

Chapter 1

Death chills the doorway. It hasn't come for the child laying in the bed yet, but it will. His final resting place is softly illuminated by window-filtered daylight. His sweat-dampened chestnut curls lay softly against his flushed forehead.

He looks angelic, really. Divine, even in the clutch of a reaper.

His mother clings to his hand beside him.

Sara came to Diana's apothecary only a few days ago, her son still grinning, gap-toothed and flushed. She carried him in, frazzled and panting, claiming that he had fainted outside in the garden that morning. At first, we thought perhaps he was just malnourished or dehydrated, a common condition around the village of Comraich. But while the boy was definitely underweight compared to the plump, rotten children of the affluent neighborhoods in Raith, the blazing fever seemed to be ailing him most. No amount of fever-few could mellow the heat, and by dawn, he had fallen to delusions.

I've seen enough of life to know when to brace for death.

A tragedy. One I have become quite detached from, unfortunately.

There are only so many dead children, siblings, parents, and friends that I can muster up true devastation for. Now, the family's grief pounds at the walls I've built up around my soul; it's relentless but manageable. I leave the empty soft smiles and wasted condolences to Diana. I cannot bear them anymore.

I chew on the rough skin around my thumbnail while I observe, a phantom in the shadows. A gross habit—one I can't be bothered to stop.

A voice, roughened by age, comes from beside the mother, soft and comforting. "He knows that you are here with him. A mother's strength is no small thing for a babe. He needs you." Wrinkled hands, which I know to be cold and soft, gently pat the back of the mother's hand melded to her child's. "We are going to do everything we can to break this fever and bring him back to you, dear. We have overcome worse odds than this."

The mother stares stone-faced at her son, memorizing every detail of his too-thin face, not acknowledging Diana's reassurances.

Cold disgust washes over me as I watch. Hope is a wretched thing; a friend peeling back armor, leaving you vulnerable.

Too often a friend betrays.

Diana is no fool. She knows that this boy is too hungry, too small, and was born with every single odd stacked against him.

Diana slowly—too dramatically—makes her way to her feet and hobbles over to where I loiter.

Closing the door, we silently pad down the hallway to our workspace. I swiftly go to the tea that is brewing over the fire, stirring the mixture, swallowing back the vitriol that I am predisposed to spill. Through the fogged-up windowpane, gray skies and drizzling rains are painting the town a dreary shade of despair.

"You'll need to go back to the clearing for some dandelion," Diana directs, glassware clinking as she putters about her workbench.

I stand slowly from my sullen vigil over the poppy tea, turn, and level Diana with a stare.

She glances up at me and sighs. "Oh don't give me that look, Alyx," she mumbles, pressing her lips together for a moment. She resumes carefully placing a bundle of sphagnum moss into a small woven basket. "You wouldn't make a weak old woman walk all the way through town and past all of those horrid Crows, would you?"

I almost let it go.

"This will not end well. Why lead her to believe otherwise?" My words come up like shards of glass. Flashes of my own silent vigil over a lifeless form harden my voice. "It's cruel."

"Are you a God? Because that would have been nice for you to say before I wasted all of these herbs trying to heal that poor boy." She flits around, moving into my space, flapping her hands

to get me to move out of the way. “You should have just told me you could snap your fingers and make him healthy again—”

“—You know better.” I cut her off before she can finish, my eyes rolling.

She grasps the pot of tea from over the fire and brings it over to the wooden countertop, shuffling in her old brown boots—there is a hole in the toe of the left one. “No. I don’t. And neither do you,” Diana states. “Child, just because you’re staring doom in the face does not give you the right to give up on that poor baby boy. We can be brave for him, if not for ourselves.” Her face turns up at me, drawing my eyes from her boot. “You would be surprised...” She stops as if unsure of her words.

“What would surprise me?” I ask, sure to regret it.

“How far a little hope goes.” She finishes her thought.

The sounds of hot tea hitting glass fill the silence as she looks away and pours a jar full.

I know my face betrays my thoughts. I’m glad she doesn’t see it. How could one with so many years of experience still believe that? I have not, in my few years of apprenticeship for Diana, even once, seen hope do a damned thing to save anyone. Hope does not heal a broken body. Hope does not rid the mind of fever-ridden delusions. No amount of hope could save a life that was bound to go.

