



1

The morning the Merry Men came for Old Rosie, Clem was trying to put a hat on a fox.

She felt quite bad about this later.

At the time it had seemed important; the fox had become tame enough to take scraps of meat and twists of hide directly from her hand, and putting a hat on him was the next logical step.

The construction of said hat had somewhat consumed her morning. She had visited the seamstress over by the river and come away with some soiled felt, unfit for trade; she'd swapped a little sage tea with Jon, who had a chronic sore throat, for a single turkey feather, just the right size to accessorise a small vulpine head.

She had been waylaid for a while by the miller's boy, Alfred, who was seven and had scraped both his knees raw but was being very, very brave about it. His elder sister Loos squeezed his hand while Clem blotted his wounds with thinned honey, and then wasted a narrow strip of bandage on him, sending him home a proud, wounded warrior. Rosie always grumbled that Clem was too free with both her compassion and her supplies, but she could hardly argue that they were in dire

need right now. Clem's penchant for *experimenting* was earning her quite the reputation, and had been attracting the sort of customers who paid in actual coin rather than stray bits of ham and pats on the head. They weren't well-off by any stretch of the imagination, but tying linen bows on Alfred's bloody knees wasn't going to tip them over into destitution.

Shaping the offcut of felt into something hat-shaped had taken a sweet half hour, sitting with her boots off in a stretch of buttery sunlight in the far reaches of the garden, amongst Rosie's ramshackle beds of mint, soft lavender and elder. The fox had made a few appearances, poking his head out of the woods to snuffle for treats and glare accusingly at her when none were to be found. He'd chosen the right garden to frequent; anyone with livestock would have made it their life's mission to see him turned into cloak-lining, but Clem and Rosie had been told very firmly by Jon that their temperaments were 'ill-suited to the needs of chickens', so Rosie's beds remained eggless and the fox was free to come and go as he pleased.

When Clem had finally reached a hattish conclusion, she fetched a soup bone, still stringy with meat, and offered it up with an enticing wiggle.

'Good little lads get hats,' she said, not bothering to talk soft or low; this fox was used to her by now, and would only have been suspicious of a gentle cajole. 'Bad little lads too, I suppose. A hat for every little lad, regardless of temperament – that's my guarantee.'

The fox seemed indifferent to the concept of hats, but very interested in bone meat. He approached. Clem readied the hat. The fox dithered, sensing a trap.

This continued for quite some time. Clem was so engrossed in her task that she didn't notice a knock at the front door, or hoofs on the path.

It was only when she heard something shatter inside the little house, ruining her best hatting attempt so far, that she realised something was amiss.

Her body's reaction to danger at her door was immediate.

Her chest contracted. Her breath caught. She was suddenly sweaty in strange and unexpected locations, like the insides of her elbows and the backs of her ears. For one terrible moment, she was nine again, and the world was ending.

She shook it off.

By the time she had barrelled through the back door, there were two cloaked and hooded figures standing by the hearth. They were armed to the teeth and comically ominous amongst all the charming clutter, some of which now lay broken and smashed underfoot. One of them had Old Rosie – who wasn't really that old, but had lived long enough to wrinkle around the edges, like she'd soaked for too long in the bath of life – with both hands pinned behind her back.

From the colour of their cloaks, it was immediately apparent that these were Merry Men. Merry Men! Standing in Clem's house! Threatening Clem's Rosie!

She would have asked for autographs if she weren't prioritising finding a weapon.

'Hullo, Clemmie,' Rosie said, perky as ever. 'Is it my birthday?'

‘No,’ said Clem, groping around on the table next to her for something sharp. ‘At least ... I don’t think so. Is it?’

‘It’s not,’ said the enormous man who had Rosie pinned. ‘Well ... it might be. I don’t know when your birthday is. But to be clear, that’s not why we’re here.’

‘It’s just, you’re awfully handsome,’ Rosie said, trying to twist in the young man’s grip to get a better look at him. ‘And *strong*. I don’t go in much for Merry Men, but if they all looked like *you* ...’

Clem snorted. ‘He’s not *handsome*, Rosie, he’s kidnapping you.’

‘When you’ve been around for as long as I have, Clemence, you’ll begin to understand that these things are not mutually exclusive.’

