

C H A P T E R 1

A Thornmarket Welcome

The road into Thornmarket smelled of honeyed nuts and woodsmoke long before the gates came into view. Rook Underleaf walked with his pack slung low, his silver-gray fur already dusted with road grit, and tried not to stare at the crowds thickening around him. Pip Quickbough kept pace at his side, the Branchleaper's bright eyes darting from stall to stall as if cataloguing every ribbon and roasted seed the festival had to offer.

"We're not here to spend coin," Rook said.

"I'm looking, not buying."

"You're memorizing prices."

Pip's ears flicked. "A careful creature knows what things cost. That's not spending. That's wisdom."

Rook let it go. The festival sprawled across the market

square in a riot of canvas awnings and braided branchwood scaffolding, stalls stacked three high in places, connected by rope bridges that swayed under the weight of merchants and messengers. Lanterns strung between the old oaks had not yet been lit for evening, but their glass chimneys caught the mid-morning light and threw small rainbows onto the mud below. Somewhere a fiddler played a tune Rook almost recognized, and the sound of it tugged at him in a way he could not name.

He shook it off and focused on the work board near the central fountain. That was why they had come. Honest labor, fair pay, and enough coin to see them home before the autumn rains turned the roads to slurry. He was not here to gawk at ribbons.

A Deepdelver in a leather apron shouldered past, dragging a cart of clay pipes, and Rook stepped aside quickly. The movement brought him close to a refuse channel cut into the cobblestones, and without meaning to he noted the way a torn festival banner had been wedged into the grate, half the fabric still clean, the weave tight enough to patch a pack strap. His fingers twitched. He made them still.

“Work board’s over there,” Pip said, pointing with his chin. “Looks picked clean.”

“We’ll find something.”

“You always say that.”

“Because it’s always true.”

Pip snorted. “Last time you said that we spent three days digging a latrine for a badger who paid us in turnips.”

“Turnips keep.”

“Everything keeps if you’re stubborn enough to eat it.”

Rook smiled despite himself and wove through the crowd toward the board. The postings were sparse, most of the good jobs already taken by locals with established names and references. He read each slip twice, weighing the pay against the time, and felt the familiar prickle of disadvantage. No one in Thornmarket knew him. No one would vouch for a Masktail from the outer burrows, not when his kind had a reputation for vanishing when the work got hard and taking the scraps with them.

He hated that reputation. He hated that it followed him into rooms he had never entered and conversations he had never had.

A shadow fell across the board. Rook turned and found himself chest-high to a Deepdelver whose broad, earth-darkened face was set in a scowl that looked well practiced.

“There you are,” the Deepdelver said. “Thought you’d slip

past without settling, did you?”

Rook blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Masktail. The cart of refuse you borrowed last market day. Two weeks overdue and my ledger’s got your name on it.” The Deepdelver folded his arms, thick as roots. “I want my payment or I want my cart back, and I don’t much care which.”

“I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

“Rook, isn’t it? Rook the Masktail. Silver-gray, dark mask, banded tail.” The Deepdelver gestured at Rook’s whole person as if presenting evidence to a magistrate. “You match the description exactly.”

Rook’s tail curled tighter against his leg. “My name is Rook, yes. But I only arrived in Thornmarket this morning. I’ve never borrowed a cart from you. I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

The Deepdelver’s scowl deepened. “That’s a neat trick, considering you signed my ledger.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

Pip stepped forward, his voice careful. “We’re from the outer burrows. South of the Thornwood. We came for the

festival work. Whatever cart you're missing, my friend had nothing to do with it."

The Deepdelver studied Pip for a long moment, then looked back at Rook. Something flickered in his expression, not quite doubt, but the first crack in his certainty. "South of the Thornwood. You're not the refuse worker, then."

"I'm not any kind of worker yet," Rook said. "That's why I'm standing at the work board."

The Deepdelver grunted. He did not apologize. He simply turned and walked back into the crowd, muttering something about Masktails all looking the same, which was both unfair and untrue. Rook watched him go and felt the unease settle into his spine like cold water finding a crack in stone.

"That was strange," Pip said.

"He knew my name."

"It's a common name."

"He knew my markings. Silver-gray, dark mask, banded tail. That's not common. That's me."

