



Red Hood's Revenge (preview)

By Jim C. Hines



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Red Hood's Revenge

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Chapter 1

If Queen Beatrice's prediction was correct, this night would end in death. Unfortunately, Bea had been rather vague about whose.

Danielle pulled her cloak tighter against the chill of the autumn air as she crossed the courtyard. The walls of Whiteshore palace broke the worst of the wind from the sea, but after sneaking from her bedroom, where the embers of the fireplace warmed the room and Prince Armand warmed the bed, even a gentle breeze was enough to make her shiver.

Leaves rustled against the base of the walls. The flowers on the ivy vines were shut tight against the cold, the same as the wooden shutters on the windows. Atop the walls, the guards stayed close to their towers. If anyone did happen to glance into the courtyard, they shouldn't think anything unusual of a lone servant girl hurrying to the storeroom by the stables on some unnamed errand. They certainly wouldn't expect the Princess of Lorindar to be up and about at such an hour, or dressed in such a plain wool cloak and simple gown.

Danielle's sword bounced against her left thigh as she joined her two closest friends. She hoped the sword would be unnecessary, but Queen Beatrice was rarely wrong about such things.

"Is everything prepared?" she asked as she reached the storeroom.

"I'm hurt you even have to ask." Snow White's voice was light and musical, almost childlike in her merriment. She had thrown back her own hood, allowing the breeze to play through her hair. Snow was younger than Danielle, though strands of white mixed with her night-black locks, the price of magic spells cast years ago. The moonlight

accentuated the paleness of her face. Beneath her cloak she wore a white scarf and a fitted gown of blue linen that accentuated the curves of her body.

“We’ve been waiting nearly an hour. I was tempted to do this without you.” Dressed in a heavy cape over a rust-colored wool tunic, Talia Malak-el-Dahshat appeared to be the very model of a proper lady-in-waiting. She stood beside the storeroom wall, blending into the shadows. “They’re inside where it’s warmer.”

“Don’t mind Talia,” Snow said. “You know how cranky she gets when she hasn’t pummeled anyone in a while.”

“I had to wait for Armand to fall asleep,” Danielle said. If the prince had known what she had been doing these past two nights, he never would have agreed to let her risk herself. Especially after Queen Beatrice’s warning of blood and death.

Snow grinned. “There are ways of helping a man sleep.”

“I don’t think the queen would let you cast a sleeping spell on her son,” Danielle said.

Snow blinked innocently. “Who said anything about spellcasting? Some magic even you can perform, princess.”

Two years ago, such comments would have left Danielle red-faced and stammering. Now she simply raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think I didn’t?” She turned to Talia, ignoring Snow’s choked laughter. “Please tell them I’m ready.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Talia moved with the grace of a hunting cat as she strode to the door. She made no sound, despite the arsenal she kept on her person. Even on a normal day, Talia carried at least three knives, a set of darts, a small whip, and several more exotic weapons. Tonight she could probably arm an entire squadron of the king’s guards.

The storeroom door opened without a sound, thanks to a liberal coating of oil Talia had applied three nights past. The smell of dust and straw wafted from within.

Talia was first through the door, searching the corners before stepping to the right. Snow followed, taking a position on the opposite side. Piles of straw filled the storeroom, rising nearly to the roof and leaving only a narrow pathway down the center. An old spinning wheel sat at the very back of the room. A small, covered lamp hung from the far wall, the blue flame dancing in the draft. The fairy-spelled light would burn nothing but oil, unlike a regular lantern which could have set the entire room ablaze.

Standing near the back of the storeroom was a middle-aged man

and a young girl. A fringe of unkempt brown hair circled the man's otherwise bald scalp. He wore an oft-patched jacket and stained trousers tucked into old boots. He smelled of sweat and mud. The sole of one boot flopped loosely as he stepped forward and dropped to one knee. "Your Highness."

The girl did her best to imitate the movement. Her brown dress was little better than sackcloth, and her limbs were like sticks. She looked no more than five years old, though Danielle knew she should have celebrated her seventh birthday only two months earlier.

Danielle slipped a hand beneath her cloak, touching the hilt of her sword. The weapon was glass, the hilt inlaid with hazel wood. This weapon was the last gift she had received from her mother's spirit. Like her slippers, the glass was all but unbreakable, and fit Danielle's hand as if cast to her flesh. The touch of that gift helped to ease Danielle's anger, and she even managed a smile as she greeted Lang Miller. She crouched before the girl, and this time her smile was genuine. "Hello again, Heather."

Heather ducked her head, hiding behind tangled hair. "Hello."

From a pocket of her gown, Danielle pulled a small, paper-wrapped pastry. She peeled back the paper, revealing a honey-glazed cake made with figs and almond milk. "I saved this from dinner. Prince Jakob likes them, and I thought you might too."

Heather pounced, snatching the cake from Danielle's hand. Lang cleared his throat, and Heather froze.

"My apologies, Your Highness," said Lang. "We've gone too long without proper meals, and I'm afraid my daughter's manners—"

"I understand." Danielle nodded to Heather, who needed no further encouragement to stuff the cake into her mouth as though she feared someone would try to steal it. "She looks like she's not had a proper meal in months."

