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Hunted



A month had passed since the Night of Souls; the night Silas Dane had left the city of Fume as a traitor and begun his new life as a fugitive. He had murdered a councilwoman, slain many of her wardens and threatened the lives of the council's twelve remaining members. In that one night he had gone from being one of the High Council's most trusted men to being an outlaw, no better than any of the smugglers and thieves he had brought to justice in his time. Word of his treachery had spread to every town in Albion. The High Council wanted him caught, but despite everything the memory of that night still made Silas smile.

Heavy mists spread across the open wilds of Albion as the darkest weeks of winter closed in. Bitter winds blasted in from the north and every morning a new layer of frost clung to the trees. Silas's crow soared high overhead as Silas rode deep into the wild counties, making his way

between the small settlements that peppered the landscape. For the first time in twelve years his life was his own and he found himself enjoying his freedom upon Albion's open roads. For now, that freedom was enough.

The settlements were lawless places, beyond the reach of the High Council's rule: roughly built clusters of houses, trading posts and inns whose residents made anyone feel welcome so long as they brought silver or goods to barter with. Disguised in a travelling robe taken from the body of an unlucky thief who had challenged him upon the open road, Silas blended in among other nameless strangers, hiding his grey eyes beneath a hood during the day and conducting his business at night. Wherever ale flowed, people talked.

As snowstorms moved in steadily from the frozen north, Silas was forced to stop camping in the open each night and began renting rooms within the settlements instead. His most recent shelter was a run-down inn clinging to the edge of one of the larger eastern villages. He had heard that whisperers – information sellers – often visited there and hoped to overhear news of the search that had been mounted against him. During his second night spent hunched in its darkest corner listening to whispers shared over flagons of cheap ale, he was not disappointed.

Just before midnight, a tall man entered the inn with a thick scarf wrapped round his neck. He walked like a soldier and swept his eyes over each face in the room, scrutinising every one. Silas lowered his eyes and turned away. After weeks spent in the company of strangers, he had just spotted a familiar face. He tried not to look interested as the man nodded in greeting to a hooded

stranger sitting three tables away and went to join him.

'There's been no word from any scouts on the rivers or at the coast,' he heard the newcomer say. 'None of the dockworkers have seen or heard anything of Silas Dane along the eastern or southern coasts. Either your information was wrong, or he has paid them well for their silence.'

'He will head to the Continent eventually. Keep searching. I want to know the moment he is seen.'

'Have you considered that he may not even be heading for the sea? He might not even have heard of this woman.'

The hooded man shook his head slowly. 'The council have known about her long enough,' he said. 'It will not be long before Silas hears about her too.'

Silas leaned further over his ale glass, trying to identify the speaker. He was dressed like any other common man, but beneath his plain brown coat Silas caught a glimpse of a bright red boot, polished and pristine. Those boots belonged to a councilman. If there was a councilman in that inn, a consignment of wardens would not be far away.

Silas scanned the room and identified two men he had not seen the night before. If they were wardens, they had not recognised him so far.

'Dalliah Grey is an enemy to our country,' continued the councilman. 'We have reason to believe that she will try to contact Dane when she discovers he has turned against us. Dane may have murdered a councilwoman, but Dalliah Grey committed far worse crimes before she was driven out of our lands. If the two of them join forces against us the consequences could be disastrous.'

A burst of laughter broke from a group of smugglers close by and Silas made use of the distraction. He stood up, walked straight past the two men and pulled open the inn door, stepping out into the snow-filled night. A black carriage stood waiting to his left with two wardens on board, their shoulders hunched against the falling snow. Neither of them looked his way as he headed right, slipping into the dark. If an attack was planned, the wardens' training would force them to do it now, while their target was in the open, out of sight of any witnesses.

No one came.

The inn door creaked open five times to disgorge various drunks out into the street until, on the sixth, the councilman stepped into the open with the man he had been speaking to close behind him.

'The longer Dane remains at large the less generous I shall be,' said the councilman. 'Find him. You have had long enough.'

The man nodded. 'As soon as I hear anything, you'll be the first to know.'

