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Shane

SHANE AWOKE WITH a jerk, lurching up and blinking into the dim. She was in some kind of underground cave. The darkness echoed with the sounds of flowing water. Her mouth was dry like she'd swallowed a fistful of sand on the way down the chute, but that was nothing compared to her head, which throbbed like she'd nailed herself in the skull with her own ax.

Shane let out something halfway between an expletive and a groan, trying to reach up and feel her head. She couldn't move her hands.

"Careful," a soft voice murmured, closer than Shane expected. "You have a nasty goose egg back there. Though I guess you'll just have to take my word for it."

Shane's sluggish brain caught up all at once. *The fight. The cave-in. Red.* She whipped around to find Red leaning back on her hands beside a tiny underground river, the very picture of uncaring. Like it didn't bother her at all to be

stuck down here together after everything that had happened between them. Apparently, Shane was the only one suffering from a bad case of emotional whiplash, feeling torn in a hundred different directions at once.

Anger won out.

“Red,” she growled. The wolf at the girl’s side bared his fangs in warning, but Red just smiled.

“I like the way you say my name—always so full of feeling.” Red soothed the wolf with a single touch. Shane could only see a slice of her face, but her eyes were dark and depthless in the crystal glow, her lips twisted in a mocking smile. “Has anyone ever told you, you wear your heart on your sleeve?”

Shane ground her teeth together. She had gotten that particular warning a few times, mostly from her grandmother, and mostly about not letting her emotions get the better of her. Which they were definitely in danger of doing at this moment.

It should be so easy to hate Red. She’d tried to kill Fi in the Forest of Thorns. She’d tried to take Briar again. And even though Shane had saved her, she’d still woken up with her hands bound.

Her grandmother had always told Shane she was a glutton for punishment because of her reckless fighting style. She couldn’t even imagine what that wizened old bat would have to say about her newly reckless heart. Probably the exact same thing.

If you insist on rushing in and leaving yourself wide open, don’t be surprised when someone takes advantage of that.

Shane scooted away from Red, letting her back thunk

against the wall and ignoring all her new aches. “You know, this is a pretty lousy way to repay me for saving your life . . . twice,” she added, blowing her hair out of her face.

Red gave a little shrug. “Well, I thought about smashing your head in with a rock at least twice, so I’d say we’re even. Besides, you’re only alive right now because I need your help.”

Shane bristled. “With what? Dragging Briar Rose back to the Spindle Witch? Because I’m not going to do that. If this is you making me the same offer you made in the Forest of Thorns, you can forget it.”

Red clicked her tongue. “Sadly, no. That offer expired when you got in the Spindle Witch’s way.” She combed her fingers through her tousled hair, carelessly pinning up the curls that had fallen out of the high knot. “I was thinking more along the lines of working together toward a common goal . . .”

Shane snorted in disbelief. Her and Red, common goals? *Unlikely.* Aloud, she just said, “I’m listening.”

Red inched closer, her shadow rippling over the glowing crystals embedded in the walls. “Well, you are an experienced treasure hunter.” She tossed her chin to indicate the cavern. “I want out of these tunnels, and I think you’re my best chance of making that happen.”

Shane peered around. She squinted up at the dry chute they had tumbled down—now precariously blocked by rocks and debris—and then along the trickling stream to where it disappeared down a narrow tunnel.

She’d definitely escaped worse than a natural cave system. Once, she’d made her way through an entire underground

maze carved from magnetic rock that sent compasses spinning and left anyone who entered too dizzy to see straight. She'd navigated the whole ruin blindfolded, half for the bragging rights, and still come out of it with a pocketful of jingling silver-backed sapphires. Of course, her partner at the time had just been puking left and right because he couldn't keep his blindfold on, not waiting to stab her in the back in the dark. Which was probably what she could expect from Red.

"And what do I get out of this bargain?" Shane wanted to know.

"Your freedom," Red promised. She wagged a finger at Shane. "You're far too unruly to make a good hostage. Get me to the exit, and I'll let you go."

Red's voice had the familiar teasing lilt, but Shane sensed there was something else there, something lurking just underneath the surface. Shouldn't Red want to kill Shane, too? Why would the right hand of the Spindle Witch ever let her go?

Unless something was holding her back. Maybe Red wasn't as unaffected as she was pretending to be.

Red leaned suddenly close, smirking. "What? Waiting for me to sweeten the deal?" she teased, one finger pressed to her lips.

Suddenly, Shane was remembering the feel of those soft lips against hers, the heat of her body and the sound of Red's laugh—her real laugh, breathless and surprised. All the memories she had tried to extinguish burned to the surface. Shane supposed her feelings were all over her sleeve again, or at least her face, but she wasn't the only one. She didn't think she was imagining Red's breath coming a little faster as Shane mirrored her, leaning in until their lips were a whisper apart.

“You think if you flirt with me enough, I’ll forget what you’ve done? Who you work for?”

