

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Return

Across the cave's floor, two other shapes moved. The darkness did not hide them from each other. It was their natural habitat. He could see Betty, huge and bearlike in appearance but with the eyes of a wolf. Small in comparison was their other brother, Fiddler. A creature no less dangerous, despite his more diminutive size.

"It's time," said Tommy, stretching out limbs stiff from hibernation. His stomach growled. He was hungry.

He stood and walked slowly to the entrance. Across the clearing was another dwelling. The House of Hweol, their father. Its entrance was edged in bone, the jaws of some ancient monster. Hweol would sleep for a while longer. It was for Tommy and his brothers to lead the return.

He breathed in, the air cold and crisp. It told him of lengthening nights and the change of the seasons. The villages that lay beyond the border of their Umbran home were waiting.

"Will we Dance?" asked Fiddler.

"Yes," said Tommy. "We will need your music to lead us and Betty to bring laughter."

Betty grinned. "I have a wardrobe ready and a new dress was made for me before we slept."

"Then we are ready," said Tommy. "Time to visit our Wheelborn family, see what mischief they've been up to in our absence. I hope they haven't been getting any ideas."

"We'll soon find out," said Fiddler. "They can't hide anything from us. Not when they share our blood."

"Some can," said Betty. "The mothers."

Tommy sighed. That state was a continued annoyance. It meant the women could keep secrets from him. The people of Umbra worshipped Mother Nature, and one of Her commandments was the reverence of the status of all who became mothers themselves. It was a nuisance. Hweol and his Umbran family demanded blood and would not let such a nicety get in their way. Their father had developed their rituals in apparent reverence of the Mother whilst subverting it to their own needs. The three had never been stopped or punished by Her. Tommy regarded this as the same as receiving Her blessing. The Mother loved her sons. "Time for a little reconnaissance."

"A rehearsal?" asked Fiddler, picking up his instrument case.

The fiddle had been newly strung before they closed their eyes, and his brother was itching to play it as much as Betty wanted to wear his new dress. It wouldn't harm anything to let them off the leash for a while before they returned to the village of Cropsoe. He would go with them a little way, listen in on the gossip, and then he would leave to walk his own path. It was for Tommy to lead their return and begin the rituals of the Dance. The Five Nights. The Five Turns.

They walked overgrown tracks, their route imprinted on memory, to the edge of the forest. Ahead lay the path that would take them to whichever one of the six villages in the Weald they wished to visit. A way hidden from the human eye unless the Umbrans pulled the veil aside. As they walked the path, Tommy sent his mind out across the landscape. He could see into every village, every house, every heart.

Not far ahead of the three, they saw a small group heading towards Fleshing. Two had fishing rods and their friends carried blankets and a picnic basket. *All we need to round off a beautiful autumnal day, thought Tommy, is a bit of entertainment.*

"Fancy a dry run?" he asked his brothers, nodding his head in the direction of the party.

"Why not," said Fiddler. "Doesn't do to get rusty."

Tommy thought of the swords waiting for him in Cropsoe. Their blades never rusted. That particular Dance would have to wait.

"Put your dress on, Betty," he said. "We've a performance to give."

Betty gave a yelp of delight and pulled his dress from the bag. The three walked innocently toward the group. Nothing more than a traditional mummers' troupe. The teller of tales, the player of songs, and the comedian in the woman's dress with a woman's name. For centuries, such travelling bands had performed across the British Isles in this manner. These three could recount their histories with accuracy. They had been there.

It didn't take long. Tommy kept to the three-act structure for their show. A quick run-through before the main events of the coming days.

He was pleased with the result. Fiddler's bow had been sharp, Betty's punchlines a knockout, and Tommy's stories had ended well. They walked back up the road to the river from which their audience had come. It didn't take long to wash the blood off. The taste had heightened their hunger, increased their need to get back to the villages of the Weald.

They returned to their original route. Tommy could see Cropsoe in the distance, waiting for him.

"High Ridge farm," said Fiddler, nodding towards a nearby hill. "Shall we take a look?"

Tommy nodded. "Always worth checking in. Make sure the lesson learned holds."

It was late afternoon and the sun still shone, although it was a cold light. Summer was becoming a distant memory. Trees added a splash of colour, their leaves having turned. They had gone from green to that last glorious palette of reds and golds, yellows and browns.

