

## The Forgotten Inn

After passing the same knotted tree-stump for the third time, Rhon had to admit that he was definitely lost. The crooked path snaked between the trees, uneven and neglected, often hidden entirely by rocks and crumbling logs. Dry leaves crackled under his boots and the wind moaned, rattling the bare branches, like the painful breathing of a dying old man. But otherwise, the forest around him was eerily silent. Silent and watchful. He had never been particularly superstitious, but he still shivered, shifting his multiple heavy bags and drawing his dark cloak closer around him. There were whispered rumors about this part of the world; it was beyond the borders of the outermost kingdom, and few people ever ventured out here. The roads were few and uncharted, the miles between various places uncounted. There were stories of ancient curses, of creatures lurking in the dark, and of evil forces that would lead you astray or drive you mad... A harsh scream pierced the stillness and Rhon jumped, but it was only a crow bursting out of the undergrowth, rushing into the sky. *This twitchiness really won't do*, he scolded himself. Already, the shadows were growing thicker, creeping quietly across the forest floor, closing in. The sky was turning an oppressive murky gray. A biting gust of wind stole up from behind, ripping at his clothes and hair and kicking up a flock of dusty leaves. Rhon fought back an unfamiliar sense of dread. He needed to find a place to spend the night, somewhere warm and dry, and get a fire going. Tomorrow he would find his way.

*You're getting too old for this*, he told himself with a faint smile. *Starting at birds and running from shadows? Your nerves used to be stronger than that.* He ruefully shifted the packs digging into his shoulders and back again. *They never used to seem this heavy*, he complained inwardly. The path turned abruptly, and Rhon found himself next to a little brook, cloudy and clogged with leaves and twigs. He followed the path alongside the bank, and noticed that the brook was steadily widening out, getting broader and deeper. Suddenly, he frowned. Ahead seemed to be something resembling a bridge. He got closer, and realized that it was a bridge, although its wooden railings had almost completely decayed, and some of the planks had rotted through. More importantly, though, on the other side of the stream, he thought he could see a house through the trees. Rhon stepped gingerly onto the bridge, mentally resigning himself to spending the night in wet clothes. He briefly considered going back and crossing the stream at a place where it was narrower, but it was almost dark, and he was afraid of losing his way. The plank groaned under his weight and the bridge creaked and shuddered, but it held. Amazingly, he soon stepped onto the bank at the other side, completely dry. The path leading up to the house was all but imperceptible, but at this point he could see the structure clearly enough to make his way towards it.

The house was as decrepit as the bridge. It was crooked, tilting ominously to one side, with a collapsing roof and sagging shutters. He knew that the floor inside would be covered in a thick carpet of undisturbed dust. Crows nesting in the trees around it cawed as he approached, their voices rasping and hoarse, and, disturbed from their perches, took off and swarmed around the building in the gathering dusk. A blackened sign, like the kind usually found outside inns or taverns, hung above the entrance, rocking slowly. The door whimpered as he walked through, and the breeze that followed him inside

ruffled the spectral cobwebs. The house was dark and still, and he could clearly hear each of his steps resonating among the walls as he trod across the floor.

The room he had walked into was large, with tables and chairs scattered throughout it. A long-dead fireplace loomed at the opposite end of the room, and a dilapidated staircase wound up to the second floor. Rhon wandered over to one of the tables, running his hand over the rough wood, worn out with years of use. He let his fingers trace over each furrow, each smoothed crack, ignoring the thick caking of dirt and grime on top. There was a broad, long gash tearing through the surface, and he let himself focus on that, allowing his mind to drift. Immediately, images flashed in front of him: ale being spilt, dripping onto the floor, fists hitting the table, drunken laughter, bright light, angry shouts, gleaming coins spilling, the blade of a knife digging into the wood...

"You're a Storyteller, aren't you?"

The rasping voice snapped Rhon back and he spun around, his heart thundering treacherously against his ribcage. A heavy crow was balancing on the back of one of the chairs, watching him with shrewd, beady eyes.

"I asked you a question, old man."

"I'm not that old!"