My eyes catch on the herbs hanging from the wall and my thumb goes to my mouth. There’s a rough edge that is just barely too short for me to get with my teeth, no matter how I turn my finger. It’s like an itch you can’t scratch.

“Who’s this for?” I ask, voice muffled by my hand.

My thumb starts to bleed. I suck on it to make it stop.

“Rhodri. You know, he’s always banging himself up in that tavern on goodness knows what. That daughter of his is wilder than him. Clumsy, too. All bumps and bruises. I would think Rhodri was taking a beating to her if I didn’t know him to be above all that.” She arranges a few more supplies in

the basket, along with the special tea I remember Rhodri's wife, Elena, favors. "They best watch out or she will set fire to this whole town one day."

Mariana *is* wild. Like fire licking across the ground, unbidden, and untethered. We used to be friends when we were little. Well, she forced us to be friends. If seven-year-old Alyx had known that asking to hold the ladybug Mariana had found in the dirt would make the little fireball stick to her like a thorn, she probably would have kept quiet. Maybe not. I was glad to have a friend then.

But then I grew sullen. And we grew apart. She still waves to me when she passes by in town, sometimes making idle chat whenever I visit the tavern to drop something off for Diana. I never wave back, and I give as little as possible in those conversations. I was a bad friend. She deserved better. Still does.

Desperate to get away from all of Diana's hopeful nonsense, I throw my cloak and hood on over my floor-length standard woollen dress, step out of Diana's place, and begin the trudge across town.

Keeping my head down is a natural instinct at this point. Like a ritual, practiced every day, whenever one moves from place to place. Don't stand out. Don't make eye contact. Walk amongst the rats that scurry along walls lining the streets. Be one with them.

Paranoia causes me to seek out the threats that haunt these streets. Out of the corner of my eye, I see two, standing outside the butcher shop. There are three more down an alleyway, questioning a drunk who's sprawled on the ground, against the wall of a tavern. At least ten are pacing the square at the center of town around Crow Stage, the rickety gallows that lord over the heart of town.

I keep up my brisk pace to the other side of town, the outskirts of which contain the meadow where I gather many of my medicinal herbs and roots. Some days, the energy in the streets drives me straight to the wood, where I circle around the circumference of town instead of passing

through it. Today seems low-energy, the Crows calm, their depraved hungers well-fed. So I go the quick way, slinking through the middle of Comraich.

I've managed to stay unnoticed since the flock came. Still, I miss the days when no gleam of plated armor halted my steps; when raiders were a whisper in the wind. Back when a mother would occasionally abandon her family one rainy afternoon and we would all write her off as a rotten woman, even those of us who knew better. A child would be snatched from the edges of town in some rare but unfortunate happenstance. Men would be found dead in the woods, their bodies too brutalized to be brought back to town for a funeral. Still, I'm unsure if I would rather have the Pretty King's men-monsters in metal "guarding the populace" in plain sight, or monsters under a foreign King's sigil waiting to ambush me in the woods.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I skirt around the edges of the main square, keeping as much in the shadows as possible. There is a body on Crow Stage, swaying in my periphery. There always is. They leave their carrion as a reminder. A reminder to those that would rebel. A reminder that there is no hope to those that oppose the Crown. I wish I could feel anything about it anymore.

My boots slosh in the mud puddles dotting the path, though I try to gently place them. The ever-present mist dampens my clothes and face as I travel the last stretch of pitted road, avoiding the drunks and addicts laid out on their sides, napping against the thatch roof and stone buildings. Few people are out and about, silently shuffling through alleyways or attaching themselves to groups as they pass through the square, trying to remain unremarkable. Sheep avoiding wolves.

As the buildings dwindle, the footpath becomes an animal path, scarcely traveled but for the creatures of the wild and darkness. Stepping into the brush, I let out a heavy breath, fidgeting with the emerald bracelet under my long sleeves, letting it see the light of day only in the solitude of the wood.

My mother gave it to me when I was too young to remember.

Once, when I was little, it dropped into the river bordering my property. I was washing off some treasures I found around the land, rocks mostly. It slipped right off my little wrist, too loose for my six-year-old lankiness. I remember desperately throwing myself into the river's rapid streams, uncaring that I could not reach the bottom or swim its rushing currents. I remember my mom pulling me out, frigid water drenching us both. I can still feel her harsh kisses raining down on my face as I sobbed my terror, bracelet clenched in my trembling fist.

