

HART

RESTORING THE CINNABAR

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CHAPTER ONE



THE PROPHECY

A steely, blue gaze fixed on Hart, urging her instinct to run. If she hadn't been sent here, that's precisely what she would've done. Instead, she recovered her nerves, cementing her almond eyes on the aged figure in front of her.

'I have been expecting you.' While the hag spoke, silver strands of wiry hair spiralled out like serpents. 'With so much at stake, I would have thought you'd be here sooner. After all, you are a rather curious creature, aren't you, Hart?'

A bony finger pointed synonymously at her, setting the hag's eye into a spasmodic twitch. The motion tipped the delicate, brown suede garment off the hag's shoulder, exposing pale skin. It hung loosely over her collarbone. Clearly, the hag did little to disguise her years for her focus seemed to rest on delivering her prophetic messages.

The two eyeballed each other until Hart broke the silence. Her breath released into a gush of stumbles. 'He – Akon – advised me to come.' The urge to bite her thumb nudged at her but she quickly shoved her childhood habit behind her. 'He said you would be the one with the greatest wisdom and knowledge to guide me.'

Deep furrows clung to the middle of the hag's brow as she held Hart in scrutiny. 'Wisdom is a fine thing but to be who you are to be, you will

need to become more. Akon is wise but he knows your next steps could falter without my help.'

Instantly, Hart caught the overtone and like an unsuspecting fly, walked into the web the hag had woven. Biting her tongue, Hart decided to concentrate on inviting a friendlier exchange. Flattery always worked well to mellow those with sharp tongues.

'Yes, Akon is truly wise but they say you are beyond wisdom. That you see beyond ordinary sight.'

The hag smirked, picked up the stone runes and expertly frolicked with them. Spellbound, Hart could not tear her eyes away. In a jittery dance, they rocked between the hag's fingers, holding her captive. 'Come, come. Sit, girl!'

Hart glanced towards a rusty, iron chair. A slight hesitation held her before she moved with extended strides towards the hag. The room, initially soaked in shadows, now seemed to light up as the flickering candlelight increased, spilling glimpses of the room's contents. To her left loomed a colossal bookshelf, stuffed with volumes of leather-bound books. Into the tiny spaces made available were creased scrolls, carelessly shoved in. But it was the aged figure, ensconced in her throne-like chair, who held her attention. The carved oak enveloped the hag's shrivelled frame, while handcrafted branches adorning the backrest appeared as a crown on her head.

As Hart edged closer, a sudden movement brought her to a standstill. It sprung out from the shadows, onto the oak table. A large albino cat, parading a gaunt ribcage, hissed and spat as enigmatic slits of green challenged her.

'Now, cat be quiet and still. Gentle now. We don't want to frighten our visitor.' The hag's soothing words, directed at quietening the hissing cat, mingled with her taunting jibes.

Hart ignored them. Instead, she focused on surrendering into the chair, only to be met with its cold, metal frame. It mirrored the cat's

welcome. This was followed by a brush of sweat that painted her upper lip. Facing an unknown opponent, in unknown territory, could unnerve anyone.

While the cat relaxed on the oak table, the hag toyed with the runes. The rhythmic gestures pulled Hart into their story, as trails of wafting sage incense swirled around them, encasing them into a cocoon of light smoke. Her breath calmed and her body relaxed as she returned her focus back to the stones. Then catching her unaware, the runes spilled from the hag's hold.

Clashes of stone collided against the table sending thundering vibrations into Hart's body. The hag leaned forward, squinting at the runes, squeezing aging lines of pallid skin into deepening folds. Hart too edged forward, taking a closer look, anticipating the messages soon to be revealed.

'Hagalz clashes with Isa. Othalan is opposite to Tiwaz. Berkanan stands alone but boldly faces Sowilo.'

