

ROBBING CENTAURS

◆ — AND — ◆

OTHER BAD IDEAS

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Robbing Centaurs and Other Bad Ideas

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*For the friends from the internet who loved the boys and believed
that this book was good ages before it really was.
This one's for you.*



Satyr

Leshy

Nixie



GLOSSARY AND TERM GUIDE

Ambrack (AM-brak) — A satyr of some small importance in satyr territory.

Aro (AIR-oh) — The country where Wick and Archer live, a coastal country wherein eight different sentient species live in harmony.

Caihu (KYE-hoo) — A prophetic centaur, now considered mad and irrelevant. Deceased.

Centaur (SENT-ars) — A prophetic race placed in charge of the welfare of Aro, appearing half horse and half human.

Crowned Head — The ruler and king of the manghar.

Door in the Wall — A magical door that one of the long-past human sorcerers created, allowing one to pass through walls.

Eland (ELL-and) — A young centaur with red hair, still in apprentice training.

Eri (AIR-ee) — One of the biggest cities in seraph territory, well-known for its riches and beauty.

Fair Folk (FAYR FOHK) — A race of small, nomadic agricultural people. About three apples tall.

Heather Stone — A magical stone used to cast spells for the protection of Aro, currently split into eight pieces and given to each race in Aro for safekeeping.

Lelo (LELL-oh) — A leshy who works as a museum guard, a childhood friend of Wick's.

Leshy (LESH-ee) — A race of people with the appearance of trees on legs, with glowing yellow eyes. The protectors of the forest.

Lif (LEEF) — The younger sister of Wick.

Manghar (MANG-harr) — An aggressive and terrifying race with the appearance of giant bats on two legs.

Nixies (NICKS-ees) — A race of pale green people with many teeth, dressed in armor and sea findings.

Oak Leaf — The formal name for the leshy piece of the Heather Stone, named for its ornate setting, which is shaped like the leaf of an oak tree.

Ongel (ON-gehl) — A centaur with dark skin and hair, commonly a mentor figure to centaur apprentices and to messengers.

Prentiss (PREHNT-iss) — A human living under the influence of paranoia.

Rewin (RUE-inn) — A human messenger.

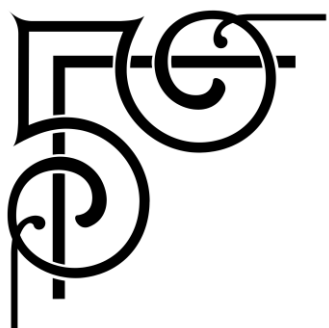
Satyrs (SAE-terrs) — A race of people with the head and lower body of a goat and the body of a man.

Seraphs (SAER-affs) — The winged people.

The Scorch — An unknown outside force bent on destroying Aro, only seen once every few hundred years.

Tinor (TEE-norr) — A centaur with grey hair, a mentor among the centaurs.

Transmogrification (Trans-mohg-riff-ih-CAY-shuhn) — A leshy's ability to change his or her appearance into something different, usually used as a defense mechanism. Irreversible and normally discouraged by the leshy.



CHAPTER ONE

Stealing From People with Horns

THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE left a window open.

Archer peered around the window frame to check for guards. There were none. He grinned to himself. Of course the satyrs wouldn't have any. He slid through the window and landed slightly crooked, sticking out his good wing to re-establish his balance.

He crept down the hallway, his bare feet stepping in and out of the moonlight puddling on the floor. Ahead loomed the dark wood archway to the satyrs' hall of valuables.

Everything about the hall of valuables exuded beauty and elegance. Maybe one day he would be invited to visit and he would get to really look around. But today was not that day, so he would just have to be quick.

The hall was large, but Archer had broken in often enough to know just where to find what he was looking for.

He walked through the wooden stands with the familiarity of someone who owned the place. As he passed, he gave a few of the items a faint smile. Then he faced forward toward his prize.

There in the center of the hall of valuables, lit like daylight by a round skylight above it, was another wooden stand.

On the stand shone the Satyr's Crown.

And it was big. The satyrs had spent centuries being enslaved by larger, more powerful creatures, and when they were freed, they had turned themselves a democratic territory. For that reason, the crown was made too large for anyone to ever wear. It was supposed to represent how nothing was to be done by a single leader ever again or some nonsense like that. Archer didn't care. All he cared about was taking it and getting out of the hall of valuables before someone came in.

The moonlight glinted strangely off the air surrounding the Crown.

So. They had tried to protect it.

Eyes trained on the Satyr's Crown, Archer picked up a hunk of sparkling stone off a nearby stand. As he approached the Satyr's Crown, he raised the rock high and slammed it down on the edge of the pedestal. The *crack* echoed through the chamber. With a splintering sound, a corner of the wood stand broke off, and the salt and sand of a mineral spell spilled out and puddled on the floor.

Just like that, the shimmer he had spotted around the Satyr's Crown vanished.

It was satisfying to know that the satyrs had updated

their security after he had stolen nearly their entire collection of valuables on his last visit.

But there was no time to revel. As reached for the Satyr's Crown, he could already hear hoof beats racing down the hallway behind him.

He would not be going out the same way he came in.

He snatched the crown off the stand and fumbled for the leather bag at his side. The bag's opening was not nearly wide enough, but he had fit larger things inside it with no problem before. He pulled on the leather, and the crown slipped inside with only a little bit of trouble.

The hoof beats were getting closer, but still Archer stared at the sparkling stone. Several uncut gemstones glittered across the surface. Hefting it in his hand, he decided he wanted that as well. He tugged the bag open again and tried to fit the stone inside. The bag refused. Even as he tried to force the rock inside, the opening of the bag shrank.

"Oh, come on," Archer muttered, trying harder than ever to jam the rock inside the bag. He only succeeded in scraping his hand. "I know you can hold it."

Someone near the archway shouted, "Stop!" and Archer decided the stone was a lost cause. He threw it away and leaped up into one of the narrow windows along the wall. Turning and crouching on the sill, he held out the bag and shook it up and down so the satyrs could hear the crown clinking inside.

They looked horrified.

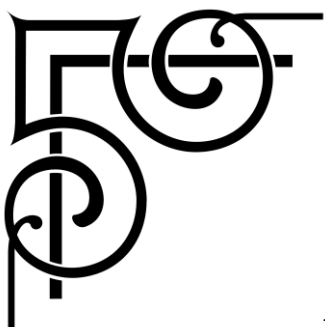
Good.

Archer looked the closest satyr full in the eye and

delivered him his nastiest smile.

“I hope you took good care of it while it was here.”

Then he tipped backward out the window and was long gone before they could chase him.



CHAPTER TWO

How to Deal with Petty Arguments

THE SUN HITTING Wick's desk had only just started to take on the color of normal morning light when someone came racing down the hall into the guest chambers. Before Wick even looked up, the flash of white fur told him the person was his host, Ambrack. Satyrs were normally very cool-headed, but Ambrack looked close to boiling over.

Any clouds that remained from working through the night vanished from Wick's head. He sat up straight in his chair. "What's wrong?"

Ambrack's hands shook with passion. "They've been bold before, but this is too far."

"Ambrack," Wick said in a level voice, "what happened?"

His goatlike face was still flushed, but Ambrack stood tall and inhaled deeply. "The Satyr's Crown has been stolen. By a seraph."

"The same robber as last time?"

Ambrack spread his hands. "I don't know. Ask the messenger; he was there."

"I'd like to. We need to know all the details before we make any decisions." Wick said.

"Very well, but be quick." Ambrack turned to leave. "I'm taking him with me when I go to meet with the seraphs. Someone has to confront them about what they've done."

The severity of the situation was finally clear. Wick stood and brushed dead leaves off his legs. "Well then. I'll come with you. Just let me talk with the messenger before we leave. Where is he?"

"He's waiting outside."

A red-haired centaur around Wick's age appeared in the doorway across from Wick's as Ambrack left. "What now?"

"Eland. It seems that someone stole the Satyr's Crown," Wick said, fetching his small bag of traveling essentials off a peg. "They say it was a seraph, so now Ambrack wants to go confront them about their crime."

Eland's brow creased for the briefest moment, then he offered a smile. "Well, my mentors wanted me to start heading back today anyway. I can spare time for an extra stop if you want me to come along."

His offer gave Wick a bit of relief. "Some company would be welcome. I don't know how well this will go."

Eland collected his things as well, and they headed out to meet Ambrack, who stood outside the house with a smaller, thinner brown satyr. Wick recognized the little curly horns on sight. "Tamarack. You were there when the

crown was stolen?"

Tamarack's eyes followed Ambrack as he left to gather supplies for the journey to the meeting place. "Yes."

"You saw the thief, then. Can you describe them?"

Tamarack realized he wasn't paying attention and his eyes snapped back to Wick's face. "I saw him." He cleared his throat. "It was the same robber who took all the valuables months ago. And then put them all back a week later."

"Listen carefully," Wick said, bending his head forward. "How do you *know* it was the same robber?"

"His hair and clothes were the same. And he had the same wing."

Wick cocked his head. He hadn't heard this detail before. "What about it?"

"His right wing. It was. . . mangled."

Wick made a mental note of the description. "Anything else?"

Tamarack opened his mouth, then shut it again. "No, nothing else."

"You were going to say something. Go on," Wick encouraged, standing up straight so he looked less intimidating. He wasn't a large leshy, but the treelike shape and glowing eyes tended to make some people nervous.

"It's just that. . . he knew how to take apart the spell on the pedestal. It wasn't even hard for him. He was in and out in minutes."

"Hmm."

Ambrack came back in, carrying a jug of water in one hand and a walking staff in the other. Slung around his neck

was a canvas bag that probably held more supplies. "Are we ready?"

"Yes," Wick said.

Eland nodded.

"Then let's go. Some of the others are waiting to come with us." Ambrack held the gate open for the others as they went out, then shut it firmly behind himself. "We meet the seraphs at noon."

THREE HOURS OF TRAVEL later, the satyrs and the seraphs were yelling at one another.

"It was a seraph!" one of the younger satyrs, a thick-furred buck named Ren shouted. "How can you say the seraphs had nothing to do with this?"

"Because we *had* nothing to do with it!" The blonde seraph girl tossed her head. "There are plenty of seraphs that don't live in our territory. Your robber might be from the other side of the mountains, or from one of our smaller territories for all we know! We only know that the robber wasn't any of us or anyone we know."

"But you won't bring the perpetrator to justice," Ambrack said in a masked tone.

"If it's not our fault, we don't have to fix it if we don't want to."

One of the other satyrs leaped forward. "Not your fault!"

The shouting swelled back up again. Eland pushed between the two groups, trying to keep them from coming to blows.

Everything collapsed into chaos before Wick's eyes.

They were never going to resolve anything this way.

He did his best to shut out the noise and broke the situation down to the essentials in his head.

The seraphs had brought a similar group to the satyrs. About seven, most of them teenagers. It was the teenagers who were causing the trouble. They had gotten excited by the opportunity to be offended and had come to take out their feelings on one another. Even now Eland was pulling Ren back because if they came to blows, it could cause all kinds of repercussions that neither Wick nor Eland would have any control over.

It seemed wisest to try reasoning with the adults.

Wick stepped forward and inserted himself between Tamarack and the seraph children. "I think this has gone a little too far. None of us know the full story, and we don't want to make any foolish moves here." He sent a look to Ambrack and to one of the more sensible-looking seraph men. "Shall we discuss this whole matter in private?"

The seraph man thought, then nodded. Ambrack nodded as well.

Wick smiled inwardly. It had worked. He touched Tamarack's shoulder. "Stay calm and listen to Eland. We'll be back in a moment."

Leaving his centaur friend in charge, Wick, Ambrack, and the seraph man moved a few dozen paces away from the others before stopping and turning to one another.

"What's your name?" Wick asked the seraph man.

"Birch," the man said. "Of the Redbridge family."

"Birch, the seraphs do have other, smaller territories around Aro, don't they?" Wick asked.

"We do. Many people do," the seraph man said, sounding defensive.

Wick nodded. "So do my people. It could be possible that the robber Tamarack saw could be from another territory, and that's why none of you recognize his description. Am I right so far?"

"He could even be from the other side of the mountains," Birch said. "We have one of Aro's larger territories. He could have come from anywhere."

"I see. And we don't know who he is either," Wick continued. "But we do know that whoever he is, he has the Satyr's Crown, a very valuable artifact and treasured by the satyrs. I propose a pact." He looked back and forth between the two men. "The three of us, as well as all of our people, will keep our eyes open for this robber. We all heard his description, yes? He's dark-haired, with a mangled wing. And he had a bag with him. A leather one."

Ambrack and Birch nodded together.

"If any of us or our people see him, he'll be arrested straight away and turned in so that the satyrs can invoke their justice upon him. As long as it's fair," he added as the seraph man looked like he was going to argue.

"Is that agreeable to everyone?" Wick asked, looking around again.

They both nodded again, first Ambrack and then the seraph man. "I'll send out word that everyone is to watch for him," the seraph man said. "I'm sure we'll find him in time."

"Thank you." Wick led the way back to where the others waited. Already Eland was keeping a side-eye on the blonde seraph girl, who looked like she wanted to strangle

Ren for something he had said.

"Everything is resolved," Ambrack announced to the satyrs.

"We can go home now," Birch said to his group. "We came to an agreement."

Wick watched the two groups shake hands with a warm pleasure. He loved nothing more than when something that could have been disastrous turned out well.

"Wick."

Wick turned. Behind him stood a tall black centaur with a head full of long, twisting braids and a face creased into a smile.

"Ongel!" Wick exclaimed in surprise. "No one told me you were coming."

"It was very last-minute," his mentor assured him, giving him a warm hug. "And I won't be here long. I've come with an offer from myself and the other centaurs, for you."

The expression on Eland's face mirrored the surprise that Wick felt. "Really? For me?" Wick asked.

Ongel nodded. "You'll be glad to hear that your years of hard work as a messenger have paid off. The centaurs are looking to employ several new counselors to work and live in centaur territory so that we can take care of the needs of the individual regions. The other centaurs agree with me that you should be offered the spot for the forest people."

Wick's heart thudded. *Counselor. They want me to be a counselor.*

Ongel's leathery face creased once more into a smile as he grasped Wick's shoulders. "Well done, Wick. I've known

for a long time that you could be doing more.”

“Thank you,” Wick managed. “It would be an honor.”
“Before you accept,” Ongel added, “there is one minor catch. You are very dear to us in the valley, but there are a few who want to be sure we aren't just making an emotional decision.”

Wick's heart sank. “What does that mean?”

“They want to be sure that you're ready for more responsibility,” Ongel said. “A few of the other centaurs have some concerns, and they want to be sure that you are a good choice to be a counselor. They're asking you to look for some opportunity to prove yourself. We want to see you solve some significant problem without any kind of help and without any sort of undesirable consequences.”

“They. . . may have to wait a while,” Wick finally forced out. “Big problems like that don't come up often, and depending on what it is, it might take a while to work out.”

“We've taken all of that into consideration,” Ongel said. “We plan to wait for you as long as a year.” He paused and smiled. “But I don't think it will take you that long.”

Ambrack and the other satyrs prepared to go back to their own territory, but Wick and Eland had other places to be, so they said their goodbyes and headed south toward leshy territory.

On the journey, Wick tried to work out what it was that the centaurs wanted from him. He wanted to help, and he wanted the counselor job more than anything, but why have him prove himself by just doing the same thing as always?

Falling back a few steps, he matched pace with Eland. "Did you know they were planning to offer me a job as a counselor?"

Eland shook his head. "I'm not involved in the big decisions yet. I did hear your name here and there, but then that's not unusual, so I didn't have a clue." He paused. "You're taking it, aren't you?"

"Of course," Wick said. "I want to take it. . . and I think I might have to."

"I don't know about 'have to', but I think you should. You deserve the recognition, and what's more, we'd get to see a lot more of each other if you lived in the valley. I feel like it's been ages since we've seen one another," Eland said.

"It's true," Wick admitted. "You'd think we would run into each other more often since both of us travel so much." He faked a serious tone. "It's not that I think they're doing it on purpose, but since the centaurs decide where we travel to. . ." He trailed off.

Eland laughed.

They walked together and chatted until they finally had to part ways.

"Don't be lonely at home," Eland said. "You can always write to us. Ongel or I would be happy to hear from you."

"Thank you."

Wick walked off toward the dense population of trees in leshy territory, waving goodbye to Eland as he went.

Fall was coming to the forest people's territory. Most of the leaves remained a stubborn faded green, but every few yards one or two trees were blooming into the bright oranges and glowing reds of autumn. Wick reached up to

brush his fingers across the bright leaves, and for a moment the anxiety that had been filling his chest was replaced with a warm contentment.

He tried to get the most out of the quiet feeling while it lasted. Soon he would have to face an onslaught of caring neighbors.

When the edge of the village came into sight, the number of decorations took Wick by surprise. In all his traveling and work, he had forgotten that the harvest festival had begun. Now, three days in, the festivities were in full swing. Garlands of leaves and fruits swayed in arches above the dirt walking paths, and the doorways to houses were crowded with handmade decorations. Slender treelike forms milled through the streets, carrying things to and fro and carrying season's greetings to one another's houses. Many greeted Wick as he went by, and a few stopped him to ask about his travels and what he had been up to lately. He rationed out his polite answers as necessary, then made his excuses and hurried on. The sun was going down, and he wanted to be home before dark.

His mother and sister were outside stringing garlands across the posts of the fence when he arrived.

"I'm back," he called, and his mother and sister spun around.

His mother met him with open arms and squeezed him tight. "We've missed you!" she said as she released him. "How are you?"

Wick straightened. *Worried and anxious*. "I'm well," he lied, deciding on the spot that he wouldn't tell them about the conflict between the satyrs and the seraphs. It was

enough of a burden for him to bear without handing it off to them.

"How was your journey?" his father asked, giving Wick a firm handshake.

"Good. Quiet." Wick nodded. "I came straight here from the satyrs. The plans for the safe houses are finished now, and construction had started on three of them before I left. They should be fully built in just a few months."

Wick's sister Lif plowed into him and squeezed him tight. "Will you be staying long?" she asked.

"I'm not leaving again for a few days at least." Wick disengaged Lif's grabbing arms from around his chest and held her at arm's length to measure her height against his own. "You need to stop growing; soon you'll look like an adult. I didn't even know you were home."

"I just got back from school this week! And I'm back for good this time," Lif said. "Now that I'm through with my education, I'm going to take up gardening like Mother."

"Maybe one day you'll get married like Mother, too," Wick's mother said in a teasing voice. "If you'd ever slow down enough."

"Slowing down isn't possible," Lif said, and both she and Mother laughed. Wick wanted to join in but found he couldn't.

Wick's mother noticed him standing there awkwardly. "We need to let Wick rest now," she declared, wrapping an arm around Wick's shoulders and guiding him into the house. "He's had a long journey."

"I'm not tired," Wick said. "I walk that far every day."

Nonetheless, his mother steered him toward the

hallway. "I know, but it makes me feel better." She gave him a little push in the direction of his room. "Go put your bag down. Get some sun."

If only to please her, Wick did as she said. He made a big show of walking into his room, then sat down at his desk and started unpacking the contents of his messenger's bag. He didn't carry much. Just a telescope, a magnifier to amplify the rays of the sun when the sunshine was weak, and a few other essentials he might need while traveling, including his seal of trust from the centaurs. Very few were given the seal of trust, and Wick made sure to take good care of it and always had it on him. Sometimes such things were needed.

When the bag was empty, he hung it on a hook on the wall. For the time being, he was home to stay.

It was so quiet.

Don't be lonely at home. You can always write to us.

It wasn't that he was lonely.

But maybe he would write a letter to Eland later.

He considered going out and joining the party. The festivities had probably started by now. Everyone would be so excited to see him and talk to him, to listen to his stories and hang onto his every word. His adventures had to sound so exotic to them.

But the idea of going out and receiving all that attention was exhausting. Maybe he wouldn't go. Maybe he would stay home and write some letters. He still needed to follow up with the seraphs about their agreement with the satyrs.

The house was still. His family had gone out to talk to

the neighbors or help with the festival preparations, which didn't surprise him. Most of his people spent little time inside their houses; thus the small size of their dwellings. They didn't need to live their lives in their homes. Their lives were out there, with one another.

So for now, Wick was alone in the house.

And since he was now alone in the house, instead of lying down on his bed and taking in the rays of the skylight like his mother wanted, he climbed up onto a shelf next to his bed and pulled himself out of the skylight.

Wick's family had always lived in this dwelling. His whole life, anytime he was home in between getting his education and doing messenger work, he had been all over it, inside and outside. He had explored every chamber and crevice. He knew the best places to hide, he knew where everything was kept, and most importantly, he knew where to find the best sun.

The best sun was on the roof, just above his bedroom.

That was where he went.

For a moment he just sat on the roof, enjoying the view. The roof wasn't very high, but from on top of it, he could see over the houses of mud and rocks, over the flowering gardens and rough wooden fences, and beyond down the dirt road lined with lamps. Leshy territory was simple and rustic. Beautiful. Soothing, even.

Wick stretched out on the clay roof of the house, right in the middle, where no shadows of trunks or branches would block out a single speck of the rich golden light. The sun was just starting to go down, making the flavor of the light gilded and not white or lemon.

The best kind.

Wick closed his eyes and drank in the warmth. He hadn't been tired, but now the weight in his limbs was gone. He melted into the roof and absorbed the sun as hard as he could. All his worries about the future disappeared. Right here, right now, he was warm and happy and alive.

"Wick!" a familiar voice shouted.

Wick resisted the urge to open his eyes. Maybe if he stayed still, they would go away.

"Wick!" the voice shouted again. "Great and powerful messenger! Are you too good now to come and say hello to your friends?"

Now Wick did open his eyes. With a bit of effort, he pushed off the roof and sat up.

Down in the garden, looking up at him with hands on hips, was his old friend Twill. As tall and gangly as ever, and by the tone of her voice, her strong and cynical personality had not suffered any change. Even the bees in the garden refused to buzz anywhere near her. A few of the braver ones lighted gently on her shoulders, but none ventured near her face.

"I don't think I have friends!" Wick called back. "I just have you!"

"It's a good thing you have me then, isn't it?" Twill said.

"So," Twill said as Wick slid down into the garden from the roof, "why, exactly, are you here and not at the festival with everyone else?"

Wick stopped dusting his hands off on his legs and shrugged. "There's too much to be done, I guess."

"Too much to be done." Twill nodded wisely. "You mean you have to obsess over writing a thousand letters, letters that could be written later, after the party."

"And other things," Wick protested.

"Such as?" Twill prompted.

Wick racked his brain for some sort of task and came up empty.

"Exactly," Twill said. "Now off you go. You're coming to the festival, whether you like it or not, because if I have to be there, so do you." She pointed a threatening finger down the road. Deeper in the village, the lights and laughter of the party floated toward them.

It was probably better this way, anyway. If he avoided everyone, the village might be offended. Wick and Twill started walking down the road toward the party.

"What's the news?" Twill asked. "You seem even more serious than normal."

"I probably shouldn't say—" Wick began.

"Of course you should. There's something on your mind, let's hear it."

"Nothing's wrong," Wick said. "Actually, it's a good thing. I've been offered a position as a counselor to the centaurs."

Twill tilted her head. "That does sound like a good thing. You'd be moving to centaur territory then, yes?"

"Yes," Wick said. "And that's the problem. I really want this, but being this excited to leave home makes me feel. . ."

"Guilty?" Twill suggested.

"Yes."

“Hmm.”

They passed under the first arch of leaves, into the torchlight of the festival.

“I wouldn't worry about it,” Twill said as a cold breeze gusted across the festival grounds. “It's not my job that's changing, but I think you'd like it. It would take your career up a level. And as much as I'd miss you, the leschy need you to stay visible.”

Wick's brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Twill stopped under a torch and turned to him. “Look around you, Wick. Do you see a single visitor from another territory? Have you ever seen one of us leave this territory? No. We're a quiet species, we keep to ourselves, and we're happy like that. We don't have important trade routes or connections. We only have you. You're what keeps us from being overlooked or left behind by the times.” She gestured at the crowd. “Everyone here needs you, and where they need you is out there, doing the things that keep us seen.”

Wick looked down at the ground. “That's why I was thinking I might not change my face after all.”

“Really? You changed your mind? You seemed so set on it.”

Wick looked up with surprise.

“Not that I want you to do it,” Twill said quickly. “I still stand by my opinion that leschy transmogrification is not to be taken lightly, and no matter what you say, I don't see what's wrong with looking like a leschy.”

“Twill,” Wick said. “Our faces are empty wooden masks with glowing eyes in the middle. We look like trees walking. We project our voices into other people's heads in

order to be heard. Leshy scare people.”

“Then they can be scared.” Twill was unyielding. “This is the way God made us. If that scares them, that's on them.”

“Yes, but we were also made with the power to change our faces if we want.” Wick realized their argument was attracting a few sets of eyes. “It doesn't matter, anyway,” he said. “I haven't decided yet if I'll transform, so there's no point in arguing.”

Twill stared at him a moment, then laughed. “See, this is why I quit the messenger training. I can't diffuse conflict like that. I can't just stop speaking my mind.”

Wick shrugged.

Twill retrieved a string of carved party beads from the ground and wound them around her neck. “Well, we can talk about something else, then. What's happened out there recently?”

Wick fought the urge to fidget. “Nothing much.”

“Lies,” Twill said airily. “Something must have happened. Now speak.”

“It seems some seraph stole the Satyr's Crown,” Wick explained. “Easily. And it may be foolish, but I'm worried about it. The Satyr's Crown has one of the pieces of the Heather Stone set into it. What if he's trying to collect all eight pieces of the Heather Stone?”

“Did he say anything about trying to get all of them?”

“No. I just have a bad feeling.”

“Then I wouldn't worry about it,” Twill said. “All they're good for is keeping Aro's borders protected; what's the worst that could happen?”

"Don't you remember this from school?" Wick asked. "Years ago, a group of bandits managed to get their hands on six of the stones, and they nearly burned all of Aro to the ground. That's why the stones are so spread out now. They're too powerful and too easy to abuse."

"Well," Twill said, her voice becoming teasing, "I know you're having a good time worrying, but so far the thief only has one stone. And he might not even know what he has. I'd hold off on worrying until you know if any others have gone missing."

"True," Wick admitted. "I know I shouldn't worry so much, but it's my job. Or about to be my job, anyway."

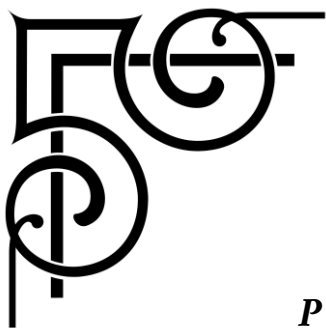
Twill looked around at the party. "So, political things. Job things. Boring things. That's all we can talk about?" She gave Wick a pitying look. "Wick, my dear, dear friend, you have gotten very boring."

"Sorry," Wick said, not feeling very sorry at all. Twill was just going on one of her kicks criticizing his lifestyle. In a minute she would leave him alone.

But this time, instead of leaving him alone, Twill said, "That's it, we're going to do something fun."

Wick sighed. "You already made me come to the party. This isn't fun?"

"This is just normal fun. I'm talking about crazy, youthful fun, the kind of fun we should be having at our ages." Twill's eyes glinted. "Like stealing the entire cart of fireworks for the party."



CHAPTER THREE

Pumpkins Explode

ALARM SPIKED THROUGH Wick's veins. "Twill, you can't do that!"

"We," Twill corrected, "can so." A few younger leshy waved to Twill from the crowd. Wick thought he recognized them as Twill's other friends, the friends she had met after quitting the messenger training and becoming an artist instead.

"We've been planning this for months," Twill whispered excitedly. She saw the skepticism in Wick's eyes and added, "We're not going to do any harm, we just want to give some life to the fireworks display. It's the same every year, and it's boring."

Wick leaned forward. "Twill. You're going to get into a heap of trouble, and I don't want to get mixed up in it, not when I'm this close to getting the counselor promotion."

But Twill wouldn't give up. Her eyes became pleading. "What if I say *please*? Pretty please, Wick, just have a bit of

fun with me before you go away to be famous and important? I promise it won't be dangerous. Just fun."

Something twinged in Wick's chest. But still.

"I don't dare, Twill, I'm sorry."

Twill's energy wavered for a moment. Then she stood tall and saluted. "Fine. If you're not going to help me, you had better watch. It'll be awesome."

She was going to get in trouble if Wick didn't stop her. "Twill."

"Ah, Wick!" A weather-worn leshy with a wreath of autumn leaves wrapped around his head appeared behind Wick and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "We were just talking about you."

Twill gave Wick a sly look and disappeared into the crowd.

"Mister Fik—" Wick began.

His old teacher interrupted. "My new students and I are discussing the importance of what they learn in their education." He gestured to three smaller leshy standing behind him. All the students looked painfully bored. "They insist that learning about the history of Aro and the significance of the Heather Stone isn't important to their education."

"Because, Mister Fik," one of the students murmured, "that's all over. It doesn't matter anymore."

"Oh, but it does matter!" the teacher declared, and leaning toward Wick he whispered, "I brought them to you because I think it would be good for them to hear it from you."

Over his teacher's shoulder, Wick could see Twill and

her friends scurry by with a wagon heaped with gourds and apples. The telltale sparkle of silver fuses told him that the produce was loaded with explosives and pigment.

Wick's brow furrowed. "Why me?"

Mister Fik pulled back, surprised. "Because you're you! Everyone knows your name, you've traveled every inch of our fine country, and you were my student! I couldn't be more proud." He clapped Wick on the shoulder and gestured to the students.

Was this what Twill had been talking about?

Wick turned to the three students, gathering his thoughts. "Your assumption is: since we already cast the spell that keeps out the Scorch once, the Scorch isn't a threat anymore and we don't need to worry about it, is that right?"

The student nodded.

"That isn't correct. It's still a threat," Wick said. "Years ago, our people did use the Heather Stones against the Scorch, but we only drove it back. It isn't gone. We hardly know anything about the Scorch, and no one knows how to drive it away forever. It may be a battle that Aro will fight for the rest of time."

"That's why the Heather Stones are important," Mister Fik broke in. Behind him, Twill's friends dashed up and down the dark road leading to the museum, laying out fireworks across the road and along the tops of fence posts. Twill was busy constructing something on the cobblestones in front of the museum itself, but he couldn't see what.

"That's why the stones are important," Wick agreed, refocusing on the students. They were starting to look

interested now. "They're what stands between us and destruction. For now, they're spread out so their power can't be abused, but the next time we see the signs of the Scorch coming, we'll gather all the pieces of the Heather Stone together and cast the spell again."

Wick could feel his teacher's proud gaze, and he realized he understood what Twill had been saying. The other lesby relied on him.

It occurred to him that Twill wasn't just down the street anymore. Where had she gone? It seemed they had set up all the fireworks, and the fuses stretched in long sparkling rivulets down the street. But Twill and her friends were no longer anywhere to be seen.

"Excuse me." He left the conversation with his teacher and walked toward the dark street. Fireworks littered the ground and the tops of the fence posts, but no one was there.

"Twill!" Wick called in a loud stage whisper. "Where did you go?"

"Want to light it?"

Wick jumped as Twill's voice whispered next to his ear. "What?"

"The fireworks." Twill struck a match against the trunk of a tree, and it blazed to life. "I want you to do the honors."

"No."

"Come on, Wick, we're trying to see you off," Twill said. The flickering of the flame bounced off her face. "I did this for you. I want you to make some memories before you go."

Make some memories. Something stirred in Wick's

heart. For all her criticism and how she insisted that he do things her way, he was going to miss Twill.

She held out the match.

He would never have another chance. He would never get to do this again. In the name of making one youthful memory, Wick snatched the match and lit the fuse.

The twine burned down toward the sparkling fuse of the first apple. Wick braced himself. The first firework exploded with a bang.

There was a disturbance under the canopy of lights, and several people turned to see what had made the sound. Then the next firework went off, and the whole crowd noticed. Down the street the explosions went, gaining momentum. Sparks sprayed into the air, gold and green and red and white. Bits of dried-out produce flew in every direction. The longer the explosions went on, the louder the cheers became.

Wick's heart hammered as the fuses burned closer to the museum. Twill had set up a dozen of the largest fireworks out front with all their fuses wound together so they would go off all at once. This would be the great explosion, the finale.

The end.

The last two pumpkins nearest to it went off, spraying pumpkin flesh and seeds in all directions, and the sparks on the twine burned down the snarl of fuses Twill had tied together.

"Wick!"

Wick turned around and found a messenger standing behind him wearing a grave expression.

Dread knifed into Wick's stomach. Something was wrong.

Rewin forced his usual friendly smile as the finale exploded behind them. "I've been trying to find you."

"Sorry, I was—" Wick stopped himself. "Never mind. Is something wrong?"

"The fair folk have been robbed," Rewin said. "Their piece of the Heather Stone was taken."

All the anxiety Wick had been pushing away came rushing back. "When was it taken?"

"Two weeks ago. The fair folk are so scattered that most of them didn't even know until just a few days ago. And," Rewin went on uncomfortably, "between the Satyr's Crown and now the fair folk's piece of the Heather Stone, the centaurs are assuming the worst."

Wick had already guessed. "The thief is trying to collect all the pieces of the Heather Stone."

"That's what the centaurs assume."

Wick's mind was racing. "Why did they send you to me? I'm glad to be included, but what does this have to do with me?"

"Once I told the centaurs about it, they spotted the pattern in the thief's movements. The fair folk piece was the closest to where the Satyr's Crown was being kept. And since the thief was seen running southeast the last anyone saw him, and since he seems to be just collecting as he goes, going southeast would then logically take him—"

"Here," Wick finished. The news was getting worse by the moment. Twill had caught on to what was happening by now, and she sidled up next to Wick to hear the rest of the

conversation.

"He would be coming to get the lesby's piece next, yes." Rewin's mouth tightened into a grim line. "They sent me a message to give to you." He reached into his messenger's bag at his side and produced a heavy white envelope, which he handed to Wick.

Wick broke the wax seal and slid out the folded piece of paper inside. He lifted the top piece of the paper and saw only a few short lines of handwriting.

"Several of us have had visions of the lesby's piece of the Heather Stone being stolen. Take it and move it somewhere more secure. Leave without notice and tell no one where you are going. Notify us yourself when you have delivered it."

There ended his instructions.

"I understand." Wick slid the paper back inside the envelope. "They want me to take the message on and give it to someone else."

"What?" Both Rewin and Twill looked confused.

"I thought the message was for you." Rewin started to reach for the envelope, then stopped himself, remembering it was confidential. "I could have sworn— never mind. I'm sure they know what they're doing."

Wick nodded absently. He would leave tonight, he decided. The thief could arrive any minute.

"Would you like to stay the night?" Wick's mother asked Rewin, seeming to have appeared out of nowhere while they were talking.

"I have another message, but it's not urgent, and I

doubt I'll make it much further tonight," Rewin admitted. "I'd love to stay if I may."

"I'll prepare the guest room," Wick's mother said, and Rewin's shoulders relaxed. Everyone went their separate ways, leaving Wick to figure out what he was going to do next.

WICK MADE HIS PLANS while the rest of the village cleaned up from the fireworks. As he made his way back home, he formed an idea of where he would go. He could take the piece to someone he trusted in the nixie territory. Since the thief could easily penetrate satyr security measures, satyr territory was out of the question, and sadly Wick couldn't be sure about the seraphs since the robber was one of them, but his nixie friend was discreet. If the leshy heather stone would be safe anywhere, it would be with Wick's friend.

As the festivities wound down for the evening, Wick made his move.

Rewin would be asleep, and all the leshy would be getting about their duties now that the party was over. With everyone distracted, now was the time to leave unnoticed. Wick gathered up his little messenger's bag and poked his head out of his bedroom doorway.

The house was empty. Wrapping his bag strap over his shoulder, he left the house and took the road winding through the middle of the village, heading for the museum. He kept his head down and stayed out of the torchlight to avoid notice.

The tall stone building looked worn. As he

approached, Wick realized he didn't even know how old the museum was. He told himself to research it later as he sidestepped the fireworks debris in the dirt out front. A quick glance around proved that no one was looking his way, so he slipped through the empty doorway.

Inside, a huge dark room greeted Wick. He peered between the pieces of statuary lined up across the tiled floor. Lelo, the museum guard, was nowhere to be seen, and Wick remembered that the museum wasn't open yet for the evening. But for Wick's purposes, it was good that no one else would be around.

Wick took the sweeping set of stairs in the corner and disappeared deeper into the museum.

He knew the layout of the museum by heart. The first floor displayed art. The second, historical artifacts. On the floor above him, a series of smaller rooms held a mixture of natural history, portraiture, and personal items given to the museum over the years by the royal family. He wove through the candlelit rooms of historical artifacts and meticulous art without glancing around. Two floors up and one gallery of historic tree bark over, he entered the room where the lesly kept the most important pieces in the collection.

All the valuables and heirlooms were displayed on open shelves and pedestals. Nothing was locked away. No one was kept out. Visitors from other territories were monitored while they viewed the collection, but it was believed that such valuables belonged to all and should be on display for all to see. Wick had always loved that.

Past candlelit displays of cut gemstones and behind

open cases of valuable heirlooms, a shelf held possibly the most important thing the leschy had ever owned.

The Oak Leaf.

Centuries ago, after using the stones to avoid a great disaster, every race had been given a piece of the Heather Stone as a sign of trust and unity among the people of Aro. Many people, like the satyrs and the manghar, had set their pieces in objects of great importance. Others, like the leschy, had given their piece a setting that made it important in itself.

Even as a child visiting the museum with his family, Wick had always thought the stone's setting was stunning. The elegant leaf shape surrounding the stone was wrought of silvery gold and polished to glitter like a rock in a riverbed. Some clever artist had designed fine grooves across the surface to imitate the leaf's veins, and tiny topaz dewdrops shapes glittered across the face, cut to sparkle even in the faint lamplight. It was only about as big as Wick's hand, but it was easily the most stunning piece in the leschy's collection of valuables.

Since being placed in the tower, it had never left this shelf except to be cleaned and polished. This was its home.

Wick reached out and took the Oak Leaf off the shelf.

"What are you doing?"

Wick glanced back and saw Lelo standing in the doorway. Wick had known Lelo since childhood, ages before Wick had become a messenger and Lelo had become a museum guard. Lelo was stocky and often frightened the smaller children, but underneath all the pretense he had a heart of gold. Wick had meant to avoid everyone on his way

out of the village, but he could reason with Lelo. Wick twisted to put the Oak Leaf inside the bag at his side. "I'm on orders from the centaurs. The Oak Leaf isn't safe here."

"Where is it going? Are the centaurs taking it?" Uncertainty crept into Lelo's voice.

"I can't tell you that. But it will be safe, I promise." Wick flipped the flap of his bag shut over the Oak Leaf, then turned and looked Lelo in the eye. "You can't tell anyone that I took this with me, do you understand?"

"I understand."

Lelo let Wick go without any more questions.

As Wick stepped out of the museum he saw a figure walking toward him that must have been Rewin, judging by the smaller build and dark hair. But Wick couldn't talk to anyone now. Now that he had the heather stone, he had to leave.

Wick ducked into the shadows and made for the edge of the village.

When he stepped out of the ring of lamplight and into the darkness at the edge of the forest, relief flooded his mind. He was out of the village, with the Oak Leaf in hand, in less than six hours from when he had received the message from the centaurs.

The first part of the journey was over.

Now with the village behind him, he started off at a sustainable walking pace with the moon shining down on his head. He didn't make it a quarter mile before the centaur guards fell in around him. Despite their large size, they were strangely stealthy.

"I didn't know they were sending a traveling party," Wick said to the centaur on his right. "How serious was the vision?"

"Serious enough to have all of us concerned," Ongel replied, appearing from the left. "I arranged to travel with you to the leshy border, and after that, I hope you'll be safe alone."

"Thank you, Ongel," Wick said.

Ongel reached out to squeeze Wick's shoulder. "Of course."

