



Prologue

There were strangers in her forest. Even from inside the thick, white-washed walls of her cottage in the woods, even under the heavy thatch, Granny could feel them. And she didn't like it. Not one little bit.

She'd been feeling the pressure of their presence for days, like a storm building up. Or a sewer overflowing after a deluge. But she couldn't quite see or feel who they were or why they were here. She just knew they weren't up to any good.

The gaudy, purple-striped stockings on her feet, propped up on a hassock, belied the seriousness of her role in this land, her charge to protect. Granny leaned back in her chair, sucking on her clay pipe, trying to settle her nerves. She'd lit no lamps, preferring only the light that came from her hearth. As she smoked, she studied the rings she blew and the patterns of light and shadow the firelight threw on her walls, seeking answers and omens.

She sighed, worrying that she'd have to take her broom out of mothballs. The last time she'd been forced to use it had been decades ago, after she'd left her old life behind. Granny really hoped she wouldn't have to resort to all that again. She wouldn't have thought she'd ever have to—that lot had learned their lesson good and proper. But this felt just like the last time, only with a new bunch of players. It seemed that there was just no stopping stupidity.

The sound of soft scratching at her kitchen door penetrated her thoughts. She wasn't surprised at company, even this late. Laying down her pipe, she settled her black skirts and stuffed her feet in her clogs, then trudged to her back door. Opening it, she saw a wolf sitting on her mat, his trusting amber eyes gazing up at her. She knelt down and gave him a scratch behind his ears. “Come for a nibble, have you?” she asked, hoping it was only that.

He shook his head then laid it on his front paws and whimpered. The wolf was one of “her boys,” as she called them. They were her eyes and ears in the forest when her inner sight was blocked. It paid to have a fallback plan. The forest and its creatures depended on her.

“Ah,” Granny responded. “You'd best come in, then, and tell me about it.” She held the door open and the wolf padded over to her chair. She closed, then bolted the door.

As the wolf told his tale, the flame shadows threw images of two wolf shapes across the wall. They weren't his clan—her wolves—and they weren't natural. Mixed with shadow-grey, their images bore streaks of a poisonous yellow: the colour of greed.