Hart watched as the hag's gaze darted over the runes before spilling their story. 'Your duty has caused you much grief in the past.' Her declaration caused the folds of her neck to wobble. 'You have paid a high price but you know that, don't you?' The hag's spittle flew into the air like fireflies emitting a cold light of luminosity.

Hart flinched. The memory of her decisions to please, to obey, aggravated her like unexpectedly brushing past poison ivy.

'You need to claim yourself, girl. Stop fighting with yourself. Who you once thought yourself to be, can no longer be told.'

Another droplet flung out at her like loose ammunition. The spittle aggravated Hart's senses, reminding her of regretful past decisions. She brought her hand to wipe away the single drop suspended on her cheek.

'Who is she? Who is Hart?'

Hart's shoulders raised under the hag's insensitive attack but she was given no chance to defend herself.

‘Pay attention, Hart. It’s time to tune into the messages you have been gifted with. Listen to your inner voice. It speaks to you. Are you listening?’

Such a time existed once. But the duty of her title and deceitful adoration left her swimming in treacherous waters.

‘Yes. There it is. Distractions. See here. They bring you to a standstill. Deception is the main part in your story. But you chose to ignore it.’

Akon said that the hag would not hold back but she underestimated the impact of the hag’s insight. She watched as her aged hand swept over a rune with a single symbol of a vertical gold line etched into its black surface.

‘The Rune of Isa. This is why you have fallen into traps. The crossroads of your journey have impeded your ability to focus on your path. You chose the dark side of Isa, falling for shallow, false trappings.’ Stilled into silence by the truth, Hart could barely breathe.

‘Distractions. Distractions. Ignorant and shallow decisions. It is *he* who has sabotaged your freedom, pulling you away from the path Yes, you fell for his sweet words and charms. For his cunning.’

Suddenly, a splay of pink covered Hart’s open neckline. Her soul knew. She had let herself be swept away, ignoring her deeper truths. They forced Hart back into the chair. She had danced with him many times, unaware of his true intentions. She succumbed to a fate that imprisoned her in a place of desolation. There, she wiped the memory of who she was. Casting her fate to destiny, she had buried herself deep within, guarded by the dragon who knew her inner truth.

‘Yes... but I know better now.’

The hag cackled. ‘Wisdom is to be earned not tossed around like a plaything. The runes too speak otherwise.’

Hart flinched.

‘Hart, there is much more for you to learn. There will come the time when you will need to climb the mountain and face some of your

greatest fears, crawl through a window of a dream to find the arms of thy mother and then sift through the deepest corners of the forest to discover who and what you seek.’

Hart quickly came to her defence. ‘You speak as if my journey has had little value or pain, like it is only just beginning.’

‘Oh, no. No, Hart. It began many moons ago.’

Hart calmly suspended the hag’s scrutiny, but inside her thoughts scrambled like besieged soldiers under attack.

‘And it will continue. Only then will you reach the absolute pinnacle of who Hart truly is. Only then, will you find *you* in all your truth.’ As the hag heaved breathlessly, she locked eyes again with Hart. The truth of the hag’s words pierced Hart’s conscience.

‘In order to release yourself from the darkness, you must learn to tame the dragon. You have already met with it. Use its billows of fire; tap into the energy. It will enable you to continue to move forward. There will be a time when nothing separates you from it.’ The prophecy spilled from the hag as no untruth had been left unturned with the messages emanating from the stone runes.

But the hag challenged her further. ‘There will be many more tests to come, to try and weaken you.’

Hart faltered into a wave of memories before she could speak. ‘There are times... times when I know who I am and what my true path is. But then he comes in and surprises me with his lack of respect, his cruelty, his desire to see me fall.’

‘This is what he desires the most. For you to fall victim to his demands, to his desires, to his control. Can you stop him? Will you stop him?’ The hag’s interrogation sent her into a childish nervousness, challenging her power to do what her destiny required. It became a battle she knew well, a battle of taunting whispers where he lurked constantly.

The hag proceeded to spit out Hart’s fate. She picked the runes up and threw them with finality. Once again, they rolled into a symbolic

formation, speaking to the hag as they guided her prophecy.