They traveled in the dark for miles without speaking. The only sounds among them as they walked were the faint clank of the centaur's armor and the soft thudding of their footsteps. In all his years of working for and with the centaurs, Wick had never seen them in their armor. He had never even considered that they might still have armor, not after how long everyone in Aro had been at peace. Wick found himself looking at Ongel out of the corner of his eye, trying not to think about how he had never seen his mentor look so serious. Ongel's armor dimly reflected the moonlight onto the dark skin of his face, bringing out all the harsh angles and lines of his grim expression.

The stars rotated across the sky, towing the moon along its track from one side of the world to the other.

Wick watched the centaurs, curious if they would start to tire as the night wore on into early morning, but they showed no sign of exhaustion. Perhaps they had foreseen that they would have to travel all night and had known to prepare themselves ahead of time. Or perhaps they were just resilient travelers.

The sky turned grey, then pink, then orange, then the sun rose behind their backs, lighting the way before them and casting long shadows across the landscape. The birds slowly began twittering, then rose into a great chorus. Wick took it all in with admiration.

Another few hours later, when the sun had risen nearly into the center of the sky, the border of leshy territory came within view. The centaurs said nothing as their group passed with Wick over the line of red trees, but as soon as they were on the other side, they stopped.

Wick turned to face them. "I suppose this is where we part ways."

"The thief could still track down the piece," Ongel said, "but from what we've seen it's not likely he'll catch up with you. Watch your back going forward, but you should be safe now."

Wick nodded. "Thank you, all of you, for your help. And thank the others for the warning about our piece of the Heather Stone."

"It's just as much our concern as yours if it's stolen," another centaur said. He adjusted his hoofs, as though one of his legs threatened to fall asleep. He offered a quick smile. "But we'll be sure to tell the others of your thanks."

Ongel gave Wick a quick embrace, and then the centaurs left. Wick raised his hand in farewell as they passed out of sight.

Once they were gone, Wick set his face back to the southwest, where he could hear the rushing of the river leading down to the nixie kingdom. As he started walking again, he couldn't help but look over his shoulder to make

sure no one was following him. One could never be too careful.

It would take several days to reach the coast and his nixie friend. Anything could happen by then. And now that the centaurs were gone, he would have to go the rest of the journey alone.



CHAPTER FOUR

The Thief with One Wing

WICK TRAVELED ANXIOUSLY. In all his years of carrying things around the country, he had always needed to be alert. On occasion, he had to watch his back when he passed through more dangerous regions. But never before had he needed to watch for someone following him.

True, there was no way of knowing if the thief was following him or even knew which way he had gone. But still, Wick remained on edge. Somewhere out there, the thief was looking for him. He wouldn't be safe until he reached nixie territory and the Oak Leaf was out of his hands.

He felt a temptation to stop at every small dwelling he passed like checkpoints, just so that someone would know he was still going unhindered, but that would be against the point of his journey. The few people that he encountered out in the wilderness he avoided or hid from, and he kept away from any roads he found.

Following the river was the easy part. Wick kept on high alert, checking over his shoulder, searching behind every tree and boulder for a seraph thief trying to take the Oak Leaf from him.

At noon on the second day, he finally stopped for a rest. He would much rather have had a drink of the setting sun, but the noonday sun would have to do for now. He would get another chance to have some of the setting sunlight when this was over. He sat in the middle of a clearing of trees with the messenger's bag tucked between his crossed legs and guarded by both his hands. He sat for a good long while, absorbing the light as much as he could. He wouldn't get another chance to get sun today, not if he was going to the nixie territory, and he wanted to get as much of it as he could before moving on.

A while later, Wick opened his eyes and got up off the ground. Glancing behind him once more, he slung his bag back over his shoulder and started walking again.

The riverbank was getting steeper. He stayed on the edge of the woods to keep from slipping down into the water. The brambles thickened, too, and the bushes grew closer together. He had to skirt around things more often, and a few times he got so far off course he had to work to make his way back to the riverbank again. Wick reached where the river split off into the delta and glanced around before stopping to rest his stiff legs.

Stretching, he leaned away from the tree where he had been resting and took another look behind him.

This time there was someone there.

Leaning against a tree watching him was a dark-haired

seraph boy with one bent and mangled wing.

In a moment of panic, Wick almost challenged the thief outright. But before he had even decided what to say, his more practical, guarded nature took over. If this seraph boy was the thief, which Wick was sure he was, he couldn't know that Wick had the piece. Only Lelo and Wick's centaur bodyguards had known that Wick had the piece. Few knew it had even left the tower.

For all the thief knew, the Oak Leaf was still in leshy territory, and Wick was just another messenger carrying a letter.

He had to act like one until he could get out of sight.

"Hello," he said, polite enough to be someone greeting a stranger.

"Hey." The seraph boy gave Wick a quick look up and down. "Where are you headed to?"

In every lie, there was a grain of truth. "The nixie kingdom," Wick responded. "I was given a message to deliver to them."

"The nixies," the seraph boy repeated, sounding almost speculating. His bright blue eyes watched Wick's face like he was looking for something.

"What about yourself?" Wick asked, acutely aware of the descending silence. "Where are you headed?"

"Not sure," the seraph boy said, without moving. "I'm still trying to make up my mind."

Silence again.

"Well," Wick blurted. "I had better be going." He turned to walk away.

"Do all messengers have bags like that?" the seraph boy

asked.

Wick spun around. His heart thundered inside of his chest. *Stay calm.* He forced himself to look casually down at the bag. "Yes, most of us. The centaurs give them to us when we're put into the bigger circuit around Aro. They're good for carrying things in. Very handy." He was talking in short bursts of words. Fragments. Why couldn't he just act natural?

The seraph boy took in Wick's nervousness, his hands clutching the strap of the bag, then met his eyes again, unflinching. "Do you ever get worried? Out here, in the wilderness, by yourself? Carrying valuable messages and. . . whatever else they have you carry?"

He knew. Somehow or another, he knew that Wick had the Oak Leaf.

Still, Wick tried to convince himself that he was safe. He tightened his hands on the strap of the bag to stop their shaking. "Not really. I don't have any enemies, and I don't think anyone would attack a messenger. Most people know better."

Here, the seraph boy frowned and cocked his head. "Really?" He paused. "Interesting."

Then he made a sudden move toward Wick.

Wick darted.

He heard the quick footsteps of the seraph boy racing behind him, trying to catch up. Wick was taller and had longer legs, but for all he knew, the seraph boy could be much faster than him. Or cleverer.

He ran through the trees toward the river delta. Maybe he could lose his pursuer in all the mud.

But no. Only a few more steps told him that he wouldn't make it. The seraph's footsteps were growing closer. He would never beat the thief to the river delta.

He made a new plan. Wick wove through the trees, turning quicker and taking a serpentine pattern to try to keep out of reach just a little longer. Rounding the trunk of a huge oak, he yanked his bag off his shoulder. As the seraph boy rounded the trunk behind him, Wick swung the bag up as hard as he could. It slammed the seraph boy in the face.

The seraph boy slapped straight down backward and landed heavily in the dead leaves covering the ground. As he tried to recover, Wick slung the bag back over his shoulder, picked up a sizable fallen tree branch to use as a weapon if he needed to, and disappeared into the trees.

He walked quicker than before, scanning the skies just in case the seraph boy's mangled wing was any good after all. If Wick was lucky, he could still make it to the nearest nixie outpost without having to encounter the thief again.

But he had no such luck. Wick had barely started his slog across the muddy miles of the river delta's many streams and rivulets before he glanced around and found the seraph boy behind him once more.

Wick jumped a little and made a threatening swing with the tree branch. When the seraph boy made a move, Wick swung it as hard as he could, knocking the boy backward. But even as he went, the seraph boy latched onto the stick, using his weight to jerk Wick to the ground.

The seraph boy's eyes were furious. He yanked the stick out of Wick's hand and growled, "*Stop* hitting me with

things!"

For a moment, Wick was afraid he would be beaten to death with the stick, but instead, the seraph boy sat up and tucked the stick into his lap, wrapping his arms around his knees. Wick couldn't get the stick back now if he tried.

"Listen here," the seraph boy said. "Getting the last two stones was almost too easy, I'll give you that much, so I should have known that sooner or later I'd hit some kind of snag and I would have to explain myself to *somebody*. I just didn't expect it to be this quickly, and I definitely didn't expect to be beaten over the head with a stick by. A. *Tree*."

"Leshy aren't trees," Wick said before he could stop himself. "We just look like them in the same way that forest animals camouflage into the foliage."

"Whatever." The seraph boy tightened his grip on the stick. "Tree or not a tree, if you'd stop trying to break my face and let me *talk*, maybe this would go a little better." He suddenly stopped speaking. He tucked the bag back at his side and gave himself a few quick cuffs to the side of the head. "Why does your voice sound so weird? It sounds like—" His jaw dropped. "Why don't you have a mouth? Where's the rest of your face?"

Wick couldn't even begin to muster an explanation. "It's telepathic." How was it even possible that anyone existed who wasn't fully studied on everything about their fellow countrymen?

"So you're in my head right now? That's so rude!" The boy sounded indignant, so Wick finally had to sum up the energy to tell him that it was only the leshy's voices that projected into other people's heads. They couldn't read

minds, they couldn't make anyone do anything they didn't want to, they could only talk and be heard. The thief still didn't like it, but he accepted the explanation.

"Whatever," the seraph boy said finally. "Now will you let me talk?"

"You're a thief," Wick said. "You don't have any authority here."

"Stop interrupting me," the seraph boy snapped. "It's rude." He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Let's start with names. I'm Archer."

Wick hesitated. "Wick."

"All right, Wick," Archer said. "You're a messenger and you seem pretty pretentious. . . Do you know what this is?" He held out a satchel made of smooth, dark leather. "Do you recognize it?"

A faint memory niggled at the back of Wick's mind, but he couldn't recall. "No."

Archer flipped open the bag's top flap. "How about now?"

Stamped inside the flap of the bag was a symbol of a mountain, with eight star shapes hovering above the peak.

"I've seen that in historical documents. It refers to our ancestors using the Heather Stone to stop the Scorch. They saved Aro from destruction," Wick said. Realization hit him. "That's the bag that the centaurs made. It was stolen centuries ago."

"And now he's on track again," Archer said with fake praise in his voice. He caught Wick's skeptical look and rolled his eyes. "No, I wasn't the one who stole it. Think rationally; I'm not nearly old enough. I probably would have

stolen it if I could have, but someone else already stole it, ages ago."

"So how do you have it?" Wick asked, still looking for the lie.

Archer's eyes locked onto Wick's for a long, uncomfortable moment, and Wick couldn't help but feel that somewhere in Archer's mind, he was being slowly analyzed and filed into categories.

"As I was saying," Archer continued after much too long. "It's my bag now, but I didn't steal it. It was given to me by some centaur older than dirt who got it from someone else."

"Why did he give it to you?" Wick asked.

Archer met Wick's gaze, expressionless. "Because he was about to die, and there was no one else for miles, so I was the worthless piece of dead meat that he gave it to. Any other questions?"

"Not yet."

"Good." Archer settled back into a more comfortable position, spreading his good wing out across the grass. "He said that it couldn't be filled, but only so long as I kept to the sacred duty of the bag. Now, I don't do *sacred duties*. Who does *sacred duties*? That's just one of those things no one says anymore because there's no way to take it seriously."

Wick thought about when the centaurs had given him his messenger's seal of trust. The words *sacred duty* had involved several times. Still, Wick said nothing.

"Apparently," Archer continued, "whoever has the bag is supposed to watch the skies for the next big disaster. You

know, something like when 'our ancestors had to stop the Scorch'."

Wick could feel the mockery.

"If the person with the bag sees the special scary thing coming, that person is supposed to gather all the pieces of the Heather Stone, go to the mountain in the middle of the centaur's territory, and save the country from imminent disaster. Apparently." Archer shrugged. "But that wasn't any of my business, and I don't do 'sacred duties'. So I just skipped that part. I thought I'd keep the bag and ignore all other warnings of doom and gloom and go along my merry way. But about a month ago the bag stopped working."

"What do you mean, it stopped working?" Wick asked.

"Interrupting. . ." Archer muttered under his breath. "It's an unfillable bag, remember? It stopped working. It stopped being unfillable. I couldn't put anything in it anymore. It wouldn't hold more than a few pieces of fruit. After a while, I remembered he said it would only be unfillable so long as I kept the 'sacred duty'. I figured if I wanted the bag to work again, I would have to do what he told me."

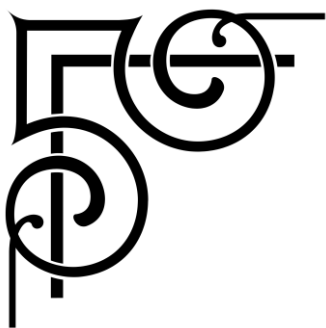
"So you just started stealing all the pieces of the Heather Stone to. . . what? Be ready for when something is about to happen?" Wick asked, skeptical again.

"No. Not at all. I forgot to mention. . ." Archer tucked the strap of the bag back over his shoulder. "He also said that he'd had a vision about the Scorch or whatever it's called. It'll be back five months from now, and if we're not ready this time, it'll be the end. Everything we know will be destroyed, and if we're lucky, we'll all be dead too."

Archer sat there, nodding, waiting for Wick to respond. When Wick didn't, he said, "Well? What are you going to say, Tree?"

Wick left the *tree* comment alone and stood up, brushing his hands off on his legs. "I say that I really should go now. I still have something to deliver to the nixies. But thank you for that very interesting story."

Archer said nothing. Wick glanced at him and saw that his mouth had dropped open in disgust.



CHAPTER FIVE

A Smattering of Failed Plans

“YOU HAVE GOT to be kidding,” Archer hissed under his breath.

Not the tree. Anyone but the tree. Well, maybe not anyone, but hadn't he put up with enough from this guy already?

Wick was still staring. “What?”

Archer's mouth snapped shut. “Nothing. So even a centaur prophecy won't convince you that I'm telling you the truth. Huh.”

But inside, Archer's mind whirled. Thinking about the other thing the centaur had said, the part he'd blown off. The part where the centaur had said Archer would fail without just the right partner.

“He'll thank you for the story.”

“What?”

"He'll say 'I really should go now. But thank you for that very interesting story.' And he'll want to come with you, before the end. You can't do it without him."

Younger Archer had been indignant. *"I don't need help. I'm done with help."*

"It doesn't matter. Without him, you will fail."

The centaur had even brushed his hands off on his legs the same way the tree had just now.

Wick stood a little taller, stuck-up tree that he was. "If the centaur was here to prophesy for himself, that would be a different story, but telling me a tale of doom and woe isn't enough. You don't have nearly enough proof."

Seriously? Archer's mouth quirked in irritation. "So when you hear thunder, but you can't see the clouds, do you just assume there's no storm coming? I'd hate to see how often you get caught in mudslides."

"If you can come up with some more solid proof, I'll be happy to hear it," Wick said evenly. "If you can't, I'll be going now."

No, Archer decided, Wick wasn't the one that Caihu had been talking about. It didn't matter that he said the exact thing Caihu said he would say, it didn't matter that he seemed to fit all the boxes. Wick wasn't it.

Archer made an irritated noise and watched him walk away. Now what? He still needed to pinch the stone Wick was carrying, but the centaurs enchanted messenger bags like Wick's so they couldn't be stolen. Archer had tried to dismantle them in the past, but centaur magic was strong, and he had been unable to even budge the flap.

Archer's fingers tapped against the stick in his lap. He

needed a different approach. He could always jump Wick and make him open the bag, but somehow, he couldn't bring himself to do it now that Wick was part of the whole prophecy thing.

No, the tree wasn't part of anything! Archer had already decided that much. He didn't have to adhere to anything he didn't want to.

But he still didn't want to attack the tree. Not yet, anyway.

For the moment Archer opted to follow him.

Like before, he had to keep out of sight if he wanted to keep the trail. The tree was paranoid and kept looking behind him like he thought someone was following him.

Which, of course, someone was, but that wasn't for him to know.

As he tracked Wick across the river delta, Archer had plenty of time to scheme.

He couldn't take anything out of the bag, and even if he knew how to dismantle the magic on the bag, he wouldn't be able to take it away from Wick to do so. But maybe, he realized as he walked, maybe he could take the bag when Wick wasn't holding onto it. Maybe if Wick set it down somewhere, or if he let go of it in his sleep.

Archer's brow furrowed. Did lesly sleep? Wick had done that thing where he sat in the sun forever. What was that, exactly? Was that sleeping?

Wick had gone out of sight. Archer picked up the pace. He soon found the tree trying to avoid him by walking down the side of a steep stream bank.

Or maybe he could scare the bag out of Wick's grip.

That would work, wouldn't it? Even if he still couldn't take anything out of it right away, at least then he'd have the bag with him, and he could try to take it apart.

He waited for another half mile, then snuck up behind Wick and leaped at him from the shadows.

Wick jumped, but he kept a firm grip on the strap of the bag. He didn't try to flee and didn't fall over. In fact, if Archer was trying to read that empty face of his, Wick just looked mildly annoyed. He pushed past Archer and kept walking toward the coast.

Archer scowled after him. It had been a stupid plan, but he had hoped it would work. Now he had to think of something else.

The sun slid across the sky as Wick and Archer tried to outsmart one another. Wick seemed to be trying everything he could think of to shake Archer— changing direction, taking a zigzag pattern, trying to hide in the brush and wait until Archer went past— but Archer spotted him again in minutes every time. Archer tried his fair share of schemes too. He tried to slip his hand inside the bag to grab whatever he could find, he tried to knock it off Wick's shoulder using branches. But no matter what he tried, the bag couldn't be opened, wouldn't fall off Wick's shoulder, refused to budge at all.

Centaur magic was strong stuff. Archer cursed the day it was invented. It was unfair that the centaurs got things like visions and the strongest magic and still got to be in charge. Sure, no one seemed to mind them, and they seemed nice enough, but Archer had long ago decided not to like them.

The sun slipped down toward the horizon, and Archer stewed. There had to be *some* way to get the bag away from Wick. Archer hadn't come all this way and gone to all this trouble just to get stopped by a tree. A *tree*. And the tree was smart, but he couldn't be smarter than Archer. No one was smarter than Archer.

No, somehow or another he was getting that bag. There had to be a way. He just needed to keep thinking.

Shortly after the sun had set, Wick's pace slowed. He picked out a small clearing and lay down under a bush, using the messenger bag as a pillow. He took one more look around before he laid his head down, but Archer was a good stone's throw away, shielded by a tree. There was no way Wick saw him.

Finally, Wick laid his head down on the bag, and the glowing orbs of his eyes blinked out.

So unsettling.

Archer nearly snuck over for another attempt at filching the bag, but something about the whole situation seemed fishy. Did *leshy* sleep? He didn't know, but something nagged at him. Something about it felt like a setup. Maybe the tree was just lying there trying to hide. Or maybe he was waiting to hit Archer with another stick as soon as he approached.

Archer rubbed the growing bruise on the side of his face. He did not want to be hit with another stick.

He entered the clearing, stepping softly across the crunching pine needles. He didn't approach Wick. Halfway across the clearing, Archer stopped and narrowed his eyes at the figure under the bush. Even asleep, Wick was still

holding onto the bag for dear life. There was no way Archer would be able to get it out of his grip, not with all the magic that was on it.

Again, he questioned himself. Was Wick really sleeping, or was it a trick? Everything slept, right? Archer couldn't think of any way anything could survive without it. Wick had to be sleeping. And if Wick was sleeping, at some point surely he would let go of the bag.

Fine. If it was a waiting game, Archer was willing to play.

He climbed up in a nearby tree, onto a large, broad limb. The bark wasn't too comfortable, but maybe the roughness of the bark would keep him from falling asleep. Tucking his wings behind him, he settled back to wait.

WICK WAITED.

Staying still wasn't the hard part. The hard part was not knowing if the plan would work. Wick's whole plan rode on Archer knowing nothing about the leshy. If he knew that leshy didn't sleep, didn't even rest at night, everything would fall apart. The plan was a gamble, but this seemed to be the only thing he could do to shake the thief. He had run out of ideas.

So far, all was well. He had heard the soft crunch of footsteps and the pause as Archer took in the scene. It had taken all of Wick's willpower not to freeze. But then the footsteps moved off again. Archer hadn't called Wick's bluff. He hadn't told him *get up, I know you're faking*. Instead, Archer seemed to take in how tightly Wick was holding the

bag, and after a moment his footsteps moved away again.

A faint scrape and a rustle came from across the clearing, and Wick cracked open a curious eye. Archer had climbed up into one of the trees and sat spread out on a branch to watch for Wick to wake up.

Wick could wait. He stayed there, eyes shut, clamped tight around the bag, not moving.

He had to get rid of Archer. He knew that just keeping the seraph away until he got to the coast would not be enough. Archer had already stolen two pieces of the Heather Stone, and his coming after Wick could only mean that he had already been to the museum and found out for himself that the leshy piece was no longer there. How he had found out that Wick had the stone and where he was going with it was a mystery, but Wick now knew enough about his enemy to know that he would need some means of losing the thief for good before he got to the coast.

If he was able to lose Archer during the night, Wick would try to put as many miles between him and Archer as he could. If he was lucky, he would be almost to the coast by the time Archer woke up.

To keep up the ruse of being asleep, every so often he moved around and changed position on the ground in the way he expected any normal sleeper would. Sometimes the bag was tucked under his arm, sometimes he had it folded up near his head, but he never let go of it or put it anywhere Archer would be able to easily take it from him if he thought he could steal it while Wick was 'asleep.'

Hours passed. Night creatures and insects emerged out and made their usual chirps and peeps as they went about

their lives. The hard ground made Wick's back ache.

After what felt like a thousand years of patience, Wick cracked his eyes open and peeked up into the tree.

Archer sat slumped against the trunk of the tree, arms crossed, head down. His breathing was smooth and regular, and even though Wick watched him for several minutes, he didn't move or even look up.

He was asleep at last.

Wick slowly and carefully slid out from under the bush and got up. He made as little noise as possible, trying to keep from stepping on any loud twigs and not touching any foliage that would make a noise. Slinging the bag over his shoulder again, he slipped out of the little clearing, leaving Archer asleep behind him.

He had lost the thief at last.

Once he was out of sight of the little clearing, Wick walked at his normal swift traveling pace, looking around him at the busy night creatures and up at the many stars twinkling overhead. It was a beautiful cool night. He couldn't get enough of it.

"Sly move."

Wick spun around. Archer stood ten feet behind him, his hair mussed rather than up in its usual spiky formation, his good wing flared out to the side. He looked only half amused. "That really was sly," he said, nodding. "Turn the tables back on me and try to get away while *I* was sleeping rather than the other way around. It was clever. I'll give you that. But still not fair."

"You won't get the bag from me," Wick said. "You had better stop trying."

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be happy to know I’ve made a decision,” Archer said. He ran a hand up his hair, trying to put it back into his customary spike at the front. “I’m leaving. In case you hadn’t noticed, I was trying to get this whole ‘saving the world’ thing over as fast as possible so I can go back to my normal life—”

“Troublemaking?” Wick said incredulously.

“Yes, troublemaking. I love to make trouble. And this is holding me up. I think I’ll go and get all the other pieces while you’re over here slogging through the swamp protecting your bag, and then when you’ve left the piece with the nixies and gone home, I’ll just hit the nixie territory last and steal their piece and yours in one fell swoop. Sound good to everyone? Good. I’m leaving.” He spun on his heel and stalked off in the other direction.

This plan sounded worse than his original one of stealing the bag from Wick. If Wick didn’t take control of the situation now, everything would spiral out of control, and he could be putting everyone in danger.

He weighed his options.

1. He could keep his original plan and leave the Oak Leaf with the nixies, risking it being stolen with the nixie’s piece of the Heather Stone when Archer came back.

2. He could take the Oak Leaf directly to the centaurs, throwing the thief off his trail and allowing him to warn the centaurs of the further thefts that were about to happen.

3. He could catch up with Archer and follow him as he went after each piece of the Heather Stone. Then, once he had learned Archer’s full plan, he could turn him in and get

all the pieces back at once.

The second option sounded the most comfortable, but some nagging part of Wick's mind told him that if the centaurs had wanted him to bring the Oak Leaf to them, they would have told him as much. The first option sounded all-around terrible and just the kind of foolish path Archer wanted him to take.

Then it occurred to him what Ongel had said about the counselor job. *"We want to see you take on and solve some significant problem completely on your own, without any kind of help."*

Maybe this was the opportunity he was looking for. If he could handle this on his own, figure out what was really going on, maybe that would be just what the centaurs wanted. This might be his only to do so chance for a long time. Furthermore, if he just let the thief walk away now, who knew how long it would be before anyone had a chance at catching him? If Wick trailed him, at least for the time being, he could keep tabs on the thief. If it turned out that Archer was lying, Wick could turn him in.

He took one more look over the landscape. He could just see the spires of the nixie palace above the tops of the trees. So close. He had come so close.

Reluctantly he turned away from the coast and walked back the way Archer had gone.

"Wait," he called, "what was the centaur's name?"

Archer stopped and looked over his shoulder. "He said his name was Caihu. Why is that important?"

Wick caught up. "Because a name proves he was a real

person.”

Archer looked like he was resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Does he exist, then? Does the high and mighty Wick know the name of Caihu?”

“Yes.” Wick smiled inwardly. “Which is exactly the problem. He disappeared about eight years ago, and before he disappeared, he was invalidated by the other centaurs for having gone insane. All his visions were figments of his crazed mind.”

“You're saying they called him crazy and kicked him out.”

“No, he left of his own choice.”

“Still, that must make it very convenient for you,” Archer said and turned to start walking again. A cricket screeched in a bush off to Wick's left.

“Is there any other proof you can offer?” Wick asked.

Archer stopped again. “Why does it matter to you?”

“Because,” Wick said, “if you're telling the truth, you're not making a very good case right now.”

Archer snorted. “I don't have to prove anything to you.”

“Have to, no. But if you could prove it to me, I wouldn't recommend everyone in Aro arrest you on sight. I am just a messenger, and I don't have any real power, but people trust me. They'll believe me when I tell them you're coming. So if you're telling the truth and there really is some kind of danger, I'm going to need more proof.”

Archer scowled, but he seemed to be considering. At last, he adjusted his grip on the strap of his bag and said, “What if I had everything he said, written down in Caihu's

hand?" His tone turned defensive. "Or is that not good enough for you?"

Wick considered it. "I think I could identify his handwriting."

Archer nodded and started walking again.

"Wait, where are you going?" Wick asked.

"I don't have it with me. It's in seraph territory," Archer called as he walked away. "Which is good for me, because the seraph piece of the stone is there too. Why are you following me?" he asked with a sigh as Wick came up beside him.

"I'm coming with you," Wick said, watching his footing as he stepped over a large fallen branch. "But only to keep an eye on you. You haven't proved yet that you're telling me the truth, and you're not getting away if it turns out that you never had Caihu's word in writing in the first place."

Archer smiled. "What makes you think I want you coming with me? I could lose you in a minute if I wanted."

"From where I stand," Wick said calmly, "either I come with you to seraph territory and you prove to me that what you're saying is true, or I'll send out enough letters to make sure that all the stones are under triple guard. Unless I come with you, you'll fail."

For the briefest moment, so fleeting he could have missed it in the space of a breath, Wick thought he saw Archer freeze up. What had Wick said that had him on edge? But all too quickly, the thief's carefree attitude returned. "Fine, if you're that worked up about it, you can come with me. But if we're going to seraph territory, we're

stealing the seraph stone.”

Wick balked. “I’m not stealing anything.”

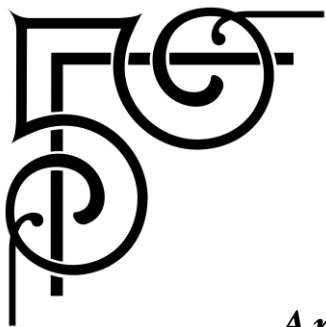
Archer shrugged. “Fine, don’t come if you want, but I thought you said you wanted to keep an eye on me.”

Wick tried not to let his frustration show as he walked along behind Archer. This was already looking like an impossible task.

Archer called back to him. “Keep up, Tree, or I’ll leave you behind.”

“You couldn’t; I walk faster than you. And I’m going to need you to stop calling me tree.”

“Hmm. I’ll consider it.”



CHAPTER SIX

The Tale of An Unfillable Bag

THEY WALKED FOR the rest of the night, stopping little, talking less. Either Archer was used to traveling at night, or he didn't want to complain about being tired, but he never acted like he needed sleep. Wick suspected it was less stamina and more being too proud to look weak.

It was the longest night of Wick's life. He was used to traveling in silence, but that was only when he was traveling alone. On the occasion that he had someone with him, it was normally a friend or previous acquaintance, someone he could talk to as they walked.

However, in this situation, he suspected Archer wasn't in the mood to chat, and frankly, he wasn't in the mood to have a conversation either. At some point, he dared to mention that going to seraph territory had to be something of a homecoming for Archer. All he got in response was a slight raise of the eyebrows and more silence.

That was the full extent of their conversation. As the hours passed, Wick became painfully aware of the crushing silence.

It was a relief when the sun came up. The dawn chorus was quieter than it had been the previous morning. Although the birds seemed almost hesitant to sing, there were still a few who sang out anyway, and soon the sound swelled to something like a full chorus.

It was Archer that broke the silence next. "Tell me, Tree, what made you want to carry fancy people's messages all over the place for a living?"

"First of all, I'm not a tree," Wick said. "Not even related to a tree."

"You keep saying that, and yet I'm still not convinced." Archer ducked a tree branch. They were starting to cross back over a good deal of the land that Wick had crossed on his way to nixie territory.

"Well, I'm not," Wick said. "So stop calling me a tree."

"Whatever you say, twig."

Wick sighed.

"Well?" Archer looked over at him with eyebrows raised. "You still haven't answered the question."

Leshy were assessed and assigned jobs that their family and surrounding village thought might suit them best in their skills and interests, but Wick didn't feel like explaining that part. "It's what I've always done. I started going to school when I was very young, and that's what I was taught. Once my education was finished, I went into full messenger training and then started the job for real. My circuit just sort of grew from there. Now I go all over the country."

"You're telling me you've never done anything else?" Archer asked. "Ever?"

"I haven't. And I don't think I'd want to."

"Why not?" Archer asked.

"Because this is what I enjoy. I don't want to try anything else because this is what I like doing, and what I want to keep doing." Wick took an easier route around a tree, avoiding a bramble thicket that Archer walked straight into.

"But how do you know that you wouldn't like something else more? You don't even want anything else?" Archer insisted. He pulled one last branch of thorns out of his sleeve and kept walking.

"I don't," Wick said, "because this is my job and this is where people need me."

"Ah, so that's what it is. You do it for other people." Archer said *other people* in a voice of utter disappointment. "It's not because you like it. Which is good, because I just don't see what there is to like about it at all."

Wick's nerves were starting to fray. He snapped back, "Not everyone lives only for themselves the way you do."

Archer grinned. "I'm perfectly selfish and *perfectly* happy. It's great."

"I'm sure."

"It's better than how you live. I know *I* wouldn't want to do the same thing over and over again for the rest of my life," Archer said. "Over and over and over and over until the day they put me in my grave. It sounds like hell."

"It's not hell," Wick said in the patient but condescending voice of someone dealing with an obnoxious

youngster.

"But I'll bet you like it because you get to talk to all the leaders. Help make decisions. Kiss up to the big wigs. Am I right?" Archer asked, slapping a branch away as if it had offended him.

"You're wrong about that, too." Wick ducked under the same branch without slapping it. "But most of the leaders around are nice people, and they're kind to me. There were a few advisers that had problems with me when I first started out because I was so young and all, but those have all been replaced over time."

"But you like all the power, don't you?" Archer shot Wick a grin. "It feels good to boss people around. You like it."

"I don't boss people around," Wick insisted. "That's not my job. I can offer suggestions and help with their plans, but they don't have to listen to me."

Archer said nothing, but he smiled as he walked, and Wick could feel another little piece being filed away in Archer's bank of knowledge. The easy way Archer seemed to read him was starting to grate Wick's nerves.

"I don't know why I'm telling you any of this," Wick said. "I don't have to prove myself to you."

Archer's smile only grew. "But it's fun to watch you try anyway."

Wick took all the feelings of frustration and possibly murder and ushered them into a deep, dark cubbyhole in his soul, where he asked them politely never to come out again. With his temper stabilized again, he trusted himself to speak again. "But I do like talking to them if that's what you

mean.”

“It isn't.”

“The centaurs especially have been very kind to me,” Wick went on. “They've been my mentors for the better part of my life, Tinor and Ongel especially. They're always eager to help anyone grow. And most of the other leaders like having me around. I'm reliable and levelheaded, and they like that.”

“Well, good for them,” Archer said. “But it can't all be fun and games and people patting you on the back for doing a good job. You can't do a good job *all* the time. What do you hate about it?”

Wick stood up straighter and kept his gaze straight ahead. “I don't hate anything about being a messenger.”

“Oh, come on. You have to have feelings buried in there somewhere. Don't you hate when someone tells you off?”

“No,” Wick said with finality. “Some situations are more difficult than others, but everyone in Aro has a voice and everyone deserves to speak if they think something is wrong.”

“Sorry,” Archer said, and for a moment Wick thought he was apologizing for being rude. But then he continued, “I thought I was speaking to the messenger, not the handbook he learned from.”

Wick swallowed his words and said nothing more for a while after that.

A few minutes later, Archer opened the bag at his side and dug out a handful of berries, which he ate as he walked.

“Didn't you bring anything to eat?” he asked Wick

after eating about half the berries. Almost before he finished asking the question, he seemed to remember Wick's lack of a mouth and said, "Right. Forget I asked." When he was finished with the berries, he said, "I really think you're missing out on some of the best things in life. You can't even eat."

"I think I'll live," Wick said. "I have the sun, and that's better than food."

"Are you sure, though?" Archer asked. "You don't know if you like anything better than messenger-ing because you've never done anything else. And you don't know if the sun is better than food because you've never had food. How would you know?"

"The difference between those two things is that I have no way of eating food at all," Wick said in a practical tone. Any way short of transmogrifying, and that was out of the question. "I guess I'll just have to live knowing that the sun is certainly better than how those berries taste."

"If you say so," Archer said, and pulled a slice of pie out of his bag. He brushed a few crumbs off the top and took a large bite out of it as he walked.

And so the traveling went on. Archer stopped every so often to look at some part of the landscape, whether it was some crooked tree or dead flower or to listen to the sound of the wind, but Wick waited for him every time. Neither of them was certain who was the leader of the journey, but one way or another they tolerated one another as they traveled.

The third time Archer stopped, he had one of the dead flowers in his hand when he stood. "Can you put this in your bag?" he asked, distracted.

"Why?" Wick looked down at the flower, then back up at Archer again. "You're the one with the unfillable bag. Put it in there."

Archer now seemed to realize that he had made the request out loud but refused to backtrack now. "Can't put it in the bag," he said shortly. "The horse will eat it."

"Ah," Wick said, and then stopped short. "Sorry, what? The horse?"

"Yeah. She'll eat it if I put it in the bag, and that defeats the point."

Wick was still mystified. Then he realized. "She'll eat it if you put it in the bag? The horse is *in* the bag?"

"Yes," Archer said, like Wick should have known.

"You put a horse. . . *in the bag*?"

"Yes! Stop yelling about it!"

"Why?"

"Because I don't need her all the time, and I don't want her wandering off when I forget to tie her up, so she's in the bag!" Archer opened the flap of the bag for a moment, and a horse's snort came from within like a greeting.

Now so thunderstruck that he could say nothing, Wick wordlessly took the dead flower and tucked it inside his messenger's bag.

A mile or so later, when Wick had come to terms with the fact that Archer kept a horse inside his unfillable bag with the Satyr's Crown and goodness knew what else, he got up the courage to ask, "What else do you have in the bag?"

"Why is it any of your business?" Archer demanded.

Wick turned to him and exclaimed, "Because if you

have a horse in your bag, I'd like to know what else is in there!"

Archer rolled his eyes. "Not much else. The horse, two pieces of the Heather Stone, some cooking supplies for when I want to make something nice to eat, a cloak if I want it, some other food that will keep for a few days—those are in a bag by themselves inside the bag—some rocks, and. . ." He stopped himself, looked at Wick incredulously, then mumbled something under his breath.

"What did you say?" Wick asked, almost certain it was some snide comment about him.

Archer mumbled again, staring at the ground in front of him.

"What?" Wick demanded. "Speak up!"

"A river," Archer finally said, raising his head and taking up a defensive stance as though he dared Wick to say anything about it.

But Wick did have something to say about it. "There's a *what* in the bag?"

Archer didn't break eye contact. "I think you heard me."

Wick took a moment to process, then collected himself to say what he was going to say next. "*Why is there a river in the bag?*"

"In case I need it." Archer rolled his eyes. After a moment of awkward silence, he muttered, "I dropped the fair folk's piece of the Heather Stone in a river when I was crossing down from satyr territory, and I couldn't find it again, so I stuck the bag in the river and just took the whole thing out. Once the river was out of the way, I found the

piece lodged in the riverbed and kept going.”

“Without putting the river back.”

“I was in a hurry! I had satyrs looking all over the place for me after I stole their stupid crown, and getting the river back out would be harder than putting it in, so I haven't had time to get it back out yet.”

Wick eyed the bag. It did seem to be bulging, but he couldn't imagine an entire river being inside it. Or a horse. Or a lot of things. And yet the entire Satyr's Crown was supposed to be in there. “How can taking the river back out be any more complicated than it was putting it in? Just open the flap and let it out!”

“I told you, it would be complicated!” Archer bellowed. “I have a lot of things in there that I still want, and if I let the river out without collecting it all first, it would all wash away and I'd never find it all again! Sasha would be drowned in the mudslide! It's more complicated than it sounds!”

Wick blinked, another strange sight on his face that made Archer's eyes bug out in shock. “Who's Sasha?”

“The horse!”

Wick decided that now was the best possible time to stop trying to make sense of this seraph and continued walking without saying another word.

They kept walking, cresting hills and climbing through patches of rocks and thick bushes whenever the terrain got rugged.

Wick had to keep reminding himself that Archer was individually robbing every race in Aro, and he had to be turned in at the first opportunity.

Sometimes reminding himself wasn't so hard.

"Are you just going to let me have the bag already?" Archer asked, having apparently reached a point where he thought being irritating would get him what he wanted. "You wouldn't have to walk all this way for no reason if you just gave it to me. Then we wouldn't have to put up with one another."

"No," was all Wick said.

"It wouldn't be difficult to just do nothing. Have you ever tried to do that? Do nothing? There probably hasn't been a day in your life where you weren't running like you were in a race. You don't seem like the type to stop. You'll keep running until you're dead."

"You don't seem any different," Wick said.

Archer leaned sideways and stared at Wick with an exaggerated expression of concern. "I can't tell if you're joking. I am nothing like that, and I would have thought you could tell." His expression soured, and then he stood up straight and kept walking. "I can't even tell you how irritating it is trying to read your face. Is there even anything to read? Do you even make expressions? Why do you even have a face?" He raised his hands in defeat. "You don't have a mouth. You don't have eyebrows. You barely have a nose. And I'm not even going to get started on how scary it is trying to look you in the eye. It's like staring into. . . I don't even know. How can anybody have a conversation with you for more than five minutes without losing part of their soul looking at your eyes?"

If Wick gave a reasonable explanation, he would only be criticized more. He remained silent.

In reality, while the other creatures used expressions to

convey their feelings, the lesby used inflections of the voice and what faint feelings they could transmit telepathically. Many years of reading expressions had made Wick used to them, but the other lesby tended to find the changing faces unnerving.

A little after noon, Wick stopped on a nice hilltop clear of trees and nearly set his bag down before he thought better of it.

"Why have we stopped?" Archer demanded. "We're going at a good pace. We're just passing centaur territory now. If we keep going at this pace, we'll get to the seraph piece the day after tomorrow, in the evening. Perfect time for thieving."

"I need sun," Wick said. "You had your food, now I need sun."

"But I could eat food without stopping," Archer pointed out. "You're stopping. And you were standing in the sun for ages when I was following you. Hours, probably. Half the day. How long is this going to take?"

Wick was tempted to roll his eyes at the exaggeration, but he fought the urge. "Only an hour or so, and then we can carry on. I had a good long time in the sun yesterday, so I just have to recharge a short while today and then I shouldn't need any more until sometime tomorrow."