"Her powers take a great deal out of her, I'm afraid." Lang rubbed a dirty hand through Heather's hair.

"Given those powers, I have to ask why. . . ." Danielle gestured at their ragged appearance.

Lang chuckled. "Forgive my boldness, but you were once a commoner yourself, were you not? Locked away in the attic to serve your stepsisters and stepmother. Your father was doubtless a good man, but he couldn't shield you from—"

"Your point, Master Miller?" Danielle hadn't meant to speak quite so sharply. Talia glanced back, eyes narrowed in warning.

"I can't protect her from such people," Lang said. "Nor can I buy her safety. For a poor miller to start flashing gold about would be a siren song to every thief and kidnapper in Lorindar. I'm a simple man, Your Highness. All I want is for my girl to be safe and happy. I can't give her that, but you could."

"You have my word I will do everything in my power to protect her." Danielle forced a lighter tone. "Heather will be well cared for."

"So we have a deal?" asked Lang. Behind him, Heather's tongue darted out to lick the last few crumbs from her lips. She stared up at Danielle, brown eyes wide.

Danielle grabbed a handful of straw and squeezed, feeling the stalks crunch and break in her hands. "The first night I suspected trickery. The second, I began to believe." She gestured to Snow and Talia. "My servants have inspected every corner of this room. If your child can work her magic a third time, then we have an agreement."

"You hear that, Heather?" Lang knelt and squeezed the girl's shoulders. "Spin straw into gold again tonight, and you'll never go hungry again. Princess Cinderella here will take care of you, and when you're old enough, you'll marry her son, Prince Jakob. You'll grow up to be Queen of Lorindar!"

Heather's expression didn't change. Her gaze was empty, almost bored. She either didn't understand or else she didn't care. She sucked her fingers and trudged toward the spinning wheel.

"We'll hold a public betrothal tomorrow," Danielle said. "When Jakob reaches thirteen years of age, they shall be wed."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Lang took Heather by the hand and whispered into her ear, then backed away. "Come morning, my darling girl will have filled this room with gold. Lorindar will soon be the richest nation in the Arantine Ocean."

Danielle said nothing as she led Lang and the others from the storeroom. Talia pulled the door shut behind them, leaving Heather to her work.

"Snow will find you a place to sleep," Danielle said.

"Thank you." Lang rubbed his throat. "I don't suppose I could trouble one of you ladies for something to drink? All that straw and dust is murderous harsh on the throat."

"Of course." Danielle was still watching Snow, whose brow was slightly furrowed.

Snow studied the storeroom, almost as if she could see through the wooden walls. Slowly, she smiled. With one hand she tugged her

scarf free, revealing the shine of silvered glass from her choker.

At that signal, Danielle spun so abruptly Lang almost walked into her. Forcing herself to relax, she said, "Before we retire, I would like to watch your daughter work, to observe this miracle for myself."

Lang flashed crooked teeth. "I wish you could, but to view such magic is to rob it of its power. I stole a peek myself the first time she told me of her gifts. The gold vanished in an instant, swept away like sweets before a glutton. The shock of Heather's broken magic left the poor girl abed for days. Don't you worry, though. How she does it matters less than the results, eh? Those results will fill your treasury for years to come."

Talia's stance changed so subtly most people wouldn't have noticed. Knees bent, one foot slightly forward, her eyes never leaving Lang Miller. Her hands remained tucked into her sleeves, where Heaven only knew what weaponry awaited.

Snow finished unwrapping her scarf. A choker of oval mirrors and gold wire circled her throat. Lang's smile faltered slightly at the sight. He might not recognize the power of Snow's mirrors, but he knew such decoration was unusual for a simple palace servant.

"Years, you say?" Snow tossed the scarf to the ground and reached into a pouch at her belt, pulling out a piece of straw. "Strange. Most fairy glamours fade within a week at most." She snapped the straw between her fingers and flicked it to the ground.

"Glamour, you say?" Lang's grin tightened as he watched the straw fall. So intent was his gaze that he failed to notice Talia slipping up behind him until her arm snaked around his neck, pressing the tip of a curved Arathean dagger to his throat. His eyes went round, and a faint squeak escaped his lips.

Danielle winced as a thread of blood welled and dripped down Lang's neck. Despite Queen Beatrice's warnings, Danielle intended to do this without bloodshed if she could. "Easy, Talia. We want them alive."

Talia snorted. "Alive and unharmed are two very different things."

"If it's fairy magic, I'm as much the victim as yourself," Lang stammered. "Perhaps the fair folk left a changeling in my daughter's bed. She *has* been behaving most strangely of late, not talking to anyone, refusing food until she starts to waste away—"

"If that's true, then you've nothing to fear." Danielle pushed her cloak back from her shoulders, revealing the sword at her side. The blade slid soundlessly from the leather sheath.

“What’s this?” Lang raised his hands. “You’re not trying to rob me of my prize, are you?”

“Your *prize*?” Danielle turned, her voice soft. It was a tone that would have sent her son fleeing in fear, but Lang didn’t know her well enough to recognize the signs of her fury. He would learn soon enough. “I wonder what her parents would say to hear her described so. Shall we ask them, Lang Miller?”