Silas's hand stood ready upon his blade as the hooded man walked to the carriage and the driver cracked a whip to drive the horses on. The other man stayed by the inn door, counting money out of a small coin purse into his pockets. Silas moved silently up behind him.

'How have you been, Derval?'

The man reached for his dagger in surprise.

'There will be no need for that,' said Silas, pulling his hood back a little to expose his full face.

'Silas?' The man relaxed at once. 'You have the luck of a demon, my friend,' he said. 'Do you know how many wardens were just here?'

Silas led him back into the shadows where they could talk unseen. 'What are you doing here, Derval? I hear you have been hunting me. And not very successfully.'

'I have far better things to do than hunt you down,' said Derval. 'I like living too much, but the High Council don't need to know that, do they? Where there's fear, there's coin, and you have got them all quivering in their boots since the Night of Souls. Twenty wardens killed, half the city swearing they saw spirits of the dead, and a councilwoman finally getting what she deserved.'

Silas nodded slowly. 'How is the hunt progressing?'

'It's not,' said Derval. 'The council don't know where you are, and if anyone else does, they're not talking.'

'So the councilmen have decided to head out into the wilds themselves?'

'This was an arranged meeting,' said Derval. 'He chooses the location. I spin him a lie or two and I get paid. It works for me.'

'I don't believe in coincidences,' said Silas, keeping a close eye on the street, still primed for an attack. 'Since you are here, I need something from you.'

'What kind of thing?' asked Derval, suddenly suspicious. 'I'm not giving you my horse. Not after what happened last time.'

Silas smiled. 'I need information,' he said. 'This woman the council are worried about. I want you to tell me everything you know about Dalliah Grey.'

'From the sound of it, she's as bad as you. Trouble,' said Derval. 'Word is she caused Albion a lot of trouble a few hundred years ago. Got on the wrong side of the council, killed a few of them, messed with things she shouldn't.'

'A few hundred years ago? Why are the council worried about her now?'

'Because, according to our councilman friend, the old girl *isn't dead*,' said Derval. 'Now, I have an open mind, you know that, but even I think the High Council have got it wrong with this one. Five hundred years later and they're convinced this woman is still going strong, with a grudge against Albion even longer than yours, I'd bet. All that business in the city square a few weeks ago jogged a few memories within the council. I wish I'd been there to see their faces when the veil opened like that. Some of them think Dalliah Grey was involved and it's got them worried. Let's face it, if there was a five-hundred-year-old woman out there with a grudge against me, I'd be worried too.'

'And the council believe she is still alive?' asked Silas.

'They sound convinced,' said Derval. 'Something to do with the veil, so I've heard. The old councils tried everything they could to kill her off when she was in Albion last, but nothing touches her. She bleeds, she heals. Just like you.'

'Where is she now?'

'On the Continent somewhere. All I know is the council don't want you crossing the sea to find out. But if they're worried about this woman, she can't be all that bad. She sounds like an interesting one, if you ask me.'

Silas emptied his pocket and pressed a coin pouch of his own into Derval's hand. 'This is for your silence,' he said. 'If I find out you have told the wardens about me, I will hunt you down, slit your throat and watch your blood drain out of your lifeless body drop by drop. Do you understand me?'

'As always,' said Derval. 'You keep the money coming and I keep my mouth shut. It is always a pleasure dealing with you, my friend. I hope we meet again soon.'

Silas nodded and a slight smile flickered across his eyes. 'With luck, we will.'

The two men clasped hands in farewell and Silas skulked away from the inn as quietly as he had arrived. His horse was stabled in the blacksmith's yard, right where he had left it. He unhitched the stall gate, saddled the restless beast, and rode out of the village without looking back.

Silas spent the whole of the next day on the move, staying away from the main trails. He rode his horse over snow-covered hills, through frosted fields and alongside frozen rivers. The presence of a councilman in the wilds and the council's fear of the woman called Dalliah Grey had helped him to make a decision.

It took two days to find a hidden dock where smuggling ships set sail for the Continent. Once there, he convinced a captain to allow him passage on the next vessel to leave that night by offering his horse in trade. If what Derval had said about Dalliah was true, Silas had to meet her. Given enough time he could hunt down anything, and his reputation as the High Council's most capable collector was known as far as his name had travelled. If he could find her, one of the council's oldest enemies could well become his greatest ally.