"Then how come your hair's all gray and speckled-looking? I thought that was a sign of aging for your kind."

"It's hardly *all* gray."

Rhon ran his hand through his short hair, slightly insulted. He had streaks of gray, that was true, but his hair was still mostly black. His slight build and narrow face also made him look younger than he was, making him seem almost boyish at times. Did he *really* look old?

"You still haven't answered my question."

"Yes, I am a Storyteller."

The crow turned its shinning eyes towards the table, where Rhon's fingers had left dark trails on the surface.

"So you can see the past?"

"It doesn't work quite like that."

Rhon continued his inspection of the room and found a bench that was still relatively sturdy-looking. With a satisfied sigh, he lowered his things onto it, and started kneading his cramped shoulders. The crow hopped onto the floor and waddled over to him, still scrutinizing him suspiciously.

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not."

"I've heard your type can see the past. And when I flew in, you were doing...something. By that table."

"I can't just see the past, crow..."

"I am a Raven, old man! A ancient bird of Dignity and Majesty!" The bird interrupted with an indignant squawk, flapping its balding wings. Rhon ignored it, continuing to massage his neck.

"Every place, every object carries memories. Whatever happens leaves a trace on its surroundings. I can bring back those memories and see flashes of them. But I can't

just go back to whatever time in the past I choose; to see a person, for example, I need to touch something that that person came into contact with. The snatches of memories I can see are hazy and blurred, and objects are bad carriers of memories, anyway, because you need direct contact to leave a clear imprint. When I touched that table, for instance, I could see the objects that had come into contact with the wood relatively distinctly. But making out specific words in conversations held around the table would be all but impossible. So yes, crow (Rhon once again disregarded the furious croak “Raven!”), I can see snatches from the past, but I don’t see a clear picture of what happened and I can’t control what details I’m shown.”

Rhon looked around the room again. It was almost utterly dark. By the fireplace, he found a musty pile of logs, and proceeded to light a fire, all under the steady gaze of the Raven. As the flames started to burn brighter, he saw their light dancing over some markings on the wall by the chimney. He smiled, running his hand over them, suddenly feeling very aged indeed. They were the messages you could find almost anywhere: two names, written next to each other, sometimes with a heart in the middle. Rhon closed his eyes, letting the memories flood in. Laughter. Hand after hand, with sharp pebbles or dinner knives, tracing over letters absentmindedly again and again. Rhon ran his hand down the wall, feeling the rough grooves under his fingertips, all the memories so similar, and yet strangely unique... Emptiness. Rhon frowned, opening his eyes. He could see nothing. There were no memories. He lifted his hand, and felt a chill. There had been a name written in the wood, in that place, but it had been scratched out. The wood had been slashed viciously, as if in a crazed frenzy, with deep, jagged wounds. Rhon’s frown deepened.

“That’s impossible.”

“What?” The Raven asked, squinting almost knowingly.

“There are no memories in this spot. Nothing. But that’s impossible. Everything carries some memories...”

He moved his hand to a blank section of the wall, concentrating on the plank itself. Immediately, memories started trickling in: moist darkness, then a blinding light and a blue sky, cold wind, then growing, slowly rising above the ground. Then an axe, cleaving into the trunk, nails, piercing into the wood... Rhon slowly moved his hand to the scratched-out name. The images stopped abruptly. There was nothing at all. Rhon slowly drew his hand away.

“Everything carries some memories...” he repeated in a whisper. “Especially something that has clearly been written on and then hacked away at. Why can’t I see anything?”

The Raven slowly nodded.

“You’re going to die, old man.”

“We’re all going to die some day. No need to be philosophical.” Rhon replied abstractedly, trying to pretend that his mouth had not just gone strangely dry. The Raven cackled gratingly.

“Oh, not some day. Tonight.”

“I can always just leave this house.” Rhon retorted, his gaze still fixed on the mutilated spot on the wall. It disturbed him more than he was willing to admit. Something about this house was very, very wrong. His hands grew cold and damp, and

he could feel the irrational dread he had felt earlier in the forest stealing back, slowly creeping into his mind. Spending a night out in the dark and cold suddenly didn't seem like such a bad idea. *I'm leaving*, he decided, *I'm leaving right now*. He turned around, ignoring the smirking Raven, and froze. The door he had come through was gone.