“My daughter—” Lang’s voice turned to a squeak as Talia jerked him around to face the door. He turned his head, trying to pull away from the knife. “What magic—”

“Snow’s spells won’t harm Heather,” Danielle said. “Her magic will simply ensure that nobody can leave this room by magical means.”

“I spent half a day preparing,” Snow said cheerfully, moving toward the door. “You’re right about the straw, by the way. Nasty stuff.”

“Remain silent.” Danielle readied her sword and nodded.

Snow yanked open the door.

Inside, Heather sat playing in the straw. Behind her, a tiny man dressed in red sat at the spinning wheel. Had he been standing, his feathered cap would have barely reached Danielle’s midsection. Gold straw tangled the white mane of his hair.

He cried out, jumped to the ground, and he clapped his hands together.

Nothing happened.

“That won’t work.” Snow beamed. “The wards are similar to those on the palace wall, the ones that prevent anyone from using magic to enter the grounds. I removed those three nights ago, just for you.”

“Rumpelstilzchen?” Danielle rested the tip of her sword on the dirt floor. “Also known as Tom Tit Tot, Whuppity Stoori—”

Rumpelstilzchen covered his ears. “Stop it! What demons whispered those names in your ear, lady?” Spying Lang beyond the door, he hopped up and down, fists clenched. “Lang Miller you ungrateful traitor!”

“Actually, I’m the demon who learned what you really are,” Snow said brightly. “With some help from Ambassador Trittibar of Fairytown.”

“Don’t blame me for this mess, you miserable dwarf!” Lang shouted. “You’re the one who said Lorindar would be an easy target! I told you we shouldn’t have come here!” With those words, Lang seized Talia’s wrist with both hands, forcing her knife back. He twisted free of her hold and swung a fist at Talia.

Danielle winced as Talia ducked easily beneath Lang's punch. In the same movement, Talia stepped close and drove an elbow into his stomach. Danielle winced.

Shortly after Talia's birth, the fairies of Arathea had blessed her with various "gifts," including superhuman grace and the ability to dance like an angel. Such skill and grace had helped her to become the deadliest warrior Danielle had ever known.

"Never tell the prisoner you want him alive," Talia said, following up with a kick to Lang's knee. "It makes them overconfident."

"Sorry." Danielle rested both hands on her sword. "Tell me Rumpelstilzchen, how many children have you stolen over the years?"

He watched Snow and Danielle warily. "The boy's right. I should have known better than to set foot on this isle. Your people and your damned treaty, shackling fairy kind like dogs."

"*We* shackle *you*?" Danielle looked pointedly at Heather, who continued to play in the straw, oblivious to everything going on around her.

"She's happy," he insisted. "Free of worry or woe."

"With no memory of who she was." Danielle raised her sword. "Victim of the same spell you meant to cast upon *my son*, robbing him of his memories, before you stole him away."

"I rescue them from lives of mortal drudgery!" He clapped his hands again, then scowled at the walls.

"A gnomish friend taught me how to block summoning magic," Snow said. "He was much better at it than you. Better looking too, with a much longer beard."

Outside, Lang shouted, "Get out of my way before I rip you apart, wench!" His voice carried clearly through the open doorway. A moment later, the wall trembled, and a shower of dirt and dust rained down from the roof. Danielle could hear Lang groaning.

Snow shook her head. To Talia, she called out, "Remember, Beatrice is going to make me patch him up when you're through!"

Shouts carried through the courtyard. The guards must have heard the commotion. Even now they would be racing down the stairs.

"Why?" Danielle whispered to Rumpelstilzchen. "Why do you take them?"

"Can't help myself, really." He edged closer. Snow folded her arms, and moonlight flashed from her choker. Rumpelstilzchen raised his hands in surrender. "It started with just the one. Is a single unborn child so much to ask in exchange for turning a peasant girl into a queen? But

after the first, I wanted more. Your people will trade anything for the promise of wealth and power. I've collected royal children from lands you've never dreamed of, princess."

"And now you'll turn them over to me." Danielle was amazed she could still speak with such calmness. This wretched creature had come here to take Jakob, to rip away her son's mind and turn him into another pet prince for his collection.

"You want them back?" Rumpelstilzchen smiled. "Then it seems we've a bargain to arrange. You can keep the girl, of course. I'll throw in a bouncing lad in exchange for your witch lowering her wards. Keep Lang, too. The boy's long since outlived his usefulness."

Danielle's sword hissed through the air. Rumpelstilzchen yelped and dove behind the spinning wheel. The severed feather from his cap drifted down to land in front of his chin.

"You misunderstand me," Danielle said slowly. "You will release every child you've stolen, and you will give us their names so that we can restore them to who they were. When I'm satisfied, you will be turned over to Lyskar to face whatever punishment they see fit."

Rumpelstilzchen picked up the feather. "Forgive me, but that doesn't seem like much of a bargain, highness."