Pip's ears flattened. "Maybe there's another Masktail in the city who looks like you."

"Exactly like me?"

“It happens.”

Rook did not answer. He was still staring at the place where the Deepdelver had disappeared, his mind turning over the words like a pebble in his palm. A cart of refuse. A signed ledger. Someone in Thornmarket wore his face and used his name, and that someone owed debts Rook had never made.

Before he could chase the thought further, a Branchleaper burst from the crowd and collided with Pip hard enough to send them both stumbling. The stranger was smaller than Pip, pale-furred and wild-eyed, clutching a wax-sealed message tube in both paws.

“Pipkin!” the Branchleaper gasped. “Thank the roots, I’ve been looking everywhere. This needs to reach the Damworks before the noon bell. Urgent. You have to go now.”

Pip stared at the tube being shoved into his grip. “I’m not... my name is Pip, but I’m not...”

“No time for chatter,” the Branchleaper said, already backing away. “You know the route better than anyone. Go!”

And then the stranger was gone, swallowed by the festival crowd before Pip could finish a sentence.

Pip looked down at the message tube. He looked at Rook. “What just happened?”

“Someone called you Pipkin.”

“No one calls me Pipkin. No one has ever called me Pipkin.”

“Someone just did.”

Pip turned the tube over in his paws. The wax seal was plain, no crest or sigil, just a thumbprint pressed deep. “He said I knew the route. I don’t know any route. I’ve never been to the Damworks. I don’t even know where the Damworks are.”

Rook looked up. The city rose around them in layers, branchways crossing overhead in a tangled lattice, staircases carved into the trunks of the great thorn oaks, tunnels burrowing into the earth beneath the market stalls. Somewhere above, a messenger ran along a rope bridge without breaking stride, and Rook watched the figure disappear into the canopy with a speed that spoke of long practice. The city was built for creatures who knew its paths. He and Pip knew none of them.

“We should find the Damworks,” Rook said slowly. “Deliver the message. Maybe whoever it’s meant for can explain.”

“Or we could leave it at a courier post and walk away.”

“You want to walk away?”

Pip’s jaw tightened. “No. I want to know why someone

thinks I'm a messenger."

"Then we go."

They asked directions from a hedgehog selling roasted chestnuts, who pointed them toward a staircase spiraling down along the inner wall of the market basin. The steps were worn smooth by generations of feet, and moss grew thick in the cracks. Rook descended carefully, his tail brushing the wall for balance, and tried to ignore the way every third creature they passed seemed to glance at him a beat too long.

A squirrel with a ledger tucked under her arm nodded as they passed. "Morning, Rook."

He opened his mouth to correct her and closed it again. She was already gone.

A young fox kit tugging a cart of kindling stopped and stared openly. "Ma said you got fined for dumping in the west channel. Is it true?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rook said.

The kit shrugged and kept walking, as if denial was exactly what she had expected.

Pip shot him a look. "How many creatures in this city think they know you?"

“Too many.”

“And they all think you’re someone who borrows carts and dumps refuse in the wrong channels.”

“A refuse worker,” Rook said quietly. “That Deepdelver called me a refuse worker.”

The word sat wrong in his mouth. Masktails were already associated with scraps and castoffs, with the things other creatures threw away. It was why Rook had left the burrows in the first place, why he had walked three days to a city where no one knew him, hoping to find work that proved he was more than his knack. More than a scavenger. And now the city had decided, before he had lifted a single paw in labor, that he was exactly what he had always feared he would be seen as.

Except it was not him. It was someone else. Someone who shared his face and his name and apparently his worst reputation.

The staircase ended at a stone platform overlooking the damworks, a sprawling complex of sluice gates and water wheels built into the river where it cut through the city’s lowest tier. The roar of the water filled the air, and the spray misted cold against Rook’s fur. A heron in a oilskin coat stood at a control lever, watching the gauges with the patient stillness of her kind.

Pip approached, holding up the message tube. "Delivery for the Damworks."

The heron took the tube, cracked the seal with one long beak, and read the slip inside. Her expression did not change. "You're early."

"I was told it was urgent."

"It is. That's why I'm surprised." The heron tucked the slip into her coat. "Tell your dispatcher the sluice schedule holds. No changes until the storm season assessment."