I've never been able to part with it. Even in the darkest of days.

I melt into the shadows of trees and life. I can almost feel its hum that is dampened in the streets of Comraich. Like a song from the outside of a room versus when you are sitting amongst its vibrations. The evil of man cannot battle the harshness of the wild.

The glass panes of Diana's apothecary hold no light an hour later when I return, basket of dandelion and comfrey root in hand. She must have stepped out. Very occasionally she braves the streets for a good book when the traveling merchants come. But the merchants are certainly not in town, and she has no qualms about asking me to run her errands for her, so there must have been some sort of emergency.

The exhaustion of the day pulls at my shoulders and makes my feet ache. All I want as I trudge up to the door is to lie down somewhere and fall into a dreamless sleep.

I try the front door, finding it unlocked. Hissing voices whisper from the darkness as I step in. I freeze, silently closing the door, mindful to stifle the light from outside before it reveals my presence.

The voices stop.

Damn it all.

I only get the door open a fraction of the way before a tanned hand the size of my face slams it closed.

I whip around to face what I'm sure will be my attacker.

What I find is a hulking stranger baring white teeth at me.

Gods. He. Is. Huge.

Twice as wide, at least a half a foot taller than my—already tall—form. His yellow eyes glare at me amidst his snarling face, molten. His hair curls around his face, shaggy to match the scruff of his face. The darkness hides the color.

“Did you never learn it's rude to eavesdrop?” His voice is thunder. Low and menacing.

I stare up into his vicious face, bracing myself. His hand firmly holds the door closed by my face. His presence is a storm in the room, bringing with it the promise of destruction, charging the air with an electric force so potent I struggle to think.

Raider.

Drug-seeker?

We generally only keep small batches of poppy tea on hand for this exact reason after that one time—

“She practically lives here too, Fionn. Stop scaring the piss out of her,” Diana's voice comes, crotchety and annoyed, from the hallway behind him.

Fionn—which must be the giant's name—is blocking my view as I try to turn incredulous eyes to Diana. Is she trying to get us killed? Does she not see this man for the threat he clearly is?

I keep my voice steady. “What do you want?”

“Oh look, the trembling little mouse has a voice. I do wish you were mute, maybe then I could have let you leave here.” Threats glint in golden eyes.

Instinct kicks in.

I duck under the arm caging me in.

I get all of two steps away before he wraps an arm around me and yanks me back, slamming me back against the door so hard I lose my breath.

“Don’t hurt her, she’s my only help,” Diana’s exasperated voice comes from right behind Fionn this time. I see her little wrinkled hand slap his arm.

“I guess I will leave your help alive, Diana.” He directs his next whispered comments at me, still trapped in his hard grip, “Though you should remember what this felt like. Remember how helpless and small you are. Because if my description appears on a posting, I’ll know it was you. And I don’t believe in giving the benefit of the doubt.”

He turns away from me, meeting Diana’s glare.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. And I don’t think we have any more to discuss, Fionn.” Diana’s voice is firm, daring to command this hulking threat taking up all of the air in the room.

An exasperated sigh comes from Fionn before he shakes his head at her. “I understand your protectiveness of your ward. I will behave.” He holds up his hands, placating. “Would you deny somebody help just to prove a point to me? Armund is innocent in all of this. Would not hurt a worm. He deserves your help, even if I do not.”

The look on his face says it all. He’s an arrogant, manipulative bastard.

“Well, it’s very unfortunate that this Armund sent the most insufferable, condescending ambassador to ask for help for him,” I say. “Maybe his poor judgment is crime enough.” The cold words tumble out before I can stop them. Diana is too gentle, too willing to believe the best in others for her own good.

His smile, once smug, turns into a sneer. I can see venom gathering in his mouth as he spits it. “I don’t recall asking for your feedback, bit—”

“No need to spew such vitriol in my home, Fionn,” Diana snaps. “I know your mother would disapprove. Maybe you don’t remember her, but I do.”

Blood drains from Fionn’s face.

Diana continues, “You’re right about one thing. I would not deny help to someone out of spite. That is not our way.”

It would be my way.