"I'm. Not. Bargaining." Danielle jabbed her sword into the dirt. For three nights she had swallowed her anger, watching helplessly as Lang Miller whisked Heather away each morning. Three nights working to confirm Heather's identity while Snow prepared her spells. Tonight this ended. "Refuse, and I'll give you to Fairytown. I'm told human justice pales at the torments the fairy lords can inflict."

"You've no idea, my lady." Rumpelstilzchen gestured with one hand, and Heather stood. "Very well. Take her. Assuming she *wants* to be returned." He shouted a word in a language Danielle didn't recognize.

Snow yelled a warning as Heather screamed and threw herself at Danielle. Heather's face was feral. She kicked and bit, her nails clawing at Danielle's skin.

Danielle shoved her away, holding her sword high to keep Heather from impaling herself. Rumpelstilzchen ran past, but she trusted Snow to deal with him. As Heather attacked again, Danielle said, "Hevanna V'alynn Presnovich!"

The girl collapsed to the floor. Danielle's throat tightened. She had practiced for hours to make sure she could pronounce Heather's true name, but neither Snow nor Trittibar had known exactly what would happen when Rumpelstilzchen's spell was broken. Was Hevanna's the

death Beatrice had seen? The girl had come so close to killing herself on Danielle's blade.

Snow blocked the doorway, but as Danielle watched, Rumpelstilzchen clapped his hands and Snow vanished, reappearing behind him. Snow's wards kept him from escaping, but he could still use his powers within the confines of those wards.

Now, Danielle said silently.

Rats burst from the straw, swarming over Rumpelstilzchen. He screamed and fell, rolling about as their teeth pierced clothes and skin.

Danielle winced at his cries. She hadn't asked the rats to be quite so bloody, but this wouldn't be the first time animals had responded to the rage in her heart. She turned to check on Hevanna. The girl's eyes were closed, and her breathing came in quick gasps.

"She's all right," Snow said. "She needs rest and real food."

Danielle sagged in relief. She turned to see Talia standing in the doorway. "What about Lang?"

Talia glanced to one side. "He'll live."

She could hear the guards approaching. "Tell them to be careful with Lang. We don't know what tricks he might have learned from a lifetime with Rumpelstilzchen."

Talia nodded and disappeared out the door. Danielle stepped toward Rumpelstilzchen and ordered the rats back.

"Lyskar will kill me!" he gasped.

"They might show mercy once their daughter is returned." Danielle nudged one recalcitrant rat with her toe, pushing him away. "Five years they've hunted for her."

"It's a sickness," Rumpelstilzchen said. "I've tried to stop, but every time I looked upon those sweet, succulent faces, those helpless lads and lasses—"

"You should probably stop talking now," Snow suggested, fiddling with her choker.

"Return every last child," Danielle said, fighting to keep her voice even. "Give us their names. I will ask Lyskar to spare your life."

"You won't leave me even one to—" Something in Danielle's expression made him swallow. "All of them. My word as a fairy."

Snow removed one of the mirrors from her choker and reached toward him.

"No need for magic," He protested, squirming away. "Fairy vows are unbreakable."

"We know," said Talia. Danielle hadn't even noticed her return.

“Just as we know how easily that word can be twisted. You’ll free them, but when? Where? In what condition?”

Snow pressed the mirror to Rumpelstilzchen’s forehead and whispered an enchantment. When she pulled back, a silver oval marked his skin. “It’s not a true fairy mark, but it should bind him just the same.”

Danielle sheathed her sword and scooped Hevanna into her arms. “Take care of him while I find a bed for our young princess. I’ll contact Lyskar and let them know we have their daughter.” She started toward the door, then hesitated. “Thank you both.”

“It was fun,” Snow said brightly. “I’ve wanted to try that binding spell ever since Trittibar showed it to me.”

Talia was staring at Rumpelstilzchen. “You should have let the rats finish him.”

Danielle didn’t trust herself to answer. She stepped into the night air and breathed deeply. Two guards were carrying a moaning Lang Miller away. The rest drew to attention.

“Is everything all right, Your Highness?” asked one, obviously uncertain how to react to the sight of his princess and her servants having beaten two strangers into submission.

“It is now.” Danielle smiled. Charles was new to service, and like many, he probably assumed Danielle’s glass sword to be a ceremonial weapon meant only for show. “Thank you for your quick response.”

“And Queen Bea thought this would be hard,” Snow said, brushing straw from her dress.

Danielle said nothing. Beatrice had predicted blood and death. True, the rats had left Rumpelstilzchen bleeding from dozens of wounds, but none of his injuries were serious. Talia had also held back, as far as Danielle could see. Perhaps Beatrice had been mistaken. Or perhaps the danger hadn’t yet passed. “Snow, could you—”

“I’ll make sure our guests don’t try anything,” Snow said.

Danielle hugged Hevanna to her chest. “Well done, both of you.”

“You too, princess.” Talia gave her a wry smile. “I think you’re finally starting to get the hang of this.”

Chapter 2

Danielle awoke the next morning to the sensation of a two year old prince plopping his knee squarely into the middle of her stomach. “Mama, *up!*”

She groaned and tousled Jakob’s blond hair. “I’m awake.”

Jakob grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the edge of the bed. “Up!”

