

What the Crows Found

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Chapter One

Winter and its cold grasp belong to the Father, the Crown faithful say, and the spring is her gift, the Mothers, melting the snow and bringing life back to Emberreach with her touch.

The sunrise was different than usual. This was wrong; a jagged red line crept along the horizon before any yellow got a chance to show. The lemongrass shoots pushed through the damp crust of the earth, feeling the strange warmth already in the soil, like it always does in Briarwood: quiet, stubborn and too small to matter. The red hue of the morning sun spilled across the village, painting it a weird colour, nobody said anything.

The main road thought the town was still soft from winter. Smoke rose and coiled with the spring winds above only a few stone hearths. Creeping vines with small pink buds wrap around some old graves, and yellow briarlock dots along the pathways. Winters seem to get harder and harder each year, this one especially, but the flowers grew anyway, like Pyrean's flame refusing to give into hollow darkness.

A slender hooded figure shifts through the small saplings of the juvenile forest, quick-footed. A short bow slung over one shoulder, dark ashenwood, carved all along it are thin golden vines, its tight silver-like string catching the morning rays light, making it shine almost like moonlight, the sun barely chasing the old forest treeline. Each step disturbing the morning dew on newly sprouted grass, worn brown leather boots, slender tan fingers pull the hood a little tighter against the morning chill.

To be a hunter isn't a gift just given. It was a skill drilled in by hours in the woods, away from prying eyes that might count the misses, and there were plenty of those. Most mornings usually meant coming home with a rabbit, if lucky. A squirrel. There wasn't much to hunt in the woods this early in the spring.

Thornbush shook. The string pulled back tight, the old arrow whooshed, and thumped into a rotten stump, a foot length away from anything. Two sparrows scattered. A soft curse came out low from under the hood. Three missed shots since sunrise.

Then the crows started up. Loud and unrelenting.

One or two crows, that was nothing. But a dozen, circling the same patch of woods, were wheeling and diving like they were all arguing over something special on the ground.

The footsteps dug into a halt.

Carrion.

Carefully, steps closer, one soft step at a time, the air seems to get colder, and the wood creeps in closer with every step taken.

“Four above us, four beside us,” a small whisper steamed out, soft and light-voiced, more of habit than real prayer, hidden under the cawing. The hood shifted back a enough; a few strands of blonde hair loose from the edge got pushed back up and under the hood.

The smell hit first before anything, like rotten old cabbage, the same sickly sweet stink, like when they clean the bottom of the root cellar. Then the shape on the ground. Pale. Bloated. Naked. Mutilated. Breathe, catching and then burning like it's stuck there.

Crows were still working on it; tearing strips of skin gone the colour of old lard. One crow yanked an eyeball loose and took off to the trees with it. That was more than enough. A retch splats down on the leaves, and even after that, the world wouldn't stop spinning. They kept screaming through the branches like the whole forest had lost its mind.

Running out of the forest, it felt like watching someone else run. Feet carried the rest of the body out of the trees and through the still sleeping village without much say in the matter, past the well, past the town gate, past all the small ordinary things that hadn't heard yet what the woods had just shown. None of it felt real: not the mud sucking at worn boots, not the stitch tearing through one side, and not even the crows finally fading out behind. Briarwood looked exactly the way it always looked in the early light, and that wrongness, more than anything left behind in the trees, was what finally cracked something open in the chest.

The old stained bakery door stood there, with a push, it slammed open.

“By the Father.” Tom's voice is rough with sleep and flour dust. “Jemma, you look like you have seen a ghost.” Tom pulls the hood back himself; yellow-blonde falls loose from the hood. It was the same colour as his own; her skin, usually darker, like her mother's is now pale white like flour on his big hands.

"Dad, there's a body," she managed.

"I told you, hunting's not..." He stopped. The rest of the scolding just wasn't in him.

