”

“You wounded it?”

“Then it blew the door and windows out.” Robin snapped her fingers. “Like that, it was gone.” She grinned, the brightness of her pride almost too much to witness. “Doubt we’ll be seeing it anytime soon. This thing packs quite a punch.”

Would be great if she was right. If the monster just slunk away. Experience had taught that this was rarely the case.

Glass crunched beneath my boots as I stepped over Robin. A quick glance around the cottage proved that everything else seemed in order. On the other side of the small room, Garrick was leaning up against Gram’s bedroom door. Guess it was Ruby’s bedroom now.

“She’s locked herself in there.” Garrick whispered. “What does this thing want, Hunter?”

Movement behind me as Robin came inside. Both of them now staring at me, in wait of an answer.

“What do you know about the Hand of Glory?” I asked Robin.

Robin blinked several times, her jaw slack as she formulated an answer.

“It was the only magic we Crows ever had,” she said in a monotone voice of someone who had repeated the answer many times before, “a guiding flame for treasure seekers. Once gifted to our tribe by a desert djinn, and sacrificed to defeat the Evil Queen.”

Sounded like I wasn’t the only one forced to sit through a few history lessons.

“And you are sure your father didn’t dabble with magic, spell casting, anything of the sort?”

She replied without hesitation. “Don’t know if you were paying any attention at Haven, but I was the only Crow there. My mum is the Witch Queen, and I don’t have a spark of magic. Don’t know what things were like before, but these days my people have no patience for it. My father was no different.”

“Garrick, see if you can summon a dwarf to fix these windows before the festival starts.” I said. “Wounded or not, I doubt this creature will attack tonight during the festivities. Not with so many faces around.”

Robin waited for Garrick to leave before asking. “What are you not telling?”

Remembering that there should have been a fourth, I ignore her question with one of my own. “What happened to the Truth Seeker.”

“She stood around for a few minutes then muttered something about obscuring shadows and left.” Robin narrowed her eyes and pointed the one end of her bow at me. “Now your turn. Unless you expect me to believe you spent all that time picking apples with me mum.”

I considered her for a moment before saying, “We were right to assume that there is someone behind the Shade, but not the way we thought.” I pressed my back up against the locked door that was between us and Ruby. “Without a host, it’s no more than an animated shadow. A host makes it tangible. The more powerful the host, the more powerful the Shade.”

“This host,” Robin tilted her head, “how consenting would they have to be?”

“There seems to be some debate around that.” I admitted. “I believe they are after the book, trying to free the Crow magic trapped inside its pages.”

Robin began to pace, the fingers of her free hand drumming away on her outer leg. Despite my headache she was adding to, I let her finish her thoughts.

“They could want the Hand of Glory in order to find something else.” Robin suggested.

It was a good theory.

“Either way, we can’t allow this Shade or anyone to get their hands on it.”

Her lip curled, and her grip on the bow tightened. “Someone should guard the book.”

“The book is safe. The only person who knows its location is Ruby. So if you wanted to guard anything, it would be her.”

Lowering her crossbow, disappointment clouded her face. “You can count me out then. I’m nobody’s shepherd.”

“You best tell those little birds of yours to keep an eye out for anything suspicious.”

“And you?”

“Why do you think I sent Garrick to find the dwarves?” While I couldn’t see a dwarf doing something like this, I’m not a slipshod tracker.

With a smirk, she left, and I focused my attention on the door behind me. Without turning, I rapped my knuckles against the wood.

“It’s just us, Rubes. I need to know that you’re fine. Can’t do that unless you let me in.”

I smiled at the sound of the key turning in the lock. The door whined as I pushed it open. There was no sign of a new occupant in the familiar room. A single bed, covered in a quilted blanket, a polished dresser and matching wardrobe. Porcelain figurines of children playing with wolves lined the highest shelves, out of reach from small curious hands. An array of books, along with gifts from admirers, such as dragon scales, golden shells, feathers, and a small wooden shield, took up any shelf space that was at eye level.

“I can’t bring myself to move any of it.” Ruby said, her back towards me. “And what would I do with it? Pack it away in a trunk? Put it on display in our old room? When our parents died, it was easy.”

“Plague meant we just burned everything.”

Ruby tilted her head, her dark locks falling to the side, exposing her shoulder.