Prince Armand stood in the doorway, smiling as he watched them. Tall and lean, wearing a jacket of dark green velvet that brought out his eyes, he looked so different than he had when Danielle first danced with him at the ball. That night he had been polite and formal, a prince even as he flirted. This morning, he was simply a father and husband, content to watch his son maul his wife. “I let you sleep as long as I could, but he was getting upset.”

Stifling a yawn, Danielle stood and scooped Jakob into her arms. She hadn’t bothered to change clothes before crawling into bed, and her gown was a wrinkled mess.

“Long night?” Armand asked. A neatly-trimmed beard couldn’t hide his mischievous smile. “I’m told there was a commotion in the courtyard near the stables.”

“We found Princess Hevanna,” said Danielle.

“Hevanna of Lyskar?” Armand stared. “That’s wonderful! How—”

“A foreign fairy named Rumpelstilzchen. Beatrice asked that we not announce Hevanna’s rescue until she’s safely home.” Danielle

squeezed Jakob until he squirmed, then reluctantly set him down. “Hevanna was the first of twenty-three children he returned to us.”

Danielle had been up most of the night finding room for them all and people to look after them. She hadn’t gotten to bed until nearly sunrise.

“Oh, no.” she said, staring at the window. The sunbeam was nearly vertical. She started for the door, then spun back around. “Where did I leave my sword?”

Armand opened the wardrobe and retrieved her sword from between her skirts. “You left it beside the bed. When I woke up, Jakob was dragging it toward the door. No doubt planning to threaten Nicolette into giving him more sweets.”

“Thank you, love.” Danielle kissed him, bent to kiss her son, and raced into the hallway toward the stairs. “I’ll be back soon!”

Low-floating clouds drifted overhead as she crossed the courtyard, heading for the chapel. Talia was already waiting. She looked alert as ever, despite spending the entire night helping Snow and Danielle with the children.

Danielle stifled her envy. Talia hadn’t slept a single night since awakening from her cursed slumber. On those nights when she wasn’t fighting fairy kidnappers, she passed the hours roaming the palace or practicing her fighting skills, or more recently, checking to make sure Prince Jakob hadn’t woken up and snuck out to explore.

“You’re late.” Talia smirked as she took in Danielle’s appearance. “Are you barefoot?”

“Hush!” Danielle glanced behind, half afraid she would see her handmaidens chasing after her. Sandra and Aimee would be outraged at the thought of their princess running about in such a state, straw tangled in her hair, rat fur clinging to her gown. “Is Snow here yet?”

“Still sleeping.” Talia stepped aside and pulled open the door. “Magic takes a lot out of her lately. The binding spell wasn’t too bad, but then she stayed up using her mirror to try to break Rumpelstilzchen’s charms. The little beast didn’t even know the true names of half of his stolen children.”

The smell of incense greeted Danielle as she entered the chapel. In the past, she and the others would have reported to Queen Beatrice in the secret chambers beneath the palace, but everything had changed after a mermaid attacked Beatrice more than a year before.

A knife to the chest would have killed most people. It would have killed Beatrice, if not for Snow’s quick intervention. Today the queen’s

spirit was strong as ever, but her body was so frail she could barely manage stairs without assistance.

Beatrice sat with Ambassador Trittibar of Fairytown near the front of the chapel, their heads close together as they spoke.

Danielle hurried to join them. The stone tiles were cool beneath her feet. As she walked, she could feel herself relaxing. She glanced at the stained glass windows in the upper walls, the colored panes laying spells of peace and protection over all who entered. Father Isaac's magic was subtler than Snow's, but still powerful.

"I'm so sorry," Danielle said as she reached the queen. "I asked Aimee to wake me, but—"

"I told her I'd have her shoveling stables if she dared." Beatrice gripped a gnarled oak staff in both hands for support as she rose to her feet. "You've earned a night's rest, Danielle."

Danielle kissed the queen's cheek. She smiled to hide her grief at Beatrice's appearance. Everything about Beatrice was *thin*. Her hands, her hair, even her voice was weaker than before. She wore a heavy cloak lined with rabbit fur for warmth, though the day was relatively mild.

Beatrice was dying. Most everyone in the palace recognized this, though none spoke of it. Every day she faded a little more.

Danielle blinked and turned to Trittibar. She put one hand to her mouth as she took in the monstrosity of the fairy's wardrobe. Enormous blue feathers sprang from his cap. His doublet was dyed the same shade of blue, though the inside of his slashed sleeves were lined in red silk. His trousers were the green of spring pines, trimmed with white ribbon. Worn leather sandals revealed blue lacquer on his toenails. A rainbow of glass beads braided into his white beard topped everything off.

"That's awful," Danielle said, laughing. "Even for you."

Trittibar glanced down at himself. "The toenails are too much, aren't they?"

"Can your people even *see* color?" Danielle asked.

"Better than yours, in most cases." He brushed his beard, clinking the beads. "Why you humans insist on dressing so blandly I'll never know."

He spread his arms to embrace Danielle. The fairy had a pleasantly earthen smell. He backed away and switched to a more formal tone. "On behalf of my lord and lady, I thank you."