Archer lowered himself into a seat against a rock and watched Wick dig his feet into the soil. "How long can you go without sun?" he asked. It was strange hearing a genuinely curious question from him.

"A few days," Wick said. "But it gets less and less comfortable, and I'll get slower and stiffer as I go. I won't be

able to think as clearly. Sort of like if you didn't eat food."

"Sort of," Archer said, making the so-so gesture with one hand. He said nothing more as Wick got himself settled and raised his face to the sun.

With his feet in the soil, sun time rejuvenated Wick a little faster, and he was ready to continue in less than an hour. When he pulled his feet out of the earth, Archer inhaled deeply and picked his chin up off his palm. He had nearly fallen asleep.

"All right, let's keep going," Wick said. He almost added that they could still be to the seraph citadel in good time, but refrained when he realized that saying that would be encouraging the theft, and that was exactly the opposite of what he was trying to do. He decided to say nothing.

A DAY AND A HALF later, they were only a few miles from Eri.

The problem was, in order to reach Eri, Archer was saying that they would have to somehow cross a gaping stone canyon. A canyon that seemed to be kept from falling to pieces by dozens of massive iron chains.

Wick took a step back.

Archer had to be joking.

But his smile was not the smile of someone who was joking. It was the smile of someone who was completely serious and loved what the sincerity was causing.

Somewhere, the seraphs who had chosen to build these chains in place of a real bridge had to be laughing just as loudly.

"We can't cross here!" Wick spun to face Archer,

hoping the suggestion was all for show and that Archer really did know the way around the canyon that yawned in front of them. "There's nothing to cross *on!*"

"Sure there is." Archer took a few steps backward, stepping out onto one of the waist-thick chains that stretched across the canyon.

Wick jumped forward to stop him from falling, but Archer's balance never wavered. To make a point, he took one bare foot off the chain and stuck it out to the side, balancing on one leg with his good wing extended for balance.

Wick lunged toward him. "*Stop that.* You're going to fall."

"Calm down." Archer put his second foot back on the chain and turned around to face the way he was going over the canyon. "I've walked this way dozens of times before. A hundred times. A thousand, maybe."

"It can't be a thousand."

"Maybe it isn't. But I'm not going to fall, and you won't fall either so long as you focus on balancing rather than talking. Now come on. It's the only way to get to where we want to go, short of walking thirty miles west and going around, then walking thirty miles back on the other side." Then he turned around and kept going, walking across the canyon on the chains. He didn't look back.

Wick fought with himself. It was one thing to want to go across the canyon to get to the other side, it was another thing to make himself go across.

But he had to. Didn't he? He wanted to first see what he was up against.

He took a quick look over the edge and realized it would have been better not to. The drop was massive.

Only seraphs would build something like this. If he fell, it would be fatal. It was dark at the bottom, but he could make out a few shapes. Whether they were rocks or bushes or even figments of his imagination, it didn't matter; even if the bottom was made of pillows, the height of the fall would kill him. And while the chains appeared to be strong and attached securely to the sides of the canyon, his mind filled with images of them pulling loose and plunging him into oblivion. If he fell, a few of the chains were close enough together for him to grab onto one and pull himself back up, but if a limb were caught it would break, wouldn't it?

A terrible thought crossed his mind.

Wick called to Archer over the drop of the canyon. "This isn't how you broke your wing, is it?"

He hadn't dared approach the subject of Archer's wing before now. From the way Archer never touched it, never extended it, never looked at it, he could tell it was a subject that was best left alone. But if Wick fell and that was likely to be his fate or worse, he wanted to know.

The last few syllables of the shouted question bounced off the walls of the canyon more than once before Archer responded. Without slowing his steady stride across the chain or even looking around, he shouted back.

"No."

No.

Archer shouted again. "Now come on."

Wick decided that thinking about it wasn't serving

him, and before he could waste another moment in speculation, he stepped out onto the chain.

It immediately wavered under his feet, but not as much as he had thought it would. The sheer weight of the chain kept it from swaying further than an inch from side to side. And for now, at least, the wind was low.

Which meant that his main concern was balancing.

The links of the chain were huge, most of them three to four feet in length. Some of them had small clumps of grass or swatches of moss growing on them, and more than a little grime from birds and weather coated the part he was trying to walk on.

But somehow, Archer was crossing, and somehow, Wick already managed to make it a good ten feet away from the edge of the canyon, so *somehow*, he had to make it the rest of the way across.

One foot in front of the other. He just couldn't fall.

The wind started up as he reached the middle of the canyon, but he forced himself to keep moving forward. Stopping would not make the wind go away. The wind grew stronger, so strong he was starting to worry it would knock him off the chain. Then, as it was getting to its climax, the wind cut out.

That, of course, was when one of Wick's feet slipped.

His heart nearly stopped. He tried to catch his balance again, tried to lean back to an upright position, but his own weight was pulling against him, and now the chain link he stood on was tilting just slightly, and *oh no I'm going to fall*.

He had chosen a chain that was very close to another chain in case he needed to catch himself, but now that he

was about to fall, he saw the folly in it. If he fell the wrong way, he could break his arm, or worse, he could snap his neck.

This whole thing had been a terrible idea.

But as he started to fall, somehow the foot that had slipped landed on top of the chain next to him. He caught a firm foothold. And then some part of his mind must have been still in perfect order because instead of falling, instead of flailing, instead of tilting over and getting his neck broken on the way down, he calmly stepped from one chain onto the other with all the grace of a trained dancer.

He could have felt proud of it if it weren't for the moment of absolute panic before his foot touched down.

After that, he focused on staring at the other side of the canyon and kept walking. A few hair-raising moments later, he made it to the other side of the canyon without slipping again.

Archer made it to the other side a moment or two before Wick, and when Wick set foot on the other side, he frowned just a little bit and said, "I could have sworn you started on a different chain."

"So could I," Wick said, looking behind him at the death trap he had just convinced himself to cross.

"You don't. . ." Archer trailed off. He tried again. "You don't by any chance want to go solo on this one?"

"What do you mean?" Wick asked.

"You could just get the piece and I'll wait outside the city for you?"

"And when I'm caught and arrested, I'll be the one to take the blame?" Wick gave Archer a hard stare. "I don't

think so. I'm not even planning to do any of the robbing, if it's all the same to you. I'm just here to keep an eye on you, not to be an accessory to whatever crimes you plan to commit while you're here."

"At least I tried," Archer said in a disparaging tone. "Well—" He shrugged, then looked over at Wick with a curious tilt to his head, "are you ready to rob some seraphs?"

Something inside Wick itched to run away, to drag his traveling companion by the collar to the nearest authorities as quickly as possible, but he was still waiting to see if Archer could produce any proof. After only the briefest moment's hesitation, he nodded.

They entered the city to rob it.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The First of Many Faulty Schemes

THEY TRIED TO ATTRACT little attention while entering the city. For the moment, Archer was too busy trying to stay out of sight to breathe any mention of the upcoming robbery, so for the moment, Wick was comfortable.

But he still knew that he had willingly agreed to steal something. He also knew there was a chance that the proof he was waiting for didn't exist. That bothered him.

For the moment he tried to distract himself with the glorious architecture of the city.

The seraphs built beautiful cities. He had never been to Eri itself in the past, but he had been to several of the seraph's other citadels delivering messages and paying visits to important people, and all of them had been equally stunning.

Seraph cities found a balance between working with

the landscape and using the landscape to their advantage. Some trees had been cleared to build the city, but most of the larger ones had been left standing, and the large rock formations that covered the hillsides had not been moved. The seraphs built their buildings and houses against the sides of the trees, up, up, up, into the sky. Bridges went over rocks, balconies leaped from incredible heights. Hardly anything had a railing. After all, if one fell, one could just fly, couldn't they?

Unless, of course, one was not a seraph. The seraphs were fun-loving and lighthearted at their centers, even if they were reckless, and rather than trying to catch anyone who might fall, the seraphs loved to watch from their balconies and laugh uproariously at the visitors as they clutched their injured limbs. Many a silly tale was told at feasts and festivals about the wingless folk that plummeted from balconies, and the number of injuries never stopped the seraphs from singing their songs about the wonders of their cities.

Wick noticed Archer didn't even look around at the glittering windows or the elegant architecture. Of course, he might have been here before, but he never even glanced up at the buildings. He greeted no one. Wick knew that greeting neighbors upon arriving home was only something the leshy did, but he would have thought that Archer would have at least acknowledged someone as he wove through the trees and under hanging houses. Now that he was paying attention, Archer seemed to be keeping out of sight as much as possible.

Probably because he was trying not to be recognized.

Wick tried to put everything else out of his mind and focus on what he was going to do to get Archer arrested. So far, his plan was teetering on the delicate line between weak and nonexistent.

He wondered if he was doing the right thing. The rational part of his mind reminded him just how unlikely it was that the world could be ending without the centaurs knowing about it. If he acted now, while they were still in the city, he could still get Archer caught.

But what if Archer was telling the truth? What if something horrible was coming? Wick could try to turn Archer in, but what if Archer was the only thing between Aro and destruction? It seemed unlikely, but what if it was true?

He turned a corner and suddenly, there was Eland, across the street, talking to a tall, red-haired seraph.

Wick's heart almost stopped. Eland would recognize both Wick and Archer on the spot. And if he did, who knew what would happen. Wick had to get himself and Archer out of sight, now.

Then Wick realized that he wasn't next to Archer anymore. Somehow, they had gotten separated. He spun around wildly, trying to find where Archer had gone. *There.* He caught a quick flash of spiked hair and a leather bag headed down a shaded back street. Wick darted after Archer before Eland could spot him.

"Oh, there you are," Archer said in disappointment as Wick came up beside him again. "For a moment there I thought I had finally lost you."

"Not quite," Wick said. He took another quick glance

behind and saw no one following them. He felt a twinge of guilt for running away.

"There's a house nearby we can use as a hideout." Archer didn't seem to notice Wick's strange behavior in the slightest. "Well, it's not really a house. It's more like a study. But it should be empty."

As the hideout in question came into view, Wick's confusion grew. The study wasn't built up in the treetops the way seraph structures normally were. It was built of the same wood and stone, but it was set into the base of a tree, on ground level. It seemed wrong and out of place, like a fallen bird's nest. Wick glanced around at the rest of the street. It was quieter than the rest of the city, and a little darker, too, shaded by the branches of many trees and further darkened by the slow descent of the sun.

When they arrived, the sun was just passing into a low place where it cast long shadows across the landscape, and a deep gold light filtered through the trees. Archer entered the little house first, and for a moment he fumbled around near the door before finding a match and lighting a glass lantern. The light flared across the walls and a few pieces of furniture before settling to an orange glow. Wick followed Archer inside, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was around.

"How did you know this place would be empty?" Wick asked.

"I knew some people in Eri a while ago. They never used this place at all when I knew them, I didn't think they would be using the space now." Archer lowered the unfillable bag from his shoulder to the floor and set the

lantern down on the edge of a wooden desk in the middle of the space. "I'm supposed to meet with someone," he said. "I'll be back later."

Wick hitched his own bag back onto his shoulder. "I'll come, then."

"You can't," Archer said simply. "I have to go by myself."

Wick didn't want to let Archer out of his sight, but what could he say? The balance of their deal was delicate. If Archer realized Wick couldn't arrest him as easily as he said, he would likely abandon Wick for good.

Archer walked out the door, hesitated, then came back in and hauled the unfillable bag back onto his shoulder. He walked out for good this time, closing the door behind him.

Wick was left alone to ponder what he was going to do in the meantime. If he had been at home, there was a multitude of responsibilities he could catch up on, but out here, in an abandoned study on a dark street during a time of day where he couldn't even recharge on the sun, he could do nothing but wait.

He had never been good at waiting.

The longer he sat, the more he found himself questioning his decision to come here. Maybe he should have just let Archer go and gone to the centaurs anyway. But if he had done that, would he just have been dooming Aro to destruction by the Scorch?

He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what he wanted to do.

He remembered Eland talking to the red-haired seraph. When something went wrong, Wick liked to go to

Eland for advice. Problem-solving was where Eland truly shone. When presented with an issue, he could easily identify and isolate the real problem, and then from there worked together with his peers to find a solution. Wick valued his counsel.

Wick glanced out the little window in the door of the study. Archer had left only a few minutes ago. He had time.

He decided to go find Eland.

Wick hoisted his messenger's bag back onto his shoulder and quickly checked to make sure he still had the Oak Leaf. It was still there, glinting green from the bottom of the bag, so he decided to set out. He didn't know where he could find Eland, but if he asked around enough, surely he could find him.

He closed the door behind himself and set out on the city.

Few people in Eri knew Wick, which was probably a mercy considering the dubious reasons that had brought him here with Archer. But since so few people knew who he was, even fewer were willing to tell him where he could find Eland. The first seraph he asked flew away without a glance back. One or two others said they couldn't tell him something like that. It took him several more tries before someone finally spotted his messenger bag and realized why he was asking.

"I think he was staying with the Becker family, down the road there," the woman said, pointing.

"Thank you," Wick said, and started down the road toward a great twisting tree wrapped in elegant rooms. As it turned out, he wouldn't have to ask about Eland at the

house. As he approached, the centaur apprentice appeared around the side of the house, heading for the walkway that led to the top.

"Eland," Wick said in relief.

Eland spun around, and his face lit up. "Wick! I didn't think I'd see you here."

"I didn't think I'd see you, either," Wick said. "I thought you'd gone home."

"I did," Eland said. "But they sent me back out again right away. Things seem to be moving fast these days."

Wick thought of the upcoming robbery he was supposed to take part in. Things were most certainly moving fast. "Agreed."

Eland turned toward the ramp again, beckoning for Wick to follow. "Well, come in. My hosts won't mind if I have a guest. Do you have time to sit down and talk?"

"That's actually why I came," Wick said. "I wanted some advice."

Eland's eyebrows rose. "Then you should definitely come in."

The pair of them climbed up the winding walkway. Eland's hosts didn't appear to be home, so they sat in the large open sitting room. The windows were cracked open, and a quiet evening breeze blew through the thin white curtains as Wick took a chair and Eland got all his horse legs situated on a low lounge.

"There's been some unrest around here since news of that seraph thief reached them," Eland commented as he got comfortable. "It's good to see a friendly face. Anyway, you said you wanted advice on something?"

"Yes." Wick tried to think of the best possible way to word his question without giving away what was going on. "Some of it I'm not allowed to talk about, but it has to do with the Oak Leaf."

Eland leaned forward. "You got it to safety, didn't you? It wasn't stolen?"

"It's out of danger now," Wick said reassuringly. He tried his hardest not to look at his messenger's bag. "It's just. . ." He decided to start over. "Eland, have any of your people had bad visions lately? Anything on a large scale?"

Eland thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Not that I can think of. Why?"

Wick fumbled for an explanation and found he was all out. "I don't know. I just. . . have a feeling. Like something bad is going to happen."

"No, I don't think anything's come up on the large scale," Eland said. He suddenly sat up straight as he remembered something. "But I did see something about you. I was going to send it to you in a letter, so I wrote it all down. Let me find it." He got up off the lounge and fished through a drift of papers on a nearby desk. He shot Wick an embarrassed smile. "I have to write so many letters every day it's hard to find anything on this desk. I write a dozen to the valley every week just to keep accountable by my mentors."

"I write a fair number myself," Wick admitted. "There are a lot of people to keep up with in our jobs."

"Ah." Eland found the envelope he was looking for and brought it back with him to the lounge. As he folded himself back into a comfortable seat, he handed the

envelope to Wick. "Read it soon. I have a feeling it might be important for you. Honestly, it had me a little worried."

"Thank you." Wick tucked the envelope into his bag, nestling it next to the Oak Leaf. "Eland," he said slowly, "what should I do if I'm not sure someone's lying?"

Eland's brow furrowed. "How so?"

"I don't know. If you were in a position where it was important whether you chose to believe them or not. If something bad would happen if you chose wrong."

The furrow deepened. "I suppose in your case or mine, we'd have to pass the problem up to a higher authority. We're too young to be handling that kind of problem."

"I know," Wick said. "But if you had to handle it on your own. Then what?"

Eland looked at Wick with concern growing in his eyes. "Wick," Eland said slowly, "have you gotten yourself into something? Because that vision I had—"

"No." Wick looked down at his hands. "I'm all right. It was only a thought. "

"You don't sound all right. You've seen that seraph thief, haven't you?"

Wick tried to conjure a lie, but the stricken look on Eland's face stopped him. "Yes," Wick said, "I've seen him. And now I'm trying to work out what to do. But it's all right. I'm not in trouble."

Eland was already past convincing. "If you've seen him and you haven't already turned him in, then I'd say you are in trouble. Answer honestly, Wick: do you need help?"

"No. I don't know. Not yet." This was not turning out the way Wick had planned. "I'm not in danger, I promise.

Just trust me on this.”

Eland seemed unsure.

“At least give me a little more time,” Wick said. He glanced out the window at the darkness outside. *How late is it?* It had taken him longer to find Eland than he had expected, and he had to get back to the study before Archer returned. “I’m sorry, I really have to go now. Please don’t tell anyone about this.”

Then he fled before Eland could answer. Racing down the stairs, he rushed through the darkening streets back to the little study. He hoped that Archer hadn’t beaten him there, because there would be no delicate way to explain why he had sought Eland’s advice.

Wick’s heart lurched as he thought again of the robbery that was coming.

He didn’t want to do this. Stealing was wrong, and that was that.

It’s just for tonight, he reminded himself. He only had to wait out the robbery so that he could get the proof he wanted. If there was no proof, then he could turn Archer in and end all this.

The study appeared around the corner, and Wick’s chest flooded with relief. The study was still dark.

Once inside the study with the door closed behind him, Wick took the lantern around the room and lit whatever he could find. A few candles on each surface yielded enough light to see everything in the study fully.

It was a nice study, albeit a small one. A dark wooden desk and equally sturdy chair took up space in the center of the room, carved with matching designs of tiny animals

down the sides of the desk and the arms of the chair. Bookshelves laden with volumes lined the walls surrounding the desk, and off to the left of the door was a table covered in maps, crowned with a globe in one corner. Whoever had designed the place had even thought to put a carpet across the floor to keep drafts from leaking in under the door.

Wick surveyed the books on the shelves. Whoever owned this study had a mind for philosophy and an eye for ancient art. He flipped through a few of the books. The owner of the study had an extremely diverse collection; some of the books were a few hundred years old, and they were written by authors from every territory in Aro.

He waited for hours, but Archer didn't come back. Midnight had well since passed before it occurred to him that maybe Archer hadn't planned on coming back.

Maybe his grand plan was to leave Wick here while he made his escape. Maybe he had even been planning to lose Wick all along. Wick's mind raced. If Archer was out there about to steal the stone, Wick could go out now and catch him in the act.

But then he remembered how Archer had almost left his unfillable bag in the study, with the two other pieces of the Heather Stone inside. It had seemed as though he had only taken it with him almost as an afterthought.

Wick decided to keep waiting.

In the end, he waited all night.

JUST AS THE FIRST bit of light started to trickle through the glass of the window, the door opened, and Archer finally stepped back through the doorway. Wick

looked up from the book he was reading. "You took a long time. I thought you said you were planning to go after the piece during the night."

Kicking the door shut behind himself, Archer slid to the floor next to the doorway and pulled the strap of his bag off his shoulder. "No. Not last night. Tonight." He wrapped his arms around the bag on his lap and closed his eyes. "Don't touch the bag."

With that, he fell asleep.

Wick felt more mystified than ever, but it seemed that all he could do was wait some more. He dug through his bag for his sun magnifier.

He approached the door and hoped he wouldn't be spotted from the outside as he leaned into the light. The sunlight felt so good. He drank it in, knowing he would need as much extra energy as he could get for what lay ahead.

Then, since Archer was still asleep, Wick sat down at the desk again and took out the letter Eland had given him. He blamed himself for not thinking of it sooner. Centaurs only had so much power to use in their lifetime; if Eland had used some of his power for this vision, he must have thought it was important.

The stationary felt heavy in his hands as he slid the pages out of the envelope and started to read by the light of the window.

*My dear friend Wick,
I'm writing to you out of concern. This morning I took a vision because I knew something bad was going to happen to you.*

Something big.

In the vision, I could tell that you were upset. You had come a long way, and you'd reached a vital turning point. That's all the context I have, and I'm afraid the vision itself is brief, but here it is all the same.

There weren't many details in the surroundings; I can't offer you any clues when or where this may happen. I'm sorry.

In the vision, you had your back against the wall, and you had a sword to your throat. You were standing next to some boy I didn't recognize, but he was a seraph, and he had a broken wing. I think he was the thief everyone is looking for. It looked like both of you were being captured. And from what I could see, together you had most of the pieces of the Heather Stone.

The vision has me worried. My mentors are also concerned, but they assured me that perhaps the real context of the vision, when or if it comes to pass, may be different than what I think. I hope so, I really do.

Be careful and watch your back.

-Eland

Wick glanced over at Archer, who was still asleep next to the door. He hadn't moved yet.

Did the vision happen in seraph territory? Would he be caught here, just like he feared, and everything would be over?

But no, it couldn't be. They had very few pieces of the Heather Stone so far. Right now, Archer had two, and Wick only had the leshy piece. Even once Archer took the seraph piece, between them they would only have four. Hardly 'most of the pieces'. And Wick knew that Eland

wouldn't exaggerate. Apprentices received extensive courses on describing their visions to others so that everyone could understand the same things with clarity. If he hadn't been able to count the exact number of the stones, 'most' would imply at least five, maybe even more.

When or if this happened, it was still somewhere in their future. It could still be avoided.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, Wick's worry vanished. Any vision could be avoided with the right foreknowledge and planning, and his plan was still to part ways with Archer once they left the city. If Archer could come up with proof, Wick would just let him go, and if he couldn't scrounge up any proof, Wick would turn him over to the nearest authorities. Either way, he and Archer could go separate ways, and the vision would never happen.

He pushed the letter into his bag and out of his mind while he waited for Archer to wake up.

Archer slept most of the day away. Wherever he had been, whoever it was he had gone to meet, it had worn him down. Before now he had seemed fine with very little sleep, but whatever had happened last night appeared to be the feather that broke the camel's back. Archer never even stirred.

As the sunlight was starting to angle back through the window again with the descent of the sun, just when Wick was starting to wonder if waking him was worth the anger that would doubtless result from it, Archer inhaled deeply and raised his head.

Archer squeezed the bag a little tighter as if to make sure it was there. "At least I wasn't robbed in my sleep," he

rasped, and then cleared his throat. "What time would you say it is?"

"About an hour from sunset," Wick said.

"Good. Plenty of time to lay out plans." Archer scrubbed at his eyes with his fingers, then frowned at Wick. "I can't believe you never sleep. You never eat, you never drink water, you never sleep. You're not human."

"Neither are you," Wick pointed out in confusion.

They stared at each other briefly.

"Really?" Archer said. "I hadn't noticed." He twitched to a more comfortable position and slid the bag off to the side. "Here's the plan. I got the location of the stone, it's in a house not far from here. I know the house, so getting in and out should be easy as long as we don't hit any snags. Here's what we're going to do: we leave here a few hours after nightfall, we leave no indicators that we were ever in here. Place has to be immaculate. We stick close to large pieces of cover so that nobody sees us. There shouldn't be too many people out at that time of night, but you can never be too careful. I think I remember how to get into the house, so once we're in it's just a matter of swapping the real stone for the fake and sneaking back out of the city."

"The fake?" Wick asked.

Archer dug in his pocket and held up a piece of pale green rock. "The person I met with also gave me this. With this in place, they won't even know we robbed them until we're long gone."

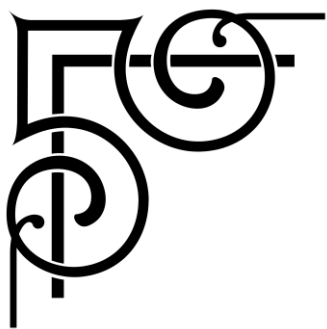
Surely it wasn't too late to avoid robbing anyone. Wick squirmed a little bit. "That doesn't sound like much of a plan."

“My plans have always worked before. Just don't do anything stupid and we'll make it out fine.”

Two hours after sunset, they packed up what little wasn't still in their bags and slipped out into the dark. Wick paused to listen. The muted chatter of a few remaining party-goers floated through the trees, and somewhere, a few extra seraphs had been undoubtedly assigned to keep the night watch, but for now, the city seemed to be quiet.

Archer hiked his bag further up on his shoulder and jerked his head out toward the street. “Let's go.”

Wick had a sick feeling as they ventured out into the city to burgle.



CHAPTER EIGHT

How A Tree Fell Out of A Tree

OF COURSE, THE place they needed to go had to be in one of the city's tallest buildings. And being a seraph house, it had no stairs on the outside. They had to suffer through quite a bit of climbing, shimmying, and pulling each other up over balconies and up to higher floors before they even reached the level where Archer said the seraphs were keeping their piece of the Heather Stone.

"There are lights lit up there!" Wick whispered at some point in their journey. "Are there still people inside?"

Archer shook his head. "I don't think so."

"You don't sound like you're sure," Wick whispered.

"I am sure!" Archer hissed back.

"If you're not sure, we're going to be caught," Wick said. Of course, that was what he wanted, wasn't it? He wanted Archer to be caught so that he could deliver the Oak Leaf like he was supposed to and get the other pieces

back to their rightful owners. But if Wick was also mistaken for a criminal. . . “How sure are you?”

“What scale do you want me to use? One to ten?”

“Does it matter? How sure are you?”

“One to ten? Out of one hundred? Or more abstract?”

Wick was getting exasperated. “It doesn't matter. One to ten. I don't care. One to ten.”

“Fine. One to ten,” Archer whispered, as though it had been Wick who wanted to know which scale they were using so badly.

“Yes. Out of ten, one being you aren't sure at all, ten being absolutely certain, how sure are you that there isn't anyone up there?”

“At least a three.”

“Wonderful.”

“We'll be fine.”

With that uncertainty out of the way, Archer started to shimmy around the balcony wrapping around the outside of the building, his back pressed up against the glass of the huge windows. Wick hesitantly followed him, twisting his neck to see inside.

The space inside appeared to be some sort of sitting room. A few comfortable chaise lounges were scattered around the large fireplace opposite from the windows, and while no one was in sight, the back of Wick's neck prickled with the knowledge that someone could appear at any moment.

“This looks like a place where someone lives,” Wick whispered, twisting around to speak to Archer, who was pressed against the wall behind him. “Are you sure that this

is where your people keep their piece of the Heather Stone?"

"Yes," Archer insisted. "This is where they hide it."

"Because the person you met with said so?"

"No, because I've been here before. I told you, I know this house. I just wasn't sure if they still kept the stone here, that's why I went to meet him. I needed him to confirm for me."

He sounded certain. "So how do we get in?"

Archer pushed around Wick, pressing gently against the glass with the tips of his fingers as he crossed the windows. At last, he found the one that gave slightly, seeming to be separate from all the other panes of glass around it. He gave it a harder push, and the piece of glass sprang open. A door. The seraphs had built a door into the large panes of glass. Wick made a mental note of the architecture. With the door now open, they could hear voices and clinking glasses floating up from the lower levels of the house. It sounded like a party.

Wick turned to Archer. "Now how certain are you that no one's here?"

"At least a two."

It was only then that Wick spotted the emblem stamped into the iron of the window frame. "That's the Hessen family seal! This house belongs to the Hessen family! They've hosted me before."

Archer looked flabbergasted. "That's not my fault!"

"I can't rob this house with a clear conscience!"

"Look, I don't think you could rob anyone's house with a clear conscience," Archer said. "Now are you going in

or not?"

It was too late to turn back, so Wick entered the house. It smelled like fresh cedar. For the moment, at least, no one seemed to be on this level of the building. Everything was quiet other than the creak of trees outside and the crackle of the fire from within.

Archer made a straight line across the room to the fireplace. Next to the hearth, almost hidden in the shadows next to the stone of the sides of the fireplace, was a little wooden box, painted an earthy green.

Wick hesitated, then crossed after Archer to take a look as well. Archer twisted the lock on the box, and it sprang open. Carefully, to avoid making the hinges of the little box creak too loudly, he cracked the box open.

It was a keepsake box, full nearly to bursting. A few folded letters curled out of the box's opening as soon as Archer cracked the lid. Similar items filled the box. Letters, flowers folded out of paper, little handmade presents from someone dear, even a few sparkling stones.

Archer reached around to the inside of the box and grabbed the opposite side of the lock. With a harsh twist and a quick pull, he unlocked a second mechanism. The ornate lower half of the box fell open on its own set of hinges, swinging downwards. Wick stuck out his hand to catch the opaque piece of green stone as it tumbled out.

The seraph's piece of the stone was shaped like a diamond, but still rough-cut, like the others. Aside from a rose lightly carved into the face of it, no one had dared to alter its shape or cut.

They had it.

Wick glanced at Archer. Now that the piece was in his hands, he was tempted to take it and run. Archer could do quite a bit of damage even if he lacked two of the stones, but not even close to the destruction one could wreak with all eight if that was what he was really planning.

And there was still time. If he could find someone in authority before Archer could make it out of Eri, he could keep the remaining stones from being stolen. This was his chance to get away.

And yet, something made him hesitate.

Some of the stones in the keepsake box were gemstones. Some of them would have been excellent pieces to take and resell. But Archer didn't take even one of them. He didn't even touch them. Taking the fake stone out of his pocket, he placed it in the bottom of the box. Then he folded the box back up on its two sets of hinges and clicked it shut again, setting it carefully back where he had found it.

Something here seemed wrong. This wasn't the petty thief that had been described to Wick, and now he felt confused. He weighed the pros and cons of letting this go on. If everything turned out wrong, would he still have enough time to gather the forces he would need to catch Archer?

If he couldn't, was he wasting his only opportunity now?

Straightening, Archer turned to him. "All right, we have it, let's grab the letter and get going before someone turns up."

Wick held out the seraph's piece of the Heather Stone, and Archer took it. Digging in his bag for just a moment,

he produced a small scrap of cloth and wrapped it around the piece.

"Clever," Wick said. "Using the cloth to keep the stones from touching and reacting with each other."

"I'm glad you appreciate that I'm not a total moron." Archer tucked the little package inside his bag.

It was then, of course, that someone flew up from one of the lower levels and landed only ten feet away from them on the wooden floor. It was a lower-class seraph, as Wick could tell by his simpler white clothing and lack of ornate jewelry, but he had the long hair customary of the seraphs and a mouth that was already wide open shouting the alarm.

"Time to go!" Archer made a break for the door in the glass that they had come in through, pushing Wick out ahead of him. Wick raced out in a rush, sped up further by Archer pushing through behind him, and he nearly fell over the edge of the balcony. Archer managed to avoid falling, and Wick barely caught his balance before he could go over the edge.

Together they ran back the way they had come. Jumping down the platforms to the ground was much easier than it had been climbing up them, but in their rush, they nearly took a tumble several times. As they reached the balcony just above the ground, someone flew into the air just behind Wick, grabbing for them. Wick jumped out of reach, pushing Archer ahead of him and knocking both of them off the far edge of the balcony.

They tumbled down the last length to the ground.

Wick smacked into the ground, and Archer slammed down on top of him. Every part of Wick was ground into

the dirt road. Everything hurt.

Grimacing, Archer scrambled up, grabbing Wick's arm and yanking him up behind him. "Come on, we have to go!"

Wick had just enough time to look up as Archer hauled him to his feet. It seemed everyone in the citadel had been woken up. Seraphs spilled from the balconies like water, pouring down toward them and swooping across the ground to grab them.

Wick got his feet under him at last, and the two of them took off across the ground. Archer started weaving through the trees and buildings, ducking under things and scurrying through narrow places, trying to lose all the seraphs that were on their tails.

It didn't work for long. More winged men and women were pouring from windows and doorways and walkways above with every passing moment, only gaining them more pursuers the farther they ran. Wick could already tell that their techniques to evade were failing them. They were going to be caught.

"This way!" Archer raced across a large open space, nearly being caught by the collar at least three times, and leaped across the space a bridge should have spanned. Wick was close behind him. Past the bridge, Wick could see the edge of the city. Outside, it was pitch black. He couldn't even see the terrain past the city limits. But Archer knew his way better in Eri than himself. Wick had no choice but to follow.

He leaped across the gap.

Someone caught him by the arm before he even touched down on the other side. A second seraph snatched

his other arm, and they yanked him up into the air, toward the treetops. More seraphs joined the mob every minute. It took him a moment to realize that many of them were laughing.

Maybe they didn't understand that he and Archer were thieves. Maybe they just saw this as another bit of fun.

If he escaped. . . would they even try to find him?

Wick yanked his arms free of their grip, and he plummeted like a stone.

The fall would kill him.

Then, out of nowhere, a tree branch slammed against his chest. He had just enough presence of mind to cling to it. His grip started to slip, and he hitched his armpits up higher across the branch. If he could just get a leg up, he would be safe. With a mighty heave, he got the crook of one leg up over the branch. A seraph swooped by, and he stopped moving, trying to camouflage into the branch. If he looked as much like a tree as they all said, maybe no one would see him.

The seraph soared on past.

It worked!

He finally managed to haul his body onto the branch and started shimmying down the trunk of the tree. Another seraph soared by, and he buried his face in the trunk of the tree until the danger was past.

Where did Archer go?

He clung to the tree with both arms as he craned his neck around, looking for Archer. Had they both gotten away from the mob?

No.

A huge knot of seraphs raced across the edge of the forest not far from him, and Wick caught a flash of Archer's furious face being tossed around in their midst. Suddenly the shape of the mob changed, a few of them jerking back.

Wick saw Archer's wings flash out, and all of a sudden he fell from the mob of seraphs. He dropped into the trees. The seraphs milled around for a moment, trying to find him again.

Wick waited to see what would happen when the seraphs realized they had lost both of them. If they called a search, he would need to stay in the tree and blend in. But it seemed that worrying about it was unnecessary. When the seraphs realized they had lost both their victims, they gradually splintered off and went back to their parties and midnight flights.

Wick thanked his lucky stars that most of the seraphs hadn't had a clue what was going on. Once he was sure the mobbing was over, he slid down the trunk of the tree to the ground and set out to learn what had happened to Archer.

When he reached the place where Archer had fallen, there was no sign of him. He couldn't have recovered from the fall and run away already, could he?

Somewhere above him, a branch cracked.

Wick didn't have enough time to even realize what that might mean before something heavy hit his shoulders. His face collided with the leaves.

Wick's shoulder throbbed where Archer's knee had run into it. His chin hurt where it had hit the ground. His arms hurt from hanging off that tree branch. A lot of things hurt. Suddenly he realized Archer was laughing.

"Stop laughing," Wick snapped. "This isn't funny. Now get off me."

Wick pushed Archer off his back and crawled further away to regroup.

Archer didn't stop. His deep-throated laugh turned into almost a giggle.

Wick slowly picked himself up into a sitting position. He rubbed his face with one hand, and with the other he found the trunk of an evergreen tree behind him to slump against. Finally, he asked, "What are you laughing about?"

Archer lay face up in the leaves, hair falling in his face, one leg bent and one arm slung across his ribs, shaking silently as he laughed. Gradually his laughter slowed, and he gasped out, "I didn't know any of those people." His laughter slowed to a stop, and he stared up at the sky with a sigh. "At last, my reputation precedes me."

Wick didn't laugh. "If we had been caught, really caught, my career would be over."

Archer picked one hand up off the ground long enough to wave it dismissively. "I doubt any of them knew you, either. Forget about it."

"Easy enough for a thief to say," Wick said.

"I'm not a thief," Archer responded, as though the topic bored him. "Rogue, brigand, will-o-wisp, occasional pilferer. Not just thief. Sticking to thieving is for the simple people."

Wick felt it was below him to respond to that. Instead he, too, stared up at the sky. His eyes were starting to adjust to the blackness now, and he could see the stars and a bright crescent moon between the tops of the trees. It was a

still night. No more avenging seraphs with grabbing arms swooping down like vultures on prey.

"I don't think they knew you stole the piece," he said at length. "Most of them didn't know what it was all about, so they just let you go."

"They let *us* go," Archer corrected, getting to a sitting position. He dug through his bag and pulled out the carved piece of stone. Turning it slowly in the moonlight, he admired the glint. Then he gave Wick a side-eyed look. "You helped steal it, so you took part in the whole thing."

"And no," Archer went on, "I don't think they even knew why they were trying to catch us. This late at night, I'd be willing to bet that half of them were drunk. To them, it was just some game."

"And with the fake in place, you don't think they'll come after you?"

"That's what the fake is for." Archer tucked the piece away and reached behind his back to massage his bad wing, grimacing. "That's why I put it there. We'll be long gone by the time they think to check that the stone in the box is the real one, if they bother to check at all." He grinned.

"And that's funny too, is it?" Wick asked.

Archer stood up, still rubbing his wing. "Yes, actually, I find it hilarious. So. Now we have four pieces of the stone, we're halfway there."

"*You*," Wick said with emphasis, "have three pieces. Whatever proof you said you had is still back in the Hessen house somewhere, so for now the Oak Leaf is still mine." A thought struck him. "And now that I've risked everything on this adventure and still haven't seen any proof that you're

telling the truth, the deal is over.”

As amusing as the whole thing might have been to Archer, Wick knew his people, and he knew the centaurs. In fact, he knew all the people of Aro. And all of them, the leaders especially, were quick-witted and terrifying people. They did not take to traitors easily and did not suffer enemies gladly. If he went on with this, he could see himself becoming their enemy in their eyes, and he did not want that.

“We’re going back there,” he declared. “We’re going back and we’re telling them what is going on. We might both be arrested, but maybe my name can still be salvaged, and at least then this whole nonsense will be put to an end.”

Archer whipped his wing back behind his back with a snap. Even in the dimness of the moonlight, Wick could see Archer’s expression quickly take on a much darker and angrier look. “Do you really think that would work?”

Taken aback by the dangerous look on Archer’s face, Wick couldn’t conjure a response.

“One of them just saw you trying to steal an ancient artifact that has been prized by their people for centuries. If you go back in there and tell them anything, they’ll realize that my plan is to steal them all and that you were just standing by watching me do it.” Archer took a few steps closer, just a little closer than the place where it was uncomfortable. Wick was slightly taller than him, but at this moment, Archer looked a good deal bigger and much more dangerous. “Do you think that will look very good for your reputation, Wick?”

Wick was forced to take a step back, losing ground but

getting back the personal space Archer had just invaded. As soon as he moved, he got the feeling that he had lost some unspoken contest.

“Better make a choice now, Tree,” Archer said, turning away and readjusting the strap of the bag over his shoulder. “I know we didn't get the letter like I said we would, but going back would be bad at this point. I don't care whether you come with me or not. Pick whatever works best for you; it doesn't make much of a difference to me.”

Wick knew if he let Archer go now, the chances of anyone catching him again would be slim to none. He could talk about getting Archer arrested all he liked, but even if he told everyone in Aro to keep a lookout, they would only be able to catch him on the seventh or eighth stone, when they knew where he was going and could head him off. If Wick stayed with Archer, at least for now, he could keep tabs on him until the opportunity arose to turn him in.

And then there was the business with the keepsake box. He couldn't stop thinking about how Archer had taken nothing but the Heather Stone piece. There had been other things of value in the chest, some of them small enough for Archer to tuck in a pocket, even if he didn't have room in his unfillable bag. And yet Archer hadn't even taken one.

Even if that had all been for show, to convince him to see it Archer's way, Wick knew that he had taken nothing but the Satyr's Crown from the satyr territory, even though everything in the hall of valuables could be resold for a great deal of gold. Some of the other valuables had been found lying on the floor, and the stand that the Satyr's Crown had stood on had been broken, but the satyrs had reported

nothing else stolen.

If Archer was just a thief who wanted to build the device for his own means, something here was not adding up.

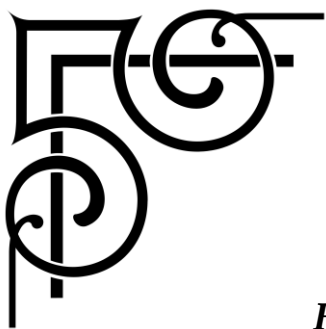
But was believing him the right decision? If it turned out he was making the wrong decision, would he still be able to turn everything around before Eland's vision came true?