Pip hesitated. "My dispatcher."

"At the messenger guild. You do work for the guild, don't you?"

"I... yes," Pip said, and Rook heard the lie catch in his throat. "I'll tell them."

The heron nodded and turned back to her gauges. The conversation was over.

They climbed back up the staircase in silence. Halfway to the market level, Pip stopped and leaned against the mossy wall, the message tube still clutched in his paw even though it was empty now.

"She thought I was a guild messenger," he said. "The Branchleaper who gave me the tube, the heron just now."

They both thought I was someone who already belongs here.”

“The Deepdelver thought the same about me.”

“But we don’t belong here. We’ve never been here before.”

Rook looked out over the market, the bright awnings and the swaying bridges, the refuse channels cut into the stone and the branchways threading through the canopy. The city was full of places where things could be lost and found, where a scrap of fabric or a torn banner or a discarded message tube could become something else entirely. He had always noticed those places. He had always been good at seeing what others overlooked. And he had always been ashamed of it, because it was the Masktail in him, the part that knew how to find value in what the world had thrown away.

But right now, standing on a staircase in a city that seemed to know him better than he knew himself, that shame felt less like a flaw and more like a tool he did not yet understand how to use.

“Someone in Thornmarket has my face,” Rook said. “And someone has yours.”

Pip’s ears lifted. “You think there’s another Branchleaper who looks like me?”

“I think there’s another everything who looks like us. And I think the city can’t tell the difference.”

Pip was quiet for a moment. Then he pushed off the wall and started climbing again, his stride quicker than before. “Then we find out who they are. Before their debts become ours.”

Rook followed him up into the festival noise, the honeyed nut smell and the fiddler’s tune and the lanterns waiting to be lit. The city had given them a welcome they had not asked for and a mystery they could not ignore. Somewhere in the tangle of branchways and tunnels, two strangers wore their faces and lived their names. And Rook intended to learn why.

C H A P T E R 2

The Stolen Contract

The market had thickened since midday. What had been a cheerful press of festival-goers now felt like a slow-moving current of fur and feather and chitin, all of it flowing against Rook and Pip no matter which direction they turned. Pip kept close to Rook's shoulder, his tail twitching every time a stranger brushed past, and Rook could feel the tension radiating off him in small, sharp movements.

"We need somewhere quiet," Rook said. "Just for a minute. Enough to think."

Pip scanned the branchways overhead, where a few creatures perched on the wider limbs, eating roasted seedcakes from paper cones. "Up there's worse. Everyone can see you."

"Then down."

They found a narrow gap between two stalls, one selling

dyed ribbons and the other stacked with clay pots, where the noise dropped to a manageable hum. Rook pressed his back against the rough bark of a support post and let his breath slow. The honeyed nut smell from earlier had been joined by woodsmoke and something sour, old cider maybe, and the fiddler had been replaced by a trio of beetles drumming on hollow gourds. The rhythm vibrated through the wood under his feet.

“All right,” Rook said. “What do we actually know?”

Pip pulled the folded message from his belt pouch and stared at it as though it might bite him. “Someone named Pipkin owes a delivery to the Damworks. Someone with your face owes a cart debt. And a heron in an oilskin coat thinks I’m a guild messenger.”

“You delivered it, though. That’s done.”

“Is it?” Pip’s ears flattened. “What if there’s a reply? What if they come looking for me tomorrow and I’m not the right Pip?”

Rook had no answer for that. The city’s confusion had felt almost funny at first, the kind of mix-up that would make a good story once they were safely home. But the cart debt and the message and the creatures who had greeted him by name, all of it had accumulated into something heavier, something that pressed at the edges of his thoughts and

refused to settle into a shape he could understand.

“Maybe it’s a city thing,” he said, trying the idea out loud.

“Maybe everyone here just assumes they know everyone else. Small place, lots of faces, they see a Masktail and think oh, that’s the one who owes me three coppers.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“No,” Rook admitted. “I don’t.”

A group of young leverets tumbled past the gap between the stalls, shrieking with laughter, their long ears flopping. One of them glanced at Rook, and for a moment her expression flickered with something that might have been recognition before she turned and ran after the others. Rook watched her go, and the unease that had been trailing him all day curled a little tighter.

