

## **Rough Justice**

### **One - Olivia**

Tonight I would watch a man die for his crimes. I would hunt him down and let a pack of giant black hounds rip him to death and send his soul to the afterlife, and I would trust that he had done something to deserve it.

I was struggling with that concept.

Not the part where I'd hunt him or even watch him die. I'd seen a man torn apart by a cŵn before, and while I didn't intend to closely observe the process, I did not have an issue with the overall idea of it. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here.

I believed in the Cŵn Annwn, in their purpose on earth. The Welsh Wild Hunt, tasked with wreaking vengeance on humans who murder those with fae blood. Did those crimes deserve such a fate? Sometimes. Other times, though, it was indeed rough justice. But justice it was. When you take a life—intentionally and maliciously—you must accept that you may receive the same in return.

My problem with tonight's Hunt? The part where I didn't know what our quarry had actually done.

I had chosen not to know. I'd seen that as purpose. Resolution. Faith, too, which doesn't come easily to me. I trusted that the Cŵn Annwn were justified in their actions, and so for my first Hunt, I would prove that by not asking for details.

Yeah . . .

A noble sentiment, which lasted only until the moment of truth loomed.

I sat on my horse, leaning forward, hand rubbing her neck, trying to calm my nerves with her warmth. She felt those nerves, though, and her left ear twitched.

"Dwi'n iawn, Rhyddhad," I said, reassuring her I was okay.

A soft whinny suggested I might be lying.

Rhyddhad looked like a regular horse—a young gray mare—just as the cŵns looked like regular hounds. They were, in their way. That is, they weren't shape-shifting humanoid fae. But they were fae beasts, and they understood us better than mortal ones.

Rhyddhad and I were on an empty stretch of country road, outside Chicago. Waiting for our quarry to arrive.

The Hunt must take place in a forest. That was traditionally the domain of the Cŵn Annwn, and back in ancient Wales, the restriction had been no restriction at all as people passed through forest regularly. It was trickier in the modern world. And in Chicago? A city of three million people . . . let's just say that it was a good thing the local Cŵn Annwn pack had been here for centuries, with time to adjust and improvise. Time to learn how to get even the most urban-dwelling killer to a patch of woods.

It helped, too, that they only needed to conduct a proper Hunt a few times a year. That meant plenty of time to use their tricks—both human and supernatural—to get their prey where they wanted him.

This time, they were lucky—their target worked in Chicago but lived outside it. He passed daily along this wooded road, and he often drove past dark.

It'd been almost a week ago when Ioan—leader of the local Cŵn Annwn—came to me and said, "We have one. Are you ready?"

I was. There wasn't any doubt of that. I was the new Mallt-y-Nos. Matilda of the Night. Matilda of the Hunt. I had accepted that role, and along with it, I accepted this responsibility.

When headlights bobbed down the empty road, hooves tapped across the pavement, a rider coming to my side, a cŵn loping beside him, her tongue lolling.

“Looks like we have a winner,” Ricky said as he reined in. “Dark sedan headed this way, right on time.”

He smiled, but it wasn’t his usual grin. He was on edge, too, and his horse—Tywysog Du—shook his head, breath streaming in the cool spring air.

“We doing this?” he said.

“I guess so.”

He inched Tywysog Du closer and reached to squeeze my arm. Ricky Gallagher. Former lover, current best friend—a feat I was still amazed we’d managed. It took work, but it was important to both of us, and six months later, we were settled into the new relationship.

This would be Ricky’s first Hunt, too. The first time we fully inhabited our ancient roles—me as Matilda and him as Arawn, Lord of the Otherworld, legendary king of the Cŵn Annwn. There was a third party in this configuration. Gwynn ap Nudd, even more legendary king of the fae, the Tylwyth Teg. But Gabriel had no place here. Not tonight.

“Is that the car?” Ioan asked, his quiet voice traveling through the silence.

Another of the Cŵn Annwn—Meic—peered down the road with binoculars. Yes, just regular binoculars. The Huntsmen were blessed with near-perfect night vision, but not bionic sight, and unlike most fae, they embraced human tech.

“It’s definitely a dark sedan,” Meic said. “Could be an Audi . . .”

“You realize you have an expert, right?” Ricky called to him.

Ioan chuckled and waved for Meic to bring the binoculars to me.

My Cŵn Annwn blood gave me decent night vision, but it wasn’t like theirs, and I had to squint to make out the oncoming vehicle.

“We’ve got a BMW,” I said, as it came over a dip a hundred feet away.

I only needed to nudge Rhyddhad. She knew what that meant: get the hell away from the roadside before some poor stranger goes into a tailspin seeing a pack of giant hounds and horsemen.

Human folklore said that if you spotted the Hunt, you'd die. That wasn't exactly true. Yes, if you spotted them, and they were there *for you*, I'd suggest an emergency call to check your life insurance policy. But for any culture with Wild Hunt folklore, the fear of them was ingrained, and the Cŵn Annwn preferred not to send innocent humans into mindless panic, especially when they were behind the wheel of a motor vehicle.

So the horses and hounds headed into the field, not unlike city kids playing road hockey when someone called "Car!"

I watched the vehicle as it passed and . . . "Shit!"

There was the dark blue Audi we were waiting for—a few car lengths behind the BMW.

"Brenin!" Ioan shouted, alerting the alpha cŵn.

The hound whipped around, but he was too far from the road. The closest to it was Ricky's cŵn, Lloergan. She suffered from old injuries, meaning she hadn't kept up when we bolted for the field.