"Waiting, Tree," Archer said impatiently.

Wick hated everything he was doing. "I'm coming."

"I knew you'd come around." Archer slung an arm around Wick's shoulders as they walked. "You might shape up to be just like me one day."

"I will not. Get off." Wick shoved Archer's arm off, and they kept walking into the night.



CHAPTER NINE

How to Betray All Your Known Allies

“STOP MOPING,” ARCHER said.

Wick opened his eyes. “What?” he asked, irritated.

“You’re still moping about what happened back in the seraph territory,” Archer said. He rubbed an eye, adjusting his position against the spiny bush he leaned on. “Either accept it or reject it, but you can’t just keep moping. It’s not working for me.”

“I’m not moping,” Wick said, forcing his voice into the passive one he used in the most difficult political situations. “I’m just reflecting on what happened.”

“You know I’m right,” Archer said.

“I can’t say whether you are or not just yet,” Wick said evenly. He started digging his feet back out of the dirt. The earth in human territory was so dry and dead, it was a wonder that anything grew in it.

"You actually can." Archer got to his feet. "You've got to know how much I hate when you do that. Answer in that flat voice like nothing in the world makes a scrap of difference to you. I can't stand it."

Wick shrugged. Never in his life had he been told that taking a diplomatic defense on something was irritating, and he wanted to think that Archer was just saying it now because he was trying to get under his skin.

As they started walking again, Archer said, "And you know I'm right."

"I already told you that you're wrong," Wick responded.

"No, I don't think you know what part I'm talking about." Archer pushed the twiggy branches of a bush out of his way as the clouds in the sky finally broke and started to drop a light drizzle. "You're talking about being mopey. Which you are. But I'm talking about being right about everything. I think you know that I'm right, but you don't want to believe it because why on earth would I be telling the truth? You think you're so above me, so you think that means you don't have to listen to me. And do you want to know how I know?"

"I really don't." Wick tried to protect his messenger's bag a little bit more with his body as the dark rain started coming down just a little harder. They weren't at the level of a storm yet, but the drops of rain were getting bigger. They were likely to get a good deal of rain before it was over.

Archer looked angry for the briefest of moments, then the expression disappeared, replaced with relaxation at a

startling speed. "Fine. Have it your way for now. But I know things about you, Tree, and don't you forget it."

A FEW HOURS later, when the rain had pounded and passed and they hadn't spoken to one another short of occasional warnings about rocks and holes along the way, Wick found himself longing for conversation once again. Archer was taking berries out of his bag again and eating them silently along the way.

"What's it like to taste things?" Wick asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Archer looked confused and faintly annoyed. "I don't know. When you're hungry, you just eat whatever you have, and it tastes how it tastes. Sometimes it tastes like dirt. Sometimes it tastes great. I don't know."

"Tell me you can do better than 'sometimes it tastes great'," Wick said, giving Archer the same side-eye Archer liked to give out himself. "What does great taste like? Not that you were any help telling me what tasting is like in the first place, but you could try."

To his surprise, rather than give him a snappy retort, Archer complied. He rolled his head back to stare up at the sky for a moment while he thought. "I guess the stuff that tastes good all depends on you. Everybody tastes things differently. Everyone agrees that sweet things taste good and bitter things normally taste not that great, but. . . I don't know how to explain this."

"What's it like when something's sweet?" Wick tried, stepping over some larger rocks. The terrain was getting rockier as they got closer to human territory.

"It's. . . good." Archer was struggling. "It's a light taste, I guess. Everyone I've ever met said bitter things taste heavy or dark or something, so I guess sweet must be a light taste. No," he said suddenly, realizing something, "It's not light. It tastes thick. The sweeter something tastes, the thicker the taste is. I think." He struggled a moment longer, then just shook his head and said, "I give up. It's hard to describe tastes to someone who doesn't have taste buds. What's sunlight like? What's it like eating sunlight instead of food?"

Now Wick was the one that was put on the spot. But he found he could describe it more easily than Archer could describe food. "It's. . . the best feeling in the world. All that light comes down from the sky, and you can just stand there and absorb it, drink it all in. And there are so many kinds of sunlight. Not everyone knows this, but some kinds of sun are better than others. Where you're standing and how the light diffuses and the time of day is important." He realized how fast he was talking, but now the floodgates had opened. "The best kind of sunlight is when the sun isn't all the way in the sky. When it's just going down or just coming up, that's the best kind of light."

Archer stepped over the rocks. "What's so great about that kind of light if the whole sun isn't even there?"

"Well, it depends on whether you're talking about the light when the sun is coming up or the light when it's going down," Wick responded, his panicked babbling now over. He found he was calmer now, more honest, everything seemed all right, at least for the moment. "When the sun is just coming up, the light is fainter. It's lighter and colder

and more delicate. It's a wonderful feeling once in a while, but I couldn't live off it."

"Hmm," Archer said. "What about the other kind?"

"The light when the sun is going down is the best kind," Wick said decidedly, and he realized it was true. "It's my favorite kind. It's stronger than any other kind at any other time in the day. It's so much richer and deeper, and the energy it gives you could last for days if you were careful."

"Huh," was all Archer said. He didn't seem sure what to say now that Wick was really talking, and Wick wasn't sure what to say now either. It felt like a barrier had broken.

"So," Wick managed after a moment, "we're nearly to the edge of human territory. Do you know where the humans are keeping their piece of the Heather Stone?"

"I think I do." Archer backtracked. "At least, I have a hunch. I don't know many humans personally, but I did hear through a few people that some man was bragging about having seen it with his own eyes, and they knew where he'd been before he started talking about it."

"That sounds promising," Wick said.

Archer shrugged. "Well, it would be if he wasn't a traveling salesman and hadn't been to three streets of houses that day."

"You said you knew where it was!"

"I do! I will." Archer held up his hands defensively. "Sometimes you have to do this kind of research on the road. I can't know everything ahead of time or I would be a centaur."

"Even the centaurs don't know everything ahead of

time. They can't channel every vision," Wick said.

"I know they don't know everything." Archer skirted a hole in the ground. "If they did, I wouldn't have to be the one getting the stones together, and I wouldn't have to put up with you right now."

Wick knew better than to take any of that personally. "Do you at least have a plan?"

"Baby steps, Tree. We'll find out who has the stone, then we'll make a plan."

They had barely crossed over the border to the human territory and found the first of the many dirt roads the humans insisted on building when the skies let loose again, harder this time.

"Oh, come on!" Archer hollered at the sky. "It already rained! Wasn't that enough?"

Just as he asked, the wind picked up, and it started raining harder. The dirt road under their feet was quickly turning into a thick mud.

Wick spotted a thick plume of smoke over a rise ahead of them. Smoke meant a building or some other structure that they could take shelter in until the storm had passed. "Look!" he called to Archer. "There's smoke ahead! Maybe we can find shelter!"

Archer nodded, and together they ran over the rise to the small town on the other side.

A woman held the door of the inn open for them as they raced inside. "You made it just in time," she said as she closed the door again behind them. "It looks like the thunder and lightning will be starting soon. But that's good. We've been needing rain here for a good long time."

A few fair folk men entered behind Wick and Archer, thanking the woman for holding the door in small but gruff voices. Archer sort of smirked at their small size as the fair folk passed, heading for the only table that would seat people who were shorter than knee height.

As much as the rain was an inconvenience, the land had clearly needed it. Wick had been to the human's territory enough times to know that the ground always looked that parched, but in dry territories droughts could easily turn savage. He often wondered how the humans could live in such a place. But the humans seemed to thrive on the difficult living circumstances rather than saving their energy and moving to a place that was easier to tame. They saw it as a challenge, where anyone else would only see it as an inconvenience. Human resilience was a weakness and a strength.

“Care to sit down and have something to eat while we wait for the rain to pass?” the hostess offered, pulling out a chair at one of the empty tables.

The ground level of the inn seemed to be a sort of tavern, with a bar and large seating area. Most of the tables were already seated to their limits with men and women chatting and laughing as they waited out the storm. A pair of musicians sat in the corner playing the flute and the drums, providing a calming and homey sort of atmosphere to the tavern. While the tavern had no windows other than a small peephole slit cut into the wood of the door, every other table had a lit lantern in the center, casting a flickering golden glow over the tavern.

Wick and Archer took a seat at the nearest empty

table. Wick noted that Archer had chosen a table pressed up against a wall. Probably a good choice; if anyone in the tavern did happen to know who they were and what they were doing, they were at a good vantage point to spot any trouble before it started and keep out of sight.

Their hostess came back over, carrying a plate and a wooden mug. She set the plate, overflowing with cheese and grapes, in front of Archer. "Some food for you, my boy, and for you—" She glanced awkwardly at Wick, then set the mug down in front of him. It had a dark liquid inside that he could only assume was wine. "I wasn't sure what to get you."

"It's all right," Wick said, accepting the mug graciously. "I ate earlier."

As soon as she walked away, Archer said, "You ate earlier, huh?"

"I did. My way."

Archer shrugged. "Well, I know you can't drink that."

"No," Wick admitted, "but she would have considered herself to be a bad host if she didn't give me something. At least she tried." He slid the cup over to Archer, and Archer took a long drink.

"I don't know how they make this," he mumbled as he chewed, waving one of the cheeses in the air, "but it is amazing. I can never figure out where they get it."

"Something to do with cows and milk or something like that," Wick said distantly. "I never paid much attention to the process." The rain outside caught his attention as the door opened again for more of the little fair folk. Through the peep slot in the door, he could catch glimpses of it coming down in sheets. It was uncannily dark outside, even

for the middle of a storm. The lightning flashed white outside, and he looked away.

Even as Archer continued to talk about the wonders of cheese and how great it tasted, Wick was looking around the tavern. The advantage to not having irises and pupils like everyone else was that he could do any amount of staring and if he didn't turn his head too much no one was likely to notice. No one seemed to have recognized them, at least not yet, and for the time being, no one seemed to be paying them any mind. He could be thankful for that, at least.

Now if they could only track down the stone.

A few men were gathered at the next table over, talking to one another too loudly not to hear. "It's almost a shame," a man with a long black ponytail said to the others. "I don't know a single person who really liked him, but he did have all that money."

"And a few relics besides!" exclaimed a man with three empty steins in front of him. "I saw his collection once. There were only a few, but they were pretty ones. Probably expensive."

"Probably bought them all to keep. . ." Here the man with the ponytail became inaudible, "camouflaged. Hard to find a needle in a haystack."

"He didn't have enough money for a haystack's worth," the man with the three empty steins said with a laugh. "But I think you're right, all the same."

The third man, face nearly hidden by a long and full brown beard, leaned forward. "He must have left it to someone. Who has it now? All of it?"

"I don't know, but I'll tell you who probably does know," the man with the ponytail said, "Anna." He nodded to their hostess, and as she passed again, he grabbed her sleeve to get her attention. "Anna," he said, and the other two nodded eagerly, "who did old Silas leave everything to? He had too much of it for it to have all just disappeared. Especially with him having the. . . well, you know."

"We figured if anyone knew," the man with the full beard said, "you would."

The hostess, Anna, regarded them shrewdly for a moment, then gave them half a smile. "And I do," she said in a low voice. "He didn't leave it to anyone. Not anyone. But now Prentiss has it all. He was his closest living relative, and now he has every penny of it. Even the relics and other things." She nodded and winked, and then left with her tray to serve the other patrons.

"Huh," the man with the beard said. "I didn't know Prentiss was his relative at all."

"Neither did I," the man with the three empty steins said, and the three of them twisted to stare at a middle-aged man sitting against the back wall, eating a bowl of stew in a very quiet and private way. They all turned back to face the center of the table again.

"Wonder what he'll do with it all," the man with the steins mused.

As their conversation turned to what one could do with all that money, Wick cut his attention away from them. He had heard enough to have formed a hunch. The way they wouldn't say what relic the dead Silas had been trying to hide, the way the man with the beard had first

asked only who had 'it', and then specified 'all of it' as an afterthought. . . he wanted to guess that old Silas had been the keeper of the humans' piece of the Heather Stone, and now that he had died, the man Prentiss now had it.

Wick leaned forward and whispered to Archer. "Those men behind you. Did you hear what—"

"Yes." Archer never looked up from his food as he reached for the last of the cheese. "Don't lean forward like that. It means you're hiding something."

Wick jerked back to a sitting position again.

"That doesn't help either. Yes, I heard the whole thing," Archer continued. "I think the same as you. Prentiss just might have it."

"What do we do?" Wick asked.

Archer put the last of the cheese in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "He's having his dinner now, so when he goes home, he'll probably just go to bed. Perfect time for thieving. We'll follow him home and get the piece from him if he has it, if he doesn't, we go back to square one. Easy plan."

"Easy plan," Wick repeated softly, watching Prentiss as he finished his stew and got up from his seat. Leaving some money on the table to pay for his meal, Prentiss walked toward the door.

Wick stopped looking at him as he passed, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see Prentiss fiddling with something in the pocket of his green coat.

As soon as he had gone out of the door, Archer hissed, "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

Archer ignored his own advice and leaned forward, eyes bright. "He had the Heather Stone fragment! It was in his pocket! I saw it when he went past!"

It was all Wick could do not to twist and stare after Prentiss to see if he could spot the stone too. "You're sure it was the Heather Stone? Absolutely certain?"

"Yes."

Wick tried to keep calm, but his excitement fizzed inside him like a swarm of bees. "If he has it on him, we should go after him and see if we can get it."

"Straight out of his pocket?" Archer asked, and Wick saw a devilish gleam in his eye. "You want to jump him and steal it right off of him?"

Wick tried to keep his dignity intact. "It seems like the most straightforward way of getting the stone. This isn't like the seraphs. We don't have a clue where in his house he would hide the stone while he sleeps. If we wait until after he's asleep tonight, it could take us hours to find it, and in that time he could wake up and sound the alarm."

"Aren't you still afraid of being recognized?" Archer asked, raising his eyebrows.

Wick's chair suddenly felt less comfortable, and he fought the urge to squirm. "If one of us were to incapacitate him— hit him over the head, maybe— he would never see either of us. We would just have to find a quiet spot along the way."

"Maybe I can make a criminal of you, after all," Archer said in a voice of wonder and leaned over to clap Wick on the arm. "That's the plan of a true mastermind."

"Hardly. I still refuse to do any of the thieving," Wick

insisted. "That's all up to you."

Archer's smile faded, and he nodded grudgingly. "I guess small steps are fine, too." He scrounged a few dripping coins out of his bag. Leaving their money on the table as Prentiss had done, the two of them got up and left the tavern. Archer had the nerve to thank Anna for the meal as they left.

"Honestly," Archer said in a low but self-satisfied voice as they walked down the path, "I've been waiting a while for you to believe me and let me do what I do without being a massive pain, but I never expected you to end up being the one making the plans."

"You haven't made me a criminal that easily," Wick said.

Archer looked his way with his brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"While you were talking about how I was looking like I was keeping a secret, I heard the men at the other table talking about robbing Prentiss later," Wick confessed. "They felt he didn't need or deserve the amount of money that had come his way or something like that. If we didn't do anything, people could get hurt, and the Heather Stone could fall into the wrong hands."

Archer's mouth twisted down. "I should have known you'd have a *greater good* sort of plan going on here. Still, you were the one who voted to jump him, so I'm still considering this a win on my part."

"Whatever you want," Wick said, feeling a sigh build up inside of his chest.

The rain had stopped, and while it was darker now

than it should have been for the time of day, there was at least enough light to walk by. It was just bright enough to still see Prentiss clearly on the path ahead of them. Prentiss walked quickly, head down, shoulders hunched, but for the time being he seemed to be more focused on getting home than paying attention to his surroundings. For the time being at least, he hadn't noticed them following him.

The dirt path passed into a bit of forest standing between the inn and the rest of the town. It was dark in the thick of the trees, and as Prentiss turned around a corner, out of sight, Wick knew that this was the place they would have to catch him.

He turned to Archer to tell him, but Archer was well ahead of him. By the time Wick realized he had moved, Archer had picked up a large piece of fallen branch and raced around the corner after Prentiss.

Wick heard the surprised yelp just before he too turned the corner.

Prentiss had been ready for them. Throwing Archer against a tree, he spun on Wick with eyes like fire. "You thought I didn't see you following me?" he spat. "The both of you are worse robbers than even those fools at the inn would have been. You can't rob me without my knowing about it!"

He threw himself at Wick.

The momentum took both of them to the ground. Prentiss grappled to wrap his hands around Wick's throat while Wick thrashed, desperately trying to throw him off. Never in his life had Wick needed to fight for survival like this. Prentiss had a kind of madness in his eyes, and

somewhere deep inside Wick's mind, he knew that if he didn't take control of the situation now, Prentiss would kill him.

He got one hand against Prentiss's face, trying to push him off, but it wasn't working. Prentiss's madness was giving him more strength than Wick possessed.

Wick's other hand, caught under Prentiss's knee and held to the ground, found something solid and heavy. He wrapped his hand around it and jabbed his free hand into Prentiss's stomach. Prentiss gasped. His hands didn't lose a bit of grip on Wick's throat, but his knee lifted just enough for Wick to tear his other hand free and smash the rock against the side of Prentiss's head.

Prentiss dropped like a stone.

Beside the path, Archer slowly sat up, rubbing his shoulder from where it had struck the tree trunk. He stared at Prentiss where he had collapsed in the grass, and then at Wick as he dug through Prentiss's pockets, trying to find the Heather stone.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Archer said in a stunned voice, checking himself all over for damage before getting up. "Is he still alive?"

"I don't know!" Wick said in a flustered voice. "I don't know how to tell. Which pocket did he have the stone in?"

"Uh, the inside pocket next to his right hand," Archer said. He came over to where Prentiss lay, presumably to make sure he was still living.

Wick found the pocket and dug inside. His fingers found something smooth and hard at the bottom. The fragment of the Heather Stone. Wick drew it out and

rubbed his fingers over the surface. It was whole, undamaged, probably just the way it had been the moment the centaurs had broken it from the rest of the Heather Stone. The humans had taken good care of it after all.

Laughing voices floated down the path toward them, coming from the path to the inn. The other three men were on their way.

“Let's move!” Archer hissed, jumping to his feet and leaving Prentiss where he lay. “I don't want to be caught off guard twice!”

Wick didn't argue. Scrambling up himself, he tossed the Heather Stone fragment to Archer, and the two of them took off into the shadows of the trees. They had just skidded out of sight and hidden under some bushes when the shouting began.

The men sounded more infuriated at being beaten to the stone than at how Prentiss was now out cold on the path. Quickly they started forming a plan on what kind of ugly end they would give to whoever had done this, and Wick and Archer exchanged glances. Best to make a quick exit before they were discovered, or they might have to undergo the violent threats the three men were spewing into the night.

The woods were a maze. Too many things overlapped, too many roots stuck out of the ground in the perfect places to trip them as they made their escape. Twice Wick turned to look behind him and ran face-first into tree branches, and three times Archer caught his foot in foliage and nearly fell flat on his face. But they kept running. Humans were unpredictable. They couldn't risk being caught. Somehow,

with a lot of ducking and sneaking, they made it a good five miles away from the town without the humans ever finding them.

The fight and then all the running had left Wick drained. Sometimes bright enough moonlight and the light of the stars was enough to last him until the sun came up, but he had used up almost all his energy with the events of the day, and they had a good deal of the human territory still to cross before they would arrive in manghar territory.

After a while of pushing through, Wick finally asked Archer if he'd like to take a rest.

It was then, of course, that it began raining again. They took shelter under a tree trunk fallen across a group of large rocks, but the branches of the tree were not nearly enough to shield them from the heavy rain. Drops and occasionally large splashes of rain made it through the branches and seeped through the bark of the tree. Despite his best efforts, Wick was getting soaked. Archer had his good wing held up over his head to protect him from most of the rain, but Wick, it seemed, would just have to get wet.

He tried to make himself smaller, keep under the thickest part of the log, then suddenly, the rain cut out.

For a moment, he was confused. It was still coming down harder than ever just past the edge of the log, inches from his knees, but he was hardly getting wet now.

A soft brushing noise came from above him, and he looked up to see Archer's other wing extended over his head.

Archer stared straight ahead as though he had no idea what his wing was doing.

"Thank you," Wick said.

Archer stared out at the rain. "Don't mention it."

Wick took another hesitant glance up at the wing over his head. The satyrs had been right to describe it as mangled. It must have been broken in the past and then. . . what? It had never been set? It hadn't healed correctly? He couldn't guess. Where there should have been a straight line across the main bone of the wing, there was a significant and obvious dip. Another little dip echoed it nearer the tip, making the very last feathers of the wing tuck into the others at an odd angle. In various places, it seemed whatever had happened had assured that the white and grey feathers had not grown back the right way, leaving patches of strange down where there should have been full feathers.

"What happened?" Wick found himself asking. He looked at Archer.

Archer let a long moment pass before he responded, and when he did, the answer was brief, simple, and said in the soft tone of a pained heart.

Archer said, "It broke."

Outside, the splashes of the dark rain falling from the sky filled the gaps in their conversation. Archer's wing never moved from over Wick's head.

"How did it break?" Wick asked quietly.

For a long moment, Archer's sharp face was full of shadows. He looked almost haunted. Then, like a magic trick, Archer shook off all the shadows and smiled devilishly.

"It's a boring story. I didn't have anything to do one day, and I thought to myself, 'Who needs two wings,

anyway? One's plenty', and I snapped it in half. I use it as a battle scar to show my enemies who doubt my strength." He flexed his arms, still managing a slightly strained smile.

Wick could tell that that ridiculous story wasn't the truth. "Come on, Archer."

"No, it's true!" Archer leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He glanced over at Wick. "I snapped it on purpose because I just couldn't take the boredom. I'm better for it."

Somehow, he was still managing to look pained behind the bright smile. Wick dared to push a little harder.

"Does it have anything to do with how you always say 'they' when you're talking about the seraphs, instead of 'we'?" he asked, not looking at Archer. Archer refused to look at him.

"Do I do that?" Archer asked in a voice that was just a little too carefree to be real.

"You do."

"Huh." Archer bounced his knee a little bit, and since his elbows were resting on his knees, his torso bounced as well. "Who knew?"

"Archer," Wick asked, "what happened to you?"

"No, actually," Archer said, suddenly more animated as he turned to Wick with a keen expression, "what happened to *you*? You never cared before, what makes now special? Nothing. I think what's going on is you're so used to being someone people trust that you can't stand when someone has a secret. You think you're too special not to know everything there is to know, so you're going to pry everything out of me even if that's not what I want, just

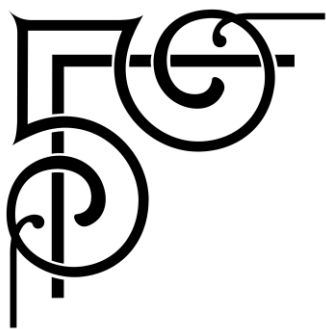
because it's what *you* want. Everything has to be all about you, Wick, doesn't it? Everything is your responsibility, everything you do is more important than whatever everyone else is doing. It's all. About. You."

As much as Wick wanted to give a snappy comeback, he had to be the bigger man here. He wouldn't have become everything he was now if he flew off the handle every time someone insulted him.

It was his responsibility to be better than those who would try to get a rise out of him. Plenty had tried before, and he had never felt the need to give them an answer. He was used to this.

But none of them had ever been so painfully right before.

The rain that hit him when Archer whisked his wing behind his back again had nothing on the cold water that had already been poured down his collar.



CHAPTER TEN

A Plan That Can Only End in Disaster

AS HE ABSORBED the light of the rising sun, Wick could feel the cold deep within his bones. The last few days had been uncharacteristically cold for autumn. Archer seemed to be dozing despite the chill, but Wick could feel the cold even through his thick leshy skin.

A distant sound caught his attention. Something sharp, loud, irreverent.

He tried ignoring it. But no, there it was again, louder this time. Something about it bothered him. He opened his eyes, trying to shake off the grogginess that was filling his mind in the sunrise light. He turned an ear toward the sound and listened carefully.

The sound repeated itself, different this time, and a bolt of ice shot through his brain as the realization broke into his fog.

There were voices.

Voices were coming toward them from across the landscape. From the sound of it, it was the three men who had tried to catch them as they fled through the forest after robbing Prentiss. And it sounded like they were catching up.

He shook Archer. "Wake up, we have to move."

"Hey, that's my line," a bleary Archer grumbled, scrubbing at his eyes with his fingertips. "What's the problem?"

"Someone's following us," Wick said, "and now they're catching up."

Archer sat up quickly. "The same ones from the tavern?"

"That's my guess, too." Wick couldn't stress his urgency enough. "We have to hurry up and get moving before they see us. There's not much cover to hide under, but if we keep far enough ahead of them, we may get lucky and they might not see us."

"That would have to be pretty lucky," Archer said, swinging his bag over his shoulder in one sharp, aggravated movement. "But I've done it before, so it is doable. I'm just saying they just could have made themselves obvious *after* I caught up on some sleep, that's all."

They took off across the bare and rocky landscape.

It took some work to keep ahead of their tail. They had to keep in a constant state of motion, always keep an ear out, make sure they weren't losing any speed as they crossed patches of brambles and skirted small lakes. The plains of human territory were not the easiest terrain to

cross. The ground was hard and the rocks were frequent, making it extremely uncomfortable to keep moving at the pace required to keep ahead of the men following them. Thus far, it looked like the men were just going in the same basic direction as they had seen Wick and Archer go when they had disappeared in the thick of the trees. They didn't seem to know just yet how close they were to catching them, and Wick desperately wanted them to stay that way.

Archer suggested they keep changing direction and weave a bit to make it harder for the men to follow them, and they did so, all the while still trying to walk faster to keep their pursuers from catching up with them. They wanted to evade detection, not be overtaken while they were trying not to leave a trail.

They were only a few more hours of travel away from the manghar border. Getting there would be fairly straightforward but getting into the bat people's territory was going to be complicated no matter what they did.

Since Wick had been to their territory many times and had visited their leader in the past, he could almost guarantee the border guards would let him in, but Archer was another matter, and so were the men tailing them. Wick could only hope that the manghar wouldn't let the three humans cross the border, but he couldn't be sure.

Wick tried not to think about the consequences they might be facing or how the manghar would react if they knew what was happening. He just kept walking, making sure they were making good time even though he didn't know what he would do when they got to the border.

At some point, Archer stopped, turned around, and

listened for a long moment. Just as Wick was about to hurry him along, he asked, "Do you hear anything?"

Wick stood still and listened, too. The only sounds he could catch were the whistling of the wind and a rustling patch of dry grass. At last, he said, "No, I don't hear anything."

"Since they couldn't seem to shut up before, I'd say we lost them somewhere," Archer said, nodding with satisfaction as though he had been the sole person that had kept them from being caught.

"How?" Wick asked. "They were behind us only a few miles ago."

"They probably took a wrong turn somewhere. I told you, if you weave around like that, people who are following your trail get thrown off." Archer shrugged. "It's not hard to lose some people. Some are dumber than others."

Wick didn't even bother to address how Archer seemed to have just described the entire race of humanity as being stupid. There would be no point to it.

Since there didn't seem to be anyone following them anymore, they took a brief break. Archer finished his nap and then ate some watery fruit he found on a tree. He claimed it wasn't bad, and since he didn't drop down dead, it appeared to be edible and not poisonous. Wick got a bit more of the noonday sun and they checked their bags to make sure that they hadn't lost anything in all the running they had been doing the last couple of days. Fortunately, they hadn't lost anything, and even after waiting around for an hour to see if they could hear or see any sign of the men who had been following them, no sign of the three men

showed up.

They had lost them.

"So, Tree," Archer said as they collected themselves to start traveling again, "we're about to go pose a heist on possibly the most terrifying race in all of Aro. Maybe even the most terrifying race in the whole world. Not to make you worried or anything, but we could die. I'd just like to know that you're fully committed to the whole 'collect the pieces of the Heather Stone' thing." He tilted his head toward Wick in an inquiring way. "Well?"

"I've been thinking the same thing," Wick said.

Archer brightened.

"About the manghar. I agree, we could die if this goes wrong."

Archer's face fell into a familiar disgusted expression. Clearly, they were not on the same page here.

Still, Wick forged ahead. "I think we should try a different approach this time. I think we should just approach the manghar and explain what you think is going on, then ask them politely if we could borrow their piece of the Heather Stone. Maybe I can come up with collateral that they can keep until we bring the stone back—"

"Hold up," Archer interrupted. He crossed his arms and gazed at Wick with a quizzical quirk to his mouth. "I was under the impression that you'd been to manghar territory before."

Wick was taken aback. "I have."

"Then I would have thought you'd know that they don't just have nice little conversations with people."

"I'm a messenger. I know all the important people in

Aro,” Wick insisted. “I’ve met with the Crowned Head before. I’ve helped him make decisions before. If I handle the situation well enough, this could work out.”

“And if it goes wrong, then what? I think we’ll just lose time doing that when all they’ll do is tell us no and have us thrown out. Need I repeat, I’ve already been thrown out of one place on this whole thing. It’s no new experience or anything,” he admitted, “but I think I injured something falling from that high when we were thrown out of seraph territory. I don’t really want to do it again this soon.”

“Then what would you do? Just race in there and steal from what you just admitted was the most terrifying race in Aro?” Wick demanded.

“Yes,” Archer said decidedly. “Because that’s what’s worked so far. I don’t know why you’re still being so difficult when—”

“When I don’t know for certain there truly is a problem?”

Anger flared in Archer’s eyes. “Don’t interrupt me. When it’s this obvious that the problem is real, I don’t know how you’re missing it!” He inhaled deeply and made a noise sort of like a laugh. “I don’t know how you don’t see it.”

Wick had a sinking feeling that he was missing something. “Don’t see what?”

“All the warning signs. You didn’t see any of it?” Archer waited, watching Wick’s face, and slowly shook his head. “I thought you knew history. I don’t know much of it, but when I was little, I was *very* interested in hearing about the last time the Scorch attacked, and I remember all the

weird signs that showed up before it became obvious what was coming. The birds left. The grass died. The rain turned black. Everything got cold.” He gestured at the landscape around them. “It’s been all around us all the way here. And you’re telling me you didn’t see any of it?”

“Well. . .” Now that Archer had brought it to mind, Wick realized he *had* seen it. Or he had seen something. It had been too cold the last few days, and Archer had stopped several times to stare at dead plants that had no reason to be withering the way they were. He had one of those plants in his bag at this very moment.

“In any other circumstances, none of those things would even make sense.” Archer’s tone was earnest. “The birds don’t just up and decide one day that they’re too scared to make any noise. It doesn’t just happen. You’ve got to see that.”

But could it still be possible that all of it was just a series of coincidences? Natural things that had conveniently happened at the right time? Things that only seemed to be connected because Archer was pointing it out to him?

“I do see it,” Wick lied, composing himself. “That’s why I’m still here right now, not working with the centaurs to get you arrested.”

Archer shook his head and started walking again, smiling. “Some days I think you’re more pig-headed than me. Not that you could catch me anyway,” he called over his shoulder, “even if you did want to arrest me.”

“We’d have to see about that,” Wick replied, still smiling inwardly as he hiked his bag further up on his shoulder and started walking after Archer.

Another problem arose when they reached the border to manghar territory. When the border came within sight, Archer suddenly started and jumped behind a pine tree, desperately beckoning for Wick to do the same.

Now that they were both trying very hard to fit behind the trunk of one tree, Wick hissed, "What's going on?"

Still pressed against the tree trunk, Archer jerked a thumb around the tree, toward the manghar border. Wick carefully leaned to the side to peer out.

The three men who had been following them stood clustered around one of the border guards, talking and flapping their hands.

Wick pulled back as one of them looked around.

"You're sure you didn't see them?" the man with the long black ponytail asked. The ponytail man had looked more awake now than he had in the tavern. He tapped his fingers against the side of his walking staff impatiently.

It was astounding that the human men could summon the courage to speak so boldly to any manghar. The manghar were six feet tall at the shortest and burly, with the broad, bristling faces of bats and huge, membranous wings. There wasn't one of them that hadn't drawn blood from a relative or close friend just for sport, and they took great pleasure in terrifying everyone who stepped across their borders.

"They were ahead of us," the man with the beard said. "They must have slipped by you."

"Nothing can slip through our borders," the manghar guard said. "They wouldn't have made it through without being seen."

"Not true," Archer whispered. He was grinning, even as he pressed himself against the tree to avoid being seen. "I've been in and out of their territory before without ever being spotted at the border. That's why I've been banned from entering."

"You've been banned?" Wick hissed, and Archer nodded gleefully.

Wick silently cursed Archer's name. Their small chance of just being let in now dwindled to zero. It seemed getting the piece was going to be a lot more complicated than he had thought. He tried to come up with a new plan.

The men had just finished animatedly explaining something to the guard, and the guard didn't seem to be having any of it.

"Would you at least tell your leader that they're here?" the man with the black ponytail asked. "This could be important."

Wick peeked around the tree and saw the border guard cross his arms across his leather chest plate, spear still in his hand. "Your request will be considered."

Archer peeked around the other side of the tree, then jerked back, clutching his unfillable bag closer to him. "That's what I was afraid of," he whispered, jutting his head back toward where the guard stood arguing with the three human men. "He *would* be on duty at this part of the border just when we arrived. That guard has a grudge against me."

"What did you do?" Wick whispered.

"Nothing! Nothing." Archer shook his head. "He needs to be a little less sensitive, that's all. You would think one would get over being made a public spectacle of after four

years, but no. He still tries to rip my throat out every time I see him." Archer peeked around the tree again. "Let's go the other way."

Leaving Wick still shaking his head, Archer darted off to the right of the guard, further down the border to where the trees were thicker. Wick watched for an opening and then raced after him.

Only another thirty yards down the border was another guard.

"Do you know this one as well?" Wick whispered.

"No."

"Good." Wick stepped out from behind the tree and approached the guard, leaving Archer's protests and quiet choking noises behind him. "Good evening," he called to the guard, trying his hardest to make it look like he hadn't been hiding behind a tree just a moment ago.

The guard nodded but didn't make any kind of expression that felt very welcoming.

"I'm here to see the Crowned Head," Wick said. "I need to request something from him."

"Is he expecting you?" the guard asked, shifting his weapon in his hand. Wick stared at the sharp point and tried not to squirm.

"He's not, but what I have to ask is very urgent." Wick felt around inside his bag and produced his seal of trust from the centaurs. He could only hope that he wasn't betraying the trust just by using it as he held it up for the guard to see. "May I enter?"

The guard nodded and waved him past. Relief flooded Wick's mind as he stepped over the border onto manghar

land. He had made it through. The manghar were, indeed, the most terrifying race in all of Aro, and he never felt an enormous amount of confidence while he was around them. He had dealt with them before, handled their politics just as he had handled many others, but dealing with the manghar face to face always put him on edge.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the three men pointing after him with outrage scribbled all over their faces. The guard who had been speaking with them turned them away with a wave of his hand. Once the three had trudged away, the sentry ventured over to the guard Wick had spoken to and muttered something into his ear. Together they cast dark expressions after Wick, but they did not come after him.

Wick could have relaxed, but he knew the real reason they didn't come after him. They let him go because if he made even one mistake, any other person in the territory would be more than willing to throw him back out again. That is if he wasn't executed first.

He stopped briefly, pretending to admire a tree as he glanced over at the border out of the corner of his eye. While the two manghar guards were still discussing something in low voices, Archer slipped through the gap that the guard had left by leaving his post.

They were through.

Now the easy part was over.

Archer and Wick didn't meet up again until a good few hundred yards into manghar territory. Once they had gone through enough groups of trees to know they were well out of the guards' sight, Archer came jogging up behind Wick.

"What's the plan when we get there, since your last plan worked so incredibly well, and you seem to be domineering the playing field this time, too?" Archer asked as they walked.

"We're going in head-on," Wick said without pausing to think.

"Excellent." Archer rubbed his hands together. "I've always wanted to rob these guys right to their faces. This is the kind of thing where I always thought the Door in the Wall would be handy."

"The what?"

"The Door in the Wall," Archer repeated. "You know, one of those things that the human sorcerers made when human sorcerers still existed? The door that lets you walk through any barrier? It disappeared ages ago?"

Wick shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. Never mind. We're not doing that." He collected himself and continued. "The manghar are the most dangerous people we've dealt with yet, and if it's all the same to you, I don't want to die. So we're going to ask to see the Crowned Head, and when we're allowed to see him, we're going to explain to him what's going on. Then we're going to ask to borrow the piece until the danger is past."

"That is the most boring plan I've ever heard. And right after the plan you had to rob that Prentiss guy? This might be the most boring plan ever."

"Practicality is boring now," Wick said, unimpressed.

"Practicality is the most boring thing I can think of, yes," Archer responded. "Which is why I never go for the

practical option. I don't want to die boring."

"Well I don't want to die at all," Wick said, suddenly remembering Eland's letter anew. "Especially not here. Do you know how manghar executions go?"

Archer opened his mouth, then closed it again and put on a wise expression. "Probably, but it doesn't come to mind right now. Why don't you tell me?"

"All right. They make you wait until sunrise, and then they put a noose around your neck. But you aren't hung. You're taken by the collar and flown up above the highest branch of the highest tree in their territory. Which, since the Crowned Head loves to grow his trees and never cuts them down, is very, very high up. Then, when they've flown as high as the highest branch of the highest tree, they keep flying, but they let go of your collar, and then, yes, you're hung by the neck until dead. And then whether you're dead or not by the time they fly back down, your body is dropped into a pit of sharpened branches next to the Crowned Head's dungeon as a warning to all future criminals who might think to cross the manghar. Now, does that sound like a nice death to you?" Wick demanded.

"Death doesn't sound nice to me at all," Archer said matter-of-factly. "If it's all the same to you, I would much rather live forever."

"Well, that unpleasant death is the more likely option if we rob the manghar to their faces like you're suggesting." Wick raised his head and walked a little faster. "We're using my plan first because it gives us the best chance of not dying."

"Not dying sounds better," Archer said, then, as

though it was his plan all along, he said, "I think we should try just asking for the piece first. We could just borrow it and then bring it back."

"Yes, I think we should do that too," Wick said in a tired voice.

When they arrived at the edge of the city, they found it crawling with manghar. Their huge forms were everywhere: in the air, on the ground, lighting on the branches of the trees and on the sills of windows to stare down the visitors. A few fell into step behind them as soon as they had walked past.

It was obvious from Archer's tight gait that he, too, was aware of the tail they were gaining. Out of the corner of his eye, Wick could see him casting his eyes about to study the city for means of escape should they need it.

The design of the city was elegant but strange. The manghar didn't bother with stairs any more than the seraphs did. In fact, they were worse. If they had been planning to rob the manghar rather than ask for the piece, it would have been impossible. Every ledge was hundreds of feet off the ground. The structures were all sharp corners and sloping roofs, and every house had some open wall or chasm in the floor that would make it impossible to walk around in. Everything in the manghar kingdom was built to make the wingless feel insufficient.

Wick could feel dozens of eyes on his back as they approached the palace. From his few visits before, he knew why the manghar were watching them with such interest.

The only set of stairs in the entirety of the manghar kingdom was the broad, cold, stone staircase that swept up

to the throne room of the Crowned Head.

And it had one hundred and twenty-three stairs.

Wick and Archer trod up the dozens and dozens of stairs, one step at a time, slowly climbing higher and higher. Half of the manghar trailing behind them flew to the top ahead of them and disappeared into the palace. The other half waited at the bottom, watching them climb.

"I never got why anyone would want such a ridiculous staircase," Archer muttered at some point, still plodding up step after step. "It's like he doesn't want anyone to visit him."

"The stairs are so that his forces can gather in the throne room before his enemies reach the top," Wick said, still plodding. After a moment more of climbing, he admitted, "And they're partly meant to make those who can't fly feel uncomfortable."

Archer's brow furrowed. "Well, that's just rude."

They kept climbing. Wick could feel the gazes of the manghar people on the back of his neck, but he tried to ignore it and just focus on climbing. It was bad enough that there were so many steps, but each stair step was just deep enough that one had to either take two small steps on each or one huge step across it, and either option was awkward and exhausting. There was no way to win.

