

CHAPTER 1

A Peaceful Hunt

August 11, 2026

I enjoyed having Mother so distant. I wasn't entirely sure of the reason for her trip, though I hoped that it wouldn't end badly for someone—Mother's involvement usually ended badly for everyone who wasn't her, but I could hope. All I knew was that one of her investments had gone awry, and she had rushed off to save it. Not that I was spending the night at home. It was a beautiful night for a hunt.

One thing that had taken years for me to get used to after reincarnating was how alive the forest was at night. While I certainly had intellectually known that it varied from place to place, I still had the intuition that a forest gripped in the depths of winter should be quiet, dark, and furtive.

It probably was dark, honestly, but 'sees in darkness' was hardly a rare talent, and snow always made everything brighter anyways. Despite that, many small mammals seemed to see the night as shelter against their hunters. A family of possums darted silently in the distance, while a badger moved more casually through the forest. Not everything was active, obviously. A glyptodon was just sleeping in the field quite near where I was dressing my deer. Evidently, the smell of blood hadn't bothered it, with its confidence born from both size and shell. Though as Chort'sbin seemed to be giving the giant armadillo the majority of his attention, I expected it to have an abrupt wake-up call. A short one.

As for quiet. It was. It just wasn't *consistently* quiet.

Silence. The mad laugh of a bird cut through the night. Silence. The off-tune wail of the raccoon-dog (and wasn't it a little late in the year for that? If it didn't have enough to hibernate by now, it probably wouldn't make it). A branch snapped off under the weight of snow. Silence.

Satisfied with my work, I started packing it into the back of the sled.

"If you want to hunt, I'm good to make it home."

Chort'sbin gave the glyptodon one last look, then shook his head.

"Naah," he drawled in his soft Waskiusal accent. "Yer mama would take it sideways if I skadoot the moment she turns her back. 'Sides, ain't been a fortnight

since I last ate.”

Chort'sbin took the form of a young man in his early twenties. Clean-shaven, raven-haired. Waskiusalians always struck me as looking vaguely Persian in a soft, pretty kind of way, and Chort'sbin's chosen form cleaved to that. The only detail out of place was his shockingly blue eyes.

I had never been to Waskiusal, but the impression I had of it was something more pastoral than I would have assumed from his features. Just another lesson in not making assumptions off memories of my past life. They were, for all the vaguely 'eastern' theming, a plantation republic—one where only major landowners could vote. Plantation-based republics were infamous for making heavy use of slavery. Waskiusal was the one the rest could point at when they sought a moral high ground. *We're humane and kind, see. We only whip disobedient, lazy slaves. We aren't the Waskiusali.*

I always wondered what it said that Chort'sbin liked that form. He played the part of a backwoods rustic aristocrat to a tee, so folksy you could gag on it, but there was always something cold in how he looked at things. Though I suppose that was also in character.

In case it was unclear, I didn't like him, however helpful he was. His parents had evidently wanted to find him a... a 'summer job' basically, and they had owed Mother a favor. Markers were cleared, and I got myself an unwanted babysitter for a few years. Still...

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing in this forest is going to give me a hard time.”

“That dog won't hunt. Qumzotz might be as nailed as a butterfly, but he's still only two days away as the crow flies, and his worshipers ain't pinned in with him. Wouldn't take a leap for them to extend their influence this far if pushed. Could be other beasties I don't know hereabouts. Nah.”

I sighed, then gestured at my work. “Right. So how did I do?”

He nodded at the bundled carcass. “Peeled the hide a mite too clean where even a clever and handy boy your size would struggle. Your witchyness slipped out more than you meant—just no way for someone your size and build to cut through bone that easy. But nothing major. Really, only size will fix that. I reckon you did decent.”

“Good enough. Let's head back then.”

“Sounds right. I’ll harness the worgs.”

The next few minutes—or maybe a bit more than a fourth of a mark, though I never thought in candle units—were spent in silence as we worked. I packed the carcass in with the rest; it had been a productive hunt. Chort’sbin took the coachman seat, while I fished a book from my jacket pocket. The ride back was peaceful enough, and I tuned out the growling chatter the wolf-like creatures made between themselves as they pulled our sled through the snow. I enjoyed my schlock adventure novels, but it always took so long for one to make its way to this backwater.

As home came into sight, I slipped the book back into my jacket.