Pip folded the message again, refolding it along the same creases until the paper was soft and fraying at the edges. “We could just leave. Find work somewhere else. There are other festivals.”

“We came here to earn coin. We don’t have enough to travel further.”

“Then we find out who they are. Like we said.”

Rook nodded, but before he could answer, the drumming

stopped.

The silence that followed was not the natural pause between songs. It was the kind of silence that spread outward from a single point, a ripple of held breath and turned heads. Rook stepped out from between the stalls and saw the crowd parting.

The Greatpaw guard was enormous. He moved through the market with the slow, deliberate weight of a creature who had never needed to hurry, his thick brown fur dense as winter coat, his paws leaving impressions in the packed earth that Rook could have curled up inside. The guard's head swung from side to side as he walked, scanning the stalls, the branchways, the gaps between. When his gaze found Rook, it stopped.

"You."

The voice was deep enough that Rook felt it in his ribs before he fully heard it. The guard pointed one massive paw directly at him, and the creatures nearest to Rook edged away as though the gesture carried a physical force.

"Rook Flickerfoot," the guard said. "You will return the contract record you stole. Now."

Rook's mouth opened, but no sound came out. The name landed wrong, close to his own but not quite, and the accusation behind it was so far from anything he had done

that his mind simply refused to engage with it.

Pip stepped up beside him, his voice thin. “What contract?”

The guard ignored him. His eyes, small and dark beneath a heavy brow, stayed fixed on Rook. “I am Bramm Clawfoot, guard of the Peace of Tooth and Tongue. I act on Lord Veyr Aspen’s orders. The record you removed from the archives must be returned before sunset.”

“I don’t have any record,” Rook said. The words came out steadier than he felt. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were seen.”

“Seen where? Doing what?”

Bramm took another step forward, and the crowd behind him drew back further. A ring of empty space had opened around Rook and Pip, and in that space the market’s warmth had turned into something else, something watchful and cold. Rook could feel the stares of the onlookers, dozens of them, and he knew without looking what they were seeing: a Masktail being accused of theft, a creature of his kind caught in something shady, exactly what everyone expected.

“The contract record,” Bramm said, each word slow and deliberate, “pertains to the Alderwake Storm. Its removal

from the archives is a serious matter. Lord Veyr has instructed me to recover it. You will produce it.”

The Alderwake Storm. Rook had heard the name before, in stories told by travelers passing through his village, but the details were vague, the kind of history that older creatures referenced without explaining. A disaster, he thought. Something that had happened a long time ago. Why anyone would think he had stolen a record of it was beyond him.

“I arrived in Thornmarket this morning,” Rook said. “I’ve never been inside your archives. I don’t know where they are. I don’t know what record you mean.”

“You were seen,” Bramm repeated, and the flat certainty in his voice was worse than anger would have been. Anger could be reasoned with. This was a wall.

A murmur ran through the crowd. Rook caught fragments: “Masktail,” and “knew it,” and “always the same.” His fur prickled. He wanted to shout at them, to demand that someone explain what was happening, but he had learned long ago that a Masktail who raised his voice only confirmed what everyone already believed.

Pip’s hand found his arm. “Rook.”

“I heard him.”

“No, Rook.” Pip’s grip tightened. “Look.”

Rook followed his gaze. At the far edge of the crowd, where the market opened onto the wider branchway, a figure stood apart from the others. Tall and slender, with antlers that branched in a perfect, pale symmetry, he watched the scene with the stillness of someone who had no need to move. His coat was a light gray, almost silver where the late afternoon sun caught it, and his expression was calm in a way that felt deliberate, as though he had chosen it and was holding it in place.

Lord Veyr Aspen. Rook did not need an introduction to know it. The antlers alone marked him as one of the Antlered nobles, and the way the crowd had parted for Bramm was nothing compared to the space that had opened around this creature, an invisible boundary that no one seemed willing to cross.

Lord Veyr did not speak. He did not step forward. He simply watched, and his watching felt heavier than Bramm's accusation, heavier than the stares of the crowd. It was the weight of someone who had already decided what was true and was only waiting for the world to catch up.

Rook turned back to Bramm. "I don't have your record. I don't know who you think I am, but you've got the wrong creature."

"You are Rook Flickerfoot."