An age later, they finally reached the top, took a moment to catch their breath and shake out their legs, and then they followed two bat guards through the twisting hallways and into the throne room of the Crowned Head of the manghar.

The Crowned Head, the king of the manghar, sat

across from them on a tall and ornately carved throne. Everything in the vast throne room glittered with jewels. The manghar were famous for their gemstone mines, and the stones were their primary source of trade as well as their pride. Everyone bought their stones— rich seraphs, human men wishing to give their bride a token, the occasional satyr seeking to make a beautiful object. Rubies and topaz alike were set into the surface of the Crowned Head's throne, and just above his head, just below the pointed peak of the seat's back, was a familiar jade-green, translucent stone.

It was just as Wick remembered. The manghar had set their piece of the Heather Stone into the Crowned Head's throne.

Wick offered a brief bow as he entered and shot Archer a warning glance so that he did the same.

“You may rise,” the Crowned Head said.

Wick straightened. His heart pounded inside his chest. It didn't matter how many times he came to visit the manghar kingdom; he was never fully comfortable around the Crowned Head.

After all, he couldn't have been any more massive.

The Crowned Head, even while seated, was taller than the pair of guards who stood beside him. If he had been standing, he would have towered a good two heads taller than Wick, and Wick was not one of the shorter leshy. The manghar king's fur was the deep charcoal grey of burned trees, and thicker at the shoulders, thick enough to make him look broader than he was. Taloned fingers tapped at the arm of his throne.

If the stories were true, he had killed the last Crowned

Head with a fireplace poker as he slept.

"The tree messenger. I remember you." He didn't use Wick's name, but then, Wick doubted the Crowned Head even remembered his name. "You've been very helpful in the past." He leaned forward slightly. "What did you come to me for?"

"I came to admire your territory and your trees," Wick said, going for compliments first. Better to get on the Crowned Head's good side before asking for a favor he wasn't owed.

The Crowned Head, still tilted forward, nodded his approval without smiling. "The trees grew well this year. Better even than the year before."

The only thing in their territory that the manghar prided in as much as their gemstones were their great evergreens. Since the manghar were located between the mountain range on the border of human territory and the mountain range that made up most of centaur territory, the manghar had many strong forests. All the runoff from the mountains made for good tree soil. And since it was one of the colder territories, what grew the most were evergreens and firs.

"They're beautiful." Wick saw Archer adjust his pose out of the corner of his eye and willed him not to say anything either of them would regret. Or anything at all. That would be much better.

The Crowned Head smiled this time. But it wasn't a warm smile. It was a cold and alert smile, like a cobra in a corner waiting to strike at the snake charmer. "But what do you want?"

Wick raised his head a little higher, taking a more defensive stance. As a diplomat, his defensive stance did not look like most. It didn't look ready to run or ready to strike. Just stronger, looser, more confident. Confident of success. Confident that requests would be granted.

Or at least that's what Wick hoped the stance was.

"To ask for a favor."

He felt like he was facing down the Crowned Head. The way the bat king sat, his pointed ears alert, flame-colored eyes not moving from Wick's face, posture just tense enough to almost look natural, suggested that he saw the conversation the same way.

"But let me explain first," Wick said, knowing that if he asked the favor first, he would not get to explain himself afterward. Not before being thrown into the dungeon, out of the manghar kingdom, or downward with a noose around his neck. "My companion has reason to believe that the Scorch is coming back to Aro."

The Crowned Head rested a fist under his chin, his eyes still bright and fastened on Wick. "It isn't." He paused. "But tell me why he thinks so."

Wick saw Archer's eyes tighten in satisfaction, but Wick knew the Crowned Head better. He was asking for Wick to tell him everything not because he was afraid that the Scorch really was coming back, but because he thought Wick's talking was amusing.

This was Wick's least favorite thing about visiting the manghar kingdom. He didn't like being amusing when he was trying to discuss something serious. He didn't like being amusing at all.

But somehow or another, he had to explain to someone what was going on, so he told the Crowned Head all the same. He described what Archer had seen happening with the birds leaving and the dark rain. He convinced Archer to give him the unfillable bag and showed the Crowned Head the symbol on the inside of the top flap, telling him how the bag had suddenly ceased to be unfillable. He told the Crowned Head everything he could and as persuasively as he could. And then he got to the difficult part.

“And it's because of all this that we had to come to you to ask for—”

“You came to ask if you might take our piece of the Heather Stone.” The Crowned Head blinked once, lazily, and then leaned back in his chair. The piece of the Heather Stone glinted above the tips of his ears. Slowly, thoughtfully, he stretched his great wings out to the sides. The orange membrane in between the bones looked almost sheer in the light of the sun pouring in through the windows of the throne room.

Wick knew the Crowned Head was not just stretching cramped muscles. With his wings extended, he looked bigger, stronger, more terrifying.

It was a show of power.

Drawing his wings back in, the Crowned Head asked, “How many pieces of the stone do you already have?”

Wick was already in too deep to be uncomfortable with the information he was about to give. “Five.”

“More than half the stones in all of Aro combined.” The leader of the manghar continued without hesitation.

“Let me just ask you one more thing: do you really believe any of this foolishness about the Scorch returning?”

Wick's heart skipped a beat. “Excuse me?”

The Crowned Head's gaze did nothing but intensify. “Truly, I never thought your people were very intelligent, but I never thought you could be this stupid. Do you think any of what he has said is true?”

Archer chose this moment to turn an expectant look in Wick's direction.

The sunshine suddenly felt too hot. The walls of the manghar throne room were too close.

He tried to collect his wits. “I believe that if it is a genuine concern, that we should be ready.”

Archer sighed.

“So you don't think it's true,” said the Crowned Head.

Wick tried to find his words. “Well, I—Well, I'm sure—”

The Crowned Head slammed his fist down onto the arm of his throne, and the crash hit Wick like an unexpected splash of cold water to the face. “Do you think I don't know who your companion is?” the manghar king shouted. “He's banned from crossing our borders! And do you know for what? Thievery! Vandalism! Unashamed, lawless impropriety! He has broken every sacred rule that the manghar ever laid down for outsiders who enter as guests! He is beyond ill repute! He is an abomination to even have wings. And while he is with you, do you think for a moment that I believe you obtained any piece of the Heather Stone through good means? No.”

Wick could almost physically see everything spiraling out of his control, like it was all caught in a spinning

whirlpool. And he would be pulled in too if he didn't do something right now. "Give me a chance to explain," he began in a voice forced into an even cadence.

"Your chance has expired."

The guards lunged toward them.

Wick could almost see Eland's warning manifesting in front of his eyes.

Wick was not entirely unprepared for an attack, but as the guards threw themselves at Wick and Archer, weapons out, arms reaching, wings snapped open, it was obvious that Archer was more than prepared.

Wick fell back, trying to jump out of the way of the spears and claws. But Archer didn't go back. He leaped forward, head-on and unarmed, toward the manghar guards.

Just as he and the nearest guard were about to collide, he pushed off the manghar's spear pole with both hands, using the momentum to leap up over the manghar's head. His feathered wings shot out for balance for the briefest moment before he lighted down on the other side. Before anyone had a chance to turn around or even to react, Archer was running. He tore doggedly toward the throne, where the Crowned Head sat without weapons or guards. The Crowned Head leaped up to meet Archer. His claws shot out to defend himself. But Archer was airborne. He took another great flying leap up over the grabbing claws of the manghar king and dunked the opening of the unfillable bag down over the top of the throne.

In less than the time it took Wick to get cornered, Archer had successfully stolen the entire manghar throne. And then, instead of making any move to rescue Wick,

Archer leaped out of a window.

The Crowned Head raced to the window and leaned out. "He's gone!" he screamed in outrage. He spun to face the guards. "It only takes one of you to put the tree messenger in prison where he belongs. The rest of you, get all the palace sentinels and find the seraph boy before he gets to the border!"

A manghar guard grabbed Wick by both arms and shoved him out of the throne room and down the hallway. Wick's stomach twisted. Everything he had tried to avoid had all happened at once. Everything had fallen apart, just as he should have known it would. He would be thrown into a dungeon and inevitably executed for everything he had done and everything he hadn't stopped Archer from doing.

He lowered his head.

Pale sunlight hit his face as he and the guard passed a window, and something came flying in through the window and slammed into the side of the guard's face.

The guard tumbled against the wall, bringing Wick with him, and they slammed to the floor. The guard's grip loosened, and Wick pulled free, shuffling away from the bat man as fast as he could. Archer was the only one still standing. He hopped up and down on one foot, clutching the heel of the other foot, the one that had slammed into the manghar's face. Muttering under his breath, Archer lowered his foot long enough to kick the manghar's motionless body and beckoned quickly to Wick.

"Come on! Let's get out of here!"

Wick picked himself up, checked to make sure he still had his messenger's bag, and the two of them took off down

the hallway.

"Why did you leave me to get arrested?" Wick demanded as they ran. "I wasn't even the one that stole the *entire throne*."

"I created a distraction!" Archer exclaimed, sounding almost offended. "Now they're out there somewhere looking for me, and we have no one chasing us. Anyway, I came back for you, didn't I?"

He *had* come back.

The pair of them came skidding to a halt as they came to the stairs. Or rather, where stairs should have been. The throne room level of the manghar palace ended in a terrifying plunge down the twenty feet to the level below.

"This is why I think the Door in the Wall would be handy," Archer said, gesturing to the drop.

"You said it was lost, so it doesn't matter," Wick snapped.

Fortunately, the manghar couldn't build without involving columns. With some difficulty, they grabbed onto the columns below the throne room level and slid down to the second floor. Wick remembered something. "You probably just came back for the Oak Leaf."

"You say that like I wouldn't come back for just you," Archer said. They started racing down a long stone gallery. The sound of flapping wings surrounded them, in the walls, outside the palace, down other hallways. Any second now someone was going to spot them. They had to move fast if they were going to get out of the palace without being captured.

"Granted," Archer continued, "catching that guard

when he least expected it would also have been the time when your stupid Oak Leaf was under the least amount of security if I did just want to steal it. But I would have come back for you if you didn't have it."

It was difficult to tell how to get down to the next level of the palace. From where they stood, they could see the huge round room ahead of them, from which, looking up, one could see every level of the manghar palace. But at least ten dark hallways branched out from the gallery, and none of them looked like an obvious way down to the ground level.

Archer spun around and picked a hallway at random. "That way! I think I see a window down there. Maybe there'll be something we can jump to outside the window."

The flapping of wings grew louder by the second, and Wick tried to block the sound out of his mind as he and Archer raced down the random hallway.

It seemed Archer's eyes were better than Wick's, or at any rate, he had guessed correctly, because sure enough, a huge glass window appeared at the end of the hallway. Wick and Archer skidded to a stop next to it and Archer jumped up onto the sill to figure out how it opened. The sound of wingbeats became suddenly more defined.

They had been found.

"Got it!" Archer jumped down from the sill and pushed the window outward. Both of them leaned out to look.

The drop was significant. The sill of the window was at least two body lengths from the ground, and even then, there were bushes at the bottom. Outside the window, just too far to jump to, were the branches of an evergreen tree.

And a glance over his shoulder at the shadows swarming in the gallery they had come from was enough to tell Wick that they couldn't possibly go back. Their options seemed to be few.

Wick looked back out the window as Archer leaned back in. "How far do you think you could fall without breaking your legs?"

"Not that far." Archer ran a hand down his face, looking genuinely flustered for the first time since Wick had met him.

Wick stared at the ground, speculating. "I think I could survive the fall. Probably walk away from it, too."

"Maybe you could, twig, but I couldn't." Archer stepped back from the window and started pacing back and forth, across the window and back again. "I couldn't make it without breaking my legs or worse."

"How about the trees? Could you jump to the trees?" Wick asked.

Archer didn't even pause. "It's too far. I'd never make it."

"Then use your wings," Wick said.

Archer finally stopped pacing long enough to flare out his mangled wing and give Wick a hard look. "Is this funny to you? Does this look like something I could use to you?"

Wick gestured back the way they had come. "You used them in the throne room! I saw! That was one step short of flying."

"That was jumping," Archer said.

"But it was almost flying! You could make it from here to the tree!"

"I couldn't." Archer held out a hand flat in a 'that's that' gesture. "The distance I jumped in the throne room was much smaller and more manageable. I do things like that all the time. I'm used to it. This is from a window into a *tree*. The branch could break the second I grab it."

"Like I said, use your wings," Wick repeated. "I know how wings work. Use them to catch the air. They don't have to be perfect to do that."

"I know that," Archer said shortly. "But I still couldn't make it. I've never practiced. I don't even know if I could make it that far."

A shout came from the atrium, and something huge and black came flying down the long hallway.

They were out of time. And Archer had gone back to pacing.

"I don't see what the problem is!" Wick cried. "It's either we escape or we don't! Either you fly or you don't! I don't know why you're hesitating!"

"Because I told you I can't make it that far!" Archer shouted.

"But you could fly before!" Wick shouted back. "It's just different now. You could still do it if you wanted—"

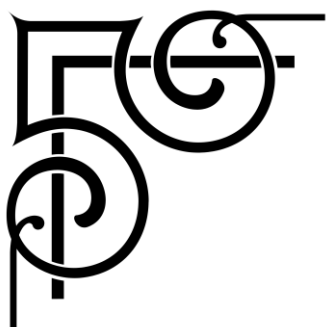
"I could *never* fly!" Archer spun around, his face inches from Wick's. The fire was back behind his eyes, burning brighter now than Wick had ever seen it before.

Wick searched Archer's face, looking for the joke, for the lie born out of cowardice, for something that would tell him that Archer wasn't serious. He didn't find it. He opened his mouth to say something back.

But he had forgotten to keep an eye on the hallway.

Something slammed into them from behind. Both they and the attacker fell toward the open window. Archer managed to catch himself against the window frame, but Wick went straight through the opening. His hands grabbed at empty air, grabbing for anything that could prevent him from falling. He caught the strap of Archer's bag, but Archer wasn't holding on, and Wick's weight just ripped the bag off Archer's shoulder.

Wick tumbled out the window, flailing. He fell headfirst toward the ground.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Not a Twig

WICK WAS DROWNING.

He didn't know how, but he was drowning.

How was he drowning? There hadn't been any streams or ponds or anything of the sort below the window. There hadn't been any water in sight. What was happening? In his desperation, he couldn't think.

At last, his head broke the surface, and Wick flailed at the water in confusion for a moment before he realized something else was wrong.

It was dark. Dark as midnight without the moon. He couldn't find any light at all.

Wick kept thrashing, trying to keep his head above water. He couldn't feel the bottom. He couldn't see the shore. He couldn't feel a current and yet he smelled river water.

This didn't make any sense. There had to be a current

of some kind, didn't there? He could barely feel waves.

Something moved in the water next to him, and Wick jolted. He beat at the water, kicking harder to get away from whatever behemoth was with him in the water.

A good-natured whinny came from the behemoth, and then the sound of hooves hitting something solid. A horse?

And suddenly everything fell into place.

"Sasha?" Wick spluttered in confusion.

The horse whinnied again, confirming all of Wick's worst suspicions.

Archer kept Sasha in the bag. Archer kept a river in the bag.

Wick had fallen in the unfillable bag.

But could he get out? Sasha had climbed up on something to get out of the water. Wick felt for it. After groping a moment, his fingers met a wet, rough surface: a boulder, jutting half out of the water. So that was how Sasha had survived in the water this long.

Wick clung to the rock with one hand. With the other hand, he reached up into the darkness above his head. Only a foot or so up, his hand hit something thick and firm that gave under his hand. Hoping it was the flap of the bag, he pushed. The leather ceiling moved just enough to let in a small beam of light that bounced across the water. In the flash of light, Wick saw a honey blonde horse peering down at him from the boulder.

"We'll have to get you out of here soon and dry you off," he told Sasha, and, grabbing onto the edge of the bag's opening, pulled himself out.

He almost didn't make it out. The opening was much

smaller than he thought, almost too small for him to squeeze through. He nearly got stuck. But eventually, he got high enough to balance on straight arms, and it was easy to pull his legs out of the opening.

He fell onto the sharp branches of a cluster of bushes. It took him a moment to get his bearings. Looking up, Wick realized he was under the same window he had fallen out of. He glanced back at the bag, and everything fell into place. The bag must have been under him as he fell. Since it had become nearly invisible once it landed in the bushes, he had made it out of the manghar palace without being found.

Archer hadn't been so lucky. Wick tried to form a plan, but he was cold, wet, confused, and starving for sunlight. The sun was starting to go down. Wick had no doubt that the manghar had captured Archer to execute him for everything he had done in their kingdom. In the morning, Archer would be hung.

Wick heard a few shouts not far away. They were still looking for him.

Immediate priorities took over, and grabbing both bags, he made himself scarce.

He found a little shelter under the low hanging branches of a spruce tree and hid there, trying to absorb what little sunlight filtered through the gaps between the branches and grasping for a plan. The flap of wings went overhead several times, and every time he ducked down and covered his head. When footsteps passed directly next to the spruce bush, Wick finally had to accept that he couldn't stay. If he stayed in his current hiding spot, he would be found, and he would be no use to anyone, least of all

himself.

Wrapping the straps of both bags over his shoulders, he took off into the gathering darkness. Once he was far enough from the palace and deep enough into the underbrush that no one would find him, Wick collapsed under an overhanging boulder, shivering.

He needed a plan.

Dragging the bags off his shoulders, he dug through them with stiff fingers. His supplies were limited. Traveling essentials, brick-a-brack, several pieces of enchanted stone, and what else? He was forgetting something. There had been something else in his bag, hadn't there?

Oh. The flower Archer had made him carry. Wick's fingers searched the bottom of the bag, but the flower was nowhere to be found.

Stop worrying about the flower.

An objective. He had to start with an objective.

Wick shook himself and inched into a crack of moonlight, hoping that the weak light would grant him enough energy to think straight again. He desperately needed to focus. He had to figure out what his objective was. What was he going to do?

A terrible thought crossed his mind.

He had Archer's bag. He had his own bag. Unless something had fallen out of either one of them, he had everything he needed. He had a horse and supplies. He had all the pieces of the Heather Stone that they had stolen. He even had the unfillable bag that had been stolen from the centaurs a century or longer ago. If he wanted to, he could escape the manghar kingdom and take everything back to

the centaurs, who would put everything where it belonged. He would be able to straighten everything out and clear his name. He might get to prove himself the way his mentors wanted him to.

It seemed straightforward. Take the opportunity and go. Why didn't he just get up and do that?

"Good question." Wick hugged himself and sank back against the base of the rock. The breeze, as cold as it was, was beginning to dry him off from his dunking in the river.

He could go. Why didn't he just go?

Something large flew overhead, and Wick ducked down.

How many stones did he have now? He thought back through the territories they had come through. Between the two bags, he had six stones.

In other words, most of the stones.

Just like Eland had said.

Wick ripped the letter back out of the envelope and pored over it again. *You had come a long way somehow. . . reached a vital turning point. Watch your back.*

Now that he needed guidance, Wick realized how unhelpful the letter was. It had warned him of what was coming, but it hadn't given him a solution. It had only given him the problem. He didn't know what he was meant to do now that the time was upon him.

He wished he could just take the bags and leave. Why couldn't he just leave?

He couldn't go, he admitted to himself, because of Archer. Archer was in prison. The seraph boy who he had followed all this way, who he had done so much with, was

locked up in the manghar palace probably staring out a window, waiting to die. Wick had seen the dungeon himself from the outside of the palace. Every cell had a slatted window overlooking the pit of spikes.

It would not be a good night's sleep for anyone locked up in there.

If Wick was the one locked up in the tower, staring out over bodies on spikes, would Archer come and get him out?

He tried to tell himself that Archer wouldn't. Archer didn't seem to care about a living soul on the surface of Aro or anyone who had been buried under it. Nothing mattered to him. Right?

Wrong. Some traitorous part of Wick's memory reminded him of how Archer had watched out for him in Eri. In all their travels together, even when chaos arrived, Archer had never abandoned him. It had often seemed like he wanted to, and maybe the only reason he didn't was to stay within stealing range of the Oak Leaf, but he had never left Wick. Only a few hours ago in the manghar palace, when Wick had been arrested and without a means of escape, Archer had come back for him.

Still, he might have just come back for Wick's bag and the piece of the Heather Stone inside, but then again, Wick had asked him about it, and Archer had casually replied:

"You say that like I wouldn't have come back for just you. I would have come back for you if you didn't have it."

And the way he had said it, matter-of-factly, offhand, as though it was instinctive, had been enough to make Wick believe him when he said it.

The moon glinted down on him through the trees. It had to be nearing midnight now. If he was going to form a plan, it would have to be soon or he would have no time to prepare.

His mind wandered back to the flower Archer had made him put in his bag.

Something about the flower being missing bothered him. He took everything out of the bag and dug to the bottom in search of it. Once everything else was out, he shook the bag upside down over his lap.

A black powder poured out. Setting the bag to the side, Wick inspected the powder. It was the deep black color of something that had been rotted or burned. It was finer than dust, rougher than soot. The flower had disintegrated.

That bothered him much more than when he had thought the flower was just missing. The flower had gone from dead to dust. To ash. To a fine powder. Dead things didn't just do that.

The only reason it would was if. . .

If Archer had been telling the truth all along.

Wick's mind raced. The plants were dying and turning to dust. The birds were leaving. The rain was turning black.

All the signs were there. Everything that had happened when the Scorch had come to Aro the first time was happening again.

Wick's heart beat faster as, for the first time, the truth hit him.

We'll all be destroyed. Everyone is going to die.

Someone had to do something. Something had to be done before the Scorch made it back.

While Wick now knew what he had to do, he understood everything that would happen as a result.

If he committed to this, he would have to go in and rescue Archer, and then together they would have to finish this. They would have to steal the rest of the stones and save Aro, and he would have to face the consequences of pillaging every race in his country. He would be breaking dozens of treaties and alliances between the people.

If he did this he would be stealing, not observing stealing, not trying to prevent stealing, not trying to decide if stealing was the wrong thing to do or not. And in doing so he would be risking his reputation and his status.

The worst-case scenario was losing face, losing his job, losing the opportunity to be a counselor for the centaurs. Maybe even losing every friend he knew.

But it was the right thing to do, wasn't it?

He dropped his head into his hands and didn't move for a long, long time.

He was never meant to make big decisions like this. He was a messenger, a helper. People consulted him for their own decisions, and he offered what input he could. Even if he had received the counselor promotion, he would never have needed to decide the fate of Aro alone.

Sitting there in the dark, with his arms wrapped around his head and a branch digging into his back, he realized he had never made a big decision in his life.

But one way or another, he had to decide something, or the world he knew would end, and Archer would die.

Time ticked as he did his best to put everything into a logical format. In its purest form, the situation was this:

The Scorch was undeniably coming back, and something had to be done about it. It was much too late to take the case to the centaurs and have them sort it out.

He had to do something, but he couldn't do anything on his own.

And the one person who could help him finish all this was waiting to be executed.

Despite his gut begging him to run, Wick decided to rescue his seraph friend before he was slaughtered in the morning.

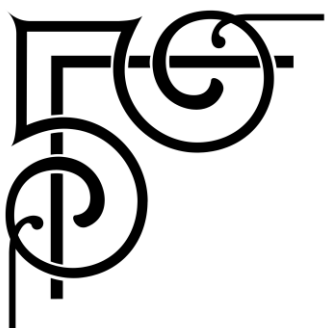
But how? Looking back at the unfillable bag, he realized he had the perfect rescue plan once he made it in. But, he thought a little sadly as he looked down at his woody hands and fingers, he wouldn't make it anywhere near the palace looking like this. Even if he wrapped himself in a cloak and drew on a mustache, they would still recognize him in an instant, and he would be put in the noose the second Archer's broken neck left it. Other Leshy didn't travel much, and even if they did it was highly unlikely that any other leshy of his exact height and build were to pass through this area, so he couldn't possibly pretend to be anyone else.

No.

He would have to make more changes to his appearance than a mustache. If he was going to pull this off, he would have to look completely different.

Transmogrification was his only option.

Ready to face the vital turning point that Eland's letter had warned him about, he dug through the unfillable bag to see if Archer kept an extra shirt and pants anywhere.



CHAPTER TWELVE

A River in a Bag

ARCHER STARED OUT the window as the first gleam of sunlight crept over the tops of the trees.

So this is how I die, he thought to himself and nodded. Sure, plenty of times before he had come close. Sometimes, very, very close. He reached back to grasp the huge bow in his useless wing and pressed his lips tight together.

But he should have known the real thing would be at the hands of the manghar. He had never made a clean escape from them in the past, of course they were going to catch him eventually.

He just wished the stupid tree hadn't described the whole thing to him ahead of time. He would have been just fine going into it confused and ignorant. But no. The twig had to go and ruin everything. Now Archer had to stare out the window at a pit full of spikes and ragged bodies, knowing he would have to hang gruesomely before they threw him in there, too. That thought made him sweat just

a little more than he was comfortable with.

Archer abandoned the window and started to pace, hands grasped in front of him, rubbing his thumbs up and down across the sides of his pointer fingers, back and forth, over and over.

He didn't know what he had expected of Wick, but he had sort of hoped the twig would make an effort to rescue him. He had hoped that someone would want him not to die. There were enough people in the world who wanted him dead or at least out of the way, but he had hoped that just maybe one person somewhere would want him to exist as he was.

He glanced toward the window and saw the sun start to spread across the ground outside. No one was coming for him.

No one cared after all.

I should have known.

I really should have known.

Archer slid down the wall with his good wing facing out and wrapped the wing around himself, blocking him from view to anyone outside the cell. His head dropped onto his knees, and he ground his forehead into his kneecaps.

He was going to die. Any minute now, someone would come to the cell, and they would take him away to be killed.

Pathetic.

Well, then, he'd make as big of a ruckus as he could on his way out.

He unwrapped his wing from around his shoulders and started to sing. It was an old song and probably a stupid

song, but the seraphs had taught it to him, and there had always been something about it that he liked. So he sang it, as loudly and lustily as he could manage.

"There once was a princess of Eri in land, and she was a sight to see!" he yelled. "But it's just that she wasn't a princess at all, seraphs don't have princesses, you see!"

A low groan came from outside the cell as whoever was guarding him realized it was a song and not just some random statement. Archer grinned. They hadn't started yelling at him yet; clearly he wasn't being loud enough.

"She flew the whole world, and she never came down, and that is the tale she told!" he bellowed, tucking his legs tighter into himself and screaming louder, "She made men besotted, was never forgotten, she died and will never grow old!"

He paused for effect, waiting, listening.

He barely had to wait for a heartbeat before the guard yelled, "Stop that!"

Archer took a huge breath. "There was a young princess from citadel Eri and she was a wonder to hear! She sang like an angel and looked like a cherub, she sang fit to sorrow your ear!" The words were getting tangled, and his singing was more yelling now than anything resembling a tune, but he was making a clamor, and that was how he wanted to go out.

"Shut up!" the guard bellowed.

Archer interrupted him. "Her singing made her enemies or something, I don't remember how this line goes! Something something, to have her killed! I remember that part! Wherever she went, assassins were sent, but she still

went wherever she willed!"

The flap of many wings came up the hallway. Archer's eyes darted up toward the window. The sun was truly shining through now. This was it. His heart took a terrifying plunge.

Determined, he sucked in a breath and started on the third verse. "There was a young princeling from seraphs land fair, and he was the ugliest thing!" That wasn't how the verse went, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything at all. Nothing mattered to him now. "His people still loved him for he was not above them, and that's why they made him their king!"

Footsteps approached.

"About time," the guard growled, and someone threw Archer's cell door open. More manghar ducked into the cell. Grabbing Archer by his upper arms, they dragged him to his feet and hauled him with them out the door. Archer grinned over his shoulder at the one who had been guarding him as he left, and the manghar shot him a bristling glare.

Archer found he really wanted to start on the fourth and final verse of the song. He started bellowing it out. "There once was a family in Eri the town and they were—"

The guard on his left hit him in the stomach so hard he nearly lost all the air in his lungs. That was the end of singing folk songs.

This is really it.

They dragged him down the stairs of the tower and back into the throne room of the Crowned Head, where he sat on a glorified armchair instead of a throne. That little detail was enough to make Archer smile, but not laugh,

since laughing probably would have made his stomach hurt more than it already did.

Manghar men, women and children alike, gathered in the throne room as the Crowned Head leaned forward on his throne and spoke to Archer.

"You stand accused of theft, border crossing, and overall foolishness within the borders of manghar territory, which is against the laws of our people. You have mocked superior powers and taken things that are worth more than your thieving self," the Crowned Head said. "And for these charges, you are sentenced to death. You will be brought out into the courtyard and hanged above the highest branch of the highest tree, and your body will serve as a warning to all who come after you who think to do the same."

The other manghar nodded in agreement.

The Crowned Head banged a fist against the arm of his glorified armchair. "And thus, you are—"

"Hang on," Archer said. "Can't I have any last words or something? Isn't someone going to write down my last words?"

"We don't write down last words," the Crowned Head said in a tired voice. It was apparently too early in the morning for him to be dealing with these kinds of shenanigans. But Archer could work with that. Maybe if he bothered this guy just enough, he could get something out of dying. "Those we deem worthy of death are not people we honor enough to remember. Your last words don't have any worth to us."

"What about last requests?" Archer asked. "Can I have a last request? It would only take you a minute."

"That doesn't matter," the Crowned Head said. "You aren't getting a last request."

Archer shrugged. "Then I'll be singing folk songs the whole way down to the courtyard. Doesn't bother me."

Both the guard on his left and the guard on his right flinched. One of them shot a pleading look at the Crowned Head, whose lip curled. It seemed he didn't want to listen to Archer's rendition of 'The Princesses of Eri' all the way down to the courtyard and possibly all the way up into the sky. Which was good, since Archer didn't particularly want to die mid-verse.

"Fine, what is your last request?" the Crowned Head said, visibly suppressing a sigh.

"It won't take you long," Archer said. "It won't be hard. Won't even take a minute out of your day."

The fingers of the Crowned Head's left hand started tapping at the arm of his chair. "Say what you want quickly, or you won't get a last request at all."

"Fine," Archer said. "I just want a moment of silence. That's all. I am about to die, remember. I just want everyone to bow their heads and have a moment of respectful silence before I go hang above the highest leaf on the highest branch or whatever. Just a moment of silence. That's all I'm asking for."

The Crowned Head waved a hand flippantly. "It doesn't matter to me. Have it. Everyone, bow your heads."

Everyone reluctantly lowered their heads and closed their eyes. Archer shook off the hands of the guards on either side of him. "I'm capable of standing on my own while I'm having a moment of silence for myself. There are

people between me and the doors. I won't escape."

The guards let go of his arms, and he nodded his thanks before lowering his head himself. For a long and blissful moment, everyone in the Crowned Head's throne room was silent.

Archer took that moment to slip out of a window.

Lowering himself down from the windowsill, he swung down to another window on the level below, just as he had done yesterday after he had stolen the throne. Shouts of rage came from upstairs; they had discovered his escape.

He had to move fast.

Archer jumped down onto the cold floor of the hallway and started running as fast as he could. Wherever the tree was, the tree had his bag, and he planned to find that stupid kid and beat the leaves out of him for not coming back. Then he would get all the pieces of the Heather Stone and finally finish this. Somehow.

There were wingbeats behind him. Big, stupid, leathery ones. The guards were catching up, and they would catch him if he didn't make a quick getaway. Unfortunately, there weren't any more windows nearby for him to jump out of and no stairs anywhere in this blasted palace. He would have to make it out by the main entrance.

The entryway that he and Wick had entered through only a day ago came into view. The morning light shone through it like a beacon. He raced toward it.

A huge manghar dropped down on him like a bird of prey.

Everything fell into a mess of arms and legs and wings and that terrifying pig face with teeth that was much too

close to Archer's face. Archer tried to shove the bat off, but the manghar had to weigh at least twice what he did, and manghar were all muscle.

I'm not going to make it.

More manghar dropped down from above like demons, surrounding him on all sides.

He wasn't going to make it out. There was no question now. He just wasn't going to make it.

Then the least expected happened.

Whap.

A rock bounced off the back of the manghar's skull, and the bat leaped up, ready to take down whoever had thrown the rock. The other manghar jumped back as more rocks came flying through the entryway into the manghar palace. As all the manghar started to move away from the onslaught of flying rocks, a filthy boy with blond hair came racing up the steps and across the room toward Archer.

Archer scrambled up as the heathen ran toward him. The boy still clutched an armful of rocks, throwing them at random. The boy reached Archer just as he made it to his feet and got between Archer and the manghar.

The boy threw one more massive rock. "I thought I was too late. The sun was getting pretty high, and I couldn't hear anything. The manghar are never quiet."

The boy's voice sounded familiar. Come to think of it, he looked familiar, too. Something about the tall and strong but ultimately scrawny build, something around the face, but the face looked wrong, somehow. Not that Archer could see it very well; the kid was caked in dirt.

And the voice. . . the voice sounded familiar, but at the

same time, it sounded wrong. The way Archer remembered it, it should have been quieter. Less echoey. Less weird. What was weird about someone's voice sounding the way a voice should?

The boy threw the last of his rocks, driving the manghar as far back as he could. But the manghar were waiting for that. As soon as the last rock left the boy's hand, one of them leaped away from the wall and sprang toward them, arms outstretched, wings flared to catch the air.

The boy whipped a bag up from his side and ripped the flap open.

"I'm watching my back," he muttered.

What?

Whoosh.

Water spurted, poured, *leaped* out, gushed in a huge flood toward the manghar.

That was when everything fell into place. Archer's eyes bugged out as he tried to take in the blond boy's whole face.

"Wick?"

The strength of the river pouring out of the bag suddenly became stronger, knocking them both backward and across the smooth stone floor. They flew back toward the open arch that marked the edge of the manghar palace. Archer tried to grab the edge of the archway on the way by, but there was too much water, too much force, and not a thing to grip anywhere.

Out they washed, out of the manghar palace and down the steps. Every step thumped against Archer's spine on the way down. They reached the bottom with the bag still pouring water, and for a brief second Archer thought they

might drown, but then all of a sudden the river seemed to wear itself out. The stream slowed to a significant trickle, then down to a little splash, and then all Wick was left with was a soggy leather bag.

Everything hurt. Archer's head throbbed as he tried to figure out what on earth had just happened. But there wasn't any time. He could already imagine the manghar were getting up off the drowned floor of the palace and preparing to come after them.

"Come on, run!" the strange humanish Wick exclaimed, and still dripping, they took off into the forest. Nearly everyone had been gathered to see Archer hang, so they met no manghar in the forest. It was a tight squeeze, and they barely made it out of the city and into the wilderness part of manghar territory without being seen.

About two miles out, when they were out of the reach of anyone trying to catch them at least for the moment, Archer slowed to a jog and stopped, panting. He held up a hand for Wick to stop too. "Okay, stop. Stop, stop, stop." He sucked in a breath, straightened, and gestured at Wick with both open palms. "What. In the world. Happened to you?"

Wick's brow furrowed, worried, and he waved a hand. "I think we should go another few miles before we stop. We don't want them to catch up with us."

"No. Not a chance. I'm not taking another step until you tell me what's going on." Archer took a few steps over to a dead tree stump and sat. Crossing his arms over his chest, he said, "Except for those ones."

Wick, if it really was Wick, turned toward him and

rubbed a hand over his mouth, slowly, as if only just realizing he had one. "I had to go back in to rescue you. They would have recognized me in an instant, and if they recognized me, I wouldn't have made it even close to the palace. I had to find a way to disguise myself. Leshy don't disguise very well."

"Yeah, but how did you do that?" Archer asked, still confused. "I think I would have noticed if you had some kind of. . . transform-y magic before."

"Well, I did," Wick said, sort of shrugging just a little bit. "It's called transmogrification. And I've thought about changing before, too, into something more. . . relatable? Something that had a whole face and no glowing orbs for eyes."

Archer was temporarily taken aback. In all his jabs at Wick's appearance, talking about how he only had part of a face, Wick had never once given him the impression that it bothered him. Archer had never considered that maybe things got under that woody hide. He opened his mouth to apologize, but changed his mind.

"Can you change back?" Archer asked at last.

Wick looked away. "No. It's done now, I can't change it ever again."

Archer nodded. "Okay."

For a moment neither of them said anything. Wick shifted on his feet uncomfortably. He looked around and then decided to sit down against the trunk of a tree across from Archer. "How do I look?" he asked.

"How do you expect me to tell under all that dirt? You're filthy!"

Wick scrubbed at his face with the green fabric of his shirt. Once enough dirt had made it onto the shirt, he looked up again. "How about now?"

He could still do with a good dunking in a large body of water, but now Wick's face was clean enough for Archer to get a good grasp on what features he had been given.

Archer squinted at Wick, tilting his head to the side as he considered Wick's new face. "It's different, that's for sure. It's a little weird seeing you with a full set of— you know— features. Typical that you'd end up prettier than me. . . But it's not a bad look. You look just like a human." He hesitated. "Well, sort of like a human."

Wick's brow furrowed, yet another new thing to get used to. "What do you mean?"

"Well, your eyes. They're still yellowish. And then there's this. Have you not noticed this?" Archer reached over and grabbed up one of Wick's arms to show to him. Wick's new skin, while a fairly normal brown skin tone, was covered in little ridges that could have been mistaken for scars if they both didn't already know what the marks looked like.

Tree bark.

Wick stared at the skin on his arm for a long time.

"I think you've lost some height, too," Archer said, and Wick's eyes bugged out. "No, really. I think you were taller and maybe broader before, too. But that still makes you bigger than me, so here we are." He shrugged.

"So," Archer added, raising his eyebrows. "You better not have lost every single piece of the Heather Stone when you took the entire river out of the bag."

"I didn't. They're all in my messenger's bag," Wick said. "It wasn't easy to get them all out of the river. I had to swim for hours before I got everything that wasn't river out of your bag."

"What about the food I had in there?" Archer asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Here." Wick handed him a canvas sack, one that Archer now remembered he had been keeping inside of the unfillable bag.

"My trinkets? My cooking utensils?"

Wick gestured to the bag. "They're in there."

"My extra clothes?"

"I'm wearing them."

Archer didn't like the sound of that, but for now, he let it go. "My horse?"

Wick did a full-handed point over Archer's shoulder. "She's been following us for the last mile and a half!"

Archer looked behind him and lo and behold, Sasha stood behind him, munching on the only patch of green grass in sight. She rolled her eyes up at him and kept chewing. She looked better than he had expected, all things considered. All things being she had survived on a boulder inside an unfillable bag for several weeks now. Her hide was still drying out, but Archer still wasn't fully dry himself.

Archer twisted back to face forward again and said what he'd been thinking about since the manghar palace. "I thought you weren't coming back for me."

Wick hesitated, then admitted, "For a bit, I thought I wasn't, either."

"But?"

"I thought better of it. You came back for me; I came back for you. It would have been a long and lonely journey to the coast without you."

Something in Archer's heart tried to stir, but he wouldn't let it. His mouth quirked sideways. "That's touching and all, but there has to be more to it than that. I can't imagine you actually missed me."

Wick shrugged, uncharacteristic for him. "Then don't. If you don't think I see you as a friend and wanted to make sure you didn't die, then think whatever you want. But it's as simple as that." He got up off the ground and slung his bag back over his shoulder. "We have to get moving again. We're still in manghar territory. They can still catch up with us if we don't keep going."

Interesting. Archer got up, too, and they started walking again.

It was a long, long journey to nixie territory. Most of the way across Aro, actually. The manghar were the furthest territory inland, and the nixies were on the coast. They would have to walk to the edge of manghar territory, which from here was another day's walk yet, and from there they needed to skirt the edge of centaur territory to start their journey to the coast.

Of course, it would be easier to rob the centaurs on their way past and then get the nixies last, but centaur territory was the Heather Stone's resting place. They would need all the other stones before going to the valley to cast the spell. They would just have to get to the nixies and then double back.

However, by now they had robbed everyone but the

centaurs and the nixies, which meant that anyone who was dedicated to stopping them from stealing the last two pieces would be gathered at both places. The pieces would be under triple guard and watched at all times.

Stealing the last two pieces wouldn't be easy.