Rhon felt cool sweat running down his spine. His heart was racing, and for a second, he found it hard to breathe. *That's not possible*, he kept repeating to himself. *That's absolutely impossible. How could a door just...vanish?* But it clearly was possible, because the door was simply no longer there. He stumbled over to the place in the wall where the door used to be, his legs slightly unsteady. He leaned against the wall with both hands, conscious of the grainy wood under his palms, and images flickered before him. He saw the door, saw it opening to let him in, then quietly swinging shut. Then it had melted, dissolving into the wall and becoming a part of it, disappearing completely. The door may as well have never existed. Rhon closed his eyes, breathing deeply, trying to get the swelling, mind-numbing panic that was flooding him under control. He wondered if it had gotten colder in the room; despite the crackling fire, he could feel his hands trembling.

*Windows. There must still be windows.*

The windows were gone, too.

"You are going to die here, like everyone else."

Rhon glared at the Raven, who was attempting to groom his filthy feathers with his beak, a smug glint in his eyes.

"Who's 'everyone?' I doubt many people come here."

"Not many. But occasionally humans wander in here, looking for a place to spend the night – just like you did. There was a merchant once, I remember. A few wandering physicians. A beggar or two. Some travelling salesmen. Even a Fortuneteller. None of them survived the night."

"Why?" Rhon asked, conscious that he very much did not want to know the answer.

"You'll see soon enough."

Rhon sat down by the fireplace, trying to keep as close as possible to the light. The room seemed bigger than it had when he had first walked in: there were so many dark corners that the firelight couldn't reach, so many lurking shadows, jerking and flickering, seeping into every crack and crevice, like long, spidery fingers... *They're just shadows, you idiot*, Rhon snapped at himself. *There's nothing there. You're just imagining things. There can't be anything there.* The wind outside seemed to be getting stronger. It shrieked, making the trees outside creak and tremble. The whole house convulsed, moaning like a wounded animal. Rhon gritted his teeth, trying not to think about the mangled section of the wall, trying not to hear footsteps on the groaning floorboards upstairs... *There are no footsteps! It's just the wind. Just the wind... The pile of firewood will last all night. Nothing will happen.* He could feel his thoughts getting fitful and delirious, as fear slowly pulsed through every part of his being. The Raven perched nearby, seeming bloated and grotesque in the quivering firelight, his keen, inky eyes reflecting the flames. Rhon could feel time slipping away. It felt like he had spent a lifetime watching the darkness and listening to the wind howl, although he knew he had probably been there for only about an hour.

The wind died suddenly. One moment it had been there, rocking the whole house and screaming in the night. Then it was silent. Completely silent. Rhon grew tense, fingering his cloak, his eyes darting over the room. He suddenly realized it had definitely gotten much colder. He could see his breath escaping into the air, ragged and uneven. It was then, in the stillness and the freezing cold, that the shadows started moving.

This was not the fluttering caused by the flames. The fire continued burning, but the shadows seemed to suddenly take on a life of their own. They slowly slithered across the floor, from every corner of the room, gathering in one place. Steadily, they began mounting, rising up from the ground like the head of a coiled snake. Rhon stared at them, mesmerized, feeling his hair stand up on end. The terror constricting him was so complete that he couldn't feel anything at all. He was finding it hard to breathe.

The shadows writhed and seethed, gradually molding themselves into a defined shape. Rhon could see a head and shoulders emerging from the murky spiral, followed by a torso. Finally, a man stood before him. He was the color of a light shadow, a muted dark grey, wearing black trousers and an unbuttoned, dusty grey shirt. He looked young, perhaps about thirty. His skin was semi-transparent, and through it Rhon could see translucent bones and quivering internal organs. The hazy outline of his heart was not beating. Rhon tried to swallow. Part of his brain was unconsciously skimming through the scores of stories he told for a living, identifying the newcomer: *Shade. Spirit of the dead, tormented after death, not permitted to leave this world, sometimes because of a curse. Present in the legends many cultures, also called a wraith, specter, ghost, or phantom.* He choked back a whimper, his clothes drenched in sweat.

