



Chapter Six

Just a Job

Backlit by the fiery sky, his lanky silhouette etched in amber, Griff looked like something out of Mal's wildest dreams. He watched for a few self-indulgent moments as Griff swung his maul into the wood on the chopping block. Followed the drip of a bead of sweat from Griff's neck all the way down past his navel, pale skin gilded by the sunset. Touched his tongue to the corner of his mouth, thinking of all the times he had seen Griff do this when they were growing up, three best friends under one roof, every other night a party that called for a bonfire.

After Rhun's disappearance, Wynn timer was always out, always covered in someone else's blood when she turned up again, but Mal never had to worry about being warm or where his next meal was coming from because Griff took care of the woodpile.

He took care of things. Birthday presents. Scrapes. Mending clothes. Even though Griff was only two years older, he thought of the little things while Mal's sights were forever on the horizon.

The dull, rhythmic thud of the maul in tandem with Griff's laboring breaths would always be a familiar tune, one from a time when Griff still knew how to stay.

Mal could never forget it. He'd tried.

Unaware that he was making any sound at all, a groan rose from the back of his throat as he watched Griff work that rather resembled the sound the family's old dog, Whiskey, made when someone scratched behind his ears. The hound was more gray than brown now, with fur like velvet and sagging jowls, a sagging stomach to match, and failing eyes that—much like Mal's did—glimpsed certain darting shadows and wispy figures that others simply couldn't. Poor old dog must be cursed too, though Mal couldn't imagine what *he* had done to piss off the gods. All dogs were good dogs, after all.

He took a deep breath in through his nostrils, steeling himself. Quickly sipped from his flask, that constant silver companion flashing in and out of the breast pocket of his jerkin in a span of seconds. And then, as fortified as he was going to get, he approached.

The clip of his boots against the cobbles didn't quite grab Griff's attention the way Mal had expected it would. Nor did his shadow falling across the current object of Griff's focus, or the dry clearing of his throat.

So between strikes of the maul, Mal let a few words fall from his lips: "Preparing for tomorrow when everyone else has already gone home? Whoever hired you should really raise your pay."

At that, Griff left the heavy tool embedded in the chopping block and pushed some dark hair out of his face with a scarred hand, blinking sweat from his eyes at the intrusion.

Mal rarely glanced in a mirror, but he still had some idea from Griff's startled expression of how he must look: like some kind of gray ghost with his woolen cloak around his shoulders. Still wearing the same style of patched and torn hunter-green jerkin over an equally mended shirt and brown cloth pants worn thin at the knee, because he had never taken great care of his things; cool gray eyes always running some calculation; the set of a jaw that was always braced for impact; crooked nose reset too many times to count; tawny skin already deepened by the start of

summer, more like Wynnies than Griff's eternally pale complexion; shaggy golden hair tied back in some semblance of a bun by a leather strap, full of so many knots that at this point he would have to cut most of it off just to run a comb through it.

He looked like death warmed over, and he felt like it too, having to stand here facing the man he'd almost put in an untimely grave. It was all he could do not to roll up his sleeve and rake his nails over the raven's feathers on his forearm until he bled.

Griff was silent for so long that Mal was about to ask if he needed some kind of help. When he finally spoke, he said dryly, tentatively, into the air between them, "Can I get that in writing? Addressed to my employer?"

Just before the light shifted, a hint of a grin slipped across Mal's face, echoing back across the years to a time when things were so much simpler. When it was the three of them, just them and Alys, invincible in their bond and existing in their own narrow world where they were certain that one day, they would be even greater heroes than their parents had been, writing their own legacy together.

Yet that had been nothing more than a dream, an empty promise. Mal could count on two hands the number of times he and Griff had spoken in nearly ten years.

"What are you doing here?" Griff asked bluntly, clearly unsettled by this breach in their unspoken agreement to stay the hell away from each other. "Is something wrong with Wynnies? Or Vic?" A brief pause followed in which he looked stricken, and then, "Is it . . . Alys?"

Mal glanced quickly toward the smoke curling from the nearest chimney just over Griff's shoulder, which was easier than looking at Griff himself, and shook his head. "Everyone's fine."

"Dove saw Alys in the jeweler's recently. The expensive one who makes the rings," the foreman offered curiously. "Any idea what that might have been about?"