Hedgerows were revealing empty nests and skeletal branches. The three tramped across fields bristling with stubble, the crops long harvested. The soil needed ploughing. Nourishing. Tommy could do something about that when the occasion demanded. The Weald was beautiful. This little pocket of England was theirs and Tommy intended it would remain so. Their visits ensured the modern world was kept clearly at arm's length.

The trio found themselves a position overlooking the farmhouse. They made no attempt to hide themselves as they could only be seen when they wished it.

Three men stood outside the house, or rather a man and two youths. A father and his sons. There was no mother. Not anymore. She had become part of the land.

Betty started to sway, and Fiddler was humming.

"I can hear her," said Betty. "She's still singing."

Tommy looked at the nearby hedge. The interwoven branches were not wood, but bone. She protected the land, held it in a maternal embrace. She had died because of the mistakes of her children. They could never forget. He could see by the way anxiety had etched itself on their faces. No doubt they were casting about in their minds for anything they had done wrong this time. Their father steadied them with an arm around each shoulder.

"Will we choose him?" asked Betty. "I would like to see him Dance."

Tommy threw his brother a quick look. The man had no compassion. He was a monster. This father had already given much—or rather, his wife had. If any of them were chosen, there would be nothing they could do and his sons would have to accept it. This time, however, it would be an honour, not a punishment. It was all a dance, and the Dance was only just beginning.

Tommy smiled. The memories remained, and the lesson had been learned. A hard lesson, but necessary.

The three tramped on, using their path to take them from Ashburn to Scythington and Soulsbury, Reaper's Hill and Fleshing. At the latter settlement, they saw a group of youths gathering for a 'pre-Dance' party, clutching beers and old bottles of spirits probably raided from parents' cupboards. They had forgotten those who Danced before. One of the tricks Tommy played on them in the guise of a blessing.

"Spare a drink for an old man," said Fiddler, wandering up to the group.

"Only if you play us a tune," said one.

They hadn't recognised him. Tommy would lift the curtain of memory soon enough. In the meantime, he would let Fiddler have his bit of fun.

"I thought you'd never ask," said Fiddler, pulling his fiddle from its case and plucking its strings.

His notes took control of their minds, and soon they were all laughing and dancing to Fiddler's tune.

Tommy nodded to his brother and walked on with Betty, leaving the sound of the music behind. They would meet up again later. Through the village they rambled and Tommy saw old women sitting motionless at their windows. In a back garden, one woman sat seemingly oblivious to the grandchildren who tugged excitedly at her skirt. He knew where her mind had gone. To that night of the Dance which celebrated not the Maid or the Mother, but the Crone. All ages of woman were venerated in their celebrations.

"Have you chosen?" asked Betty, as they continued on their way.

"Yes," said Tommy. "Want to see? Or would you rather it be kept as a surprise?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Betty was too impatient. Whenever he'd planned a surprise for his brother, Betty discovered it early. Sometimes with disastrous results, despite the planned end result usually being the same. Blood was never wasted in their family.

He led the way to Reaper's Hill. To Anne Slattery's house. He could see her in the garden with her friend Rose, hear their quiet chatter. That one had a few years left in her yet, unlike Anne.

Anne had poured them a sherry each. They sat quietly, watching the path he walked. The old saw and understood so much. They could sense the change, feel the turn of the land.

"Not long," said Rose, sipping her drink.

"No," said Anne.

"Who do you think will be chosen?" asked Rose.

"Can't you tell," said Anne. "Can't you smell the taint on me?"

"No," said Rose. "We won't know until the actual day."

Tommy knew Rose was lying, as did Anne. That was what friends were for. They would lie to keep dark thoughts away for a little longer. Across the Weald it would be the same. Grandmothers gathered together or sat alone, all focused on the one night when the Crone was celebrated.

"It is an honour," said Anne.

She was right. It was the privilege of the chosen Crone to know it was their time.

"Yes," said Rose.

This time they were both lying and so was Tommy. It wasn't an honour. It was an extra layer of suffering he inflicted on the women. An additional enjoyment.

Betty was pacing up and down behind him. Fidgeting. "I'm bored."

"Soulsbury," said Tommy. "Playtime."