Red was so close, Shane felt the shiver on the other girl’s skin. “No,” Red whispered back, the words almost a kiss before she pulled away. “But I think we’ve both realized we’re not going to fight to the death down here. So what other choice do you have?”

Shane hated that she had let herself be taken hostage. She hated that Red’s brown eyes could still look so beautiful to her, even knowing all the dark things that must be concealed behind them. But she hated most of all that Red was right. Shane wasn’t sure if the magnetism between them would pull them together or fling them apart or just set her internal compass spinning until she was hopelessly lost. But one way or the other, they were at a stalemate.

Red stood up, calling the wolf with a quick whistle. “Cinzel. We’re leaving.” She looked expectantly over her shoulder. “Well?”

Shane swallowed. But there was really only one answer.

“I’ll stop you, Red,” she promised, struggling to her feet. “I’ll protect Fi and Briar, over and over. As many times as it takes.”

Red smiled like she’d expected nothing less. “But first you’ll have to get out of here. Who knows what’s happening to them while you’re stuck with me?”

That was a sobering thought. Shortcut or no shortcut, this was still Witch Hunter territory. If it came to a fight, Shane ought to be the one at Fi’s back, not the peaceful, animal-loving Paper Witch, whose most dangerous weapon was a very disapproving look.

“Truce, then—just until we get out.” Shane nudged her messy braid over her shoulder, waving her bound hands. “So maybe we can lose these?”

“I think I’ll feel a little better if they stay on,” Red said, gesturing for Shane to take the lead.

The wolf—Cinzel, Red had called it—growled at Shane as she passed. Shane glared right back before heading off down the narrow passage, following the little stream. It was as good a place to start as any.

The light was much dimmer in the underground tunnels. The great swaths of crystal that lit the caverns above were sparse this far down, most of them clustered into the ceiling and high on the walls. They gave off a watery glow, almost like moonlight.

The cave system was clearly natural, which made it hard to pick her route. Some tunnels tapered off into holes barely big enough for a gopher, while others stretched out into vast glittering halls, the crystals reflected a thousandfold in great pools as still as glass.

Shane tried to follow the waterways—no easy feat when the streams kept crisscrossing and vanishing into fissures in the rock, but at least they were all basically moving in the same direction. She remembered the Paper Witch saying there was a river on the other side of the ruin, drawing it with a stick in the dirt the night before they’d entered the forge. Part of her wished she’d been paying better attention to Fi’s nine hundred follow-up questions. The other part of her knew there was only so much navigating you could do from stick drawings in the dirt. It was a good bet the underground waterways and the river flowed to the same place, though, which made it

her best chance for meeting up with the others.

Something moved in the shadows. Shane jumped as the wolf lunged past her, utterly silent until he scabbled over the rocks and snapped at the eyeless fish flickering in the stream. She kept forgetting about him, and the crackle of fish bones crunching in his jaws wasn't a real cheery way to remember.

The scraggly brown-and-white wolf didn't look like much compared to the twisted monsters Red had commanded in the Forest of Thorns, but even this one had almost taken her arm off. Shane was really wishing she had her ax right now—for a lot of reasons.

Her eyes darted over to Red. Unlike Shane, who was caked so thick with grime and dust she probably looked like she'd been buried alive and then crawled back out, Red still looked unfairly put together. She wore an outfit suited to traveling, a fitted red tunic that flared at the hips over black pants, with a wide black belt cinched at the waist. Her crimson-lined cloak flashed around her ankles. In the soft light, she was mesmerizing, her cheeks glistening with the exertion of the march.

Shane cursed under her breath. The next time she tripped, she'd make sure to break her fall with her head. She had clearly knocked something loose in her brain if she was still mooning after Red.

The tunnels stretched on and on. Red had her waterskin, which they were quickly draining, but she didn't have any food, and only Cinzel seemed to be enjoying the slimy fish. It was impossible to tell time in the perpetual twilight, but if Shane's protesting muscles were any indication, they might have to find a spot to rest soon.

She was about to suggest they call a halt when they came on an archway carved into the rock. Where everything else was mottled and raw, this looked like it had been chiseled at, the stones scarred by deep grooves. The area beyond was pitch black, not a crystal in sight, but the trickle of water she'd been following led straight into it.

Shane wrinkled her nose. "We need to go through there, but . . ."

"But what?" Red demanded crossly. "Let's go." She stepped around Shane, pinning her with a glare. It was somewhat undercut when she immediately caught her foot on a rock, tripping and almost tumbling into the stream.

"I was going to say we need some light first," Shane said smugly. "I would have tried to catch you, but . . ." She waved her bound hands.

The look Red shot her was positively murderous. Shane's chuckle died as Cinzel butted his big shovel-shaped head into the back of her knee and she lurched forward, cracking her elbow against the rock.

Shane swore. Red hadn't even given the wolf any kind of signal!

"Very funny," Shane told the mangy creature. His tongue lolled proudly out of his mouth.