"Thank *you*," Danielle said. "You were the one to spread the rumors of our financial need, and to make sure word of Prince Jakob reached Rumpelstilzchen."

Talia sniffed. "If your lord and lady truly wanted to help, why didn't they hunt the bastard down themselves? How many years has he been running this con? How many more children would he have stolen if Beatrice and Danielle hadn't planned this trap?"

"A trap which would have failed without our assistance," Trittibar pointed out.

"What assistance?" asked Talia. "I didn't see you there last night."

"Rumpelstilzchen is not of Fairytown. We have no responsibility or authority to—"

"Stop this," Beatrice said mildly. She stepped over to embrace Talia, cutting off the debate. "You know as well as I that Rumpelstilzchen might have sensed another fairy. His presence could have undone all of our efforts."

Talia grunted, but didn't press the matter.

Though Beatrice tried to hide it, a gasp of pain escaped her lips as she lowered herself back to the bench. "Rumpelstilzchen and his partner are on their way to the docks. Lyskar is sending an escort for Hevanna."

"What about Lang?" Danielle asked. "Did Snow ever learn his true name?"

Beatrice bowed her head. "Lang Miller *was* his true name. He was under no spell. He helped Rumpelstilzchen of his own free will."

"Lang was stolen from his parents," Danielle protested. "How could he help to take other children—"

"Lang was stolen as a babe," said Beatrice. "Rumpelstilzchen was the only family he ever knew."

"He still had a choice," Talia snapped. "Look at Snow. Raised by a woman so evil she hired a man to cut out her own daughter's heart. Snow turned out all right. More or less."

"Don't underestimate the allure of fairy magic," Beatrice said, gazing into the distance. "They can tempt even the most chaste."

Trittibar cleared his throat. "For that reason, perhaps it would be best if Rumpelstilzchen were turned over to my people. I was telling your queen how he's been a blight upon our honor, and I can give you my word he would never again trouble another mortal."

Beatrice shook her head, though she was smiling. "And I was telling Trittibar that if Fairytown wanted Rumpelstilzchen for themselves, they would need to negotiate with Lyskar." She turned back to Danielle. "You're certain you retrieved all of the children? None of them were harmed?"

“He gave his word.” Danielle’s fists dug into the folds of her gown. “Some spoke languages even Snow didn’t recognize. I’ve asked Nicolette to see to their needs.”

“They’ve been away from this realm a long time,” Trittibar said. “Mortal food will help, as will the passage of time, though the older ones may never fully adjust.”

The queen frowned. “When Rumpelstilzchen and Lang were taken alive, I thought perhaps the death I had dreamed was one of the children.”

Danielle sat down on the bench in front of Beatrice. “For some of them, death might have been kinder.” There had been a Hiladi boy, older than most, who had done nothing but hold his knees and rock, mumbling in a simple singsong. Another girl had screamed herself hoarse, ripping the clothes from her body and gouging her skin until Snow finally cast a spell to make her sleep.

Beatrice took Danielle’s hand. “We’ll do everything we can for them. You did well, princess.”

For a moment, Beatrice’s praise made Danielle feel like a child again, basking in her mother’s smile.

The chapel door swung inward and Snow rushed inside, stuffing the last of a muffin into her mouth as she hurried toward them.

“I’m glad you’re here,” said Beatrice. “I spoke to Lyskar this morning by crystal. The queen asked me to pass along their gratitude to each of you.” She smiled. “Once she finally accepted I was telling her the truth, that is. This should strengthen ties between our nations for many years to come. More importantly, Alynn and Francon will have their little girl back.”

“Has Heather—Hevanna—woken yet?” Danielle asked. “I’m sure her parents will want to speak with her.”

“Not yet,” said Snow. “A few of the children have been running wild, but most were exhausted.”

“She’s slept a long time.” Danielle, glanced at the open door. She hadn’t checked on the children since last night. “Are you sure the spell hasn’t—”

“I checked in on them myself earlier this morning,” said Trittibar. “I promise you Hevanna will recover. In time, most of her experiences will fade like a bad dream.”

Danielle’s response went unspoken as a boy in the green cap and jacket of a royal page burst into the chapel. His footsteps echoed against the stone as he ran, a small wooden box clutched in his hands. Beatrice

stood, her face tight with pain and something more.

“What’s wrong, Andrew?” Danielle asked.

“The carriage . . . the prisoners.” Andrew tucked the box under one arm and used his sleeve to blot sweat from his young face. His cheeks were flushed, and he struggled to catch his breath. “They were attacked. Less than an hour ago.”

Talia was already moving toward the door. There should be no danger here, but Talia wasn’t one for taking chances. She checked outside, then pulled the door closed.

“How did it happen?” asked Beatrice. Her voice was calm and commanding. She sounded almost like her old self.

“Nobody saw who did it,” said Andrew.

“Impossible.” Talia stopped behind Andrew, arms crossed. “The road switchbacks down the hillside, in plain view of the docks.”

Andrew backed away. “Whoever it was, he must have been hiding in the bushes beside the road. The dockworkers heard the screams, but by the time they arrived, it was over.”