"Lloe?" Ricky called, but she was already veering as Brenin barked a command.

Lloergan ran back to the road. The BMW was gone, the Audi coming fast. The cŵn wasn't going to make it. And if she *did* . . .

Lloergan leapt onto the road right in front of the Audi. I shouted, "No!" as the car went into a spin.

"I can't see Lloe," I whispered, leaning over Rhyddhad's neck. "Where's . . . ?"

I spotted her then . . . lying on the road.

Ricky started forward, but Ioan cut him off, saying, “No.”

Ricky let out a growl, and his horse stamped.

“She’s getting up,” I said as I peered through the binoculars. “She’s limping, though.”

Ricky cursed under his breath. Tywysog Du continued stamping.

“Wait,” Ioan said. “Just wait.”

The Audi had stopped spinning. The BMW driver either didn’t notice what happened behind him or pretended he didn’t, as the car’s rear lights faded into the night.

The Audi driver’s door opened. A man stepped out. As soon as he saw Lloergan, she toppled over.

The man looked around, as if assessing his chances of getting back into his vehicle and taking off. Not exactly a choice that warranted the death penalty, but if I was looking for signs that this guy was an asshole, I could take this.

He gave Lloergan only a cursory glance. Then he bent to examine the front end of his car.

Yep, definitely an asshole.

The man got down on all fours to check for damage on the undercarriage.

“The front end’s fine,” Ricky murmured.

I was about to ask what he meant when Lloergan pushed up, slowly. The guy didn’t notice—she was behind him, and he was intent on seeing what damage she’d done to his precious car.

Through the binoculars, I saw her lips pull back in a growl. The man glanced over his shoulder and then gave a very satisfying start.

Lloergan advanced, her head lowered, fur on end, inflating the big dog to the size of a bear. The guy scrambled up. She let out a snarl loud enough for me to hear.

The guy inched toward his open driver's door. He made it three steps. Then Brenin came tearing across the field, two other cŵns on his heels. The man bolted for his car, but Brenin was racing across the road, and the guy clambered onto the hood of his car instead. He stood up there, looking down at Brenin and Lloergan, the other two dogs approaching. Then he peered along the empty road.

He took out his cell phone. Hit a button. Peered at it.

"Yeah, that's not going to work," Ricky said.

In today's world, if you were beset by giant hounds, help was only a call away. Unless there was a high-tech cell-phone blocker . . . attached to the collar of the lead hound.

The cŵns circled the car patiently, allowing the man to realize that calling for help wasn't an option. Then Brenin leapt onto the hood. The man slid down into the opening they'd left, and he started to run as the hounds herded him toward the waiting forest.

"And that's our cue," Ioan said, handing Ricky and I each a bundle. "We let the hounds tire him while we dress."

"Our cloaking devices," Ricky said, shaking his out. "Appropriately in the form of an actual cloak."

Ioan waved for one of the others to accompany Ricky into a patch of forest so he could put on his cloak, turning him into a true Huntsman. While Ricky and I had ridden with the Cŵn Annwn on recreational hunts, this would be our first time donning the cloaks.

When I started after Ricky, Ioan said, "Wait," and motioned for me to follow him to a larger patch of trees.

As we rode, he said, “Have you changed your mind? About wanting to know what our quarry has done?”

I shook my head, but not before I hesitated a moment too long.

“You can ask what he’s done, Liv,” he said.

When I didn’t respond, he said, “If you think you need to prove anything by not asking, please remember that you aren’t the only one who is anxious to do this right. You are our Matilda. The only one we’ve ever had, and the only one we’ll ever get. Having you ride strengthens us. That’s why you’re doing it, and we realize that, so we want you to be comfortable.”

“You know he’s guilty.”

He nodded, but I meant it as a statement. Huntsmen had the innate ability to see guilt. It was like the old saying about guilt being written on a face. They knew their target deserved their justice, and so they didn’t dig deeper. With my Cŵn Annwn blood, I should have that same faith.

“It doesn’t work like that,” he said.

I gave him a hard look.

He threw up his free hand, the other loosely holding the reins. “If you don’t want me to read your thoughts, don’t make them so easy to read. It’s like speaking and expecting me to not listen. You cannot have our faith because you are not us. Yours would be blind faith. Ours isn’t—we know they are guilty. Lacking that ability, you need evidence to develop honest—and open-eyed—faith in our powers. Which is why I urged you to investigate first. That’s what you do. It’s how your mind works, Liv.”

He was right. I was an investigator by trade now, for Gabriel’s law firm. But that was the problem. Gabriel was a defense lawyer, so my job was to keep people from what was, sometimes, proper justice. Which I supposed made me a lousy Matilda. But

while my father had Cŵn Annwn blood, my mother—like Gabriel—was part fae, and their sense of ethics was a whole lot looser. Put those two sides together, and you got me: someone who was fine with setting a criminal free if the prosecutor failed to do his job, but who also believed that if you committed a crime, you needed to be prepared to pay the price.

“How much do you know about what he did?” I asked.

“His name and the very basics of the crime.” He stopped his horse. “If you have any concerns, Ricky can join us on this Hunt, and you’ll come the next time after you’ve done your research and are convinced *that* target is guilty.”

“I can’t ever know that, short of an actual confession. All the investigation in the world only builds certainty. It never seals it.” I shook my head. “No, this is better. You know the guy is guilty, and that’s enough. But I will take what you have on him.”

“Will that help?”

He told me what he knew. And I immediately saw a problem. A big one.