But Archer hadn't come for easy. He looked at Wick. "Are you with me for the last two?"

Wick's grip on his bag tightened. "The flower I had in my bag turned into dust. Flowers don't just do that, even if they're dead."

"And?" Archer asked.

"And the rain is black. And the birds are leaving. I see more flying away every day."

"And what do you gather from that?"

"The Scorch is coming back," Wick said. "I don't know why the centaurs haven't seen anything about it, but if we're the only two people in the world who know what's coming, it's up to us to make sure everyone's safe."

At last.

"Ah, forever the martyr hero." Archer slung an arm around Wick's shoulders and walked lopsidedly, trying to keep up since Wick wouldn't slow down for him. "But it's true, we're the only ones who know. No one else wants to listen. I'll tell you now, though: the last two won't be pretty. They're waiting for us now. Are you still with me?"

"Yeah." Wick nodded. "Let's do it."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When All Else Fails, A Bag Strap is A Good Weapon

THE MOUNTAINS OF CENTAUR territory had just come into view over the treetops when Archer said, “Okay, let’s stop to catch up on some sleep.”

Wick turned to him in exasperation. “You had all night to sleep while you were in the manghar prison!”

“While I was in prison *waiting to be executed!*” Archer exclaimed. “Do you seriously think I got any sleep while I was there?”

In the end, Archer won, and they found a hidden space where they wouldn’t be spotted if anyone caught up to them.

Waiting up while Archer slept was a strange feeling. Over the last few weeks of traveling, they had fallen into a familiar rhythm of stopping at noon to rest. Wick had

always stood and absorbed the rays of the sun while Archer slept, and then they had traveled all night. Wick wondered if that would change now that he was human. Well, reasonably human. It would be more realistic to travel during the day now, wouldn't it?

It probably wouldn't be the only thing that changed since his transformation.

While waiting for Archer to finish his nap, Wick found he felt very odd, and no wonder. The sun still felt wonderful on his face, but it didn't have the same effect it had before he changed. His energy reserves were wearing out.

But it didn't feel the same as when he needed the sun. Usually, when he needed sun, he would feel stiff and slightly groggy, but this feeling was more of a gradual slowing, a heaviness behind his eyes spreading through his head.

He rested against the trunk of a tree, clutching his bag to himself out of habit like a pillow, and slowly his eyes drifted shut.

SOMETHING THUDDDED INTO the side of his head, and Wick woke up with a start. Archer, who had just slapped him in the side of the head, rocked back on his heels. "You sleep like the dead!"

"In my defense," Wick mumbled, scrubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands, "I've never fallen asleep before."

"It's not like you can help sleeping that soundly." Archer stood up. "It just happens. And yeah, you might sleep lighter in the future, but I doubt it. Do you want to get something to eat?"

Now that he was paying attention, Wick realized he

felt sort of hollow inside, and there was a different kind of drain on his body, like he was running on fumes. "I think so. But I don't think there's enough food in your bag to feed both of us."

"There isn't," Archer shrugged, "but I can probably find something around here. I'm willing to look. I've been waiting for ages for you to stop asking me what things taste like."

They didn't have to walk far, it turned out. Archer went around looking for berry bushes and nuts on the trees, and even found a few. But the real success was when they ran across a single house of fair folk living in the woods. Once it was established that the fair folk would trade one of Archer's pilfered trinkets for some of their supply of food, Archer straightened and turned to Wick. "While I get us some food, you go that way. I saw a pond or something over there, go get clean. You're filthier than even I can handle, so you go wash off and I'll stay here and trade for food."

Wick nodded and wandered off. He found the pond just as Archer had described, and while it didn't have the cleanest water he had ever seen, water was water. He jumped in, clothes and all.

He really was dirty. The filth was caught in the cracks of his palms, caked in the hair on his arms, embedded in his scalp. Every swipe of his hands revealed more earth ground into his skin. It was as if he had been flung into a pit of dust. Where it had all come from, he had no idea, but he sat in the weed-filled water and cleaned off until he couldn't see any more dirt.

When he deemed himself clean enough, he climbed

out of the water and sat in the sun. The rays of the sun didn't have the same effect as they did before, but it did still feel good, and in a few minutes, he was still damp, but not dripping. Then he returned to where he had left Archer.

Archer had been busy while Wick was gone. He had a small cooking fire lit and had slung a pot over the flames. In the pot bubbled a conglomeration of various vegetables and a bit of meat, and it seemed he had even haggled a loaf of bread away from the fair folk, which he had torn into five or six pieces.

"Well, now you've gotten my extra clothes covered in pond scum, but I'll just have to bear it." Archer leaned forward to inspect his stew as it boiled. "Sit down, this is probably the only hot meal we're going to have until this whole thing is over."

Wick sat down next to the fire, enjoying the warmth, and ladled himself some stew into one of the wooden bowls Archer had produced from his bag.

"Just don't burn yourself," Archer said as Wick brought a spoonful up to his mouth.

The stew, straight out of the pot, immediately burned Wick's mouth, and he choked.

"I did warn you," Archer said and blew on his own spoonful of stew before putting it in his mouth. He chewed and then swallowed. "It's all right. I should have brought some salt or something. It's a little flavorless."

Wick got a spoonful of stew cool enough not to burn him, and he put the whole spoonful into his mouth. Flavors took over his entire focus. Whatever meat the fair folk had given them tasted like the darkness in the hollow of a tree,

like the way good, rich soil felt between your fingers. And the texture! Texture was another new experience, one that he had never considered or thought to ask about. The meat was a little rough but soft from cooking for so long. It was thick and it was chewy and took a while to swallow down.

This is amazing.

"The stew's not so good, but they grew some good carrots," Archer commented, digging another one out of his soup to munch on. "They're very sweet."

Wick dug one out of his bowl and brought it straight to his mouth. So this was what sweet was like. It was like the first touch of light when the sun was starting to come up. It was the way cold water felt when it bit into your hands. It was just as perfect as the meat had been.

Archer seemed to be enjoying Wick's first time experiencing real food more than Wick was. He tried not to laugh as he handed a chunk of the loaf over to Wick. "Try the bread, too. It's good."

Wick took a chunk out of the bread with his teeth. It was chewy, chewier than the meat, not sweet like the carrot had been. It bit into the taste buds next to his jaw muscle, right between his ears. It was almost like pain, but delicious. He could have eaten the entire loaf. He glanced over to where they still had four more pieces of the bread.

"You can't eat all of it." Archer tucked most of the delicious pieces back into his bag. "They'll keep for a few more days, and I don't plan on starving after eating everything in one shot."

Wick made his piece of the bread last as long as he could and then polished off the last of his soup as well. Now

that he had tasted the bread, he could see what Archer had been saying about the soup being a little bland. But it was still more flavorful than all the nothing he had tasted before.

They each got another large helping of the soup, finishing off what was left in the pot. Archer pulled the pot off the fire to wash it out before they broke camp and then suddenly stopped. "Do you hear that?"

Wick listened. Somewhere off in the distance, there was a faint noise, repeating itself. He couldn't tell what it was, but someone was catching up with them.

"I knew the fire was a bad idea," Archer hissed under his breath. He stomped the flames out with vengeance. "Get the horse. We'll have to ride to get some distance between us and them."

Wick took off to fetch Sasha. She stood under a nearby tree, trying to eat the leaves off the branches, and looked almost offended when he took her by the bridle to lead her back to their camp. "Sorry, girl, we have to go now," Wick murmured to her, and she came without making a big fuss.

Archer had stuffed everything back in his unfillable bag by the time Wick made it back with Sasha. "Let's get moving," Archer said quickly, slinging his bag around his neck and jumping onto Sasha's back. Wick climbed up behind him, and they took off.

Wick remembered again why he didn't like riding. There was too much bumping, and everything was altogether too fast. He liked to walk fast, but nothing like the speed of the horse, and he had to constantly duck and dodge to avoid tree branches and vines.

They rode for several hours, until the mountains on the border of centaur territory had well come into sight and they were riding along the border of them. The country was hilly, and they had to skirt more than one large body of water.

The coast was still a good distance away, but with Sasha's help, they had closed the distance a little. In time, Archer made the horse slow down, and he swung off. "She's tired out. I love her to death, but she can't run very far without wearing out. Come on, Wick, get off."

Wick didn't have to be told twice. He loved Sasha dearly, and she may have put some more distance between them and their pursuers, but he didn't enjoy riding at all.

Archer patted the horse affectionately on the nose, then dunked the unfillable bag over her head and she disappeared. Archer wrapped the strap of the bag back around his shoulder. "Now we can walk for a while." He snickered. "Your face when you got on the horse. . ."

Wick took a quick look behind them just to make sure that no one had still managed to keep up with them while they were on horseback. "You missed the face I was making while I was on the horse."

"That's true. That must have been much worse." Archer laughed mercilessly.

Wick kept looking over his shoulder as they traveled. They were practically climbing across the side of the mountain range between themselves and the centaurs' territory to make their route as short as possible. The route was good for their journey and for keeping ahead of anyone following them, but bad if someone were to decide to cut

across the mountains to cut them off. A very specific set of someones.

“What are you doing?” Archer demanded as Wick checked the sky for manghar for the thousandth time. “There’s no way they could have kept up with us. Sasha’s fast, and manghar don’t have horses the last time I checked.”

“But they do have wings,” Wick pointed out. “And they don’t have to go around things like we do if they’re flying. I’m just being cautious. Besides,” he continued, “I’m more worried about the centaurs. We’re walking straight past their territory. They may not have seen anything about the Scorch coming, but they might still be able to see us and what we’re doing. If they find out that we’re passing just by their territory, they might send someone out to capture us or send word to the manghar about where we are. Just because one thing is hidden from their visions doesn’t mean that they’re not still the most intelligent people in Aro.”

“I don’t know about ‘most intelligent.’” Archer rolled his eyes. “They haven’t caught us yet. I think if they planned to catch us, they would have done it ages ago, at a moment where we were less prepared and more vulnerable. Like when we were thrown out of Eri. Or when we were separated in manghar territory and you had all the pieces.”

“That’s true,” Wick admitted, glancing up at the sky again. “But I’ve worked for the centaurs for most of my life. They didn’t get to be the leaders of Aro for nothing. They’re very wise. And I’ve never known them to just turn a blind eye on anything.”

Archer shrugged nonchalantly. "Maybe they're just losing their touch. They can run out of seeing power, can't they? Maybe they're just all running out and they didn't want to tell you."

"The centaurs' visions have equipped them to prevent more disasters than any of us will ever know," Wick said. "You had better hope they aren't losing their power, for all of our sakes."

The sun descended toward the horizon. A brief conversation amongst themselves decided that they weren't yet tired enough to stop for the night, not yet at least, and besides, they were trying to keep ahead of any likely pursuers, so they kept going. After midnight, Archer finally said, "Okay, let's stop and get some sleep."

Wick settled with his back against a tree, his messenger's bag in his lap. Archer flopped across the grass, using the unfillable bag as a pillow. They both stared up at the huge full moon that had risen overhead.

"Full moon," Archer murmured. "That means it's been a full three weeks since I stole the fair folk's piece of the Heather Stone. Three weeks since this whole song and dance started."

Wick's brow furrowed, remembering something. "When I had to dig through the bag to get all your things out, the fair folk piece was hiding inside a cooking stove."

"Yeah." Wick could hear the grin in Archer's voice. "The stupid things were using the Heather Stone to cook with. It's supposed to be this huge relic and everything, and it was in their stove! I didn't have time to fish it out of there, so I just took the whole thing."

"Now there's a family of fair folk out there that don't have a stove to cook with," Wick said in a monotone.

"Well, yeah, but they can build another one. They build things all the time. What's another stove?"

A lot. Wick adjusted his position against the tree and said nothing.

The stars trickled across the sky. A wisp of a cloud floated across the moon like a ghost.

Wick's eyes drifted down from the sky to the ground. The grass waved gently in the breeze. Being autumn, it was too cool to be completely comfortable, but he found he could stand it, even if being human made him feel the cold much faster than he ever had in a leshy body.

He glanced over at Archer, who lay on his back, both wings stretched out across the grass. The bad wing faced Wick, just as twisted and mutilated as ever. The curve across the bone looked so wrong. How had it got that way?

Archer caught him looking and tucked the wing back against his side, hiding most of the broken part. "It's rude to stare."

Wick looked back up at the sky, watching the branches of the trees move in the wind. "So. 'I could never fly?' What was that supposed to mean?"

Archer adjusted his position again, uncomfortably. "I really wish I hadn't said that."

Wick said nothing.

At last, too uncomfortable with the silence, Archer said, "I just. . . I can't. I can't talk about it right now. There's too much, and it's too hard. I don't like to say that things are too much for me, I guess I don't like having

limits, but this. . . is too hard. Right now. Right now, this is too hard." He paused. "Sorry."

"No, there's nothing wrong with that." The ease of Wick's response surprised even him. "If you don't want to talk about it right now, I'm not going to make you."

"Hmm." The stars kept on their slow and steady course. "Thank you."

Wick fell asleep only a few minutes later.

"LET GO!"

Wick jolted upright as something whacked him in the stomach. He was instantly thrown into chaos. Four figures fought in front of him in the dark, grabbing and shouting. Two of them tugged at some lumpy object.

"Don't just sit there, help me!" Archer shouted. One of the other figures turned toward Wick, gripping a wooden staff. Wick finally understood what was going on.

It was the three men who had followed them to manghar territory. Somehow the three had tracked them down again, and the one with the full beard was trying to wrestle the unfillable bag from Archer's hands.

Wick scrambled up from the ground to help Archer. But just as he did, something fell from the bag and tumbled to the ground.

The humans saw it too. One of them snatched up the stone that had fallen and took off into the forest.

"You bring that back here!" Archer bellowed as he struggled with the other two. He gave the bag another mighty heave.

Archer wouldn't get the bag back in time to catch the runner. Leaving Archer to take care of the other two, Wick raced after the third man, deep into the dark forest.

The man was a much faster runner than Wick. Already Wick's legs and chest burned.

But losing the pieces was not an option. He didn't want to imagine what would happen if they lost even one.

The man looked over his shoulder and poured on more speed. It was all Wick could do to keep up, let alone overtake him. He needed a new plan.

But it was just then that the man looked behind him again.

And he tripped.

The man fell to his hands and knees, and Wick raced to catch up to him. As he approached he could see that the man was pawing through the twigs and leaves on the forest floor. He had dropped the piece.

The scales were tipped even now; Wick had to take the upper hand.

He was only steps away when the man uttered a desperate cry of excitement and started scrambling up.

"No!" Wick leaped forward, tackling the man and driving him to the ground. A small piece of green flew from the man's grip and bounced into the leaves.

The piece would have to wait a moment. Getting the enemy under control took priority. Wick drove one knee into the center of the man's back. "If I let you up, you won't run. Agreed?"

He hoped he didn't sound uncertain.

The man hesitated a moment but suddenly squirmed.

Wick almost fell off. But before he could get his balance solid again, someone shouted from the camp.

Wick looked behind him.

A way back, Archer stood in the middle of the camp with the strap of the unfillable bag cinched tight around the bearded man's neck. The bearded man had already fallen to his knees, his face turning a deep purple-red as he scrabbled at the bag strap around his windpipe.

"Come on back," Archer called. "We have an agreement to make."

The stone would have to wait for a moment more. Wick made a mental note of where the stone had fallen and got up, pulling the runner up with him. Together they made their way back to the camp.

"Now look," Archer said, tightening his grip on the strap of the unfillable bag. The bearded man's face deepened to a darker and puffier shade of red. "If you two don't want your friend to be choked to death by a bag strap, I'd suggest you do as I say. There's a cave over there, just past the rocks. There should be plenty of room for the three of you to fit. You two go first, he'll be right behind you."

The other two men hesitated, but what else could they do? Archer seemed sincere enough. Even Wick wondered what would happen if the other two men didn't listen to Archer. He just might kill him.

Archer, Wick, and their prisoner followed the other two men as they crossed to the other side of the clearing and lowered themselves into the little cave. Once the other two were inside, Archer pushed the bearded man to the edge of the hole. In one swift movement, he whipped the

strap of the bag over the man's head and kicked him down into the hole.

"Come on, help me!" Archer darted over to the pile of rocks next to the hole. The better part of the pile was made up of loose gravel, only kept from collapsing by some larger rocks at the base of the pile. Archer dug into the pile, pulling the larger rocks out of the way. The gravel was already starting to cascade. Wick wasn't certain how this plan would turn out for the three men, but he leaned across and dug too. The more they dug, the looser the rocks became, until the gravel showered down. The rocks flooded the hole at a terrifying rate. The men yelped and scrambled back, but soon the cave was filled with rocks.

Once the dust had cleared, Archer slung the bag over his shoulder. "There are tunnels down there that lead back to the surface somewhere, and if they don't find any of the tunnels, that's on them. Where's the last piece?"

Wick retraced his footsteps back to where the man had dropped the piece into the leaves. A quick look around yielded no sign of a green rock anywhere. "Where did it go?"

Archer looked murderous. "Good question, Wick, where *did* it go?"

They dug through the leaves for the stone. Wick went through the bushes and peered under trees.

"If we can't find it, that's *it*. You know that, right?" Archer demanded. "If we lose any of these, it's all over." He got up to look further off.

"I know, I know." Wick stuck his arm inside a cobwebby gap between some tree roots. His fingertips

brushed something round and smooth, and a breath of relief gushed out of him as he drew the stone out from between the roots. "I found it."

Archer ran a hand across his eyes and took a deep breath. "Well, at least it isn't gone. For a moment there I thought maybe someone else had come and snatched it while we were distracted."

Wick ripped a piece of moss off a stone to wrap the piece in since they seemed to have lost the cloth, and they tucked it inside the bag once again.

Wick took a look up at the descending moon. "Since we're already awake, what do you say we just start walking again?"

"We might as well," Archer agreed. "I'm not going to fall back asleep now."

They watched their backs carefully after that. They thought they heard someone following them multiple times, but no one ever came into view no matter how many times they looked behind them. Twice they heard voices coming through the trees. Probably other travelers. But once Wick saw a messenger and they were forced to hide in the only piece of shelter nearby— the unfillable bag.

With the bag's magic rapidly fading and no river in it to make extra room, the inside of the bag was all knees and elbows. Archer's right wing dug into Wick's ribs, and he thought he could feel Sasha's rump up against his back, but that could have been the back of the bag as well. He was certain he was stepping on the Satyr's Crown.

"Your shoulder is in my eye!" Archer hissed.

"Then maybe you shouldn't have crouched so low!"

Wick whispered back. "Now stop squirming or they'll be able to see you moving from the outside of the bag!"

They and Sasha stood stock still for several minutes, waiting until the sound of crunching leaves had long since passed. Finally, Wick gave one more listen and said, "I think he's gone."

"He's *been* gone!" Archer muttered, and Wick gave him a boost up and out of the bag. From there, he could pull Wick up, and the two of them got moving again.

They approached the coast in the early evening. The temperature was just starting to drop, but the sun wasn't ready to go down just yet.

They traveled down the coast and through the river delta for several hours, and as soon as the nixie palace came within view, they found a group of rocks to hide behind as they evaluated what they saw.

The nixies were ready for them.

Knowing that only their and the centaurs' pieces of the Heather Stone were left, the nixies had rallied their forces. Squadrons of pale-skinned, scale-encrusted soldiers raced in circuits through the water around the nixie palace and back and forth across the coast, and by the glints they could see off the water, they had weapons on them. Standing around the palisades of stone and glittering glass and on the tall, winding spindle towers of the palace, Wick could spot more glittering green scales and flying hair. Even from here, they could see shadows moving across the open windows.

But that was not the worst of it.

Wheeling around the towers of the palace and patrolling the air along the coast were two, three, four

manghar soldiers.

The Crowned Head had sent some of his people after them after all.

Wick took it all in and ducked back down and out of sight again. Crouching, he twisted to look at Archer. "What do you think?"

Archer rubbed his chin. The wind off the water blew the tufted spike of hair at the front of his head almost flat to the top of his skull for a moment, then the spike flew back up again. "There's a lot of them."

"There were a lot of them in manghar territory, as well," Wick said, catching his balance against one of the rocks as another strong gust came off the ocean.

"A river in a bag won't fix it this time, though." Archer checked the contents of the unfillable bag. "Honestly, we don't have much left in the bag, anyway. Nothing that can help us here."

"Agreed." Wick peered over the rock again, just to make sure none of the manghar were flying their way. "What can we use to get past them and into the palace?"

"I don't think it'll all be over when we get into the palace." Archer thought for a moment. "There's not much we can use. We'll have to invent something out of what we have and what we see around here. I think the biggest hurdle we have to worry about is how we would get over there if we did have an opening."

"We could swim," Wick said hesitantly, "but we would probably be caught before we ever made it to the palace."

"How do you normally get in there when you're here?" Archer asked.

"They have boats for visitors that they carry back and forth themselves," Wick said. "But they're all inside the palace to keep people like us from breaking in and do the kind of things we're planning to do."

"That's unfortunate," Archer said cheerfully. "Maybe we'll just have to take a hostage and get them to take us over."

"As if that would work. None of them are swimming alone, and even if I would let you kidnap one of them, they would have to swim all the way back to the palace by themselves to get the boat to bring us over, in which time they could easily sound the alarm or bring back the entire nixie army to capture or kill us."

"No hostages then," Archer said, sounding disappointed. "We could build our own boat, then. There's enough wood back in the forest, and if we paddled very fast, maybe we could make it."

Wick shook his head. "We wouldn't make it, even at our top paddling speed. The nixies are too strong of swimmers. They would catch up with us before we could make it even a quarter of the way."

"Then it looks like we only have one option left," Archer said. "Use the stones."

When Wick started to look uncomfortable, Archer insisted, "We don't have all of them yet, but we do have enough to get us over the water if we wanted to. And no one needs to know we used them. We just use them to get ourselves over there, and then we get their piece and we're gone."

"But we don't know how to use them!"

Archer narrowed his eyes. "All lies; you've probably read whole books on it. You know how to use them."

"Only a little. Bare minimum knowledge." Wick peeked over the rock again. Another patrol of nixies rocketed past, just a stone's throw from the shore. He turned back to Archer. "I know what they're meant to do and what they could do if put in the wrong hands, but if it came down to building something or using them to create a spell, I wouldn't know what to do in the least."

"Well then. I guess it's up to me." Archer started digging through the unfillable bag. "You watch how the manghar are moving. Try to find a gap in the cycle somewhere."

"What are you doing?" Wick crouched next to the rock, facing toward the ocean as instructed, but he kept looking over his shoulder at Archer.

Archer found what he was looking for and pulled out the seraph piece of the Heather Stone and the Satyr's Crown. "I'm improvising." Bracing one foot against the inside of the Satyr's Crown, he pulled at the translucent jade stone on the front.

"Just be careful with that," Wick said and returned to watching the manghar soldiers circle. A heartbeat later, he heard a metallic snap from behind him and he spun around. "*Archer!*"

"Oops." Archer didn't sound sorry at all. He stuffed the crown back into the unfillable bag and held up the satyrs' piece of the Heather Stone in its broken setting. "All set. What do you see?"

Wick watched the manghar. "There's a tiny gap in the

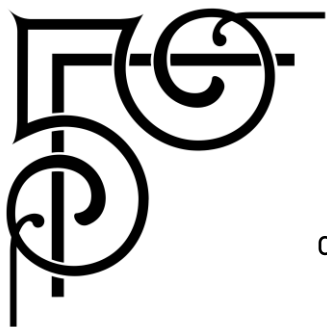
circles. Right. . .” He waited. The manghar wheeled around the towers. One, then the other, one, then the third, one, then. . . “There!” There was a few seconds where no one crossed the front of the palace before the fourth manghar swooped across. “I’ve seen it happen twice now. But how do you plan to get past the nixie patrols?”

“That isn’t going to be a problem,” Archer said, standing and taking a few steps back up the beach. Realizing he was in full view of anyone in the air or above the surface of the water, Wick got up and chased after him.

“Someone’s going to see you!” he hissed. “You’re out in the open, they’ll see you!”

Archer readied the pieces of the Heather Stone in both hands. “That isn’t going to be a problem, either.” As Wick caught up to him, he held up the stones and clicked them against one another.

The shock wave from the stones blasted them backward and threw them across the water in an arc of fire.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Brief Guide to Complete Failure

THEY HIT THE WATER just short of the steps of the nixie palace with a colossal splash. Fortunately, the water was shallow. The impact from hitting the water would leave bruises, but Wick barely gave himself time to recover. Everyone would have seen a splash that big.

Things were not going the way he would have preferred, but they had made it past the patrols. However, if they wanted to make it inside the palace, they had to move faster. Dragging Archer with him, Wick splashed to the steps of the palace and slogged up them at a run. One of the nixie patrols swerved toward the steps.

Skin still stinging from hitting the water, Wick threw his weight against the other door, and together they forced the doors shut. Archer threw the bolt. Now they only had to worry about the rest of the entrances. And all of the forces already inside the palace.

"Really, 'no one will ever know we used them?'" Wick exclaimed, turning on Archer with a vengeance. "In what way was *that* subtle?"

"I did my best!" Archer stuffed the two pieces of the Heather Stone back in the unfillable bag. "Who knew these could even do that? Come to think of it, why didn't I steal these before?"

Wick shot him a look.

"Kidding. I probably wouldn't have stolen them, maybe because now that I've done it, I've learned that stealing them gets *all of Aro* on your tail." Archer dropped the flap of the bag down with a decided slap. "But at least we're still alive. You know where they keep their piece of the stone, right?"

Wick nodded. "If they haven't moved it. Let's go." He started up one of the arching ramps leading higher in the palace with Archer right behind him. "And I actually *did* know the stones could do that. That was one of the things they told me never to do because it might damage the stones."

"Huh. Who knew?"

"*I* did."

"Well, yes, I had assumed."

Halfway up the slope of the ramp, someone leaped out from an alcove: a young nixie man, about their ages, armed with a long, twisted sword. Fangs bared, he swung the blade at Wick's head.

Wick ducked under the sword, leaving the blow swinging toward Archer. Archer yelped and ducked as well, and the sword's blade dug deep into the wall. Popping up

behind the nixie's scaled back, Wick grabbed him by the neck and slammed his blond head into the wall. The nixie's eyes rolled back and he slumped to the ground.

Archer stared down at the felled nixie with wide eyes. "I'm impressed. You know, you're getting good at that. If we could just get you a club or a mace or something, you could bash people over the head all the time."

Wick considered it. "I think I'd be good with a mace. For now, I'll just take this with me." He grabbed the handle of the stuck sword and gave a great heave. The sword came loose all at once, and he nearly fell off the ramp. "Come on, let's keep going."

"Agreed."

They ran up the ramp. The crashing started on the level below them. Wick risked a glance over his shoulder. The doors hadn't budged, and they were huge, made of solid rock, and he dared to hope that they wouldn't break. But the nixies reacted to holdups much faster than anyone else had yet. Even as some of them were trying to breach the doors of the main entrance, Wick heard cries from above, and suddenly dozens of nixies poured down the ramp from the top of one of the towers. They must have found a window large enough to climb through.

Wick and Archer reached the next level of the nixie palace, and he leaped off the slick white stone ramp. The stone and glass doors to the gallery where the nixies kept their piece of the Heather Stone were just a few feet away. But so were the nixies. Wick took a moment to make sure that Archer was still behind him. But as he stopped and turned around, Archer came barreling up behind him,

knocking right into him. Archer managed to keep his balance, but Wick slipped on the damp floor of the nixie palace and fell hard.

One of the nixies leaped down a curve of the ramp and drove her sword through the fabric of Wick's pant leg, pinning him to the stair. She screamed at him and shouted something to the other nixies further up the ramp.

This was Wick's last chance to get away. Wick took a swing with his sword, nearly hitting the nixie girl on the shoulder and making her jump back. He kicked at the handle of the sword that pinned him, loosening it a little, and with a great yank, he pulled himself free.

Archer, who had already made it to the doors of the gallery, screamed, "Come on!"

Wick scrambled up. Swinging just once more to keep the nixies back, he dashed through the doors of the gallery after Archer, and they slammed the doors shut.

Wick slammed the bolt into place. The nixies' greatest architectural downfall were the locks on every door. If he was still allowed to talk to them after this, he would have to recommend something that provided fewer security risks.

Something pricked the back of his neck, and his breath caught in his throat.

A man's voice, thick with underwater use and heavy with the twisting accent of the nixie people, spoke from behind him. "If you want to turn around, do it slowly."

Wick lowered his stolen sword to the ground, then straightening, he slowly turned to face the gallery. Beside him, Archer had already turned around, probably faster than was good for him, because he was now pressed against the

doors with a nixie sword jammed against his throat. As soon as Wick turned around, the knife tip that had been pricking the back of his neck moved to threaten his windpipe. The nixie general who held it smiled a pale smile and held out his hand for Wick's messenger's bag.

A sword at his neck, just like Eland's vision. He hadn't escaped Eland's vision in manghar territory. He had only charged toward it with eyes wide open.

The nixie took the messenger bag that Wick handed to him. "I think you'll find that the nixies do not let our relics be stolen easily."

"I gathered that," Archer gurgled.

Now that he was facing the room, Wick could see that even if no one had spotted them entering the palace, they never could have taken the piece of the Heather Stone.

The gallery, decorated with sea glass windows and hung with art both made by the nixies and found in sunken ships in the waters surrounding Aro, was strikingly beautiful and was something of a hidden gem in nixie territory. And almost every inch of it was full of people. Three dozen nixie soldiers, all armed to the teeth, stood surrounding the Heather Stone's setting in the wall. More surrounded Wick and Archer by the door. Standing in the middle, all teeth and leather wings, were eight more manghar guards.

One of the manghar leaned over the nixie general's shoulder to spit at their feet. "You can't steal my Crowned Head's throne in front of my eyes and get away."

At last, Archer's talent for making enemies had come back to haunt them.

The manghar made a move to grab the sword Wick

had put down, but the nixie general blocked him with an arm. When the manghar reluctantly moved back, the general bent to pick up the sword himself. "We were fortunate that the centaurs had a vision about the two of you and sent word ahead to us telling us how you planned to infiltrate the palace."

The messenger they had heard go by in the woods. He must have been carrying the message telling the nixies about them. And they had let him walk past.

Wick should have bashed him over the head.

One of the nixies ripped the unfillable bag away from Archer and reached inside. While the general waited, he took out the stolen pieces of the Heather Stone one by one.

"Now, who are you?" the general said, leaning forward to inspect Wick's face. "From the letter the Crowned Head sent to me about the theft of the throne, there was only a seraph and a leshy traveling together. Not a human." He squinted slightly at Wick's eyes. "But then again, you're not quite human, are you?"

Wick looked away, stung but hoping no one would see through his disguise. It didn't work.

The manghar guard that had spit at them lifted his spear to point at Wick. "That is the leshy! He changed himself. When he arrived to steal the seraph from his rightful execution, I heard the seraph address him by name."

If he just hadn't gone back for Archer. . .

No. Wick crushed that thought before it could go far.

The nixie man turned the bag upside down, dumping the manghar throne, as well as all of Archer's tools and supplies, onto the floor. A half dozen people had to step

back to make room for the avalanche. Sasha slipped out onto her rump with a startled expression. When the cascade ceased, the nixie man handed the bag to the general. "Every piece that was stolen is accounted for."

"Good." The nixie general turned to the lead manghar guard. "Then we're settled. Our stone is safe, and your throne shall be returned to you. The centaurs requested that we remove your stone from the throne for now and send it back to be inspected with the others, so if you don't mind."

One of the nixies plucked the fragment of the Heather Stone out from its setting in the throne and set it in the general's open palm. "We'll have them sent out immediately. Do whatever you like with the thieves; they're no concern of mine. However, this bag is fascinating. Is it the same one our ancestors built to contain the Heather Stone?"

"They're going to execute us," Wick said flatly.

The nixie general barely looked up from his captivated inspection of the bag. "Then I suggest you make peace with your ghosts."

With that, he lowered the knife from Wick's throat and waved to the other nixies to do the same. Immediately, the manghar guards rushed to seize Wick and Archer. The lead guard instructed one of the others to carry the throne.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather come back for it with a wagon, or have us deliver it?" the nixie general asked. "It must be inconvenient to carry it all the way back to your territory."

The head guard shook his head. "We can carry it. Thank you for your assistance."

Wick bent to retrieve something from the floor beside his feet. The manghar next to him yanked him upright again.

“No, thank *you*.” The nixie general slid his knife back into the fine silver sheath on his belt. “Between our two people, we were able to stop the thefts before they got too out of hand. Tell the Crowned Head that his letter was enormously helpful. I’ll send the same to the centaurs.” The two races shook hands, and the manghar dragged Wick and Archer out of the nixie palace.

The nixies took one of the boats and ferried their group across the water, throne and all. As they climbed out onto the shore, the manghar guards shook hands with the nixies once more. Wick and Archer had knives to their backs as they crossed the beach; it seemed the manghar didn’t want to be outsmarted again by two boys with no weapons.

As soon as they had gone far enough into the woods to be shielded from view from the water, Archer made a break for it. He spun around and swung his fist at the manghar behind him. The blow struck the manghar across the jaw and the guard’s knife fell.

Before anyone could make a run for it, the twelve guards pounced on them. Wick was held in place by two muscled manghar on either side. Another guard knocked Archer flat on his back. The head of the manghar guard, the one with a personal vendetta against them, stood over Archer and snarled. Light gleamed across the long, sharp fangs that Wick always tried his hardest to forget. The manghar grabbed the spike of metal at his belt.

"I want to make a deal," Wick blurted.

The lead manghar guard stopped and looked his way. But without even considering the offer, he chuckled under his breath. "There will be no deal. This is how it will end."

"You might want to reconsider." Wick opened his fisted hand. The grips on his arms loosened in surprise. On his palm sat a large, sparkling ruby, something that had fallen out of the unfillable bag when the nixie had dumped it out. It had bounced over to where Wick stood and he had picked it up when no one was paying attention. Wick closed his hand over the jewel again. "It's expensive. If you sold it, you would get the best meals and the finest rooms on your journey back to your territory."

The twelve manghar tried not to, but they all looked somewhat interested. Without warning, the lead manghar lunged for the jewel.

Wick, anticipating this, took a quick step back and hid his hand behind his back. "Try that again, and I'll change it into something else."

The head manghar circled back around to join his brethren, watching Wick with suspicious eyes. "I don't think you can do that."

"I can." Wick held rock-solid eye contact. "You already saw me change what I look like, I can change this, too. If I think you're going to try to take it from me by force and still take us to be executed, I'll change it into a pinecone. Or a common rock. Something that won't buy you any good food or soft beds."

The group of manghar seemed to consider this. It was all a bluff; Wick couldn't change the rock even if he wanted

to. But if he didn't waver, maybe the manghar would believe that he could.

"And if we accepted?" the lead manghar asked. "What would you want in exchange?"

Still finding himself pinned to the ground, Archer sent Wick an irritable look.

"In exchange," Wick said, "You let us go. Right here, where no one would ever see it and only the few of us would ever know. You can tell the Crowned Head that you drowned us or some other story, and you have our word that we'll never cross your borders again."

The manghar's mouth twisted. "You would keep your word, but how do we know *he* will?" The manghar jabbed a finger at Archer on the ground. Archer made a show of looking offended but then dropped back into a blank face again. "He has no honor or integrity."

"Believe my word for both of us," Wick said. "Neither one of us will ever cross your borders again."

The twelve manghar exchanged glances with their fellows, silently making decisions amongst themselves. The manghar's eyes snapped back to Wick's. "Agreed."

Wick held out the stone, and the manghar snatched it. Holding it up to the light, he inspected it briefly, then nodded to his fellows. The manghar guard carrying the stolen throne hefted the chair back up onto his back, and all twelve of the huge bat men took off into the sky.

"Well," Wick said in a flat voice. "I guess that's the end of it. They know who we are. The centaurs are watching us. And the nixies have all the stones. It's over."

Archer picked himself up off the ground. "Good, thank

you, very nice, goodbye, nice to meet you, so long and farewell." He kicked a pile of leaves and began to walk away.

"Where are you going?" Wick demanded.

Archer stopped and swung around. "Elsewhere. I need a brief vacation from the drama before the whole world comes crashing in, thank you. If we're done for, I think I'd like a good long drink of my own self-pity first."

Wick cocked his head. "You want to wallow in self-pity? I've lost everything. It's all fallen apart. I don't even have my face now."

"That was your choice," Archer said.

"My choice? You were the one that got caught back in the manghar palace. I had to rescue *you*!"

"Which was your choice," Archer repeated, his tone getting sharper. "I never asked for your help. You chose what you chose for your reasons."

"Then maybe I should have just let the manghar take you just now. I should have just bargained for my own freedom. Then I wouldn't have to deal with this anymore."

"Oh, for crying out loud. Just admit you wanted to abandon me," Archer said, shoving his face up to Wick's. "Admit it. This whole time, all you've been wanting to do is leave. You never wanted anything to do with this. You never trusted me, you never believed me, you think I'm just doing this so I can resell the stones. Well, guess what, I'm not quite as stupid as you think. I've been watching you, and I know—"

"You don't know anything," Wick said simply. "And you certainly don't know anything about me. I knew this would happen."

“What?”

“I got a letter from a friend in centaur territory that told me we would be caught like this.”

“And you didn't bother to tell me?”

“You didn't seem to think that the visions were credible, so I didn't see a point.” Wick's jaw tightened. “And now here we are, and it was right. See, you don't know everything.”

“See that?” Archer asked. “That right there? Your obnoxious attitude has been holding us up this entire time! None of your plans work, you mess up all of mine, and on top of that you act like you're the only one who matters! I should have never let you come with me in the first place. It was the worst decision of my whole life.” “You didn't let me.” Wick bit off his words. “And it wasn't your decision, it was mine. I wasn't even going to join you in the first place. I was going to wait until the right moment to get you arrested because I saw what you were: a fraud and a liar. I never believed you for a second.”

Archer's jaw clenched and unclenched. “That's not what you said yesterday, was it? Who's the liar then, you or me? The one who was honest with you since the beginning, or the one who's acting like he never believed me when he was the one who decided to rescue me like I was a damsel in distress?” He took a quick step closer to Wick. “Don't act like everything that happened to you is all my fault when you chose every. Last. Little. Piece of it. So go ahead. Make it all about you. Because this is how the world looks from inside your head, doesn't it?” he demanded. “You act like you care *so much* about everything and everyone on the face

of the Earth, but it's all to make you feel better about yourself. At the end of the day, everything is about you."

Wick tried to speak, but Archer interrupted. "Don't even try to argue with me, because if you care about failure so much, it's probably a blow to your confidence to lose a fight. That would be the real end of the world, wouldn't it? If the high and mighty Wick got just a little bit of humility."

"Don't talk to me about humility." Wick's teeth ground against one another. "Not when everything you do is all for yourself. You think everything belongs to you. You think everything is owed to you."

"If you want to talk about hypocrisy," Archer began.

"Shut up," Wick cut him off. "I listened to you, I followed you, and now here I am, with nothing, not even my dignity, and it's all your fault. You kept joking about how you wanted to make me like you. Well, congratulations, you've done it. Now I'm just like you."

Archer's brow hardened further. "Are you now? It seems like all you ever want to talk about is how we have nothing in common."

"No, I am," Wick said. "I'm everything you are now: a lost, deluded idiot who doesn't look like anything, doesn't belong anywhere, and isn't welcome by anyone."

Archer froze, and a new look came into his eye.

Wick almost wished he could take it back. No, he didn't. He would stand his ground. He and Archer stared each other down.

"Well, guess what, Tree," Archer said in a stiff tone. "You win. If I'm not welcome anywhere, I can tell I'm not

welcome here. So I'm leaving. I'm leaving you alone, to think about what a sad, lonely hero you are and every time someone's wronged you since that's all you seem to care about. But I'm going to leave you this to chew on: at least I never pretended we weren't friends. I really thought we were, and I would never deny it. That one's on your conscience, not mine."

With a quick nod, Archer turned on his heel and started off into the woods. Only ten feet away, he paused and looked over his shoulder.

"What?" Wick snapped.