“You’re hurt.”

Ruby peered at her injury. “Not as bad as it looks.”

“It’s bleeding.” I stepped closer to examine it. A single wound, thin as a lash, the skin around it red and raw. I swallowed hard before saying, “I’m just glad Robin and Garrick arrived when they did.”

Sitting alongside each other on the bed, Ruby allowed me to clean and examine all her wounds. Besides the bleeding wound on her shoulder, there were a few wickerbush scratches on her cheek and neck, half healed burns, and a visible weariness I could do nothing about. It was Ruby’s silence that I found most disconcerting but understandable after what she had been through.

Finishing up, I said. “Robin told me you were considering Corbin’s offer.”

She bit her bottom lip, avoiding my gaze.

“Talk to me, Rubes.”

“What do you want to hear, Hunter? I wanted better. And before you say anything, I didn’t want the lavish lifestyles of the other houses. Just a little comfort. Perhaps enough for a small bakery in the Gold District. Or a simple carriage for fancy occasions. Little things. Instead of relying on everyone’s kindness and respect for a ragged red hood.”

“So you tried selling the book?”

“Corbin found me on a bad day.” Ruby reached for my hand. “In my foul mood, I figured that if it was such an honor to guard the book, why not let them? When I said I would speak to Grams on his behalf, I was only half-serious. I didn’t have time to really think about his offer, let alone gather the courage to say or do anything about it, when the dwarves went straight to Grams with an offer of their own.”

Ruby stood up, tugging at my hand so I would follow suit before letting her lead the way. We didn’t go far. A few steps. Together, we faced the wardrobe.

“She warned this would happen.”

“Who did?”

“When Grams confronted me, I came clean about everything. She said I was tempting evil just by voicing the thought.” Ruby stepped forward, reaching for the doorknob. “I want to show you something.”

Her voice so earnest, her grip on my hand so tight that I couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed when opening the wardrobe revealed an array frocks and coats, and the faint smell of ash, wine and lime, a combination usually used to remove stains. With her free hand, Ruby pushed these aside, revealing the back panel. Unlike the rest of the wardrobe, its surface was not smooth and polished.

“The doors to the Storyteller are covered in similar carvings.” Again I felt the tug of a familiarity. “Where else have I seen this?”

“Ornately carved doors were all the fashion when Grams was a little girl.” Ruby said. “There are still quite a few of them in Faedon.”

“Did you say door?”

Still holding my hand, she placed my palm against the panel. Ruby moved my hand along the panel, pausing only to place pressure in several places, producing a faint click each time. When she placed my hand at the center of the door, the final click made the wooden panel swing open.

The passage was dark and narrow. At the end of it was a large room. Larger than the cottage. Larger than the hidden room beneath the Storyteller. The floor was covered in a carpet of green and blue moss and tree roots. Walls and trees, seemingly woven together, stood taller than Haven. Sunlight—despite the storm brewing over Faedon—shone through the delicate glass-stained windows high above, creating streaks of colored light that only added to the ethereal quality of the room.

“How is this possible?”

“Can’t tell you.” Ruby stood at the center of it all, her hands resting on a flat sewn off tree stump being used as a lectern. “Besides you and me, no living person knows about this place. It’s protected from magic ever finding it.”

All those hours spent searching for it, and I never came close.

“That’s the book?”

It was large and bound with black leather, but there was nothing particularly foreboding about it. My inner child was severely disappointed. To be fair, when you are a child, you tend to believe that evil has distinguishable features and is easily recognizable.

“Why did you bring me here?”

Running her fingers down the spine of the book, Ruby said, “I have no living relatives, Hunter.” She lifted her head, her eyes finding mine before saying, “If something were to happen to me, someone needs to know about this place.” There was no sadness or fear in her voice, just firm resolve.

There was a knock. It seemed to come from everywhere. And a holler that could be mistaken for nothing else than what it was: The dwarves had arrived.

Dear Reader,

I thank you for taking the time to read the first three chapters of UPON A MURDER. If you like what you read and would like to receive a free copy before anyone else, I would invite you to be a part of my ARC/Launch Team.

All I will ask for in return is one review (Either on AMAZON or GOODREADS), after the books launch Mid-December.

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Kindest Regards

Kal Locksley