“Your Mama’s home,” Chort’sbin said, nodding to the faint light coming from under the front door.

“Looks like. Wonder what was so important that she hurried out like that.”

“Don’t know, she tore out like her barn was on fire.”

We didn’t hurry unharnessing the worgs, doing the job right rather than fast. I paid them with one of the bucks—I didn’t need to, they worked for us out of fear rather than payment. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t the person who didn’t pay. The rest we hung in the larder. It was better to let them hang for a couple of days before butchering them. Then we made our way to the lodge door. Mother looked up as the door opened, and we stepped inside. Her hideous visage twisted into a brief look of fondness, before she turned her attention back to the figure shivering on the floor.

“Trip went to shit, but I recovered something from it.” She gestured at the other occupant of the lodge. “Meet your sister.”

The girl shivered even bundled in furs. She was half buried in them, but Mother hadn’t set a fire. There was a medicinal smell to her—healing potions—but the bruises that tracked up her face told me Mother didn’t care enough to get her all the way healthy. And then there were the obvious problems with that statement. For starters, she looked human. No, I corrected myself a moment later. She looked *mostly* human.

“Sister?” I asked. It might have been rude, but... “Then shouldn’t she have been left to bake a while longer?”

Mother wanted another two hags to make a circle with, and bringing her here like this seemed to undermine that goal. So while I hated everything about the question, it needed to be asked.

"Should have baked longer, yes," she stated, her face twisted into something between the smile of a plan coming together and the grimace of watching one fail. "Would have had a second in about seven months. With a second, a third would be easy to recruit. But when The Change came on her, she made it a problem."

For the first time the girl spoke, real venom in her voice, "I would rather die."

Mother nodded. "She really would. Lots of dearies *say* they would, but they never do. Not before it's too late, and they become." Her voice lilted up. "But she really meant it. Kept trying. Three times. That's why I went running, had to save her."

There was a note of respect under the anger of her tone. Hags respected that kind of virulent determination. Her long fingers tapped against her staff. "If it was just one or two... it wouldn't have mattered. Nothing fickle survives The Change. I would have just waited it out. But after the third it was clear I would have to stay with her through the whole thing. Didn't have the time, and that showed real dedication. You do keep *real* things through The Change. If my lovely daughter was that determined to die, her hate would have survived. Even when it was done, she would still hate me."

Her tone came across as deeply aggrieved that the girl hadn't just given up on herself, and she knelt in front of the girl, grabbing her, twisting her this way and that as if examining her. "There's ways of making it work anyways. I'm older, stronger. Not all the power I stole to make you went into you. If it was urgent I could have dealt with a hostile coven mate. But I just don't need the problem. So I cut a deal with her—broke the blood inside her, repurposed it. She stays human, and my dearie pays with everything else. She's yours now."

Everything. I winced, giving the girl a pitying look.

"Not as useful as a second for my coven," Mother continued, "but she'll be a companion for you."

"Oh?" Chort'sbin asked, "So got him a playmate?" His gaze was on the girl—she wasn't so much struggling against Mother as shivering so hard she seemed to be flailing, as if even her body knew it needed to escape. Mother dropped her a moment later, and Chort'sbin's cold gaze followed her down, filled with a private

humor.

I was happy for the girl, since The Change always sounded horrific. I was vaguely glad I wasn't going to have to watch someone go through it. Still... I grimaced at the scene. Every part of this was ugly.

"Won't she just hate me?" I asked as I made my way over to the girl. She was shivering so hard her muscles were starting to lock up, and I quickly pulled the furs back over her. "Chort'sbin is plenty good as a bodyguard already."

"Nah," he said, "not what you're getting here. Just a bit older than you, and not a boogie or beastie. The ma'am didn't just employ me to guard your physical safety. Yourselfs needs to mix about more with other folks, or you'll not know your what-when-how when needs must. I had been talk'n at your ma'am about snatching you a few playmates, but this is better."

Mother smiled benevolently at me. "It wasn't the idea, but this," she made a twisted face, "mess... Well, it lets me recover some of the value I put into her. She'll still be useful. A lot of what I tried out before I had you went into her first—she was the practice run, so she would have been a mighty hag. She's a sorcerer now, even with the blood broken. The hagsblood is a source of fae magic for her like it is for you."

Mother glared at the shivering thing she had dragged into our home. "This dearie *won't* be useless."