Mal shrugged. "No more than I know why she's started hanging out with you again. But I doubt any man could win her over

with a bit of jewelry or a stupid title. The last guy certainly couldn't, and they had three kids. That stuff is all just someone's moneymaking scheme, anyway, and calling each other special names is for the chronically insecure."

Griff hooked his fingers into the back of his waistband, glancing sideways at Mal like he feared one small misstep might provoke his temper, and simply nodded. Maybe he had lost his appetite for bloodshed since the attack.

Mal, meanwhile, tried not to stare too hard at Griff's still-bare chest, sweat glistening where it had dried on his cooling skin. Tried not to let his gaze wander lower, to the waistband of Griff's pants, unwilling to look upon evidence of the stabbing he had plotted even though he probably deserved to have to see it.

"Anyway," he continued, his voice heavy with the effort of what he knew he had to say next. He might as well get this over with before things could sour like they always did. Still, the words had to be dragged out of his throat from some unfathomable depth. "I'm actually here on business."

Maybe he should have chosen his words more carefully, given the way Griff blanched like he'd just chugged a bottle of the moonshine one of the barkeeps at the Maiden's Arms sold under the table to regulars. He was so delicate, so easy to rile. He must have folded immediately when they stabbed him. A perfect, pretty victim.

Mal's stomach churned. He almost regretted hitting the flask.

"Business?" Griff's shoulders were rigid with tension. Thanks to the foreman's lack of a shirt, it took little effort to notice, and Mal definitely wasn't trying to study the lines of muscle there for any other reason. "You've got funny ideas of what exactly business is, Mal. I'm pretty sure your version includes scams and intimidation and outright extortion."

Mal didn't bother correcting him. Griff was mostly right, to be fair. But it still stung, the way he always thought he was so

smart, thought he could read Mal like one of his books, one where he had every chapter memorized. Arrogant bastard.

When Griff tilted his head a little at the lack of a scathing rebuttal, Mal huffed a breath and began like he had practiced in his head on the way here: “I have a lead on an exciting new prospect, a chance to strike it rich and get some answers about the past. And I’d like for you to come along . . . with Alys and me. To Rotrose Mire. As our official healer.”

“You want to go to the Mire? On purpose?” Griff paced a few steps around the chopping block. “Of course you do. Even knowing the stories. Even after Rhun . . .”

Rotrose Mire lay to the east past the Wyrnwood, across the Plains of Plenty—so named because they were seemingly endless fields of tall grass, some ancient explorer’s idea of humor—out where the friendliest faces they could hope to encounter were businessmen like Mal, roaming bandits, or even wargs, huge hairy dog-beasts of the Shadow Queen’s with jaws like a steel trap. And then there was the Mire itself, full of orcs and trolls who worshiped the dark queen like some kind of deity, most destined to join the ranks of the undead under her command; carnivorous plants; poisonous berries that looked temptingly like common fruits; and sinister beings like revenants, walking corpses with souls inside created by the Shadow Queen to bolster her army. Her control over the dead was precisely what made some believe she had once been a human necromancer rather than, as others argued, an elf gone mad.

“That’s far from here. A long journey, especially on foot. And dangerous as hell, besides,” Griff pointed out after pacing a few more rounds.

“Which is why we’ll need a healer,” Mal said again, trying for patience. “In case the roads aren’t as friendly as in a fairy tale.”

“I’m hardly that,” Griff protested, though Mal had it on good authority from Alys that he had learned something of the art from the elves.

Mal circled partway around the spot where Griff was pacing, leaning against one of the beams already secured to the bakery's foundation, the partial roof throwing him into shadow as the sun sank lower. "Then stay here," he said, voice and eyes flat as the road that led toward home; he could generally count on Griff to do the opposite of what he asked for, anyway. "Work your straight jobs and play hero like your dear old dad." His withering tone made it sound like such a bad thing, which was mostly habit at this point. He always made the things Griff did or wanted sound so small and stupid. It was the only defense he had when Griff acted so far above him, like he was a precious elf from Stormveil and Mal was some shambling corpse of the dark queen's, trying to bludgeon him to death. "Parade around town with your boring little boyfriends, and keep on telling yourself you're so much better than the rest of us. Alys and I will get rich and not have to share the extra coin with you."

Turning more fully toward Mal, Griff sank onto the chopping block, casting aside the maul to make space and then resting his chin in his hand. For a moment, it looked as though some true pain had crossed his face—was the wound still bothering him? That didn't seem normal. Too much time had passed.