The wraith exhaled slowly, sweeping a piercing gaze over the room. Then, as if noticing for the first time that he was still hovering in mid-air on a billowing mass of shadows, he stepped down onto the floor. His bare feet left no footprints in the dust. He approached the fire, becoming paler as the firelight shone through him. Rhon felt the spirit radiating a freezing aura, as if all the snow and ice in the world had been compressed into one place. The spirit sighed, and steadily turned around and looked straight at him.

"This is quite unfortunate. I really have no particular desire to kill you."

Rhon opened his mouth, but his voice didn't seem to be functioning properly. He cursed himself inwardly. He'd devoted his life to talking well; now, even stuttering seemed inordinately difficult.

"Er...well, actually, that's quite alright, because I...ah...have no particular desire to die."

"No, you see, I have no choice in the matter, I'm afraid."

"Why...why is that?"

The shade settled down in one of the chairs by the hearth, staring hungrily at the fire. He held up one of his hands, curiously inspecting the web of veins and bones under his gauzy skin. The sight seemed to amuse him.

"I've been dead for a very long time now..." He murmured, addressing no one in particular. Rhon frowned, still badly wanting to know the answer to his question.

"He's cursed," a jarring voice interjected. The spirit threw the Raven a frigid glance, waving his hand dismissively.

"Of course I'm cursed. I have to kill anyone who comes into the house. That doddering hag couldn't even come up with something original. It was interesting, I suppose, the first few times. But it's getting so repetitive."

"Why did she curse you?" Rhon asked quickly, desperately trying to remember how heroes usually survived encounters with ghosts.

"It's odd. I really can't remember properly. I think it was something to do with a girl, but it may have been something else. I'm almost certain I used to live here." The wraith leaned back, staring dreamily at the ceiling. "I wish I could just pass on. Being a ghost is horribly dull, you know."

"I'm...I'm very sorry. How could you...um...depart?"

"It's quite exasperating, really. The thing is, to leave this world and enter the next, you need to know your name. It seems so simple. But the witch somehow erased my name from my mind, and destroyed any existing record of it. She even said she'd wiped out the very memory of my name, whatever that was supposed to mean. So I can't pass away, and I suppose that means I have to kill you, too. Although it's quite disappointing. I was hoping you would know my name, seeing as you're a Storyteller and all. But it seems I was wrong." The icy eyes turned towards Rhon again, as the ghost rose with a disenchanted sigh.

"I could if you'd give me more time." Rhon blurted out, the words sticking in his throat. His hands were shaking, and he held in a sob. All he could think about were those wispy fingers, closing around his neck...

The wraith paused, tilting his head slightly to one side. Rhon seized the chance, like a drowning man clutching at splintered boards.

"What do you lose? If I don't find your name, you can just kill me later. Give me a chance, and you might be able to pass on."

The spirit narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, then smiled, shrugging.

"It would have to be before the end of night... But I suppose you do have a point. Very well, Storyteller. I'll see you at dawn, then."

The shade melted, the shadows spilling back across the floor. Rhon blinked, breathing heavily. He could hear the wind swaying the trees outside again, their dry branches clattering. He moaned softly, burying his face in his hands.

"You don't know how to figure out his name, do you?" The Raven hopped over to him, with an accusing look. "You know you're just dragging out the pain. You're going to die anyway."

"I'm certainly going to try not to," Rhon replied wearily. "You'd get far too much satisfaction from it."

*There must be something. Something that could retain his name. Perhaps there's something the witch missed, something she forgot to drain of the memory...*

He wandered across the room, his eyes straying once more over everything in it. His gaze stopped on a grimy mirror. The layer of dirt on it was so thick that it no longer reflected anything at all. Without knowing quite why he was doing it, Rhon let his fingers slide across the glassy surface, shaving off flakes of dust.