The ship set sail just before sunset on to a calm ocean, and as soon as he was at sea, watching his homeland drift out of sight, Silas knew he was doing the right thing.

The journey to the Continent would have taken only a few hours in fine conditions, but the northern countries

were in the middle of a freezing winter. Ocean currents were carrying sheets of ice southwards down the Taegar Sea, forcing ships to push their way through and making the crossing a slow and treacherous one.

Silas spent most of the journey out in the open on deck, but as the hours passed and the evening slipped into the dead of night he crouched in the centre of the cargo hold, cleared a space in the dirt on the floor with his hands and pulled open the neck of a black drawstring pouch. Rows of fat leather sacks swung from bars lined up above him, each one swaying gently, following the slow motion of the ship as it cut through the icy waves. He could hear chunks of ice grinding against the hull, scraping at the wood like a thousand fingernails as he emptied the pouch's contents out on to the floor.

A handful of coins rattled out first, then a silver ring and three rolled notes. Two of the notes were sealed with buttons of wax, but the third had cracked open and was busy unfurling itself slowly across the floor. Silas pocketed the coins and the ring and picked up the open note. The seal was dark green and stamped with a rolled scroll: the mark of Albion's High Council. He struck a match and held the flame close to the paper to read its words.

Order is Hereby Given for the Capture of
Silas Dane.
Traitor, Thief & Murderer.
Collectors May Claim a Substantial Reward of
Gold and Land
upon Presentation of this **Dangerous Criminal** to
the Warden of the Watch.
North Tower, High Council Chambers, Fume.

Silas looked over at the dead man who had owned the pouch. His body was still warm, his neck twisted awkwardly against the floor. Collectors were resourceful and persistent, but he had not expected one to find him on the open sea.

'Good work,' he said, nodding towards the man's lifeless eyes. 'You came closer than most.' He rubbed a streak of blood from his cheek with the back of his hand. A shallow cut burned there for a second or two before the skin sealed itself perfectly, healing in moments, leaving no sign that there had ever been an injury. The collector's attack had taken Silas by surprise. It would not happen again.

He allowed the match flame to catch upon the corner of the page, consuming it in a burst of heat and embers. 'The council does not give gold to dead men,' he said. 'You should have known better.'

Silas stood up, grabbed the collector's wrists and dragged him roughly across the floor. Then he unhooked an empty leather sack from its hanging place, wrestled the body into it and hooked it heavily back into place. No one would find it until they arrived at port, and by then he would already have left the ship behind.

Silas left the sack swinging with the rest and made his way to the front of the hold, where a trapdoor led up on to the main deck. He climbed a short ladder, grabbed the door's handle and pushed it open, letting moonlight spread across his face. The deck was rough and untidy, tracked with deep scratches and stained with everything from wine to animal dung. The smugglers did not care what they carried, so long as it brought them a profit at the end of the journey. There had been eight men on the ship

when it left the dock, including Silas and the captain, whose clothes bristled with hidden weapons since he trusted his own crew as little as he trusted the strangers who had paid their way on board.

Silas carried a weapon of his own: a sword forged of blue-black metal that was still sheathed beneath his stolen robe. He stood out in the open, listened carefully and made a note of every man's position on the ship. The captain was pacing in his cabin; he could hear his boot-steps scraping on the floorboards. The helmsman was at the wheel and two young men were climbing among the rigging, bundled in thick clothes and arguing loudly with each other. The fifth man was in the galley cooking potatoes and old beef, another was snoring in his sleep, and the last would give him no more trouble: the dead collector, swinging gently in the hold.

He checked the position of the stars. The night was clear and moonlight shone upon the floating ice, making the frosty surfaces shine like ghostly lights as the ship travelled north-east. Silas knew the journey well. They were following the wide sea channel that spread like a scar between Albion and the Continent, heading for the northern Continental town of Grale. He had made that journey many times during his time in Albion's army, and so far it seemed the captain was keeping his word. The ship was set to reach Grale within the hour. They were right where they were meant to be.