“My name is Rook Underleaf.”

Bramm’s expression did not change. “I have seen you in the refuse passages. I have seen you at the lower market. You are known.”

The words hit Rook harder than the accusation had. Known. Bramm was not guessing. He was not working from a vague description of a Masktail with a dark-banded tail. He had seen someone, spoken to someone, someone who looked exactly like Rook, and that someone had been living in Thornmarket long enough to have a reputation, a job, a place in the city’s lower tiers.

The doppelgänger. The stranger who wore his face.

And that stranger, Rook realized with a cold clarity, was in serious trouble.

“I’m not him,” Rook said, and even as he said it he knew how it sounded. A denial without proof. A thief’s first reflex. “I came from outside the city. I have a traveling companion. Ask anyone, I only arrived this morning.”

“Then you will not object to being searched.”

Pip stepped in front of Rook before Rook could respond. “He doesn’t have anything. We don’t have anything. We came for the festival, that’s all.”

Bramm looked at Pip for the first time, and something flickered in his expression, a brief confusion that smoothed over almost instantly. “The Branchleaper. Pip Quilldash. You are also known.”

Pip’s mouth opened and closed. “I’m Pip Quickbough.”

“You are a city messenger.”

“I’m not. I’ve never been a messenger. I live in a village two days’ walk from here.”

Bramm’s gaze moved from Pip to Rook and back again, and Rook could see the guard’s mind working, slow and methodical, fitting their denials into a framework that had no room for them. The framework was simple: two creatures stood before him, matching the descriptions of two creatures he knew, and those two creatures were lying. The simplest explanation was the one Bramm had already chosen.

“Lord Veyr’s orders are clear,” Bramm said. “The contract record must be returned. If it is not returned by sunset, further action will be taken.”

“What kind of action?” Rook asked.

“You will be brought before the court. The Peace of Tooth and Tongue permits the Antlered nobles to adjudicate matters of public record. Theft of an archived document is a

breach of that peace.”

Rook’s throat tightened. He did not know the specifics of Thornmarket law, but he knew enough about how the world worked to understand that a Masktail brought before a noble’s court would not receive a fair hearing. The accusation alone would be enough. His kind were scavengers, skulkers, creatures who slipped away in the dark. Everyone knew that. Everyone had always known that.

“I want to speak to Lord Veyr,” Rook said.

Bramm’s brow lowered. “That is not permitted.”

“He’s standing right there. He can hear me. Lord Veyr!” Rook raised his voice, and the crowd’s murmur died. “I don’t have your record. I don’t know what record you mean. I’m not the creature you think I am.”

Lord Veyr did not move. His expression did not change. For a long moment he simply looked at Rook, and Rook felt the weight of that look like a physical pressure, something that wanted to push him down into the dirt where Masktails belonged. Then Lord Veyr turned, his antlers catching the light, and walked away through the crowd, which parted for him without a word.

Bramm watched him go, then turned back to Rook.

“Sunset,” he said. “Produce the record, or face the court.”

He did not wait for an answer. He turned and followed Lord Veyr, his heavy paws leaving deep prints in the earth, and the crowd closed behind him like water filling a furrow.

The stares lingered. Rook could feel them on his back, dozens of small judgments, and he knew that by nightfall the story would have spread through half the market: the Masktail thief, the stolen contract, the guard who had given him until sunset. He would not be able to walk through the stalls without being recognized. He would not be able to find work. He would not be able to do anything except run, or fight, or prove that he was not the creature they believed him to be.

Pip's voice was barely a whisper. "What do we do?"

Rook looked at the space where Lord Veyr had stood. The antlered noble had not spoken a single word to him, and yet the accusation had come from him, shaped by him, delivered through Bramm like a message carried by a courier. Lord Veyr had decided that Rook was guilty, and he had not needed to say it aloud. He had simply needed someone else to believe it.

"We find out what record they're talking about," Rook said. "And we find out who really took it."

"How?"

Rook did not have an answer yet. But somewhere in this

city, a Masktail who looked exactly like him was living a life Rook had never lived, making choices Rook had never made, and those choices had led straight to Bramm Clawfoot's accusation. The doppelgänger was the key. Rook was certain of it. And if he could not find the stranger before sunset, the court would not care which Rook they punished.