It was honestly more a statement of intent than a reassurance.

There was hatred on the girl's face when Mother said that. I doubt Mother missed it, but it didn't seem to bother her. It probably seemed perfectly natural to Mother. Hags didn't have much of a positive emotional register.

"I'll let the two of you get to know each other," Mother said, heading further into the house.

"Then I'll be taking my leave," Chort'sbin added, already moseying towards the door, "Call if need, otherwise I'll be back in the morn'n."

He stepped out the door. A moment later the sound of something heavy made its way through the snow, then the thunder of wings, and it was gone.

"Right," I tried, casting about for what I was supposed to do. Looking at the girl's chattering glare, it was clear that she didn't just hate me, she was *scared* of me.

It wasn't unusual, there were three reactions most people had towards me. Some saw me as something fragile and breakable, a thing Mother raised for some dark and unfortunate purpose. Some, those who knew the reputation of hagspawn, assumed I was being raised to play hatchetman, and held me in contempt. And then there were those who feared me, mostly by proxy or outright. Those were the smart ones, but I hated it.

"Let's get you settled in," I stated, pushing past the familiar disquiet. I lifted her into my arms with as many of the furs as I could balance. I wasn't sure if she had tried to shake me off, or if her shivering was simply that bad, but I chose to see it as the latter.

It was probably a comedic scene—she was bigger, older than me. It made little difference, my strength was *witchy*. I carried her towards my room with as much gentleness as the situation allowed, and then put her on the bed. Honestly, I was glad that puberty was still years in the future, because my room was the only heated one in the lodge. I doubted she would make the night anywhere else in the lodge.

She finally spoke to me as I moved to tidy her and tuck her in better.

"Th... th... the witch." She struggled to express anything through her shivers, voice pushing out words syllable by uneven syllable. "Sh-shHee-he y-y—" After a moment, her voice broke entirely. Warmth returning after you got *that* cold was painful. I filled in what I assumed she was going for. 'The Witch. She's your mother.'

"Hag," I corrected, as I silently stirred my own fae heritage to motion, and then pushed weal towards her. It wouldn't do much from such a cold start, and without any structure to turn it into proper sorcery, but hopefully it would ease warmth returning to her body. "A witch is just someone who practices witchcraft."

"A hag is a kind of wicked fairy that is always female, and has a natural talent for several kinds of magic," I continued, checking and securing the layers of curtains that stretched across the entrance to my room. I didn't have an actual door, but they worked plenty well as long as I tied them down both on top and bottom, and made sure all three layers were stretched across and not bundling up to create a gap. "One of which is witchcraft."

I went over to the hearth and shoved my hand into the pile of strange round

stones that filled it, before flooding them with magic. A moment later I felt them start to heat.

I pulled a chair over to sit where we could more easily talk.

"Then wh... wh... why... why are you a boy."

"I'm not a hag," I explained with a sigh. "Hags don't easily have children. Sometimes when they do, it's still a failure. The child," I gestured at myself, "fails to be a hag. Too much of the other parent's nature stays with them, and they come out mortal. We're the so-called hagspawn."

I shrugged. "If the child's a girl, there's rituals to push the blood when they're older. But nothing you can do with boys."

I waited a minute. "What's your name?"

She was quiet for a moment, "I know better than to give a fairy my name."

I snorted. "Hagspawn are on the mortal side of that divide." I wasn't mortal, but that wasn't because I was hagspawn. "And if I wanted your name that way I could just steal it anyway. You're going to be here for some time, I need to call you something."

That... was the wrong thing to say. She started crying. I sat there awkwardly, not sure what to do.

Finally, "Lalak."

"It's nice to meet you, Lalak." I responded, "I'm Crinn."

She took a little while to gather herself, before asking her next question.

"No one talks about hagspawn. If witches... If hags have sons to do their work. I know about, about changelings like, like, like me. But I've never heard of you."

"I said hagspawn are failures, didn't I? Most of us are abandoned. If we're lucky, we're abandoned near a village, but it's usually not seen as worth the effort."

She gave me an incredulous look, which—fair. Mother was fond of me.

"I said most. And I was a failure. You heard her though, didn't you? She was doing things to make her children more powerful. You were the test, while I was the serious attempt."