Thomas Burns never lived anywhere in Briarwood. His father baked bread for her, and his father before him. Tom is big through the shoulders from thirty years of kneading dough; he is fair-skinned with sandy blonde hair, slowly going grey at his temples, kind of plain, the same look as every other family in Briarwood. Flour worked so deep into the creases of his hands like it never would fully wash out, even on his day of rest. It's the only home he's ever known, and the place where he buried Corriane almost ten winters back when dread crept in known as the Ivory Veil, and it took her from them. He still held on to the cloak she'd shown up in Briarwood wearing, hanging probably where she last left it, a strange-sun bleached fabric dyed a deep, dusty red that no Briarwood loom had ever made, patterned along the hem with small stitched suns nobody in the village had ever asked him to explain. He hadn't had it in all those years, just dusted around it, the same as everything else, every morning before the fires caught. She'd look nothing like the rest of the village, Corriane, with skin a deep warm brown that never quite matched anyone else in Briarwood, dark hair, darker eyes, a foreignness nobody in town had ever asked about her twice after the first winter, and a temper Jemma had inherited whole along with a laugh Tom still heard sometimes in the middle of an ordinary afternoon, when he least expected it and could least afford it.

He looked at his daughter properly now: the shine in her brown eyes, the white in her face. "The Father takes and the Mother gives back love," he started, and even as he said it he could hear how hollow it sounded.

"It was a *person*, Dad." Her voice barely held together.

That stopped him cold. He wiped his hands on his old, blue apron and pulled her in, and she let him, burying her face against him the way she hadn't in years. "We need Justice Corwin," she mumbled in his apron.

"Aye," he said, taking a deep breath. "We do," and sighed.

Justice Corwin knelt down at the altar of Vaelor, eyes shut, murmuring the line over and over, the private oath every judge learned before he ever earned his first gold ring: *Truth*

does not bend because it is heavy, nor soften because the hand that carried it grows tired. The cold of the stone floor seeping up through his knees, and candle wax and old incense, thick in the air around him when the temple door creaked open behind him. He didn't need to look to know someone had come in wrong, out of breath and out of place. He slowly opened his eyes and stood, unhurried, and turned to find Tom Burns and his daughter standing in the doorway.

"Justice Corwin", Tom said, too loud for the temple, and looked immediately down and apologised for it.

Justice Corwin Lancer was an ordinary-built man made to look larger by how still he held himself; medium height, he was lean and rather broad, his clean-shaven head catching the light, his brown eyes flat and unreadable. His dark brown beard was close-cropped and a long braid hung at his chin; five gold rings for every 4 years he has served. "Blessed be the fourfold crown," He said, bowing just enough to count as one. "And what brings the Burnses to the temple? To pray, is it?" There was an edge in those words that Tom felt more than heard.

"Jemma found a body," Tom said, not quite meeting his eyes. "Out past the Juvenile Forest."

Corwin's rough hands went to his beard, one ring at the time. "A body." He said it flat, like he was turning it over to check the weight of it. "Girl. Show me where. Thomas goes to tell the mother."

Tom didn't move. "I'd rather not leave her with..." His hand rests on Jemma's shoulder .

"Now", Corwin said, and that was that.

Jemma led him out through the gate and down into the trees, dew catching the light around the vamp of her boots like something almost pretty, if you didn't know what waited ahead. The cold hadn't let up despite the sun.

Corwin's stretched arm came and stopped her before Jemma got too close. The smell-that's what reached them first, faint at first, then all at once, like a fishhook to the nose.

The body lay ahead the way she'd left it, bloodless and sunken and wrong. "Stay," he said, and walked past the mess she had left behind an hour ago without a glance at it.

He crouched over the body a long while, pulling at his beard, working through what he was looking at. A woman. Both her eyes are gone, crows' work, most likely. Throat cut nearly to the spine. The tongue pulled loose through the wound. Both thumbs gone. Both middle fingers too, leaving raw stumps where they had been. Who does this to a person?

Jemma stood frozen, watching him work, unable to look away and unable to keep staring. She found her hands had gone cold in a way that had nothing to do with the morning air, and she found herself counting the crows overhead without meaning to, anything to keep her eyes and brain from landing on what was in front of her.

Tom and Mother Vaeda arrived a few minutes later. Vaeda's hand found Jemma's shoulder; grey hair pinned up in a neat bun, her robe has a faded blue with a gold hand-stitched across the front, her face soft with age and worry in equal measure. "The hand that forgives must first reach towards the wound." Jemma's chest loosened, just a bit, standing between her dad and the priestess.