"Nothing. I just admire how you think you've lost everything now when all you've lost is a reputation. Everything I had in the world was in that bag, and now I don't even have that. Have a nice life, Wick."

With that, Archer walked away.

For a moment, Wick stood there, wide-eyed and terrified, wondering how everything had gone to pieces so quickly. Then he pulled himself together.

He shook his head after Archer's retreating back. He had nothing left to say to this seraph boy who was bent on making everything his fault. Turning on his heel, he walked away, headed east, toward the mountains.

He didn't look back.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

If Death is Inevitable, I Might as Well Cross a Few Things Off My Bucket List

ARCHER DIDN'T WASTE time dwelling on the fight. There was too little time as it was. Instead, he did what he always did: he put it all behind him and focused on himself.

What did he want right now?

Well, the world was going to end in about four months. That gave him approximately the rest of the winter to figure out what he wanted to do with what remained of his lifespan. Whatever that was, whatever he decided to do with the rest of his life, it probably wouldn't be a good idea.

He wasn't good at coming up with plans for the long term. But that was okay because for all he knew the Scorch could be coming a lot faster than that crazy old centaur had thought. With all that taken into account, he decided on a

new purpose for his expiring existence.

Nodding up at the sky, he told the clouds, "I think I'm going to get in a fight with everyone I've ever wanted to get in a fight with."

With this mission in mind, he set out to find the first person he wanted to fight. And that involved going back to the nixie kingdom.

Getting back into the territory was easy. Now that the nixies were certain that he and Wick were headed back to manghar territory to be executed, all the patrols had been thinned out, making it easy for him to swim across the bay and climb back up the steps of the palace to punch the nixie general in the face.

HIS FIRST FIGHT until the end of the world was also the shortest fight. He only got a good few punches in before the nixie general pulled that silver dagger out of his belt and slashed at him with it. With Archer driven back a few steps, the general bellowed for security, but they were too slow to catch Archer as he dashed away.

By the time Archer swam back to the beach again, he looked over his shoulder and saw that the nixies had locked the whole palace shut again. Feeling very pleased with himself, he gingerly rubbed a sore eye and sauntered off to find his next quarry.

The next few fights went better. He lost some, he won some. He took a few good blows and had to sleep some of the damage off. But he kept going. He worked his way through satyr territory, picking off the satyrs and their guests who had angered him one by one. He found a

particularly jaded satyr who had tried to rob him once and made certain he wouldn't breathe right for a month.

He caught up to that stupid little messenger who had brought the warning message to the nixies and throttled him good. The kid started crying before Archer was done with him. Archer checked the message he was carrying to make sure there wasn't anyone else he needed to catch before going to the next place, but it was just a message from the centaurs thanking someone else for their helpful input in something. Deciding he didn't care, he tossed the message back to the messenger and kept walking.

Over the course of the next few days, while he traveled across Aro, Archer did everything he could to make the country know the grudge he held against it. Every punch to the face and every jab at an eye was another win toward everything ending on his terms.

He hit from behind, he knocked over the head, he bellowed insults, he struck at the ribs, he slapped across the face, he tackled from doorways, he leaped out from the shadows, he fell for feints, he ducked punches, he came prepared, he came unprepared, he underestimated, he overshot, he tripped them up, he kicked when they were down, he swung with sticks and chairs and dropped weapons and shrieked in the face of death because he would not, could not go unnoticed in a world that kept on going with its back turned on him. And when he was not fighting, he slept.

Settling his score with the centaurs was the only fight Archer decided against. Since they would probably see him coming and lock him up, he decided it wasn't worth the

effort anyway and passed straight by their territory. He made it across to human territory in a record time of two days and fought ten different humans, three of them being the men from the inn that had tried to jump them on their way to nixie territory. When he left them, they were screaming for their mothers. Two of the other fights gave him a second bruised eye and a pain in his ribs that flared up when he bent the wrong way. He took a few more good punches from different sources but made it through all the humans he wanted to fight with less damage than expected.

The morning after fighting the ninth and tenth humans, Archer was partaking of a meal at an inn that he didn't plan to pay for. The cooking here wasn't half bad. He might have to come back some other time and see what they did in the kitchen to make the meat this savory.

He ate with one hand and with the other he held a mug of wine to his sore eye, trying to ease some of the heat that the eye seemed to be storing up. The mug was barely cooler than room temperature, but it seemed to provide some relief. Idly he wondered if he should double back and go to seraph territory before he went on to the manghar. He stood a good chance of getting slaughtered by whoever he chose to fight once he got to manghar territory, and considering how he was now officially banned from entry, he might have to send personal invitations to the individual manghar he had a bone to pick with. That would take a significant amount of time. His only other option was to ignore the rules and go into the territory anyway, and that would mean going through the execution thing again, with no one to rescue him this time.

If any of the manghar pounded him into the ground like he expected they would, he probably wouldn't be able to crawl back to seraph territory to deal with all the seraphs he wanted to punch. Not before he died of his wounds or at least needed a few weeks to recover. He didn't want to waste that kind of time on something like recovery.

Yeah. It would probably be better if he backtracked first.

In the far corner of the tavern, three manghar stood up from their table. Archer jumped, forgetting he still had his cup in his hand and nearly splashing the wine all over his lap. As it was, he fumbled for a good moment to catch it again and managed to get away with only a small splattering of wine across the table.

He should have known that some of them would come to him. They were headed straight toward him. Archer set the cup down on the table firmly and started to get up.

But the manghar didn't even look at him. They brushed by him with all the indifference of strangers in the road and headed for the door. More than a little surprised, Archer sat back down in his seat with a thud, still staring after them as they thanked the host and hostess and stepped out the door.

They weren't here for him after all.

Huh.

Archer twisted back away from the door and returned to his meal. He would have gone on and finished his food in complete and blissful ignorance if his ears hadn't caught what the third manghar said as he slipped out the door. "Time for the leshy to get what's coming to him."

Archer's chewing stopped. The meat went flavorless in his mouth.

They had found out the ruby was a fake.

Sure, he had known the stone was fake when Wick had given it to the manghar, and that was because it was his stone, from his bag. He only kept it because it was sparkly. He had known the manghar would eventually discover that it was only glass, but he hadn't guessed that they would do anything about it. It was just a rock.

And unlike Archer, the manghar didn't go after people just to teach them a lesson.

Archer's brow creased, and he stuffed another piece of meat into his mouth, chewing with renewed vigor. He refused to lift a finger to help. The stupid tree didn't want his help, after all. The stupid tree wouldn't want his help even if he offered it. There was no point in going to help the stupid tree because the stupid tree didn't even want him around. They weren't even friends, according to him. They hadn't discussed what they liked and didn't like. They hadn't laughed at the world together every time they had been thrown out of someplace. They hadn't traveled at midnight and discussed plans and poked fun at one another. They hadn't walked together for miles and somehow found a way to work in sync even though they had nothing in common.

He wasn't Wick's ally.

If put in the same situation, the tree wouldn't have tried to stop the manghar from killing *him*.

Except that it was all lies. Wick had rescued him, on purpose. He hadn't needed to come back for Archer when

he was waiting to be executed. He hadn't needed to change the way he looked so he wouldn't be recognized for Archer's sake. He hadn't needed to risk life and limb to come back and get Archer out of the manghar palace before he hung above the highest branch of the highest tree.

Crows would probably be eating him right now if it wasn't for Wick.

Unfortunately.

"Ugh." Archer ran his hands down his face. Whoever had invented morality needed a rock thrown at their head. Dragging himself off his chair, he left the half-empty plate where it was and walked out the door before they could notice he hadn't paid.

Just as he stepped outside of the inn, the manghar took to the air at the edge of the woods.

This was the part Archer hadn't thought through. The manghar could fly, and in the air, they would probably be faster than he was on foot. There was no way he could keep up. But he had already committed to following them. He would just have to do the best he could. Archer started off at a run, following the manghar in the direction he had seen them fly over the trees. He had to weave between tree trunks, and frequently he needed to stop and untangle his clothes from a bush or something, but as long as he could hear the sound of leathery wingbeats ahead of him, he kept on running.

Less than a mile in, he could already tell that he wouldn't be able to keep up. The speed of their flying alone would be enough to leave him in the dust before the day was out, and on top of that, he had countless obstacles to

dodge down in the brush. He was going to lose them.

He needed a new plan. Archer normally wasn't one for plans, but if he was going to get to Wick before the manghar did, he needed to come up with a good one.

The manghar seemed to be heading steadily southwest, which meant either they already knew where Wick was and it was a straight shot down, or they were just headed to wherever they saw him last so that they could track him from there. Archer hoped it was the second option. The manghar were incomparable trackers, and once they got ahold of Wick's scent they would likely find him within hours or days depending on how close he was. But if Archer could figure out where Wick was before they did, he stood a good chance of at least arriving when, if not before, the manghar did.

That was the new plan.

He stopped running and let the manghar go. The wingbeats faded into the distance as Archer caught his breath. He hoped he hadn't made the wrong decision. But if he had, it was too late to catch up to them again. He had made a decision, and now he had to suffer the consequences.

He started pacing. "If I was a dejected, depressing, and very annoying tree that had taken it upon my self-righteous self to change into a human shape, where would I hide my dejected, depressing, and very annoying self?" He started to rub his eye, realized that it was the swollen one, and thought better of it.

Wick might have gone home, but Archer doubted he would have. After his comment about being a thing that

didn't look like anything, he didn't think Wick would go back to a place where he didn't look like he belonged. If he wanted to fit in, he would have gone to stay with the humans for a while, but he didn't have any friends there that he had bothered to tell Archer about. He hadn't seemed to know anyone there, actually, and besides, Archer hadn't seen any sign of him during the week he had spent in human territory beating up his enemies.

So Wick wasn't in human territory, and he probably wasn't in leshy territory, either.

Archer cocked his head as a connection started forming in his mind. He spun around to face the direction the manghar had gone when they took off. They had been headed southwest, which yes, was the way back down to the coast, where the nixies were. But from human territory, the centaurs were also southwest. It was the same basic direction to get to both.

While Archer was hoping that those three manghar were trying to track Wick from where they had last seen him and didn't already know where he was, they might have had the right idea.

Wick felt safe with the centaurs. Or at least that was the impression Archer had received from him. Besides that, if Wick was so desperate to save his precious reputation, he would want to explain himself to the centaurs and ask them for help.

Archer would bet that if Wick wasn't still sitting on that beach feeling sorry for himself, he had gone to the centaurs.

And Archer knew a secret emergency tunnel that the

centaurs had dug under one of the mountains that would shave some precious time off his journey.

Shaking out his tight muscles, he started off at a run again, headed for centaur territory.

ARCHER HARDLY STOPPED for breath. He had to cross the longest portion of human territory to get to the valley where the centaurs lived. A lake lay between him and the valley as well; he would lose time going around it if he couldn't get someone with a boat to take him across.

And the manghar already had a head start on him.

It was such a long way. He ran until the sun crawled across the peak of the sky and started down the other side. When his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth because of his thirst, he stopped for a quick drink from a stream and started running again. His bare feet, though hardened from years of wandering the wilderness without shoes, began causing him pain with every step. It started with a dull throbbing pain, just enough to cause a bit of distraction at the back of his mind, but soon it grew to a vengeful stab every time he took another leap forward.

But slowing down was not an option. Stopping was out of the question. This mattered. As much as Archer wanted to think that he wouldn't care less if the tree was horribly murdered, as much as he wanted to say it would serve Wick right, he would never scrub it off his conscience if he let Wick die.

The lake came into view before sundown. The sunlight shimmered across the moving water, reminding him again how wide it was. Whether he chose to swim across or go

around, getting to the other side would be tedious and would consume time that he didn't have.

As Archer sprinted up to the water's edge, he glanced up toward the mountains. He still had to get to the other side of the mountains to get into centaur territory. And to even do that, he would have to reach the mountains.

It was so far.

As he reached the edge of the lake, a nixie surfaced near the shore. For a moment, Archer halted, afraid that the nixies had sent out their own mercenaries to find him and kill him. The nixies and the manghar were allies; maybe they had an agreement where one of them got to kill Archer and the other got to kill Wick. But when she didn't immediately try to tear his throat out, he realized: this nixie seemed to be a little cut off from the others. At any rate, she didn't seem to recognize him, so Archer took the opportunity and shamelessly made a deal to get himself across the lake. She had a ferry boat the size of a washtub to take people across, and in exchange for a ride across the lake she wanted—

"Just a feather," she said, eyeing Archer's wings. "They're so pretty."

Frankly, the deal made Archer a little uncomfortable. Giving someone a feather felt a little personal. But feathers were cheap. He could grow another one, and he had nothing else to trade with.

"Deal."

He climbed aboard the little ferry boat, which looked to be little more than a hunk of wood with a tiny rim to keep the water out. "How fast can you take me across?"

The nixie girl looped the harness around her arms and gave a great tug. Archer nearly tipped off the back of the boat as they took off across the lake at an incredible speed.

Archer clung to the tiny rim of the boat as it bounced across the ripples and waves on the lake. The nixie girl was going too fast, but he needed to go fast, so he didn't dare ask her to slow down. If the ferry boat stayed intact all the way across, everything would be all right.

The boat lurched to a stop near the opposite shore, and the nixie girl stood up in the water, hair dripping, holding out her hand. "Feather."

"Getting there." Archer climbed out of the boat into the knee-deep water and extended his good wing out far enough to reach the primary feathers closer to his body. Not that he could fly or anything, but he wanted his wings to look at least close to symmetrical. Yanking out one of the longer feathers, one with a good portion of grey in addition to the general white, he handed it to her. "Here."

The nixie girl took the feather gently and stroked it with a pale white finger. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah. Thanks. Bye." Archer sloshed out of the water and took off running again before she could ask for five more. The mountains were in front of him. He only had to make it all the way across the mountain range to the other side. And if Wick wasn't right in the middle of the valley, he would have to cross the whole valley and find him on the other side.

He tripped over a rock and fell flat on his face. Before he had time to register if he had broken any part of his face, he was already up and running again. He couldn't afford to

lose any time. Oh, but it all hurt. The many injuries he had gotten from his various fights made him regret every feint he had fallen for and every time he had taken a punch so that he could get his own blow in. His feet didn't take kindly to starting the quick pace again, either. Every step stabbed. And now his wing stung from where he had ripped out a feather.

But he'd live. It was Wick he was worried about.

Archer crested another hill, and the mountains were suddenly right in front of him. The rocks and trees stretched up and up a seemingly never-ending slant into the sky.

The tunnel going under it had to be right in front of him. He raced toward the base of the mountain and jumped down into a small ravine at the base of the closest mountain, just at the crease before it sloped up to the sky.

Sure enough, there it was. The dark arch of the tunnel's entrance stood waiting in the shadows.

Archer stuck a foot into the dark first, just to make sure there wasn't anything hiding in the shadows or any sludge that had found its way into the bottom of the tunnel. Nothing felt disgusting, and nothing tried to eat him, so he went for it.

He started running again. He didn't go long before all the light that had been coming from the entrance behind him faded out into pitch darkness.

Running in the dark wasn't exactly how he had wanted to spend the evening. Archer cursed Wick's name as he ran.

Normally he would have brought a torch with him, as he had every time he had gone through this tunnel in the

past, but right now he didn't have the time to spare, and if he ran while holding a torch he was bound to burn himself somehow or another. He would just have to run in the dark.

Something brushed the top of his head, hopefully only a tree root. The floor grew damp and a bit slimy. He tried not to slip.

Then he ran face-first into a huge spiderweb that went straight into his mouth and caught in his hair. The shock of it made him lose his footing and he fell flat on his back. Archer flailed at the sticky threads for a long moment, trying to at least get them all off his face, then finally got them off all at once with a double-handed swipe. Then he got up and started running again. There was no time to lose.

He splashed through puddles, headed toward the pinprick of light he could see on the other side. He was reminded once again just how much he hated small spaces, and just how broad mountains were. Running the full length of this one was taking far too long.

The pinprick of light grew by minuscule amounts until he could see pale light on the rocky path ahead of him. The promise of some small relief was just what his muscles needed to threaten giving out. Every step was slower than the last. His limbs weighed as much as trees. Archer lowered his head and tried to run faster, reminding himself that he had to make it to wherever Wick was before the manghar found him. It was more important than how much the muscles in his legs were burning and how tight his lungs felt and how much, how *much* his feet hurt.

He kept running.

The sunlight pouring through the hole on the other side of the tunnel was blinding, but he didn't even slow down. He squinted his eyes until they were almost shut and raced out of the other side of the tunnel.

The sun was starting to slide down the western side of the sky. In just a few short hours, it would be dark, too dark to keep running.

Hopefully, he could find Wick before the sun went down.

He reached the top of another hill and finally had to stop to take a quick look around. He needed to get his bearings. The vast lake in the middle of the centaurs' territory stretched out in front of him, and on the other side more mountains rose like sentinels. In between Archer and the opposite mountains, structures were scattered across the valley like birdseed, ranging from elegant dining pavilions made of wood and fabric to huge and grand living spaces built directly into the slopes of the mountains. Some of them even appeared on the side of the mountain that stood above and behind him. Milling around the area were many diverse kinds of centaurs, fair folk, and visiting peoples from all over Aro.

This was what the centaurs' territory looked like.

Archer couldn't imagine living in such a hell.

He spotted a seraph boy with a messenger's bag, only a few dozen yards away. Picking up his feet, Archer raced over and grabbed the boy by the shoulders, hoping that the kid wasn't anyone who knew him. "You!"

The boy's brown eyes were huge. "Can. . . I help you?"

"You're a messenger. Have you seen Wick here?"

"Wick? No."

"Or a strange-looking human? Have you seen either of those?"

"No."

"Fine." He was no use. Archer pushed the messenger away and took off again. A few dozen yards later, he grabbed someone else and demanded the same thing. The human woman looked confused and a little annoyed, but she gave the same answer. So did the next person Archer asked. He tried describing Wick's appearance and demonstrating his height, but still, the answer was no.

Wick wasn't here.

Fine. He would cross the valley and check the other side.

Gathering his strength, Archer raced across the centaurs' valley, shoving anyone aside who got in his way and never apologizing once. None of them would care tomorrow anyway, but he, if he failed, he would never forget it. He raced doggedly along the shore of the lake, watching the sky for the familiar black wings of the manghar. But for the moment, there didn't seem to be any manghar in the centaurs' valley.

He just kept running. By the time he reached the other side, he still hadn't seen anyone that resembled Wick, and he didn't think he would, either. He tore around on the other side of the valley for a moment, questioning everyone he met if they had seen a strange-looking human with yellow eyes, but no one had.

Wick wasn't in the centaurs' valley.

Archer stood stock still and circled in place, his eyes

sweeping across the hundreds of milling people. There were so many people here. But Wick wasn't one of them. None of them had even seen Wick. His breath caught as he finally had to admit that he had wasted his own time coming here. He should never have let the manghar fly away. He should have raced to keep up with them, even if it meant running faster than physically possible, running until his bones broke. But he hadn't.

He had taken a gamble, and he had guessed wrong.

Wick had never been here. He must have gone somewhere else after they separated. But where else could he have gone?

His eyes locked onto the top of the nearest mountain. It was a bit of a stretch, but surely, he could at least hope that Wick was dumb enough to start a fire of some kind. If he had, and he was at least near here, Archer would be able to see the smoke from the mountain.

He spotted a dirt path sloping up the side of the mountain and took off toward it. Up, up, up. Keep going. Keep *going*. The slope, granted, was a little steeper than it had looked from afar, but he had to keep going. This mountain didn't have a convenient flat place that made it easier to run on. He would just have to keep going the way he was.

The sun kept slipping down in the sky, shining sunlight directly in his eyes and making long shadows stretch out ahead of him. Archer kept climbing, furiously trying to reach the summit. His lungs felt ready to rupture.

At last, he reached the highest point of the patch and he scrambled up a tree, trying to get the highest viewpoint

he could. Even as he climbed, he knew it was useless. He wasn't going to find Wick. The manghar would find him first. And Archer was a fool.

A leathery *snap* passed over his head, and he jumped and ducked at the same time. Three manghar soared over his head and hovered for a moment before flying down toward a tiny thread of wood smoke coming from the woods on the outer side of the mountains.

Of course.

Archer swung back and jumped down to the next tree. From there he shimmied to the ground and took off again, headed in the direction where he had seen the wood smoke. The manghar might have had the advantage of flight over him, but he could run much faster going downhill.

He jumped off a rock, leaping over three bushes and landing hard on one ankle on the other side. A quick hiss of pain and he was up and running again. He could see the little white thread of the smoke through the trees. He couldn't see who was with the fire. Maybe it was Wick, maybe it wasn't. But Archer could hear the flap of wings. The manghar were getting closer, and faster.

The fire was just through the trees now. A hunched figure sat by the flames. Archer risked a glance up to see how near the manghar were. The three manghar took a small circle above the figure at the fire, preparing to dive, and he saw the light glinting off their weapons. It didn't matter now that he couldn't tell who was by the fire. The manghar had seen something, and they were going in for the kill.

They began the plunge.

Archer growled. He was too close now to give in to something as stupid as time. But his dying muscles could take no more. Against his will, he was slowing down.

Keep going!

With a screaming battle cry, Archer took a few great leaps up onto a sloping rock and threw himself off. The nearest manghar was passing right in front of him. His jump was too short.

Archer spread his wings and for a heartbeat, they caught the air. The extra lift supplied just enough length to his leap to carry him barreling into the side of the manghar.

The pair of them collided with the ground. The manghar took the brunt of the impact and didn't get up. Running into the first manghar had caused him to collide with the others, and now all three manghar were down. This was the opening Archer needed. One of them had lost their grip on the knives he carried, and they both tumbled to the grass with a clink, just outside Archer's immediate reach.

Scrambling forward, Archer grabbed both knives in tight fists and stood, planting his aching feet into a defensive stance. One of the manghar struggled upright, discombobulated.

Archer was at a physical disadvantage. If even one of the manghar attacked, it would all be over.

Without another thought, Archer wound back and threw the knife. It buried itself in the manghar's chest, just beside his armpit. The manghar screeched and curled forward, clutching the knife.

As the third stood, Archer threatened him with the

knife.

"I'll cut you too, don't you think I won't!" Archer shouted, still puffing from running for so long.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Wick scrambling backward from his little cooking fire.

The third manghar didn't move, but Archer could see the doubt in his eyes. "All of you, get out of here, before I slice the lot of you!"

A stirring sound came from behind him, and Archer whirled around. The second manghar, the one that had been stabbed, was inspecting the first, who hadn't moved since he had fallen. The manghar shot a heavy glance at Archer. "He's dying."

Blood trickled from the spearhead sticking out of the first manghar's gut. He must have fallen on his own blade when Archer landed on top of him.

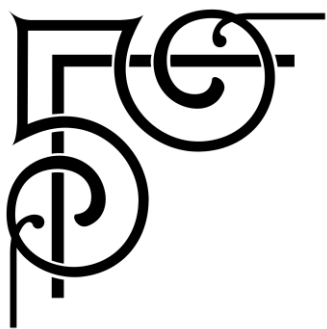
Archer fought the urge to gape. He couldn't show weakness. For the moment at least, they were afraid of him. He had to use this momentum.

He backed up until he was where he could see both remaining manghar and hardened his expression. "That's unfortunate, isn't it? Now you've got a choice. You can let him die and get me, or you can get him to a doctor before he bleeds out. Which is it gonna be?"

All uncertainty now left the eyes of the other two manghar. Together they hoisted the body of their injured friend onto their shoulders, and the two bat men heaved their wings, taking off above the trees again.

Archer shook his last knife at the retreating assassins. "Maybe you'll think first next time!"

Once they were out of sight, he collapsed into a sitting position, still clutching the remaining knife in his clenched fist.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stupidity Is Part of the Plan

ON THE OTHER side of the little cooking fire, Wick got up and took a few steps toward Archer. Archer flapped a hand at him, doing his best to convey he was all right while he caught his breath.

Sitting down again with a thump, Wick took another glance up at the sky and spluttered, "What was all that?"

Archer flopped over onto his back, trying to suck in deep breaths to re-stabilize his lungs. It seemed running that far and that fast wasn't good for you. He made a mental note not to do it again if he could avoid it.

Wick waited for an answer, didn't get one, and got insistent. "What just happened?"

Archer pushed himself back up into a sitting position, propping the elbow of his knife arm against his knee. "I feel like it should be pretty obvious that they were trying to kill you."

Wick's mouth fell open.

"Or maybe it isn't obvious." Archer took another gulp of air and grinned. "You've made enemies, Tree, get used to it."

"I'm not a tree," Wick said on reflex, and they both fell silent, staring at one another. It felt like they both were noticing for the first time just how different Wick looked now. Archer remembered with regret how upset Wick had been about it during their fight.

"No," Archer said. "You're not a tree. Not even related to one, I remember." He waved a finger vaguely around at the surroundings. "I've been gone for what? Ten days? And you're still here? In ten days, you walked maybe three miles from where I left you."

Wick used a stick to poke at a few leaf-wrapped packages in the fire, and when the words came, they came with great difficulty. "I didn't know where to go. It just seemed that if I went home, my friends wouldn't know what to do with me. The same for my family. And I didn't know if the centaurs would have me arrested, so I stayed here." Wick coughed uncomfortably. "Why? Where were you for ten days?"

"Everywhere." Archer scratched the tip of the knife under the edge of his jaw. "The nixie palace— I'm surprised you didn't see me from here, actually, I swam all the way there— then through satyr territory and then your people's land and after that all the way up to human territory. I mean, it wasn't a straight path because I met a few other people I was going to fight on the way, but I was only halfway through all the places I wanted to go before I found

out the manghar wanted to kill you.”

Wick put the stick down and leaned forward, his face taking on a tired understanding. “You met a few *other* people you wanted to fight along the way?”

“Yes.”

“That's what you were doing for ten days? Running around hitting people?”

“Yes!” Archer said emphatically. “There are a lot of people around here that have things coming to them, and if the world is going to end, I don't want it to end before they get their just desserts.” He beamed Wick a bright smile.

Wick gave him a disgusted look and went back to poking his little leaf packets with the stick. “That would at least explain why you look like such a wreck.”

Archer took offense. “*I* look like a wreck? You've turned into a mountain man! Think about what you look like right now!”

Wick turned one of his little packages over, then dug the stick under another one. It was totally dark out now. The only light left came from the faint light of the moon and the flickering orange glow of the fire. “At least I don't look like I just got caught in a rock slide.” He took another look. “And then ran through a cobweb.”

Archer hissed and raked his fingers through his hair.

“It's not like that's the worst of it,” Wick said.

Archer was well aware of that, but he kept running his fingers through his hair. Once he was satisfied that every last sticky strand was gone, he got up and moved closer to inspect the little packages Wick seemed to be cooking.

“What are those?” he asked, patting his hair back up

into the familiar shark fin with one hand as he pointed to the packets of leaves with the other.

"I set a trap this morning and caught a rabbit, now I'm cooking it," Wick responded. He picked up another stick from next to his seat and used the two together to lift one of the packages off the fire. Dropping it onto the grass, he then went for the other two packages that were scattered across the coals.

Archer eyed the fire. "Doesn't burning wood in a fire offend your delicate sensitivities or something?"

"I found all the wood on the ground." Wick set the two sticks down next to the fire.

"Ah."

They waited as long as they could and then each took one of the little packets of leaves to see how Wick's rabbit had come out. Peeling the leaves aside, Archer picked up a piece of the steaming meat and blew on it quickly before stuffing it into his face.

His eyes widened as flavor exploded in his mouth. A faint sourness hit his tongue next to the flavor of the rabbit itself, and then some kind of herb taste followed that. The meat was cooked to tender perfection, almost ready to fall apart as he brought another piece up to his mouth.

"This is good!" he said through the mouthful of food. "What did you do to it?"

Wick glanced to his left, where the leftovers of his meal fixings were spread out across a piece of bark. "I recognized a few herbs in the brush, so I took those, and then there was some kind of fruit on a tree over that way—" he nodded over Archer's shoulder, "—so I took it to test out.

I tried it and it wasn't poisonous. Is it actually good, or are you just hungry?"

Archer finished the first packet of rabbit meat and reached for the extra one. "No, it's good!" His chewing slowed as something occurred to him. "You just got taste buds a couple of weeks ago, and you can already cook like this?"

Wick shrugged. "I know how cooking is done; I just didn't have a reason to try my hand at it before because I wouldn't be able to taste it anyway."

"Yeah, but the last time I saw you eat anything it was that flavorless soup, and *you* thought it was exquisite. I thought your taste buds were busted or something," Archer muttered, stuffing two more pieces in his mouth at once and polishing off the second leaf-full of meat.

Wick made an annoyed face, and it suddenly came rushing back that the last time they had spoken, it had ended with them going separate ways. Archer tried to think of something to say that would make it better, but there didn't seem to be anything he could say that wouldn't sound stupid. Instead, he started on a different subject.

"So," he said, clearing greasy leaves off his legs with one sweep of his arms. "What have you been doing for ten days? You heard my story, what's your tale from the last ten days?"

"Trying to figure out what to do with my life now, deciding if I should just go to the centaurs and let them judge me as they will. But that was just the first week. After that, I was just trying to figure out a plan."

Archer looked up. "A plan for what?"

Instead of answering, Wick got up and gestured for Archer to follow him. They walked up the mountain a ways, up to even a higher place than Archer had been looking for the wood smoke.

The moon was just starting to come up, but it was still dark enough that Archer had to watch his step to avoid tripping over a rock and going headfirst back down the mountain. It seemed Wick could see well enough, which was all well and good for him, but he repeatedly had to stop and wait as Archer picked his way up the mountain behind him.

After a few minute's walk, they came to a place clear of trees, a little overhang from which they could see everything outside of the circle of mountains. It was an impressive view, but—

Archer squinted. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

Wick nodded.

There wasn't much light to see by, but the moonlight was enough to make out the changes that were taking place across the foothills.

The trees were turning grey.

And not just the bleached, bland grey of autumn trees changing into winter ones, but the deep, despairing grey of something dying from the root. Patches of the grey treetops were breaking out all over the landscape. From down on the ground, from the inside of the forests, it would have been hard to see, but their bird's eye view from the mountaintop made it obvious. When the wind blew over, the dying trees didn't even bend.

"The ocean is choppier than it should be, too," Wick

said. "It's never like this at this time of year. It doesn't get wild until midway through the winter."

Archer's mind scrambled to piece things together. "But the bigger plants shouldn't be dying yet. We're still four months away. Stuff like this shouldn't be happening yet."

"I know," Wick said.

"So what does this mean?"

"It means that either the Scorch is coming faster than your centaur friend predicted, or the attack is going to be a lot more powerful than last time. Maybe even both." Wick turned to Archer. "That's what I was trying to say before. All the other stuff I was thinking about was before I saw that. So for the last three days, I've been trying to come up with a plan of action. We'll need a good plan if we're going to get all the pieces of the Heather Stone back."

"But how would we do that?" Archer said. "We don't have anything to do it with. And we don't even know what the centaurs did with the pieces once the nixies brought them back."

Slowly, Wick frowned. "I might."

"If I know them," Wick said, seeming to think even as he spoke, "they haven't sent them all back yet. The centaurs are wise, but they move slowly. I'd guess they would take some time to test the pieces and ensure they aren't damaged. Even after that, they would probably keep all the pieces under observation for a while before they're sent back to their territories."

"You're saying they probably still have them," Archer said. "They're all in one place."

Wick nodded.

Archer put his hands on his hips and stared out at the landscape as he thought. "You know, it's probably a good thing that I never do my research. Because if I'd known any of the things I've learned from you before now, I would have robbed the centaurs blind before they ever saw me coming."

"Except that they would see you coming," Wick said.

"Well, maybe."

Wick abandoned the argument. "I've just been trying to think of how we could ever get in there without them seeing us coming."

An idea was starting to niggle at the back of Archer's brain. He squinted thoughtfully into the darkness. "How far do their powers of sight go? Can they see things just as they're about to happen, or is there a little time between their visions and the present?"

". . . That depends. What are you thinking of?" Wick asked.

Everything suddenly fell into place in Archer's head. He knew that nixie girl's weird little boat had looked familiar. "What if we weren't in centaur territory, and then all of a sudden we were? Would they be able to see that coming?"

"Archer," Wick said levelly, "what are you planning?"

Archer turned to him. "What if we had the Door in the Wall? What I'm asking is, if we had the Door in the Wall, would they see us coming then?"

"The old talisman from the human sorcerers? You said it's long gone; why are you still bringing it up?"

"Hypothetically," Archer insisted. "Hypothetically, in

theory, if we had the Door, would it work?"

Wick thought about it for a moment. "I don't know. Maybe. They might know if we planned to use it, but I think it's too unpredictable for them to fully keep track of. Why? I thought they took all of your tools and tricks when they took the bag from you."

"They did. And I'll get them for it."

"Then why are you asking about the Door in the Wall?"

Archer's eyes lit up. "Because I know where I can get it."

They walked back to the campsite, talking the whole way, and in just a few short hours they had a plan fit to end all plans. Wick knew where the centaurs would be keeping the pieces of the Heather Stone, and he knew the steps to cast the spell. Archer knew where to get the Door in the Wall and how to use it. If all went well, they would be able to steal all the pieces of the Heather Stone at once, and when they had the spell up to protect Aro, they could stop for breath at last.

But first, they had to get the door. It took a full extra day, but they walked back around the mountains and out to the lake where Archer had met the nixie girl. She was there as soon as Archer stepped onto the shore, eyes bright and eager, with the feather she had bartered off him stuck out of the back of her hair like an antenna. "You need to go back already?" she asked, smiling with teeth that looked like they had been stolen from a piranha.

Seeing the bedraggled feather in her hair, Wick shot Archer a weird look, but didn't say anything.

"Actually, no," Archer said, struggling to maintain eye contact. "I had something else to ask you about."

"Yes?" She had been sitting on her boat at the edge of the water, but now she stood and stepped onto the shore, too close for comfort.

Archer moved back just a few inches. "Could I see your ferry boat for a second?"

Her look of anticipation fell into a frown. "Fine." Reaching down with one arm, she hauled the little ferry boat up out of the water and handed it to Archer. He took it in both hands and flipped it around to look at the side that had been facing down into the water. On the underside, protruding from the now water-shrunken wood, was a slim gold door handle.

Looking over Archer's shoulder, Wick's mouth fell open. "This is the Door in the Wall!" He peered at the nixie girl around the side of the door. "Why are you using the Door in the Wall as a ferry boat?"

The nixie girl's pale brow creased under her mop of tangled hair. "The what?"

She didn't know what it was. The wheels in Archer's mind clicked forward just another notch. They could use her ignorance to their advantage. "Tell you what, it's a nice ferry boat," he said, lowering the Door in the Wall and passing it behind him to Wick. "I'd like to have it."

"To remember me by?" she asked, twisting a strand of hair around a slim finger.

Yikes. But he forced himself to nod. "Yeah, sure."

"Oh. But what will I use as a boat if you take it?"

Archer shrugged and gestured around vaguely. "There

are a lot of trees around here. You could get some wood from one of them and make another one. One that's a little deeper, maybe. Here, look." He extended his good wing again and ripped out a handful of feathers. "Here," he said in a strained voice, handing them to the nixie girl.

Her face lit up. "Thank you!"

"No, thank *you*." Archer turned and scuttled away, pushing Wick ahead of him, until the lake was out of sight over the next hill.

It was then that he could wince and check his wing to make sure he hadn't drawn blood.

"Are you regretting doing that now?" Wick asked, tucking the Door in the Wall under his arm.

"Uh, yeah. Why did I do that?" Archer tried to smooth the other feathers of his wing down over the gap he had made, but it wasn't working.

"I don't know, why did you?"

Archer gave up and tucked the wing behind his back again. "I was in a rush. I thought she was going to eat me alive."

"I did, too," Wick replied. Judging from his tight voice, he was trying not to laugh. "I thought you might turn tail and run. You were terrified."

"It's not funny," Archer snapped. "Did you see her *teeth*? She probably sharpens them on the bones of the dead men she drowns in the lake."

Wick started laughing anyway.

"Shut up!" Archer insisted, but Wick laughed all the louder. Archer rolled his eyes upward and something off in the distance caught his eye. "Wick, stop laughing."

Wick's chortle had been starting to slow, but Archer's demands just brought it back. "It's funny seeing you uncomfortable."

Archer stopped walking. "Wick, seriously, shut up and look over there."

Wick, hearing his serious tone, stopped and looked where Archer was pointing.

Far off to the west, a towering black cloud was rolling over the horizon. They were lucky not to be in the forest yet, or they never would have seen it.

Wick's eyes widened. "Is that a storm cloud or a hurricane?"

"It's a window of opportunity," Archer said. He started walking again, faster this time. "We have to hurry if we're going to use it."

As they raced to beat the storm to centaur territory, they solidified their plan. By now, the centaurs would have long since seen them coming and called in reinforcements. More people would be waiting for them than ever before. They had to be ready to run. And this time, they didn't have the unfillable bag to help them.

There would be no room for second chances this time. There would only be one storm, one opportunity to use the element of surprise. No matter how small their chances were, they were the only chances they would get.

As they reached the base of the mountains at the end of the second day, Wick looked up at the darkening sky and said, "So this is it."

"Yeah." Archer nodded. "Make or break time. All or nothing time."

Wick shook his head. "I can't believe we're trying to do this with just a piece of drowned wood."

"Hey, it's one of the few functional things that the human sorcerers ever made before they died out," Archer said. "One of the only ones that ever worked. And now we have it."

"If it still works."

"It'll work."

"It *might* work."

"It'll work."

The rain started then, dropping heavy and black on everything in sight. It soaked them to the bone in moments. They clung to the door as the savage wind tried to rip it out of their hands. The rainstorm was turning out to be more violent than they had been counting on.

Archer set the Door in the Wall down against the steepest part of the mountain he could find, about two miles south of where he had taken the passageway under the mountain. "Let's just hope they know that I know where that tunnel under the mountain is. Because if all of them are over there waiting for us to come out of it, then we'll have a better head start."

Wick nodded. "Archer?"

Archer looked at him. "What?"

Wick took a deep breath. "I don't know how this will turn out for us, but if anything bad happens, I swear that we are friends. I was an idiot for everything I said to you when I was angry."

Archer was about to blow the comment off, then changed his mind. "Yeah, you were, but so was I. So let's do

this, yeah?”

“Yeah. Good luck.”

“Won't need it. But good luck to you too.” Archer reached for the dripping handle of the door. “This thing had better still work. . .”

He yanked the door open, and the flickering torchlight of the centaur valley poured through the doorway.

The door worked.

The plan was in motion.

Looking at one another once more, Archer and Wick darted through the doorway and launched on their plan to rob the greatest and wisest race in Aro.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

How a Tree and a Seraph Robbed Everyone in the World

THE CENTAURS HAD called for backup. Even through the torrents of rain, Wick could spot the armor-clad members of each and every race in Aro gathered around the valley of the centaurs, on the land, across the mountains, and soaring through the air. The army that had been waiting for them at the nixie palace now looked small. The entire valley was filled with people bent on their arrest. Or their deaths.

This was it.

“Run, Tree!” Before Wick realized what was going on, Archer had taken off around a large group of satyrs carrying fighting staffs, leaving him with the Door in the Wall and a thousand enemies. No one knew where they had come from, so as soon as Archer appeared, most of the gathered

forces went after him or at least looked to see the source of the commotion.

According to the plan, Archer was supposed to have run the opposite way with the Door in the Wall. But instead, now he was heading toward the lake. Already the plan had changed.

He would have to adapt. Some of them were starting to turn his way, realizing what was going on. Wick tucked the door under his arm and ran.

He knew that the room where the stones were kept would be locked, and only certain people had the keys.

But he and Archer had already decided whose would be the easiest to take.

Someone grabbed the collar of his shirt, but he shook them off and swung the Door in the Wall like a club, striking the nixie under the chin.

The nixie went down. But there were more behind him.

Wick rammed the door up against the wall of the nearest building and darted through, ripping the door out of the wall on the other side.

He was inside the building before anyone was ready for him.

ARCHER RAN. He had attracted the most pursuers when he had dashed out into the open, taking a lot of heat off Wick as he raced in the other direction with the door.