As the moon moved steadily across the sky, the ship's heaving sails caught a favourable wind and sliced more swiftly through the frosty waters. None of the crew questioned the whereabouts of the missing passenger – he could have fallen overboard and no one would have cared

– so while the smugglers ate their midnight meal Silas patrolled the ship instead, looking for anything else that was out of place.

If one collector could follow his trail on to that ship, a second could have found it just as easily. He stood at the back of the ship, behind the helmsman's tied-off wheel, and looked back towards Albion. His homeland's dark cliffs had long since retreated over the horizon, but between the ship and the distant coast Silas spotted something moving in the water. It was a low black shape, far enough away to be indistinct, even to his sharp eyes. Something was following the ship. Silas made sure he was out of sight, and watched.

It could have been a whale. Small whales often travelled along the Taegar Sea in winter. But as the shape drew closer a square of black cloth flapped silently above the waves and Silas spotted two shadows crouched beneath it, struggling to keep a small sailing boat on course. The ice had been enough to slow the large ship down, but its hull left clear waters behind it and the little boat was manoeuvrable enough to nip safely between any chunks that passed its way.

Silas walked through the shadows and stepped up on to the ship's guard rail. He balanced there perfectly, pulled off the stolen robe and let the icy wind rip through the long leather coat he was wearing underneath. He looked down at the churning ocean. The water sliced and foamed beneath him, black and fast. He waited until the two shadows were looking away, then stepped casually off the rail, plunging feet first through the air and down into the freezing ocean.

The water swamped over his head and the ship's

powerful wake captured him and pulled him down into the depths. He opened his eyes, waited for the current to release him, and remained underwater, reorienting himself in the direction of the little boat's hull. The weight of his sword pulled downwards and the ocean blurred his vision, but he did not need clear sight for what he was about to do. His sharp ears lifted tiny sounds from the water, listening for the creak of ropes or the echo of the men's feet shuffling across the boat's oiled wood. Dull thuds carried towards him, and Silas's heartbeat throbbed glacially slow as he stretched out his arms and swam silently towards his enemy.

No breath left his lungs as he reached the boat and hung beneath it, keeping one hand pressed against the wood, feeling for the movements of the people above as vibrations against his fingertips. One man was talking loudly enough for Silas to hear, and he concentrated until the words became clear.

'. . . enough to bring down a walrus, that one. Don't think I'll need it, though. Good old-fashioned cunning . . . that's what'll finish him in the end. I'll bet he hasn't seen the likes of me in his lifetime, no matter how tough they say he is. Hey! You even listening?'

Silas felt a hard jolt reverberate through the boat. The other passenger yelped but did not answer.

'Ignorant rat! I never shoulda brought ya along. You're as useless as a pig at a rabbit shoot. Maybe I should throw ya over the side right now and test those weedy little arms of yours. What do you say to that?'

Silas placed his other hand on the hull and pulled his knees up into a crouch. The hull was slippery, but he held on and moved along it in a silent crawl until he was as far

from its occupants as it was possible to be. His grey eyes broke the surface of the water and he pulled himself up, making the boat rock and shift as he climbed aboard. Two pairs of terrified eyes glared at him in the dark.

'It can't be!'

The collector reached for his blade, but Silas was faster. He took five steps across the boat, sent the sword spinning into the sea, then wrenched the man's arm behind his back before throwing him casually over the side.

'Hey! S-stop!' the man yelled as the boat left him behind. 'C-come b-b-back!' Silas ignored him. In water that cold the fool would be dead within minutes, so he turned his attention to the second passenger, who was now cowering beneath a blanket, a useless sword quivering in his hand. Any apprentice who gave up a fight so easily deserved to be run through by his prey.

Silas drew his own sword and wrenched the blanket away in his fist. A young boy looked up in terror, dropped his weapon and held his grubby hands up to protect his face. Silas glared down at him and dragged him to his feet. This was definitely not an apprentice. He was scrawny and weak; a servant boy brought along to do whatever the collector did not want to do himself.

The boy looked down at his feet as his master's pathetic shouts faded into the distance. Silas studied him carefully. The smugglers' ship was moving away and the little boat was starting to drift off course.

'Can you sail?' he demanded.

The boy nodded quickly.

'And do you know how to reach Grale?'

He nodded again.