I leaned back, old memories coming to the surface. The confusion of rebirth, Mother's monstrous rage at her failed spawn. Fear as I realized that 'Mother' was going to recycle me, and epiphany that I had power. Reaching out with a limb of sideways thought, and driving it through her skull...

"I was born aware, and I was born powerful. And so I drove her mad."

"What."

"Haven't you heard stories about the forest spirits playing games with people's minds? Beguiling them with madness and unthinkable wants? I did that. I drove her mad with maternal love."

She was just giving me a confused stare.

"That... that doesn't make sense. Mothers are supposed to love their babies."

I just lifted an eyebrow at that, "Plenty don't. And love that is a kind of fixation, that exists at odds with your desires and goals, that consumes your wants? That remains fixed no matter how your thoughts shift or change? What can that be but madness?"

"So what?" Her tone was getting heated, "You're her master?"

"Not at all," I flatly stated, "She loves me. That doesn't make her a fool. She knows what I did to her, and she had no desire to let me ever do it to her again. After that, she arranged for my care and left for a year. When she was back... her mind was shielded. I don't know what she did, but she made sure I could never change her again."

"But... she loves you?"

I snorted, "And you think a hag's love is kind? She doesn't care if I appreciate what she does for me, nor does she hold back from pursuing her other goals in an unchanged way. She loves me, she doesn't need me to love her."

Her tone was improving as the room heated, and she started unhunching. I studied her. The Change, hmm. Well, I knew it happened sometime around the thirteenth year, and that the whole thing took something like a year. But I didn't know if that meant it ended around the thirteenth year, or started. Somewhat ironically, I just hadn't asked that many questions about it, so what I knew I picked up by osmosis. But it wasn't like it was an exact date either way. So she could be anything from two to four years older than me.

"How old are you?" I finally asked.

"Thirteen winters," she promptly answered. So about three years older than me. Around there at least, I wasn't counting my ten years in winters.

Also, she hesitated at a name, but gave me her general age? That was the foothold to start narrowing in on a proper horoscope, and those could be better than a name for aiming a spell.

Peasants, a voice echoed in the back of my head, speaking with contempt. It sounded entirely too much like Chort'sbin's voice.

She seemed to be getting tired, but kept her gaze focused on me. "So then, what are you going to do with me? The deal... I basically have to follow you around and support you or your mother will—" She stopped, and I wasn't sure if it was the cold sapping her, or simple unwillingness to continue. "What do you want from me?"

I sighed, "She's your mother too."

There was a visceral shudder, and she snapped at me, "My mother is a sweet woman. Maybe that thing *birthed* me, but she's not my mother!"

White hair, blue eyes, pale, slight even for a girl, but tall. Fingers a bit too long for her hands, and nails a bit too thick and jagged-edged. She was a bleached-out image, a bit too sharp to be called pretty. She had probably thought she was human until recently. I guess she really was now, if Mother had broken her blood. But there were dozens of signs I had been taught to look for.

"I wouldn't say that in Mother's hearing. But to answer your question, I don't really want anything from you. But I expect I'll be taking you with me when I'm sent to civilization. It's been Mother's plan for a while, she intends for me to be able to move among people without seeming too strange, and it's clear she's been planning on having me establish an identity outside. You're probably intended to be part of that, you're more—" I hunted for the word "—more normal, or maybe more grounded, than I could hope to be."

Her gaze remained locked on me, leaving me feeling a bit self-conscious. I wasn't hideous, I knew that. Many hagspawn were, but not all. But I was eerie. Most hags were rather hunched, and in some hagspawn it grew even more pronounced. I mostly just had a slightly slumped posture that was actively uncomfortable to straighten. I had skin like a medical condition, and my hair wasn't just wispy and fine, but an almost crystalline white, while my irises were nearly the same color

as the whites of my eyes.

I had had a fairy tell me I was pretty once, and I don't think he was lying, but I was certainly *strange* looking. Though I wondered if she realized I mostly looked like a more extreme version of her.

I thought about my next question, only for a light snoring to start. She fell asleep with her eyes open.

Um. Well. People sleeping with their eyes open was creepy. As a minor god of Madness, Magic, and Fate... I felt qualified to judge creepy. And that was creepy.

I went looking for more covers. It looked like I was going to be sleeping on the floor tonight. We would have to make better arrangements tomorrow. Either set up a space for her, or at least get a second bed, but I had roughed it through worse than a night on the floor.