Corwin walked back to the trio. He bowed his head in respect to Vaeda. "Ugly business," he said and nothing more. "Thomas, get your girl home now."

"Wha-what happened?" Jemma asked.

"Not your business, girl" He said, and that was the end of that.

"You shouldn't have been out there alone," Tom says low, not quite looking at her. "Not in the woods alone."

Tom puts his arm around her as they walk back towards the town.

"I've been in the woods my whole life." Jemma's voice sounded sharper than she meant to.

"I know what I know." Tom's jaw was tight, the words clipped short in a way. "That could have been you," he said.

Jemma doesn't answer, same argument every day with him. Her dad's voice sounded almost like the crows cawing back in the woods.

Finally back home, in the rooms behind the bakery, Tom turns to Jemma and tries once again. "Vaelis will watch over you.

"Vaelor, Vaelis, Aavrion, Pyrean." Jemma's voice cracked sharply. "Why bring them up now? You don't even believe in them, Dad!." Jemma spits like venom.

Tom's face turns red. "I care about you, Jemma, but since you're Mother..."

"Liar," she snaps back. Tom almost saw his wife's voice through her.

Hurt moved across Tom's face, almost like Jemma had slapped him across his face. The same hurt that hid something older and deeper than just today, the hurt look of a man who had lost the same argument with himself a hundred times over and never once won it. His hand gripped the wooden doorway that led to the bakery, and head hung low. "Jemma I don't care if you hate me. I'd rather you be angry at me than dead. He left that there to hang in the air before he closed the door and went to work, the way he always does, his way of dealing with pain and hurt.

Jemma slammed her own small door, and immediately, quietly, hated herself for it, the way she always did, but she is not a little girl anymore, she tells herself over and over again in her head.

Justice Corwin and Mother Vaeda stayed behind at the site, the body now wrapped in a blue silk cloth, to hide the grotesque site and to help Vaelis find her body. "The men are going to prepare the pyre." Mother Vaeda: "Poor thing. I must tell the cooper."

"Vaelor justice, I can inform him of this." Corwin's voice is flat as ever.

"Corwin," Mother Vaeda smiles softly. "You are not one for the proper words; I will see to them on the way back."

Corwin said nothing. "I need to reach the Halls of Vaelor. The High Justice must hear this from me." His hand resting on the rings in his beard.

Justice Corwin escorts Mother Vaeda back towards the town gate before they split off. Mother Vaeda heads towards the late Jessica house. Justice Corwin heads towards the town's temple.

Local men carried Cooper's wife off under the same blue shroud; a few more were cutting at some pine and oak for the pyre. Cries bellowed from the cooper's shop as mothers pulled their children in early. Doors shut and barred. Nobody stood outside any longer than they had to. Briarwood had its share of death over the years, between harsh winters and the Ivory Veil that had taken more than it shared before it finally moved on to wherever plagues go when they are done, but a murder, nobody could remember the last time a murder had happened in Briarwood. Shit maybe nobody ever had. The whole reason for the eerie whole-town quiet, the shut doors, and the way even the butcher's dog seems to know to hide.

The Forge stays cold and quiet. Tom's ovens barely smoked. The Small Tavern lay empty and silent, usually filled with chatter and laughing.

Even as dusk crept in, the sun was different, the red rip now almost resembling more of a teardrop. The whole village had gathered around the stacked-up wood, taller than a man; even the logs were weeping the sap like tears. Not a word was murmured around the unlit pyre.

Jemma stood next to her father, not too close, but close enough, and they both said nothing to each other. Tom looked over at his daughter, that frown, those eyes just like Corriane's. A small smile pokes to the side of his mouth at that resemblance; he wanted to say sorry and that she was the only important thing left to him. What if it was Jemma instead of Jessica, the wife of the cooper. He stuttered at the thought and returned back to look at the pyre.

The small clomp sound of Mother Vaeda's old wooden staff was followed by her in fresh blue robes which were also embroidered with the gold hand of Valies. She raised her face to the oddly dim night sky and spoke the old words.