"Mirrors are interesting things," he commented at the Raven, speaking more to calm himself than anything else. "They retain quite a crisp memory of the images they've reflected, although they will never retain sounds for very long."

"I fail to see how that is at all useful right now."

Rhon cleared his mind, and let himself be carried into the familiar current of memories. He slipped into the stream of images, carefully steering himself towards the time period he wanted to see. A young man had stood in this room. He had woken up and run down in a hurry, it seemed; he was barefoot, his shirt undone, his hair disheveled. An old woman, gnarled, with a vicious, snarling face, pointed a twisted finger at him. He stumbled back, a look of horror on his face. But hooded Death stood behind him, his inescapable hand reaching for the man, passing right through him, straight to his heart...

Rhon let his hand drop. The Raven scrutinized him, clearly annoyed.

"Yes, yes. So you know how he died. How exactly does that help?"

"It doesn't. It doesn't help at all."

"Oh, just admit you're going to die, old man. Stop wasting your time."

"Unless..."

The Raven started, hoping onto a table and peering at Rhon.

"Unless what? What are you thinking? What are you going to do?"

Rhon turned towards the Raven, trying to repress the spark of excitement he felt. His mind was racing, faster than it ever had before. He could be wrong. He was probably wrong. But it was an idea...

"Those people, the ones who came before me. Their things, where are they now?"

"Upstairs. Why?"

"Show me."

The Raven flew up to the second floor, and Rhon followed, climbing up the lurching staircase. He found himself in a cramped, dark hallway, thickly veiled with cobwebs, with doors lining it on either side.

"You said there had been a Fortuneteller. Where was she?"

The Raven shuffled over to a door. Rhon tried the handle.

"It's locked."

"Yes, she tried locking herself in to hide. Doors don't work very well against spirits, though. Wood can't stop them." The Raven added, somewhat superfluously.

Rhon threw his weight against the door, slamming against it with his shoulder. The door was thick, and had clearly once been very sturdy. But the wood was moldering, and soon gave way and crumbled. Rhon crossed the threshold, recoiling slightly. There was a skeleton, curled up in the farthest corner, wearing what remained of a lavishly colored outfit. Rhon tried not to look at it. Instead, he knelt by one of the bags she had been carrying. It was full of the articles usually used by Fortunetellers, all blanketed in dust: a crystal orb, scarves, various candles, and a few well-stoppered containers, filled with rare concoctions. Rhon carefully inspected the labels on the bottles, then faintly smiled, choosing a small, dark green vial. The Raven sat by the door preening himself, occasionally shooting Rhon a glance from the corner of his eye.

"Some Fortunetellers are just charlatans," Rhon commented, pocketing the vial. "This one was the genuine, it seems."

"What's in the bottle?"

"It's a mixture commonly called Nightbrew. It let's one see spirits. That's how Fortunetellers see things no one else can see."

“And how, pray, does that help you? The ghost won’t be invisible, you know. Not that it would make a difference, anyway.”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

The Raven snorted. Rhon turned towards the door.

“You also said there had been physicians. Where are their things?”

The Raven led Rhon down the hallway. He went through various packs of medical supplies carefully, choosing two more small vials and a metal cup. By the time Rhon came back downstairs, followed by the Raven, the fire in the hearth was burning low. He walked over to one of the tables, setting out the three bottles and the cup. The Raven settled on a chair, observing him through narrowed eyes.

“So, this plan of yours...will it work?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it a good plan?”

“No. It’s barely even half a plan, and it’s completely suicidal. It’ll probably kill me before the shade even returns.”

Rhon picked up the cup, pouring the Nightbrew in, then uncorked one of the medical vials. He stared at it, realizing that his hands were trembling. Taking a deep breath, he added the contents of the vial to the cup with the Nightbrew.

“So...what does this plan entail, then?”

Rhon managed to momentarily twitch his mouth into something resembling a smile.

“For a start, it involves killing myself.” He threw away the emptied second bottle. “By drinking aconite.”