"Alys put you up to this," he accused, distracting Mal from his concern. "This is all starting to make sense—she made you ask me along because she still thinks we can all be friends. You don't actually want me there."

Mal's gray eyes narrowed, his mouth becoming a thinner line. He hated that Griff really could read him still, after all this time. "So? Like I said, you don't have to come. It's just a job."

"Like cozying up to helpless old widows to get your name on the deed to their land is just a job? Like that scam you ran on the farmers outside Barcombe where you were a 'wolf hunter' was just a job?" Disdain dripped from Griff's voice. "What the hell is in the Mire that's worth risking life and limb for, anyway?"

Mal shrugged, trying to let Griff's sneering judgment bounce off his weathered cloak like rain. "Look, a job is just a job as far as I'm concerned—not good or bad, just work. Some jobs just happen to make more money than others, which is where I go, because I'm in it for me," he said coolly. "It's a hungry world out there, in case you haven't noticed, and all I'm trying to do is not end up on anyone else's plate."

Griff shook his head like he had heard this all before, which was probably true.

"I found myself in possession of a map recently," Mal continued while he still had Griff's attention. Normally, he had no problem walking away from Griff's unwelcome scrutiny, but he couldn't do that this time. Not when thoughts of Kage making a second attempt on Griff's life while Mal waded around in some swamp kept flashing vividly to mind.

"The writing on it is Rhun's, Alys thinks," he clarified, having saved this reveal in case Griff really needed convincing. "It looks like it leads to the stockpile of riches the Wardens were searching for when they went out there and came home without him. Ancient gold and weapons and armor from one of the first elven empires, all tucked into the barrows of their kings."

He paused there to let the words sink in, and sure enough, Griff's green eyes swiftly widened. He didn't need to spell out the significance—that the treasure, or the hunt for it, might tell them the truth about what had befallen Rhun in the end. He crossed his arms. "Anyway, I don't see the need to elaborate unless you've decided to come."

Mal was certain, by the time he finished, that he could see a spark of interest in Griff's eyes. It wasn't a yes, not yet, but it was at least a step toward taking him far away from the agents who would want to finish the job and might not care about Mal's treasure hunt.

"Say I was. Planning to come, I mean. For Rhun and Alys." Griff leaned forward on his elbows. "Could we actually travel

together for several weeks and not come to blows? You think it would change things between us? You really think we can be anything but each other's demons?"

He shivered a little, no doubt becoming more aware of the chill working its way over the city, a rapid cooling now that the day was done.

Mal drummed his fingers against the side of his leg for a moment before answering, trying to get the hammering of his heart under control. "I don't expect a trip to change a damn thing, no. But you're hardly my worst demon." In stark contrast to the dusk, the temperature in his voice rose steadily as he added, "Just say you're not going already."

Griff rubbed his hands over his arms like he was trying not to shiver again, and leveled a look at Mal, one he held for a long moment as he asked, "If I go . . . is there any hope for us?"

There was a younger man's petulance in Mal's voice that he couldn't quite disguise as he demanded in return, "Hope? What the hell does that mean? That we're suddenly going to be friends again? That I'll come over and make nice with your boyfriend and eat his shitty cooking like Alys does?" The questions burned with frustration, like they came from a caged animal glancing at things beyond his power to reach for, to give.

Peeling away from the beam he was leaning against, he knelt before the spot where Griff sat, fixing him in his unflinching gaze. "When are you going to accept that this is who I am? You always ask me things even though you know you won't like the answers, and then no matter what I say, you judge me for it. I don't know who it is you want me to be, and frankly, I don't care anymore," he snarled, letting that animal out of its cage for a moment, stretching its weary limbs. "When am I going to be enough for you just as I am? Ever? Is there any hope of *that*?"

Griff reached for him. Two callused fingers slipped beneath Mal's chin, through the gold stubble growing there, and rose to

rest against his cheek as Mal's eyes widened in surprise and he lapsed into dumbfounded silence.

Neither breathed for a moment, but Mal's pulse raced beneath Griff's fingers.

Neither moved.

Griff could surely smell the whiskey on his breath, they were so close. Cheap stuff, swill, though Mal could have afforded better. And beneath it—the lemon soap Vic had always scrubbed his clothes with.