“Did anyone survive?” Danielle asked.

“I’m sorry, highness.”

Danielle fought to keep her face composed. She knew everyone in the palace by name, but the carriage had left while she was still asleep. Who had been driving, and which of the guards had accompanied them? Which of her friends had died today?

Beatrice closed her eyes. “They died violently.” It wasn’t a question.

“They found this with . . . with the bodies.” Andrew held out the box.

Carved in crude letters on the lid was the name *Danielle de Glas*. Danielle’s name from before she married Armand. She reached out, but Talia was faster, snatching it from Andrew’s hand. She held the box to the light, examining the hinges, then turning it about to study the latch, a simple iron hook through a small loop.

The box appeared plain enough, made of unfinished wood and hammered iron. It was no wider than Danielle’s hand.

Snow’s choker brightened slightly. “I don’t see any magical traps.”

Talia set the box on a bench and dropped to one knee. A knife appeared in her hand, and she used the blade to unfasten the catch. The tip of the knife slowly raised the lid to reveal a folded note sealed with red wax. Talia opened the lid, scooped out the note with her knife, then

swore.

“What’s wrong?” Danielle asked.

Talia turned the box so they could see the severed toe, barely larger than a cashew, sitting on a velvet cushion. She cracked the seal and unfolded the note, then passed it to Danielle. Brown bloodstains marred the corner of the page.

Danielle,

Rumpelstilzchen was a miserable wretch who deserved far worse than you would have given him. I promise in his final moments, he lived long enough to repent his crimes.

Evil as the filthy creature was, how much worse was his partner? A human betraying his own kind to the fairies. Very much like your stepsisters once did, no?

In gratitude for helping to rid the world of this foul creature and the human traitor, I’ve decided to offer you a gift. I’ve freed your stepsister Charlotte from her fairy mistress. Come alone to Stone Grove tomorrow at sunset and I’ll return her to you, to deal with as you see fit. Or if you’re too weak to see justice done, I’ll finish her myself.

Yours,

R

The handwriting was beautiful, every loop and whorl drawn precisely in brown ink. Danielle read the note a second time before passing it to Beatrice.

“What is it, Your Highness?” Andrew whispered.

Danielle barely heard. It was more than two years since she had left Charlotte behind in Fairytown. She still prayed for her stepsister some nights, but for the most part she had tried to push those memories from her mind. It was a part of her life she preferred not to think about.

She remembered the cooing of the doves at her wedding. The birds had lined the eaves of the palace, while the rats watched hidden in the grass. Her only friends, come to celebrate as she and Armand were presented to the crowd.

The doves had swooped down, attacking her stepmother and stepsisters. They blinded her stepmother, who eventually died from her injuries. Charlotte and Stacia survived, but the attack left them both scarred.

Danielle grimaced as she examined the toe. The skin was wrinkled, the nail ragged and yellow.

Her stepsisters had conspired to kidnap Armand and kill Danielle. Closing her eyes, she could still see the despair and hatred on Charlotte's face as she prepared to murder Danielle and her unborn son.

Talia grabbed Danielle's arm, yanking her back to the present. "From this moment, you go nowhere alone. I want you armed at all times." She turned to Andrew. "Go straight to King Theodore. Tell him to double the guards at the gates and on the walls."

To Andrew's credit, he waited for Beatrice's nod before rushing off.

"You know who sent this," Danielle said, staring at the severed toe.

Beatrice folded the note and returned it to the box. "Roudette has entered the palace once before. She would have killed me if not for Talia's aid."

"She's known as the Lady of the Red Hood," said Talia. "Having failed to kill Beatrice, it looks like she's coming for you."

Danielle stared. "You're telling me *Little Red Riding Hood* wants to kill me?"

"Asked Cinderella of Sleeping Beauty," Snow added with a smile. She plucked the toe from the box. "Interesting choice of bait. It was a clean cut, for whatever that's worth. Look at the bone, where—"

"I'd rather not," said Danielle.

Talia pushed back one sleeve, revealing a pale scar that cut across her forearm. "Roudette gave me this the last time she was here. She's stronger than she looks. Faster, too. Some say she's every bit as fierce as the wolf from her story."

Danielle wanted to laugh, but she knew Talia wouldn't take a lesser threat so seriously. "How much of her story is true? There was a wolf and a hunter both."

"Nobody knows." Trittibar looked more somber than Danielle had ever seen him. "Roudette is the hunter now."

Danielle sank onto the bench beside the queen. "Why would she want to kill me?"

"A better question is who hired her to kill you," said Talia. "Roudette isn't cheap, but for the right price, she'll murder any target you choose. King or newborn, it makes no difference."

Trittibar tugged the braids of his beard. "When she attempted to kill your queen, she carried a fairy-forged blade, hoping to frame my

people for the murder. Had she succeeded, it could have ended the treaty and renewed the war between our people.”

“She seems to prefer fairy targets,” Talia added. “Fairies and their human allies.”

“Allies like us.” Danielle felt strangely calm, like an actress playing a role. None of it felt real. Who could possibly hate her so much that they would pay an assassin to kill her? Charlotte and Stacia were different. Their hatred had been personal. Roudette was a stranger. “You’re sure this is a trap? We *did* capture Rumpelstilzchen. Maybe this is her twisted way of thanking us.”