A manghar dropped from the stormy sky. Archer dodged under a tree, temporarily blocking the manghar's shot at him. Now he just had to shake his other pursuers.

He wove through a small copse of trees, then quickly tucked himself in a hollow trunk to hide. The crowd following him streamed past.

He tucked himself further inside the hole as someone passed too close. Getting caught wasn't an option. If he got caught, he would be overwhelmed by numbers and it wouldn't be easy to get free again. He couldn't get caught, and neither could Wick. Hopefully, Wick could handle himself.

Archer peeked out of his hidey-hole. The building he needed was still a hundred yards away, and he wasn't even lucky enough to have the Door to help him go through solid walls. Maybe he hadn't chosen the easiest part of the plan to carry out. But it was too late to change his mind now.

Some of the others had now realized that Archer was still hiding somewhere in the copse of trees. In the corner of his eye, he watched them move slowly through the trees, growing closer. He had to move soon. His wings were starting to cramp in the tight space.

He crouched, carefully so he could stay inside the hollow of the tree, and picked up a hefty piece of rotten wood. When most of them were turned away, Archer threw it as far off into the trees as he could. As he had hoped, it made a huge cracking noise. And as he had hoped, most of the people looking for him turned in that direction.

He made a break for it.

He could make it to the building, and he wouldn't be caught.

A SATYR WAITED for Wick inside. In less time than it took for him to come through the door and stand up again, the satyr had already shouted the alarm and charged at him. Just as the satyr reached him, Wick slammed the door against the wall and popped it open, shoving the satyr through and leaving him outside the building. With the satyr gone, he propped the Door against the other side of the hallway and ducked through to the room beyond, pulling the door free again before anyone else could follow.

But news of Wick's arrival had already been heard throughout the building. As soon as he reached the next hallway, a trio of seraphs dived for him. He beat the nearest one back with the Door in the Wall and raced down the hallway to the end. It was the next room he had to be in, not this hallway.

The two remaining seraphs swooped down the hall after Wick, bent on vengeance. As he reached the door to the room he needed, they both grabbed opposite arms and yanked him backward. He dropped the Door. Rain pounded on the roof as the two seraphs flew back down the hallway, dragging him with them.

He had to get free. Wick managed to catch one foot against a torch holder on the wall. The yank of pulling two different directions almost made him let go, but the sudden jolt was all it took to make the seraphs lose their hold. Wick dropped to the floor. The seraphs spun around to attack again.

As they approached, Wick grabbed them both by the shoulders and knocked their heads together.

The pair of them dropped like stones.

Hoping he hadn't caused any permanent damage, Wick took off down the hallway again, grabbing the Door in the Wall on his way by. No one realized the hallway was now unguarded before he made it inside the room and slammed the door behind him.

THE HEAVY RAIN was a welcome cover as Archer raced across open space, heading for a golden pavilion on the edge of the lake in the center of the valley. The centaurs clearly didn't believe in glass. Rain was pouring in through the open window spaces on both levels of the pavilion. He grinned as he noticed something else. There were hardly any people posted on guard around the outside of the building. Getting in would be easy.

What wouldn't be easy was getting through the group of human soldiers between him and the pavilion.

So far, they hadn't seen him. Maybe he could burst through if he had the element of surprise. But no. One of them turned his way, and Archer dived behind a rock. He had to wait until they stopped looking again. He cursed his broken wing. If he had been able to fly, a lot of things on this trip would have been a lot easier. But no.

Archer peeked around the rock. Five of them were facing his direction now. They weren't looking toward the rock where he was hiding, but they would see him the instant he moved.

He just had to wait a little longer.

ONGEL WAITED in the middle of the room with a hefty staff in his hand. The black centaur stood tall as Wick

entered and raised his head higher. "I thought I heard an intruder, but I hoped it wouldn't be you." Ongel had hoped beyond hope that it wasn't true, that the visions wouldn't come to pass. He had wanted a different ending for Wick.

Wick tucked the Door in the Wall under his arm and smiled an empty smile. "I don't have the time to explain. All I ask is that you trust me. I need the key to the holding room."

Ongel's grip on the staff shifted. "I was afraid it would end this way. So I don't have the key." He saw Wick judging his options and said, "Can't we talk this out?"

Wick shrugged with sagging shoulders. "Like I said, I really don't have the time. I'm sorry."

Wick hefted the Door in the Wall in front of him like a shield. Then, quick as a rabbit, he raced toward the nearest wall and vanished.

Ongel turned his head slowly, watching the sides of the room for where Wick would reappear. Wick was smart; he would try to appear from the place Ongel would least expect it. His grip on his staff tightened.

A soft creak behind his head caught his attention, and he whirled around, staff at the ready.

But as it turned out, he wouldn't need it. Wick already had the key in his hand and was slipping the leather cord over his head. "Before, I wouldn't have noticed that the way you were facing meant you'd hidden the key over here, but unfortunately I learned from the best." He grabbed the handle of the Door.

Fear for Wick exploded in Ongel's chest. "You're going to ruin everything for yourself, Wick!"

"I'm sorry I've disappointed you," Wick said with a little smile, "but I think I'll be all right."

Then he shut the Door.

ARCHER HAD ENDURED far too much rain sliding down his collar before the last human soldier finally looked the other way. On a normal day, he would have waited for them to go their own way or at least let down their guard, but that wouldn't be happening today. This was the best chance he was likely to get.

He scrambled out from behind the rock and made a break for the weakest part of the line.

AT LEAST A DOZEN nixies stood between Wick and the great hall that held the Heather Stones. Word had spread by now that he was using the Door in the Wall, and many of the opposers had surrounded the structures, making barriers between himself and the walls of the buildings.

He tried to think of a plan to get past the nixies. The Door was his only tool, but out in the open, the Door in the Wall couldn't help him. Or could it?

Wick judged the distance between himself and the nixies. He was pressed up against a tree, as close to the great hall as he could get, and with the torrents of rain coming from the sky, they hadn't seen him yet. A streak of lightning flashed across the sky.

Once the lightning had passed, Wick held the Door in front of him once again, like a shield, and he charged toward the crowd of armed nixies.

They saw him coming before he reached them but hadn't anticipated the impact. Bellowing a war cry, Wick sped up and slammed into them, sending two flying and splintering the spear of a third. He broke through their ranks with only a few scratches across the face of the Door and kept going. As Wick broke free, one of the nixies recovered his balance and jabbed his spear at Wick's back. The blow only grazed Wick, but it left a streak of hot pain behind it. The pain made him stumble.

He raced toward the great hall with the nixies in hot pursuit. Another spear hit the grass beside his feet, and he dodged. He could still make it! He dove through the Door and slammed it shut behind him. Something pounded against the other side. The nixies. He yanked it away from the wall and started running again.

The great hall in centaur territory was huge. Most of the buildings in the center of their valley were small, allowing extra space for the grass and trees and the visiting crowds. The only large building was the great hall. Wick limped across the glossy marble floor to the opposite side, where a few smaller rooms lined the edge of the hall. The closest of these was the holding room, the quiet, reverent space where all important objects were kept on their way to other places. So long as the centaurs were keeping to protocol, the Heather Stones would be in the chamber.

Wick reached inside his shirt for the key.

The waiting chamber would be too heavily wrapped in magic for any other intrusive magic to force its way in. Even a magic as powerful and sneaky as the Door in the Wall would never make it through from the outside. Wick

propped the Door up next to the gold double doors into the room and pulled the key's cord over his head. The key slid into the lock easily. He gave it a quick twist, and the door swung inward.

The moment the doors started to give, something slammed against them from the other side, knocking them shut again. Wick gave the door a shove, but it wouldn't budge. Whoever was inside was holding it in place.

Running footsteps echoed through the hall, getting louder as the nixies found their way in.

Wick tucked the Door in the Wall under his arm and braced himself. Then he rammed the doors with his shoulder.

ARCHER HAD HOPED the humans would be stupider. He had barely broken the line before he was buried under three of them in a pile. They struggled to their feet, hanging on to his arms so he couldn't escape. Archer fought them, but they held on too tightly. He struggled all the harder, and one of them punched him in the gut. The injury in his ribs, the one from all the fights, blazed with agony, and he gasped, doubling over to clutch his stomach.

The men laughed, certain they had him now.

But despite the pain, Archer heard the opportunity knocking. As soon as the men let down their guard, he snapped out his wings, catching two of them in the face and sending them flying. That was the problem with humans. The problem with many people, really. They always forgot the wings.

Archer's arms were free again. He had a fighting

chance.

The men were on the defensive now, but they were still reeling from the surprise attack. Archer readied himself to fight. There was only one man between him and his goal now. He just had to get past the last one.

The problem was that the last one was huge.

The man between Archer and the place he needed to go stood a full head taller than even Wick would be and twice as broad. He wouldn't be easy to take out. In fact, Archer decided to avoid confronting him if he could since it would only leave him smeared on the ground.

The huge man also got on a defensive stance: head down, arms spread like a net, legs apart to block Archer's path.

Archer grabbed the opportunity before he thought better of it. He took a flying leap at the man. As the huge soldier reached out to grab him, Archer slipped onto his stomach and slid between the man's legs.

A classic. The uproar behind him was better than he could have hoped for. But between all the hits he had taken and the sudden impact of falling onto his stomach to slide, his ribs were almost too much to run with. He bent at an angle where they didn't hurt so much and ran. The men were close behind him, he could feel it.

A massive strike of lightning lit up the valley, exposing his position to everyone across the open space. He raced into the lower level of the gold pavilion with a crowd in hot pursuit. He needed an opportunity to shake them. The lower level of the pavilion was mainly just an open eating area hemmed in by pillars, but a winding staircase over in

the corner led to the upper level.

The upper level was where he needed to go. Grabbing the handrail of the stair like a lifeline, he raced up the stairs, around and around. He was nearly to the top when the stairs started trembling. The hoard of soldiers behind him was coming up the steps.

Archer rocketed around the last turn in the staircase and threw himself into a small space between a potted plant and an ornate table. Making sure he was out of sight, he waited, clutching his ribs and trying not to groan.

A dozen human soldiers raced up the stairs and thundered down the hallway. When they didn't find him, they would start a search of the building.

He could wait.

WICK SLAMMED HIS shoulder against the door, harder this time. Whoever was on the other side of the doors lost their balance, and Wick darted inside the room, locking the doors again behind him. The impact had jarred the wound on his back. For a moment he leaned against the doors, breathing hard and grimacing as he tried to push the pain down.

But he had made it inside.

Wick spotted the stones laid out on a gilded table across the room, glistening in the pale glow of an artificial light. For the last few weeks, the stones had been resting in this room, absorbing the magic in the air of the centaur territory, soaking up more power. The room almost smelled like magic. Between him and the table, a young centaur was getting back up from where he had fallen. The close-

cropped red hair gave him away instantly. Eland.

Deep in the pit of his gut, something had told Wick that Eland would be here.

And yet he still hadn't figured out what he would say.

HIDING BEHIND THE FRONDS of the potted plant, Archer grinned to himself. The humans, having searched the whole building and not found him, decided amongst themselves that he must have jumped out a window or escaped the building by some other means. Archer waited as the humans filed past him and thundered down the winding stairs, back to their posts out in the rain.

To keep on the safe side, he waited a moment, listening, before he slipped out of his hiding place.

"That worked better than I thought it would," he muttered to himself, almost wanting to laugh. He strutted down the empty hall, glancing inside each doorway as he passed. The last stone was supposed to be here somewhere.

At last, the third doorway on his right yielded results, even if they weren't the results he had come for. Archer padded through the doorway and stopped, a smile growing on his face like that of someone who had just run into an old friend.

Just when he thought his life could never go back to normal.

Across from him, hanging on a peg, was his beautiful unfillable bag.

The bag would be useful, he told himself as he crept across the room toward it. It would help them carry the stones, like it had carried the stones before. It might even

be a helpful hiding place if they got in a pinch on their way to. . .

"To where exactly?" Wick's voice asked in his head. *"After we get the stones, we're only running to the caves, and then we won't have time for hiding."*

Archer shook his head, trying to get Wick's imaginary voice out of it. He wanted the bag back, and that was the end of it. It was his bag, and it had been stolen from him.

Rather than Wick's voice, his own voice took over. *"It's not really your bag. It's where it belongs now. You just want it so you can go back to stealing."*

"And what's so wrong with that?" he asked aloud, then quickly shushed himself.

The little voice in his head didn't bother to answer.

Archer's fingers twiddled in the air, wanting to grasp the handle of the bag but not taking it. He wanted the bag back, he wanted his life back, what was wrong with that? But the voice refused to give him an answer.

Another flash of lightning lit up the sky outside, reminding him once again that they needed to get the stones and get to the cave before the storm let up.

He sighed his loudest sigh and walked away, leaving the Unfillable Bag on the hook.

"I CAN'T LET YOU take these," Eland said.

Wick eased the Door in the Wall down beside the doors and faced his friend. "Eland, I need you to trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't!" Eland exclaimed. "You don't know how hard we've looked, Wick. All of us expended precious

power looking in every corner of the visions for even a hint of what you think is coming. We saw nothing.”

“Eland—” Wick started to say.

“I saw nothing. Are you saying that I missed it?” Eland’s eyes were ringed in red. His breath came in panicked bursts. Wick realized that this had been eating at Eland for a long time.

“I don’t think anyone missed anything,” Wick said gently. “I’m saying you may have been fooled. Maybe the Scorch found a way to mask itself from your visions.”

“We couldn’t see it, but we could see you. You trying to steal all the pieces. You coming here right now.”

“But it wasn’t in the right order, was it?” Wick asked. He knew how cruel the words would sound. “We fooled you. Archer was supposed to be here, not me. You couldn’t see us clearly in the visions because we found a way around them. That’s why you’re here, where Archer was supposed to be, because your mentors thought if you met me at any point, you would give me the pieces.”

“I won’t,” Eland said, visibly trying to cover up his pain.

Wick had to convince Eland. He needed someone to understand. Because if he couldn’t convince Eland, he couldn’t convince anyone.

He took a step toward Eland.

“Keep back!” Eland threw out his arms to shield the table. His earthy green apprentice’s tunic flapped with the harsh movement. “Have you ever thought that he might be tricking you? The Heather Stone can do more powerful things than just put up a spell to protect Aro. You know

that. That seraph could have all kinds of reasons for wanting them.”

“What about my reasons?” Wick asked. “Would I steal things if I didn’t have a good reason? What if I thought I had to?”

“Even if you thought that,” Eland said, “how do you know the seraph boy thinks the same thing? He could be lying to you. He could be planning to use the stones for all sorts of dark plans! How can you help him? You know nothing about him!” Eland’s eyes were wide. “I’m afraid for you, Wick.”

“You don’t have to be,” Wick said in a comforting voice. “It’s true that I don’t know Archer that well. But I know enough. I know I’m doing the right thing.” Maybe earlier in the journey, he hadn’t been so sure, but now, having seen Archer give up chances to be selfish over and over again, having watched him do things that someone out to destroy things wouldn’t do, he was certain. Certain enough to die for it.

This was the right thing to do.

Someone pounded against the door. They were trying to break the door in.

“Please,” Wick begged, “just listen to me for a moment. I do have proof to back up my claim if you’d just listen.”

At first, Eland didn’t move. After a long moment of agony, he lowered his protecting arms back to his sides and nodded. “For all the good times we’ve had, I’ll give you this chance. What proof do you have?”

Here, Wick was ready. “When was the last time you

looked outside?"

"What?"

"Outside the valley, over the mountains. The trees are turning to ash. The rain is going black. The birds are abandoning us. All the signs are there. If you'd stopped trying to see and just looked, you would have seen it too. I don't know how or why, but the Scorch is coming back much sooner than we thought. If we aren't ready, this time it could destroy us. And I can't stand by and watch that happen, no matter what it costs me. Please, Eland," Wick begged, "I don't have much more time. I have to meet Archer at the cavern. Please, I need the stones."

Wick took a step forward, and Eland's posture went defensive again. The look on Eland's face said that he was starting to consider Wick's argument, but he still seemed unsure.

"You're my friend, Eland," Wick said. "You know me. Would I lie to you? Would I break a single rule unless I thought it was my only choice?"

Eland struggled with words for a long moment. A cracking noise came from behind Wick. The gold doors were splintering.

Eland's eyes flashed to Wick's face. "No. You aren't a liar. You wouldn't lie to me."

"Then please. I won't let anything bad happen to the stones. I promise."

Eland suffered. "How can you promise? You don't know what will happen."

Wick offered a smile. "No offense, but neither do you. We can only make the best choices we can."

"Fine," Eland said suddenly. He turned quickly and scooped up the stones one by one, dropping them into little silk bags to keep them apart before he swept them all into a canvas sack.

"Thank you," Wick said, overwhelmed with relief.

Eland turned to him and held out the bag. "If you don't get arrested, come back sometime and tell me the whole story. It had better be good."

"Oh, it is."

Eland's face broke into a smile. "And if you do get arrested, I'll come to see you in jail, and you can tell me the story anyway."

Wick grinned. Hefting the Door in the Wall up off the floor, he propped it against the wall opposite the gilded table and slipped through. A few walls later, he stepped out into the open air again, and he took off running toward the meeting place.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Everyone is Predictable

TINOR WAITED FOR WICK. The bag that held the centaur's piece of the Heather Stone weighed heavily around his neck. He would not let the stone go easily, or rather, at all. Even for Wick, as much as Tinor had grown fond of him, he would not give it up.

Something jumped through the open window and landed on the wet floor with a thump. A shadow moved in the corner.

Tinor turned toward the sound. "Don't hide from me, Wick. I knew you would be here."

Wick moved a little closer, looking tentative.

"I'm not angry," Tinor said. "But I am disappointed. I thought you were better than thievery and bribery. I came to get you from the manghar when the nixies turned you over to them. They had to admit to me that you had bribed them for your release."

Wick still didn't move from the corner.

"I suppose if you're here, you're more serious about this than I thought," Tinor said calmly. "That seraph boy has brought you down to his level. But it's not too late. Turn him in, and I'll do whatever I can to see that your slate is wiped clean." His eyes softened. "I still trust you. Give it up and turn in the seraph boy, and we'll help the both of you sort everything out."

Wick stepped out of the shadows, and the torchlight hit his face.

And Tinor saw it was not Wick.

The seraph boy stepped closer to Tinor, too close to be comfortable. Raising his hand in front of his face, he wiggled his fingers in a little wave. "Sorry I'm a little late. I was in the building, but someone locked your door and I had to come in through the window." His expression darkened. "And I'm glad he wasn't here to hear all that crap you said. That was pathetic."

Tinor's mind raced, trying to unravel what had gone wrong. "I saw this! *Wick* comes to me, not you!"

"Well, see, here's the thing," Archer said, collapsing into a comfortable attitude again. "What you saw was our original plan. The one that we talked about all the way here, the one we've been planning for days."

Tinor's brow furrowed.

"Your visions are good for predicting things that are far away, but not things that are just about to happen," Archer said. "Right before we came through the Door, I realized we had to make a last-minute change to throw you off. Even Wick didn't know I was going to change anything. Now, because I changed the plan, your predictions won't be

accurate anymore.” He grinned without a shred of guilt. “That’s what you get for letting your star player work with a thief. He knew all your secrets, and now I do too.”

Tinor’s face hardened. “You’ll ruin him. Everything he is now was given to him by the people who live in this valley. This will ruin everything for him.”

“He knows,” Archer said evenly.

“You won’t get away with this. The odds are against you. You’re going to be captured and made into a spectacle, and you’re dragging him down with you. You’ll have ruined his life for nothing.”

Archer cocked his head to the side. “It’s not for nothing if we’re right.”

“You aren’t right,” Tinor said. “We looked long and hard, and we saw nothing.”

“How about the trees? Did you see the trees?” Archer asked. “Or how about that?” He turned and pointed at the black rain pouring through the open window. He turned to face Tinor again. “That seems pretty serious to me, or did you not notice that?”

“Appearances can be manipulated,” Tinor said flippantly. Leshy could change their own appearances with their magic, satyrs could cast spells to shield objects from the eye, and since the boys had found the Door in the Wall, who knew what other magics from the human sorcerers had survived?

Archer pursed his lips. “I hate to break it to you, but your visions can be manipulated, too, remember? That’s how we got in here.”

“Enough of this,” Tinor snapped. “You are a thief and a

criminal. I can try to save Wick, but there is nothing I can or will do for you. When you're caught, you will be handed over to a council to face the justice of all the races combined for the things you've done. And when you face them, remember that you did this to yourself, and you did it to Wick."

"It sounds like you don't think we'll succeed," Archer said.

"You won't. You'll be caught, and you'll be punished. You won't get any of the stones, and you certainly will not get the centaur stone."

"The stones? The stones." Archer scratched his head, feigning confusion. "That rings a bell. What does that make me think of? Oh yeah. The pieces like this one?" He held up a smooth green stone. The same stone that Tinor could have sworn was still hanging around his neck. "Don't let me stand so close if you don't want to get robbed."

Tinor clutched at the pouch around his neck, but it was empty. He made a halfhearted grab for the stone, but Archer danced back, grinning.

"Stop!" Tinor cried. "You won't get away with this!"

Archer stopped with one leg hanging out of the window. "Actually, I think we stand a pretty good chance." Then he slid down one of the pavilion's pillars and landed in a deep puddle of black rain. He was about to leave, but then he remembered something. He turned back and called to Tinor, "Oh, and if it makes you feel any better, he was going to turn me in originally. He wrote you a letter and everything explaining himself. But he changed his mind because he realized I was right. Anyway, thank you!" He

waved and started running again.

He'd done his part. If Wick was competent enough, he would have gotten all the other pieces by now. Archer raced toward the meeting place with dozens of enemies on his tail.

Wick had better be there.

WICK SPOTTED ARCHER racing across the field. Another flash of lightning lit up the valley, and Archer spotted him, too. Archer had a head start for the caves where the stones had come from. But then, he was a much faster runner than Wick. Wick glanced over his shoulder and saw the people behind him were getting closer. A manghar swooped down from above. Wick barely managed to dodge. The entrance to the cave he was going for was just ahead. It wasn't far. But as the manghar dove again, he knew he wasn't going to make it.

Wick dug through the bag as he ran, clawing out two of the fine wraps that held the stones. He stopped running and turned to face the crowd chasing him. The manghar dove toward his face. As they raced toward him, he held the stones up in the air. It was helpful that the centaurs had taken all the stones out of their settings. It made them much easier to use.

He clicked the stones together.

The following explosion was even worse than he remembered. He skidded backward across the grass and mud as the people who had been the closest behind him collapsed under the force of the blast. Halfway to the cavern, he realized he had dropped the Door in the Wall.

He slid through the entrance to the cave and stopped.

Archer was the one catching up now. Wick scrambled up out of the mud, wincing over the pain in his back, and beckoned wildly for Archer to hurry up.

Archer looked irked, but he poured on more speed, racing through the cave entrance a full twenty paces ahead of everyone else. "Give me those," he gasped, and snatched the stones from Wick's hands.

Bracing one of them against the rocks at the entrance of the cave, he swiped the other one across it as quickly as a man with a pair of flints. The impact made the whole cave tremble. Wick glanced up just in time to leap aside as rocks filled the entrance.

"Come on!" Archer cried, racing further into the caves. Wick wasn't far behind him. As they ran, Wick took a quick look back. The glance told Wick exactly what he didn't want to hear.

"The collapse didn't block off the entrance," he said to Archer. "It just filled part of it."

Archer hissed under his breath. "We'll just have to hope it slows them down, then."

They fled further into the cavern.

The stone pathway they ran down led deep into the caves, appearing to be carved from the rock instead of built. On either side, past where the edges of the pathway dropped off into the black, stalagmites and stalactites clustered into the empty space between boulders and ledges. Scattered among them were statues of ancient historical figures, people from every race who had done great things for Aro. Most of them were life-sized. Far ahead of them, the pathway widened, leading into a round stone chamber lit by

torchlight. Wick could see some sort of ornate gold stands scattered in a circle inside the chamber. Somewhere in that chamber waited the last piece of the Heather Stone.

Archer and Wick raced side by side down the pathway. He tried not to look down. If they fell, nothing would keep them from slipping off the walkway and plunging who knew how far down.

“Are they still coming?” he asked Archer.

Archer looked behind them. “They’re still coming.”

An earsplitting *crack* echoed through the cavern, followed by the sound of a hundred rocks falling. Wick stopped running and spun around. A dozen yards behind them, a mountain of loose stone dropped from the roof, breaking the pathway and creating a huge gap between them and the crowd behind them.

What on earth could have caused it? Wick squinted at the ceiling above the break. The remnants of some sort of spell dangled from the stone. The centaurs must have placed it there in case there was ever a risk of something happening to the Heather Stone. But who would trigger it after the thieves were already safe on the other side?

Eland.

“This is our opening, Tree! Get moving!” Archer yanked on Wick’s arm, and they raced through the doorway. As they skidded to a stop in the center, Wick saw what he should have spotted from the pathway, and his jaw dropped.

In the center of the round chamber, buried in the floor, was a vast, glistening green stone.

The final piece of the Heather Stone.

Only the centaurs were allowed to enter this chamber,

so Wick had long ago accepted that he would never see it. He had, however, asked a lot of questions, and the centaurs had been happy to tell him everything he wanted to know. Thanks to their descriptions, he had formed an idea of what the chamber looked like. But now that he was here, he realized that even in his imagination the Heather Stone had never been so huge. It took up almost the entire floor of the round chamber, and he couldn't guess how deep it went into the mountain. It was bigger than his house in leshy territory. It was bigger than the Crowned Head's throne room. So big he almost couldn't wrap his head around it.

Spread out around the edge of the stone stood eight stands, shaped like slim pillars. Three gleaming ribbons of gold twined around each base, twisting over and round each other to the top of the stand, where the three pieces split open like a flower to hold the pieces of the Heather Stone.

The commotion of the others as they tried to find a way across the gap in the pathway brought Wick back to the present.

"They'll get across the gap soon," he said to Archer. "Here, take the bag. There must be some way to close the chamber off from the rest of the cave."

Archer grabbed the bag from Wick and dumped all the little silk sacks out onto the floor. Wick busied himself with searching the entryway to the chamber. The centaurs were good people, and they did their best to make sure no one felt unwelcome in their territory, but they were not foolish. They knew they would need to keep valuable things like the Heather Stone away from thieves and vandals. The centaurs had created a way to break the walkway and keep trouble

from reaching the chamber. They had placed countless spells on the holding room to keep unwanted visitors out. They had to have created a way to close off the chamber itself.

Somewhere, there had to be a door.

Wick ran his hands across the walls, looking for an inconsistency. He checked the floor. Nothing. Then he looked up. There, above his head, at the place where the centaurs could reach it with their extra height, was a round carving of the same symbol that had been stamped inside the flap of the Unfillable Bag.

He eyed the carving, second-guessed himself, and jumped. His fingers just barely reached the button. He didn't have enough reach to press it.

He'd need more height.

Wick looked over his shoulder. "Archer, I need a boost."

Archer looked up from where he had been taking stones out of sacks, a frown already forming on his brow. "Why?" he demanded. "You're the tall one."

Wick gestured to the button above his head. A shout of triumph came from the passage. Someone had succeeded in pitching a particularly brave fair folk across the gap. A seraph clutching an injured wing must have already tried to take off in the cave and found the stalactites too low. They were making every effort. It wouldn't be long before they found a way across the gap.

Someone appeared out of the crowd with a length of wood. Slowly they shifted it forward to lay it across the gap in the pathway.

They were almost out of time. "Archer, help me or they're going to catch us."

Archer looked up again and saw what was happening on the bridge. "Forget it, I've got this." He backed up and took a running start at the wall. When only a few feet of distance remained between him and the wall, he pushed off and slapped his palm against the button.

A grating sound filled the chamber. A great stone door appeared out of the curving wall and began to creep across the opening.

Part of Wick reveled in everyone's horrified expressions as the door closed.

"Okay, let's get this done," Archer said. "You take four, I'll take four."

Wick nodded and gathered up four stones. "They go in the stands. But be careful. Don't drop any of them. I don't know what would happen if they hit the stone."

"Might be nothing. They're supposed to be together, right?" Archer asked, carefully sliding a stone into the stand that fit it. "This big one isn't reacting to itself."

"Maybe nothing would happen. Or maybe we could blow up the mountain. I really don't know."

"Lovely."

They started matching stones up to their according stands. The centaurs didn't know it, but they had made it considerably easier by removing the stones from the broken settings. This way the stones fit without any forcing. Wick found the stand for the Oak Leaf. It fit without the tiniest gap. Somewhere in Aro's history, these stands had been someone's best work.

The seraph piece was the last one left. Wick snatched it off the floor and found the last empty stand. This was it.

Archer cut into Wick's train of thought. "Can I just say: when I started on this whole thing, I thought in the end it would just be me lining up rocks in here. I thought I would have needed to ditch you ages ago."

"When I met you," Wick said with a smile, "I didn't think you'd end up in here lining up rocks at all. I thought I would have turned you in by now."

"Like you could have turned me in."

"I could have."

Archer shrugged. "Agree to disagree. Now. Do it."

Wick lined the stone up and dropped it into place.

Nothing happened.

Wick's brow furrowed. "I think the stands have to be on top of the Heather Stone." He tried to ignore the sounds of everyone pounding on the stone door as he and Archer pushed and pulled the heavy gold stands from the edges of the room. Together they hauled the eight stands on top of the green of the Heather Stone and waited.

Still nothing.

A sick feeling crept into Wick's stomach.

"Maybe it is working. Maybe we just can't see anything," Archer said, his brow creasing as he spun around and around, trying to see what they had done wrong.

"We should be able to see something," Wick said. "There should be a hum or a spark, something. Something's wrong."

"Maybe we were supposed to say some words or something?" Archer suggested.

"No, no words." Wick swallowed. "Once the stones are in place, it's supposed to just happen. Maybe one of the stones is damaged."

"Not damaged," said a voice behind them.

Wick and Archer spun around. Tinor stood between them and the door to the chamber, which was still shut. Beside him, more humans and manghar and seraphs and satyrs and fair folk appeared every minute through the Door in the Wall. The Door in the Wall which Wick had so foolishly dropped. When a fire-eyed manghar unfolded himself from the little door, Wick looked away.

"The stones are all intact," Tinor said. "But the human stone was replaced with a fake."

As much as he wanted to stand strong, Wick couldn't look Tinor in the eyes.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Archer breathing rapidly. Rather than being embarrassed, Archer looked ready to spit venom. "So all this was just. . . an elaborate trick? You let us go to all this trouble for kicks?"

"No," Tinor said. "I didn't know about the fake myself until the full collection was brought to us for inspection. I had to send a messenger to the humans to find out what had happened, and their keeper of the stone told me that he had started carrying a fake once he learned about the thefts in other territories. The human stone is still safe in their territory."

One of the manghar standing behind Tinor smirked. Wick's heart sank.

"I kept the information to myself as a last line of defense in case you made it this far," Tinor went on. "And

since you did make it this far, it seems that it was for the better that I did keep that information to myself.”

Wick's body slowly filled with an empty numbness. They had been doomed for failure almost from the very beginning.

“And now, since you have no weapons or tricks left,” Tinor said in a gentle voice, “please come quietly and don't make it difficult on yourselves.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Even Behind Bars I'll Still Say Whatever I Want

IT WAS TINOR HIMSELF who brought Wick and Archer their meals the following morning.

It had been a rough night of sleep. The cells were decently spacious(although Archer claimed the one in manghar territory had been larger), but it was cold. A thin layer of dried grass clippings covered the stone floors, but it was not nearly enough to keep the chill from seeping into the very depths of Wick's bones. However, the centaurs were too fair to allow even their prisoners to suffer. Wick and Archer had each been provided with a blanket if not any kind of mattress, and they had been given something to eat before they were abandoned for the night.

Wick had slept in worse conditions many times. But it was less the conditions and more his guilt that had kept him from sleeping.

He had ruined everything for himself. Everything that

had happened to his reputation was by his own doing, his own hesitation, and then by his own choice. That part he could come to terms with. But if he had just thought to check over each piece of the Heather Stone as they had gathered them, maybe they might have avoided arrest. He would have recognized the fake if he had just checked. And he had been the one to drop the Door that had let the centaurs back into the cavern.

If he had just thought everything through more thoroughly, they might have done it. They had been so close. They had made it through everything, past everyone, even to the point where it would have worked, if it hadn't been for the humans and their fake piece of the Heather Stone. The country would be safe now if it weren't for him.

Now they were in jail until who knew when. He had no idea what the centaurs would do with them, and he couldn't yet find the courage in himself to ask.

He sat up as the sound of hooves came down the hall to their cells. Tinor's grey head came into sight, carrying a ceramic plate of food in each hand.

"Good morning," he said smoothly as he bent and slid the first plate under the slatted door of Archer's cell.

"Morning." Archer gave Tinor a massive fake grin and then dropped it as he reached out to pull the plate closer.

Wick accepted his plate without a word. Most of the food appeared to be cold vegetables from the centaurs' gardens, but they had also been allowed a leftover cut of meat each, also cold. Again, the centaurs had given them enough to be considered fair.

"Your family sent word to us that they're coming to see

you,” Tinor said to Wick as he rose. “They should be here tomorrow or the next day.”

Wick nodded. “Thank you.”

Tinor stood there a moment longer. It seemed he was waiting for Wick to say something else. Wick had nothing more to say.

Instead, Archer was the one that piped up. “Hey, centaur guy.”

Tinor turned to Archer, bearing the best expression of tolerance he could. Archer had already well overextended Tinor's patience. He had even gone far enough to try to bite Tinor as they had been taken into the prison, and he still wasn't sorry for it.

“I know you've made your stance obvious about what you think of us and everything, but has it occurred to you yet that we might be right?” Archer shrugged. “There's nothing bad about you being wrong. Just hasn't happened before, that's all.”

“And if we were wrong, what evidence would you have to prove it?” Tinor asked.

“Nothing more than what we've already tried,” Archer said. “If you won't believe everything we've already told you, I can't give you anything else.”

Tinor nodded and turned to leave.

“But you might still be wrong,” Archer said, making Tinor stop and turn again. “I get it. You're convinced you're right. But we're convinced we're right, too. And I guess at the rate we're going, the only way we're ever going to find out who's right is if we wait another. . . what, Wick? Two months, would we say? It was going to be four, but it looks

like it's coming faster than even Caihu thought, so are we guessing two months?"

Wick thought, then nodded.

"The only way we're going to find out who's right is if we wait another two months and watch to see if Aro gets destroyed by demons from outside or not."

"As you said," Tinor said, and left at last.

"So what'd they put on this meat?" Archer asked, picking it up with three fingers and inspecting it.

"Chives, I think," Wick said. "And salt and pepper. Not complicated, but I like it."

Archer took a bite and chewed speculatively. "It would be better warm."

"True."

They chewed in silence for a moment.

"Do you really want to see your family?" Archer asked. "I know they're your family and everything, but you didn't seem very happy to hear they were coming."

Wick's mouth quirked for a moment as he gathered his words. "They are my family, and I love them, but I know why they're coming. They just want to see if it's all true and if I willingly came along with all this. They won't like the answer. And they won't like that I transmogrified and now I look like this. They won't like any of it."

"Do you want to see them?" Archer asked.

Wick hesitated, then admitted, "No, not really. I'm not ready to face them just yet."

Archer made an understanding noise.

They chewed in silence for a moment more.

Wick looked over at Archer through the slatted bars

between their cells. "We're getting out of here, right?"

"Oh yeah. I've already got it all planned out. I just wanted to make sure you didn't want to see your family first, that's all."

"Good." Wick nodded. "We still have to prove to them that it's coming, and we can't do all that from in here."

"Exactly."

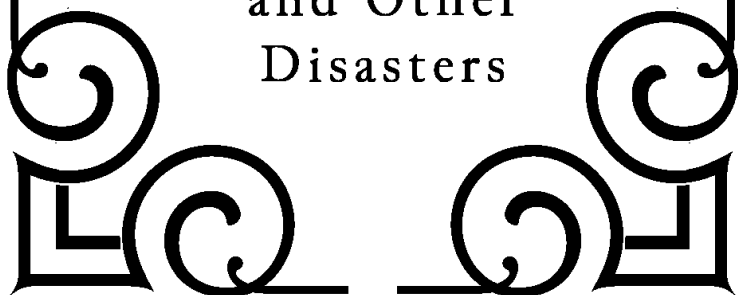
Wick and Archer grinned at one another.

They were long gone before dawn.

ENDE.

Turn the page for more!

- Character art
- Songs from the
RCOBI
soundtrack
- Excerpts from
the sequel,
World Saving
and Other
Disasters







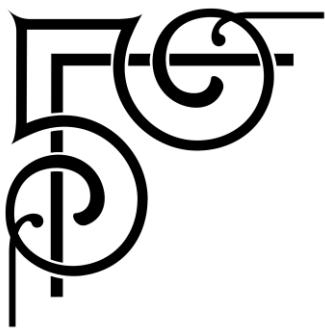
Concept Sketches



leshy



nixie



Songs From the Soundtrack

Many writers create playlists or 'soundtracks' for their works in progress, often to have something personal to listen to while writing or to have the right mood while drafting a specific scene.

The full soundtrack has around thirty songs on it, so it would take up far too much room, but here are a few choice songs from the soundtrack of Robbing Centaurs.

Main theme song:

Burn the Ships (For King and Country)

Secondary theme song:

We Are Legends (Valley of Wolves)

Wick's theme song:

Running (ONLAP)

Archer's theme song:

I'm a Wanted Man (Royal Deluxe)

'Credit song':

Bad Decisions (Bastille)

The Scorch: Book 2

World Saving and Other Disasters

Coming soon!

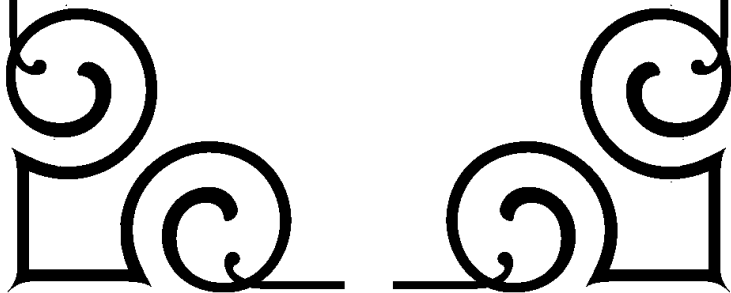
“Wish me luck.”

“No thanks. Just run and you won’t get caught.”

His father's features only hardened. “You can't avoid your duties forever, Archer. You know that.”

Archer cocked his head. “Do I? As far as I can see it, they're not actually my duties. They're yours.”

“No,” Wick said, paling. “I’ve been named an enemy of my people. My own family didn’t want to see me. I’m not allowed back there, ever.”





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bethany Meyer grew up in Maryland and finds it odd to write about oneself in the third person. She discovered a love of writing when she was eleven and has been creating stories ever since. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, drawing, or consuming a large number of animated movies.

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

You've come here for my thank-you speech, right?

I always find this part awkward. I'm never quite sure what to say. But there are too many people who deserve a hand, so I'm going to do my best here.

Let's start with the most important, shall we? All of my gratitude will always go to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without Him I would not succeed in anything, and nothing I do would have any meaning. Thank you, Lord.

Thank you, as always, to my family. Thanks for listening to me ramble, for reading drafts that were less than quality material, and for telling me to snap out of it whenever I let the stress get to me. To my mother and to my sister Rachel especially, thank you.

A giant thank you to my editor, Angela, who is such a spectacular editor and an even more superb human. Every little helpful note and every gentle but firm grammar correction was invaluable, and really, I couldn't have done it without you.

So many thanks to the wonderful people of Miblar for my beautiful cover! I still can't stop drooling over it.

Thank you, thank you, thank you to the many internet friends I met along the way. Thank you for the encouragement, for sharing resources (how else would I have found Angela?), and for being my cheerleading squad. Y'all were the first fans of RCOBI, and your kindness brings me so much happiness.

Since I forget many things, I don't doubt I've forgotten someone. Thanks to you as well.

*THANKS FOR READING! PLEASE ADD A
SHORT REVIEW ON AMAZON*

*AND LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU
THOUGHT!*

YOU CAN ALSO JOIN MY MAILING LIST AT

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