Mal couldn't look away. Not because he had any fear that Griff might strike, but because he could smell sweat and rosemary shampoo and the kohl that often lined Griff's eyes, a distinct combination that set his face more firmly into his usual nettled expression; nothing good ever came of getting this close to him, though Mal could see why so many men did. Not that he was keeping track. Griff had the sort of classic, poetic beauty that belonged on a painted fresco dedicated to some god or another, and half the time he didn't seem to know it. He applied himself to things so earnestly. He loved to learn; he was such a hopeless dork—

Mal stopped himself there, before he could have another stupid, useless thought.

"I'll go," Griff breathed at last, and the tightness in Mal's chest eased just a little. "I'll go," he repeated, sounding more certain now, as Mal's pulse continued to flutter wildly under his touch. "And I'll tend the fire and clean your cuts and sleep at your back without judgment. And maybe you'll realize somewhere along the way that you've always been enough—you just haven't let me get close enough to show it, or to try to make anything right. Not since . . ."

Did Griff know his fingers were trembling against Mal's skin? He couldn't think what had possessed Griff to reach for him like this when nothing had really changed.

Soon enough, Griff lowered his shaking hand. And as he did, he said in a would-be casual tone, "Who knows? Out in the Mire, you might even find out whether I'd die for you."

As Griff's hand fell away, a spell was broken. A breath of relief at gaining some distance escaped Mal's lips as he rose to his feet, steady and lithe as ever—as if that touch hadn't made him weak at the knees.

It had also, inexplicably, made his tattoo burn. Or perhaps that was just the result of too much vicious scratching.

Griff, on the other hand, didn't move. He seemed to have every intention of sitting on his chopping block a while longer before retrieving his shirt.

But behind him, something did shift away—a shadow, taller than Griff's, unfurling itself to its full imposing height as it separated from the fabric of night. Mal blinked hard, but still the thing remained. Even Griff shivered at the chill radiating from it, though Mal was certain he couldn't see it; he had only been able to see ghosts himself since he'd died for a few seconds in Thrallkeld. They never spoke to him, at least not in any language he could hear, but seeing them was punishment enough for having cheated death. Though usually they showed their faces, unlike this figure of solid darkness.

Maybe that explained why his tattoo was suddenly searing. After all, this thing had to be some servant of the Shadow Queen.

"It's just a job," Mal repeated brusquely to Griff, as if nothing at all were amiss, as he adjusted his cloak against the coming night, not remotely because the absence of Griff's hand against his cheek had left him colder than before. "And nobody's going to die. I'll make sure of that."

It was the least he could do.

Mal's feet were itching to hit the road again; he'd had his fill of Griff's questions for now, and this had been their longest conversation in years. Most of all, he wanted to get away from that strange shadow—though when he glanced at it again, it had already vanished, absorbed back into the night. Often, these things appeared just for a little shock; this one, he decided with

more conviction now, had appeared to speed him on his journey, or else to check out the man who had just agreed to join the expedition.

“When do we leave?” Griff asked, rubbing his hands along his arms as if to warm them. He drew in a breath, then said quickly, gruffly, almost like he didn’t know how, “I’ve missed you, you absolute shit.”

While a flash of discomfort crossed Mal’s face at such genuine emotion offered so casually, the crude nickname made the sentiment a little more palatable. A soft, appreciative snort issued from his nostrils as he set his feet on the path to home.

“Don’t get all sappy now, you sentimental fuck, or this trip really will be a hazard to everyone’s health,” Mal said with a half-roll of his eyes, feeling a little more like himself now that the shadow had gone and his tattoo wasn’t burning so much.

But something uncertain washed over his face just after, something that made him turn hastily away from Griff before the foreman could read whatever showed there as he wondered if he could trust what the other man had said: that he had missed him.

After everything.

The emotion in his voice had sounded real enough, as real as the darting shadow or the wood-splitting maul resting on the stump. But all the insults he had fired back at Mal over the years—those had been real too.

Mal had no more idea of what to do with that than he did the large shipment of dwarven crystal glasses for which he still hadn’t been paid, which were currently sitting packed in large wooden crates in a hidden glade in the Wyrwood.

“Oh, and we leave in the morning. First light, so you’d better try to get some rest while you can,” he added briskly over his shoulder before breaking back toward the road, and the far more reliable warmth of a yet-distant fire.