"Vaelor, the Father, Lord of the crown and judgement, we present to Your halls this weary soul: let truth be their guide and mercy be your actions. O blessed Mother Vaelis, whose touch brings life and forgiveness. Cover them with their mantle. Guide them along the bright road, so that they might not wander into the Hollow. Their son Avarion, faithful son and carrier of the Living Flame, walks before them though the long dusk, let no shadow fall upon him, nor any whisper of thy Hollow King turn him from his course. O Pyrean, first gift and last light, let the flames endure within him. Let death not extinguish what heaven has kindles, until he stands before Father and Mother with soul made whole. From dust we were shaped. By flame we awakened. By faith we are guided. To the Crown, we return. So let it be"

One man bends down to light the bottom of the pyre. It caught fast; the sap hissed and roared up, almost looking like a gold crown reaching to the dark sky. Nobody said much. A few people cried without hiding it. Jemma just started into the flames. Anger, more than sadness, being honest with herself, was what she felt most days. Her father stood there. Close enough to touch but further away than he had ever been.

By the time the pyre had burnt down to embering coals, the village had left back to their homes, again barring their doors behind them. Jemma walked ahead of her father the whole way back; still anger stirred inside her, the same fights about hunting and not baking. Her father's protection felt more like a prison to her.

Jemma got to the rear door of the bakery first and shut it before Tom could enter. He caught her before she slammed her own door shut.

"Jemma, I love you," he said, Tom's voice almost breaking as the word came out.

Her blonde hair didn't turn around.

That night, Jemma lay awake most of the night, but when she did, it was the cawing of the crow that she dreamt behind her eyes. The moon was full, and outside a dog barked its horse; a man shouting at his wife, then not. Jemma's straw-bedding gown was damp and sour with sweat by the time she finally fell asleep, if that's what you would call it. She woke just before dawn, yet another odd morning it felt stale, she sat up and took a deep breath, ugh she thought smelling her own fear sweated odor. Out in the early morning darkness, the morning chorus of birds start, the sound of a cartwheel grinding and creaking, two dogs bark at each other till they are both hoarse.

Jemma crept slowly out of her room and toward the door to the bakery, it was too quiet as she got to the door. She pushed the door slightly open. The oven was cold. A charred burnt loaf sitting in the oven forgotten.

"Dad?"

Nothing.

"Dad?" This time Jemma's voice broke with suspicion and fear.

She stepped into the doorway, and her whole world stopped in an instant.

There he was. His apron still on covered in flour, knelt between the counter and his oven, his arms dropped to his side, his hands resting in a semi dried pool of blood. His

thumbs on both hands crudely cut off and both of his middle fingers too. Tom's throat cut open, as his tongue loosely hangs from the bloodied open wound.

The same . All of it, the same thing.

It was her legs that gave out first. Jemma crawled towards him, though the flour covered the floor.

Tears well in her eyes “ Daddy, please wake up”

He was cold under her hands.

This bakery should've been warm and smelling of fresh bread and wood. Now it smells like a butcher shop floor. Jemma screamed into her father's chest and didn't stop for a long time. All she could think was the last thing he ever said to her and that he loved her and she let her pride and anger get the best of her and said nothing back. She brings her head up to wipe the tear meeting the almost cut of neck and his tongue.

Justice Corwin was barely into his morning prayers when a scream echoed through the town and cut into the temple, he was up and moving. He grabbed his sword , propped against the altar, Truthkeeper, grabbed his cloak and moved outside.

The scream came from the square.

He crossed the town towards the bakery, his boots hammering the dirt, feet quick and silent, townspeople already gathering around the Bakery. Murmurs and fear looked on their faces could only mean something bad. Corwin shoved his way through the small crowd.

The Bakery was not a bakery anymore.

The Justice's eyes scan the nightmarish scene of the bakery, cataloguing every detail he could, his hand resting on the hilt of Truthkeeper.

Blood spray mixed with flour, making a crimson paste, oven cold. There in the middle of the bakery, A desiccated body of what looked like Thomas the Baker and the young Jemma curled up on the body. Sobbing.

“No, no, please, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...”