“I may need some special supplies for this specific... ailment. But you cannot linger here. There are too many eyes. I’ll have to make a special errand tomorrow, but I should be able to get it to you...” She tosses her head side-to-side, considering. “...The sunset after next. I’ll give you some things to keep the swelling down and the infection at bay for now. Keep him comfortable and hopefully alive until I can make the poultice he needs.”

Fionn nods, his demeanor resigned since Diana's chastisement. Is that...*shame*? Maybe.
He should be.

My anger and residual fear war inside my body, their battle shaking my bones.

Diana dispatches me to assemble the dirty wound pack, the instruction clearly an offering to escape the glowering man. Or to keep us from each other's throats.

My movements are quick but trembling as I gather clean dressings, dandelion leaf paste, poppy tea, and comfrey root poultice. I sense tension coming from the other room, hearing nothing. I ignore it when I come back in the room, shoving the basket into Fionn's crossed arms. I want to dump the poppy tea right over his arrogant face, but then I would just need to brew another batch before I could be rid of him.

"Try not to let the Crows make you their next feast on the way out of town." The saccharine sweet smile on my face looks as unnatural as it feels, I'm sure. It's a muscle unused. When did I last smile? Real or otherwise?

Diana chortles under her breath behind me.

Fionn seems to need the last word. "Remember what I said. Don't turn into a rat, or I might have to make you *my* feast." Fionn gives me a smile that is more of a baring of teeth, turning silently, and slipping out the front door with a feline grace.

His absence brings relief that quickly transfigures into something far more consuming. Rage and betrayal drown any residual fear. They warm my face, make my voice shrill and quaking. Fists trembling at my sides, I hiss in my coldest voice, "*What were you thinking?*"

Diana sighs deeply, closing her eyes and holding them so. Weariness reveals her age. For a moment there is no teasing light in her eyes, nor smirk around her mouth.

"There is so much you don't know, Alyxara."

"Then enlighten me. Because to me it looks like you're aiding rebels, or worse, raiders." If I could scream I would, but there are Crows outside.

She meets my imploring eyes before turning to stare out the front window.

"They're... Those are our people. Fionn may be a chore, but he and his friends don't deserve the stage." She runs her wrinkled hands over her white hair, smoothing it out of her face, eyes closed.

"Who does deserve it, Diana? I've yet to see anyone *deserving* hanging there. You know as well as I do that it doesn't matter. So, he's a traitor one way or another. And now we are too, by

association.”

Please tell me I'm wrong. Please tell me you didn't risk your life for some idiot who thinks they can overthrow an empire.

Silence.

I'm determined to make her give me a straight answer to at least *one* of my questions. “Who are you to endanger both of our lives because you're too righteous to do what everyone else does? *Nothing*. All you had to do was nothing at all. If they find out, we are feast for Crows. If Derren next door decides he needs money to buy more smoke, all he has to do is say he saw Fionn leave here. A lone, hooded figure, who does not match the description of *anyone* who lives here. Who met us in the dark of night? *Does that not* look suspicious to you? Doesn't that seem like something that would get you killed?”

Diana's expression becomes disappointed.

I can live with her disappointment. I can't live with her absence.

“We have a duty, Alyxara. A duty as healers, to heal people, regardless of who they are. I had hoped to instill this morality in you. It is what your parents would have wanted. Especially your mother.”

Her last words drop the temperature of the room.

Ice crawls through my veins.

“My only duty is to myself. To stay alive. And *my mother* is dead. I don't care what she would have wanted.” I suck in a quick, pained breath. “And *you*.” My finger points, and there it is, a tremble. “You act as if you even knew her. As if you gave a damn when she died. I don't remember seeing your face at our door. I don't remember your offer of help once she was gone. When my father was raising me alone. And my father. The father you didn't help when he was choking to death on his own blood.” I hate the catch in my breath. “*Do not speak of them*. Do not pretend to be some holy healer. Not when all you are is a glorified nursemaid who makes teas and gives people false hope. You need to learn how to accept reality Diana, to temper your delusions, because they cause destruction to everyone around you. You do more harm than help.”

Diana's face loses all color.

If I look at her for one more moment, I fear I will be swallowed whole by this roaring, freezing, cacophony.

I fight my urge to throw things—to break them—to destroy her home as she has

destroyed me. Destroyed me by doing too little too late—and then doing too much, at the worst time.

The door shuts quietly behind me.