Clem’s fingers had closed around a heavy stone pestle, still dusty with crushed fennel.

‘If you came to woo her, then be my guest,’ she said to the large man, ‘but it’s a little presumptuous to grab first, and it’s *very* telling that you had to bring a friend along for moral support.’

The other hooded figure, who was approximately a third of the size of the first, made a brief, choked noise that Clem thought might have been a laugh. This held promise.

‘Now, why don’t I make some tea?’ Clem said brightly, with a smile. That sounded nice. Tea. Tea with actual Merry Men. A bit of a misunderstanding, followed by laughs and bonding over biscuits. ‘Then we can all sit down for a moment and talk about why you’re here, before anybody does anything—’

The door flew open, smacking against the wall and then

coming to an undignified stop, and a third person – also anonymised by a long, mossy Lincoln green cloak – entered. Their associates straightened up slightly; the tall one tightened his grip on Rosie, who said ‘Goodness!’, not sounding nearly as upset as she should have been.

‘What’s this?’ said the newcomer. She had a low, no-nonsense voice with a little rasp to it. ‘Stop dicking around.’

‘Not dicking,’ the tall man protested. ‘What part of this says *dicking*? Just didn’t expect there to be two.’

There was a brief pause, during which Clem felt the unseen eyes of this new authority upon her.

‘Who is she to you?’ she said to Old Rosie.

‘Not sure that’s really any of your business,’ Clem said, still friendly as ever, at the exact same time that Old Rosie said, ‘Well – that’s my *Clem*.’

The newcomer did not seem particularly moved. ‘We don’t have time for this. Let’s go.’

It finally dawned on Clem that they really were going to take Rosie with them; Rosie, who never left the village of OakVale if she could help it, and had a bad knee, and drank her nettle tea at the same time every morning standing with her hand on her hip surveying her garden. She’d hate that. It wasn’t very Merry of them at all.

‘Take *me*,’ she said quickly. ‘If you need a healer. I’m good ... ish. Young too. Sprightly, even.’

‘Could do, Captain,’ said the tall man, addressing the hood in charge. ‘If she’s offering.’

‘Leverage,’ said the smaller person, speaking for the first time. ‘Right?’

‘Yes,’ said the captain. ‘That’s what I was about to suggest. Knock her out. Bring some of . . . this. Whatever looks useful.’

‘Now hang on a minute,’ Rosie said, struggling against her captor, finally having the good sense to sound concerned. ‘You can’t just be *taking* people. That’s not on.’

‘I don’t like being knocked out,’ added Clem. ‘That’s just a personal hang-up of mine, you understand.’

She raised her pestle, readying for a fight she had no chance of winning; before she could take a single step forwards, someone new grabbed her from behind, squeezing her wrist until she was forced to release her weapon. Clem hadn’t even heard the back door creak. She felt a heavy blow to the back of her knees and immediately crumpled to the floor.

The only advantage of this was that she could see her pestle where it had rolled away and become wedged in the dust under the nuts, seeds and berries cabinet. She reached for it, but was stopped by a foot, which landed firmly on her forearm and pressed her gently into the floor.

‘What are you even going to do with that?’ said her unseen assailant, irritatingly wry. ‘Ask me to lie still and grind me into a fine powder?’

‘Enough,’ snapped the kidnapper-in-chief. ‘Let’s go. And you —’ Clem could only assume that Rosie was being addressed now, as she was at entirely the wrong angle to see for herself — ‘you know why we’re here. We must all act in the best interests of the people of the wood.’

‘That’s funny,’ Clem said into the packed dirt of the floor. ‘Because I sort of thought I was one of *the people of the wood*, and I’m over here being pummelled.’

Her attacker removed her foot, and then hauled Clem to her feet. ‘This wasn’t a pummelling,’ she said in a low, amused voice. ‘It was closer to a massage.’

Clem glimpsed the young woman under the hood – umber skin, a black braid and a flash of a smile – before a blindfold was slipped neatly over her eyes.

‘No offence, but I wouldn’t like to be the receiving end of—’

‘Bye now.’

Clem’s mouth was prised open with firm precision; she tasted the sharp, vinegary tang of dwale on her tongue before the world blinked out.