Something old and forgotten pulled tight in Corwin's chest. Death he had seen, probably more than most men would in ten lifetimes, It was the living left behind that was the tough part and never got easier for them. He stepped towards her, Corwin knelt down next to Jemma. There was nothing to say, so he didn't .

Jemma turned to him, her face a mess of tears, blood and flour smeared her face. "Please" she whimpered out "make him wake up. He listens to you. Please, make him know I'm not angry with him , not anymore."

For half a second, the bakery changed to his boyhood home. He was a young boy again, standing in the doorway , his younger sister screaming for their mother to open her eyes, their father long gone and never returning.

Corwin pulls himself back into the room. She was still crying beside him.

"I'm sorry girl" He said, putting his hand on her shoulder, out of obligation not sympathy.

Jemma still held on to Tom's lifeless body. Corwin closed his eyes and said "Four above us. Four beside us,judge our deeds and mend our failures". Her grip tying with each word.

Hands grabbed Jemma and peeled off and away from the body.

"Come her sweet child". Jemma fell into Mother Vaeda bosom, lost somewhere between the Comforting smell of her lavender smelling robes and the nothingness left in her home.

Corwin still knelt surveying the body, looking up to Mother Vaeda worried gaze. "Something very strong here" she said in a soft but firm tone.

The Justice stood and started to head toward the door. "I leave now, to the capital."

Mother Vaeda stared at him, her head dipping to the side.

"No" he said, before Mother Vaeda said anything.

"By the Four,Corwin" her voice still gentle as ever but this time with a command. "This girl needs protection. Whether she or you like it."

His head shook. "No," he said with same flatness as before.

A quick flash hits Corwin , Not Jemma's face anymore but his sister's.

He grimaced his teeth and let out a long breath. He knew Vaeda was right, and some old buried part of him knew it too." By Vaelor" he muttered under his breath. "Fine we leave now, girl"

Jemma looked up to Mother Vaeda's chest, waiting for her say in what happens to her. Mother Vaeda's fat and wrinkled hands find Jemma's distraught face. "You must go, child".

"I'll find a horse for her." Corwin said "and clean her up,pack what she needs, im not riding out of here with her looking like that", with that Corwin turns and heads outside to deal with the crowd of onlookers.

"Come now dear" Vaeda guided her towards her small room, Mother Vaeda packs what little things Jemma had. Jemma is still lost somewhere far away, only Mother Vaeda's voice brings her back.

"Justice Corwin is not a patient man, my dear" Vaeda says, softer and a little gentler.

Jemma stood there as Mother Vaeda disrobed her blood-caked clothes, some much blood soaked though. Mother Veada washed her.

"Here" Vadea said hand fresh clothing to Jemma.

Jemma dressed in complete silence. Hiding in her own mind, her father,her dad was laughing at something, tears well in her eyes.Outside, Horses Stamping and snort outside.

"Come now, dear" Vadea says, wiping the tears from Jemma's eyes, handing her a small pack, Jemma grabbed her mothers bow from the wall.Jemma grabbed her mother's cloak, the peg it hung on and pulled over her shoulders. She took one last look at her home, then walked quickly past what was left of her father without letting herself stop."I love you, daddy" she whispered.

Justice Corwin stood outside with two horses , one in each hand, A black destrier named Roslyn, Breath steaming in the cool morning air, in his other hand a smaller , white sumpter, still young and gentle like.

“This is Sugar” he pushed the resin into her then he swung up into his own saddle. “Don’t forget it , girl”.

Jemma put one foot in the stirrup and reach up to pull herself up onto Sugar's saddle, still numb and distant, like if any of this was real.

“May the four fold bless you both” Mother Veada called out to them, almost in a hymn.

The sun was only now clearing the trees, later than the morning already felt. Red like yesterday but not the same red, dark and more of rusty red , the yellow catching up slowly behind it.

The duo turned for the gates, Jemma turned her head and looked back,at her home,her only world, the safest place she had ever known, the bakery roofline just visible above the other buildings and a mob of crows already settling along its ridge,patient,unhurried,waiting for whatever came next. Then they rode out. Mother Vaeda stood in the road till they were gone, or maybe longer than that. Jemma didn’t look back again to check.