Red had a little *serves-you-right* smirk, but it faded as she stared down the tunnel. "So what do you suggest? Unfortunately, my pack and everything else useful is still above ground, while we're stuck down here." She shot Shane a look, to be sure the huntsman knew who she blamed for that.

Shane ignored her. Her eyes landed on the softly

glowing crystals. “Maybe we can pry one of those out,” she said, nodding toward a fist-size crystal about shoulder level in the wall.

“Cinzel, guard,” Red said offhand. The wolf sat obediently on his haunches, yellow eyes fixed on Shane, while Red slid a thin hunting knife from her boot and set to work prying at the crystal. The blade kept sliding against the glassy surface. Red cursed as the knife flew off, chipping against the stone.

“I’d give you a hand—you know, if I could,” Shane offered, holding up her wrists again. Red’s eyebrows drew together in frustration, and Shane wasn’t sure whether she wanted to drive her blade into the wall or into Shane.

“Fine,” she said at last, jerking her head. “Make yourself useful.”

Shane approached slowly—no sudden movements with a wolf at her back. She almost expected Red to pull the wicked rod from her belt, just to be doubly sure Shane wouldn’t try anything. Instead, Red took Shane’s hands between her own, lifting the small knife and gently sawing through the layers of frayed rope cord.

This close, with the crystals all around them, it was impossible not to notice the scars on Red’s hand. Most of them were old, jagged white lines scratched into the center of her palm, but there were some new wounds, too. Punctures that were raw and red even though they had long stopped bleeding.

Now Shane knew where those came from. The thorn rod. The weapon Red used as the right hand of the Spindle Witch—one that clearly hurt her to wield. With Red’s hair

pinned up, Shane could see a flicker of the faded tattoo on the back of her neck: the two snakes, fangs extended, frozen forever in an unwinnable battle. Fi had said it was a sealing tattoo, something the Witch Hunters had done to Red when she was a child. To them it represented magic and evil devouring each other. But Shane couldn't help thinking of a different kind of battle altogether. The battle being waged in the girl right in front of her.

There was the Red who had clearly suffered horribly and been forced to do whatever it took to survive, and there was the Red who now used that suffering to justify whatever horrible thing she was asked to do. One of them could be saved. The other one . . .

The bonds fell away. Before Red could pull back, Shane reached out, catching her wrist.

"I was hoping you'd run away after the Forest of Thorns." Her voice was low, just a breath in the dark.

Red arched an eyebrow. "I did run away, if you recall."

"No. I meant away from the Spindle Witch and all of this."

Red jerked back, her hand slipping out of Shane's grasp. She laughed, but it sounded hollow. "Oh, Shane. Don't you ever get tired of being so wrong about me?"

That stung. But Shane refused to give up, because she had realized something about Red—something important. Red was at war with herself, whether she knew it or not. There had been one moment, more than any other, when she had given herself away.

"That night, outside of the Forest of Thorns, you asked me to run away with you. You meant it, didn't you?"

Red's expression didn't change, but her scarred hand

fisted in her cloak. Shane had a feeling she'd struck a nerve.

She pressed on, staring deep into Red's eyes. "If I'd said yes, you would have left the Spindle Witch and disappeared with me. You were asking me to save you."

"You're wrong." Red shook her head, like she could chase the words away. "I only asked because I knew you would never agree."

"Red . . ."

"I cut you loose to get that crystal," Red bit out. "Don't make me regret it."

Shane had so much more she wanted to say. But there was a coldness in Red's gaze now, a warning that she was about to cross an invisible line that would put them back at each other's throats.

"Fine." Shane held out her hand for the knife. She wedged the tip of the blade in between the rocks and then smashed her palm into the hilt, hard enough to create a crack. Two more good hits and the crystal came free. She offered it to Red, who refused.

"You're leading, remember?" Her arms were crossed tight, every inch of her radiating *leave me alone*. She didn't retrieve the cord, though, or bind Shane's hands again before they splashed under the archway. It was a start.

The cavern beyond was cold and damp. The rocks above the archway were reinforced by thick iron beams bolted to the rock, which seemed reassuring until Shane passed under them and caught sight of a long split through the center where the crossbeam was bowing in. The smell of rot hovered around them. Shane held up the crystal, swinging it around to light the vast empty space. Where she would have expected veins

of crystal, there were deep gouges carved into the walls, like everything of value had been torn out. There were even deep holes scored with hatch marks from a pick or a shovel, where someone had been digging and digging—like they were searching for something.

One strange mark held her gaze, carved into the wall between two hacked-out fissures: a great curved X with an eye on either side. The carving was simple, but something about it pricked the hairs on the back of Shane's neck. She wondered suddenly if this was where the scholar had found the massive ruby he called the Hollow Heart of the Hills. It certainly felt hollow now, and empty, and bitter cold.

“Hurry up,” Red snapped.

Shane let the light drop away, but the feel of those eyes followed her long after they'd left the cavern behind.

She didn't try to talk to Red again. Whatever she had uncovered was too raw and too fragile—and too dangerous. For both of them.