“She sent you a *toe*,” said Snow. “That’s not the sort of thing you give your new best friend. Except maybe among goblins. I hear they prepare the toes of their enemies as snacks, smoking the meat and—”

“Roudette doesn’t do favors,” Talia said. “She means to lure you out and kill you.”

The flat certainty in Talia’s words broke through any remaining doubt. “So why not sneak into my room and cut my throat as I sleep?”

Snow beamed. “Roudette can’t get within a hundred paces of the palace without me knowing. Talia gave as good as she got in that last fight. There was more than enough blood for me to be able to key the wards in the wall directly to Roudette. She won’t come here a second time. You’re safe here.”

“There’s no such thing as safe,” Talia said. “Snow’s right, though. Any two-penny fortune teller could have warned Roudette what would happen if she tried to enter the palace.”

“So why bother with Charlotte?” Danielle asked. “Roudette had no problem ambushing Rumpelstilzchen on the road. Why not wait until the next time I leave and do the same with me?”

“You’d be under guard,” said Snow. “And Roudette might have a time limit. If she was paid to make sure you died by a certain day, she might have no choice but to lure you out.”

Talia turned to Snow. “Use the toe to scry on Charlotte. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a glimpse of Roudette as well. From Roudette’s note, we have until tomorrow night before she tries again. I’ll talk to Father Isaac about strengthening the wards.”

“What about. . .” Danielle’s voice trailed off. They had already decided to let Roudette kill Charlotte. She looked toward the altar at the front of the church. Charlotte’s crimes had certainly earned death, and yet—

“Danielle?” Beatrice’s brown eyes, so similar to Armand’s, never

left Danielle. Those eyes were gentle, even compassionate, as though she knew exactly what was going through Danielle's mind.

Talia looked from Beatrice to Danielle. "You've got to be joking."

"You think I should let Roudette kill my stepsister?" Danielle asked.

"I think I should have killed her myself when I had the chance," Talia shot back.

"You're probably right." Danielle watched the queen, trying to read her expression. How could she explain her conflict to Talia when she didn't understand it herself? All she needed was sit back and do nothing, and her stepsister would die. Danielle wouldn't even have to be the one to order Charlotte's death. Danielle's hands would be clean.

Beatrice nodded ever so slightly.

"We left Charlotte in Fairytown," Danielle said. "Alone, bound to a fairy master. It's possible the years have changed her."

Snow glanced up. "It's also possible beanstalks will start growing out of my—"

"Roudette took Charlotte, but if I do nothing, then I share the responsibility for Charlotte's death."

"So where's the problem?" asked Talia. "For all we know, Charlotte was the one who hired Roudette to kill you!"

"Hired her with what? Even if she wanted me dead, she'd never cut off her own toe to do it."

"If she wanted you dead?" Talia repeated. "Were you paying attention the last time she tried to kill you? If she was in your position, she'd let you die in a heartbeat."

"I know," Danielle whispered, thinking of her mother. "That's why I have to be better than her."

Talia turned to the queen. "She's mad."

"So we do it your way," Danielle said. "We let her die. What then? You think Roudette will simply give up and go home? If threatening Charlotte doesn't lure me into the open, Roudette will keep killing until she finds someone who will. At least this way we know where she'll be."

"Never let the enemy define the battle," Talia said. "Choose your own battlefield. Make her come to you, on your terms."

"Talia is right." Beatrice pushed herself to her feet, leaning heavily on her staff. "You cannot go. Roudette would likely kill you if you tried to save your stepsister. You're Princess of Lorindar. Think of

your people. Think of your husband and child. You know what it's like to lose a mother. Would you do that to Jakob?"

"That's not fair," Danielle whispered.

"I know." Beatrice took her hand. "Snow and Talia will go to Stone Grove. They will save Charlotte if they can." That last was spoken with a stern look at Talia. "However, their first priority will be to protect you by stopping Roudette."

Trittibar cleared his throat. "I would like to accompany them, Your Majesty. Assuming Talia will allow it. The Lady of the Red Hood has tormented my people for many years. Those I serve would be pleased to see her punished for her actions."

Talia looked as though she had eaten something sour, but she said nothing.

"So my friends risk their lives while I stay safely hidden behind these walls?" Danielle knew Beatrice was right, and she hated it. Snow had magic enough to protect herself, and Talia had fought Roudette before and lived. What could Danielle do? Summon a mob of squirrels to pelt Roudette with nuts?

"I understand how you feel," said Beatrice. "What do you think it's like for me each time I send you out? But this is what must be done." To Snow and Talia she said, "Stone Grove is less than a day's ride. You leave tonight."

Snow groaned. "We have until sunset tomorrow. Wouldn't it be better to leave *after* a good night's sleep? Maybe midmorning, after a nice warm breakfast?"

"Giving Roudette time to rest while she waits for us?" asked Talia. "I'd rather face a groggy murderer, myself."

Beatrice smiled. "Go and prepare for your journey. And be safe."

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