‘The stone rune, Raido, collides with Ehwaz. It speaks of a journey that you will take. Call it your destiny. This symbol, which resembles X, is the symbol of death. Ha!’

The fear within her bolted. ‘What is this message? What does this mean?’

The hag held back, pausing in silence. She sat still waiting and watching, toying with her. Hart, too, held still. Finally, the hag opened her mouth to reveal the runes’ final story.

‘You may find this hard to hear, to trust, but in the near future’—the hag heaved in between her words, her frailty resting upon her chest—‘you will once again feel his stale, breath upon the back of your neck.’

Thoughts of an unwelcome rendezvous bounded through the air. Hart shifted her weight, crossing and uncrossing her legs as she sat in the chair. For some time now, images of him flashed in and out of her thoughts and all she could do was brush him away with shuddered relief. At times, he felt like a constant, waking nightmare. And now, to think that soon, the possibility of meeting him loomed? Cold, clammy, puddles formed under her armpits and under her knees. A chilling tremor joined in. It rushed from the base of her spine to the top of her neck, hitting her like an electric current. As much as Hart wanted to pocket the runes’ story safely away, she knew she could not turn back. She had come for the truth and now, as it was told to her, she would be foolish to dismiss it.

‘You will no longer fear him as an opponent but see him as an ally who will bring you onto truth’s doorstep of who you really are. You will become one, undivided for a moment in time. It will be you alone who decides.’

Images of the past collided and as each memory presented itself, a trail of goosebumps lined her arms. Hart brought her hands up to her ears to silence the noise only to find herself standing in front of an

altar, where eternal vows had been given. Her ears rang like bells as the pleading cries of her father rang. She slammed both of her fists onto the hag's table, jolting awake all that lay upon it. Then she shut her eyes, blinking the memories away. As she wiped the pools of salty water away with the back of her hand, she tuned into the mellower voice of the hag.

'There will come the time for you to choose your fate, Hart.'

The hag leaned back into her chair, crossing her arms over her sagging bosom. Then, she waved her hand into the air with sudden dismissal.

'Go, go now.' The hag's urgent request shot out unexpectedly. 'The forest stirs with an uneasiness. Be prepared to fight for her. She depends on you.'

As Hart pushed back her chair in a bid to take her leave, she felt the wisdom in the hag's prophecies. 'I bid you farewell and with much gratitude.'

The hag's head flew up to meet Hart's.

'How much gratitude?' A wickedness sprang forward in the hag, creating ripples of shivers along Hart's back.

She remembered Akon's words. After the hag delivered her messages, a gift needed to be given for her wise counsel. The hag's eyes connected with the turquoise stone resting upon her throat. Hart's hand shot up. She covered it, pressing it close to her.

'No. Not this.'

It had been lost to her once before but never again. Reaching into her pocket, she withdrew the gift she had stuffed there. Jimson Weed, known for its hallucinating properties, enabled one to reach higher states of being. But like all nightshades, it could be fatal if used unwisely. But before it barely touched the table, the hag's deft fingers snatched it up.

'You will see me again, Hart.' The steely, blue eyes sought her almond ones. Once again, they locked but this time, Hart's had surrendered their suspicions.

'When the visions come to pass, I will see you again. BUT only when

the time is right. Only then will you be able to use my wisdom and knowledge to find the power that exists within you, to face yourself as true guardian.’

The hag repeated a final farewell. As Hart reached for the door, a hissing sounded behind her. Quickly closing it, she set upon the path. The crunching of her boots joined in with the relief of taking her leave. In the silence of her surroundings, where the fading light mingled with the creeping darkness, Hart readied herself to go to Akon. Just up ahead, Morph waited as usual. As she hauled herself up onto his back, the energy of the forest synchronised with her own. An urgency rose, escalating with fear as the forest cries amplified. It could only mean one thing... danger lurked.