'Then get to work. Give me any trouble, and I'll put

you over the side just like your master. Understand?'

Silas released the boy, who set to work immediately, checking a compass that was sewn into his left sleeve and adjusting the sails to carry them steadily across the waves.

'Keep the sail up,' ordered Silas, wringing the sea water from his clothes and drying his skin as best he could on an old blanket. 'Follow the ship until you see land, then turn in towards the cliffs. I do not want to be seen.'

Under the boy's guidance, the little boat cut swiftly through the waves while Silas stood at the bow, looking out over the ocean to where the distant shores of the Continent would soon be moving into sight. A single lantern slung from the great ship's bow glinted ahead of them as the boat kept pace. Silas whistled once – a long piercing call – and was answered by a deep cackle from somewhere amongst the huge sails.

A small shadow dropped towards the sea and a bedraggled crow skimmed the surface of the water and flapped up to land upon Silas's shoulder. Its feathers were scruffier than usual and a white line of feathers upon its chest was dull and dirty. It did not like being on open water and it huddled close to Silas's neck, fluffing itself stubbornly against the freezing wind as distant lights gradually sparkled into life on the horizon.

While many of Albion's main towns clustered along the central spine of the country, most Continental towns clung to the coast, as if trying to escape from the sprawling forests, mountains and lakes that dominated the territory further inland. Every western town had guards posted along its beaches in case of an attack from Albion, but Grale's guards were far less particular about whom they allowed in their waters compared to those posted in the

larger towns further south. Grale was too far from anything to be a useful landing point for an invading army, and anyone who risked travelling there found nothing but the pungent smell of fish and smoke to welcome them. War or not, there was still silver to be made and Grale was still open for illegal trade.

At night the town looked shabby and bleak. The glowing lights came from lanterns slung along wires above Grale's empty streets that hummed like strings of bees whenever the wind blew through them. The rough faces of Grale's once white buildings had been stripped back by centuries of powerful sea winds and the people who lived in them were as cold as the streets they walked during the few sunlit hours of their darkened days. The town stood humbly at the mercy of the elements and its residents were opportunists, every one of them devious and unpredictable. Silas had endured dealings with them before.

'Pull in the sail,' he ordered. 'Now.'

The boy obeyed. They were too close to the coast to risk being seen, and before Silas could even demand it the boy had a pair of oars at the ready, preparing to row them to the shore himself.

'No,' said Silas, noticing that the oars were the same thickness as the boy's scrawny arms. 'I plan upon arriving sometime before next week. Give them to me. You keep watch for lens lights.'

Grale had been a traders' port before the Continent's war with Albion had begun, and its inhabitants could still be persuaded to barter with smugglers who did not plan to stay too long. The smugglers' ship's arrival would already be expected. Special provision would have been made for it at the docks at a designated time, but Silas

would be given no such privilege. If just one man saw the boat out there on the waves, the rest of them would know about it in moments and decide what to do about it.

Silas rowed swiftly. The sooner he was out of sight, the better.

The land rose into looming cliffs on either side of the wind-lashed town, each mass topped by a stone watch-tower. The boy shivered in silence as they crept inshore. Silas was concentrating on avoiding the clutches of rocks that rose stealthily out of the rising waves when something glimmered up ahead, a flicker of light where a light should not have been.

Halfway up the cliff face, a shadow moved. Silas kept rowing. Another stroke of the oars . . . two . . . three, carrying the boat closer to the shore. The hairs on his neck began to bristle. He looked up – saw nothing – and then a sound high above him left no room for doubt. There was the thinnest rattle, a scrape of metal against stone, and a gentle hiss as something fell out of the sky.

Silas was already on his feet. He grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him over the side of the boat. The crow fluttered up into the darkness and Silas hit the water on his back as a weighted net swamped down on to the boat. The ropes caught upon the mast and tented across it like a dead jellyfish. The air filled with arrows. Silas released the boy and plunged underwater.

More arrows ripped past him, but his attackers were shooting blind. They had expected him to strike out for the shore and were misjudging his position by a good few feet. He treaded water to stay close to the surface and a squeal of fear sounded nearby as the boy slapped the water uselessly with open palms, battling to stay afloat.