Gripping the table, trying not to think about what he was doing, Rhon threw back his head, draining the contents of the cup. He gasped, letting the cup drop to the floor with a clang, almost feeling the poison beginning to course through his body. Then, hesitantly raising his Nightbrew-enhanced eyes, he saw Death standing by the fire. Rhon stumbled towards the figure in a hooded, black robe, and saw him raise up an arm and throw back his hood. The Storyteller caught his breath, as he looked straight into Death’s face. For so long, he had been telling stories about Death, stories where Death had been depicted as a horrifying, grizzled man. It had never occurred to him that Death would be a woman. And she was beautiful. Her hair was a pure black, rippling and flowing in thick waves. Her skin was unnaturally pale, like a sheet of ice, her lips red like fire and blood. Rhon looked into her eyes, endlessly deep and as ancient as time itself, reached out, and clasped her hand.

And screamed. He was expecting the hand to be cold, but it was like grabbing a red-hot iron. The memories hit him like a tidal wave. These were memories like he had never seen before; not pale reflections of past events, but brilliantly clear and bright. Pain crashed into him: he saw blood, swords, and vicious knives, ripping through skin and crushing bones, felt flames burning his flesh, freezing water flooding his lungs. He felt his body racked by a hundred diseases, torn apart by snarling wolves. He felt the desperation and fury of those executed for crimes they had not committed, the helpless terror of those starving to death. He gasped for breath, but none came, pure, searing agony pulsed through every fiber of his body. Death had come to thousands upon



thousands of people. And she remembered every one of them. She had touched their very souls.

She knew all of their names. Rhon struggled against the tide of memories, wildly searching for the one he needed. An old witch and a young man, standing in this very room. The man's anger. Indignation. Fear. Death's fingers travelling right through his back, travelling to his heart. And a name, passing through the memory like a ripple through water. Rhon let go of Death's hand, collapsing on the floor, gasping for breath. Death stood over him, her face serene and not uncompassionate.

"I was surprised to see you now, Rhon," she said quietly. "Our final meeting was not to be here."

"Antidote," Rhon rasped, desperately trying to get up, to get to the table. "Need antidote..."

But his limbs wouldn't obey him. His body was going numb. The poison was taking over, and even as he struggled to move, he suddenly knew he would never make it. He crumpled, falling to the floor, his hands clawing at the ground as his body convulsed. He couldn't focus his gaze, everything seemed to blur... And then he felt a hard beak push a vial into his hand. Making one last effort, he opened his eyes, unstopping the bottle, and poured the liquid into his mouth. He rolled onto his back, coughing and panting, and caught a glimpse of Death, as she faded away. And he could have sworn he saw a faint smile playing on her lips as she raised her hood.

"Our final meeting was never to be here," a voice breathed in his ear.

Rhon's vision was clouding, everything was turning black. He could feel his mind slipping away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw swirling shadows forming a translucent hand, as the room was filled with a rush of frosty air.

"Fell!" Rhon croaked, his voice breaking. "Your name is Fell."

He didn't know if the shade heard him or not. Darkness washed over him, and he lost consciousness.

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Rhon opened his eyes. Sunlight was streaming through a window, forming a shining pillar of lazily floating dust. He groaned, struggling to stand up. His head was pulsing, every muscle in his body ached, and he could barely walk, but he was alive. He ran his hand through his hair, feeling a cool breeze on his skin. He sighed, conscious only of his steadily beating heart. *I'm alive*. And suddenly, he found himself smiling, and felt something warm running down his cheeks. He laughed, and then he realized that he was sobbing, and so he simply stood in the sunlight and let himself laugh and cry and feel the wind on his face. His shoulders were shaking, and every breath hurt, and he didn't even care.

By the fireplace, he found a name carved into the wall. The scars in the wood had healed, and the engraving now read "Charlotte and Fell." Rhon ran his fingers lightly over the letters. The numbing emptiness was gone. *Rest in peace, Fell*. He murmured to himself. *Rest in peace*. Rhon rose, and went to gather his things, gently heaving the packs onto his sore shoulders. The house was still, now just a sad mass of wood, steadily crumbling into dust. Rhon glanced around the room one last time, and walked out the door. He traced the path back across the bridge, paying no attention to his protesting legs.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of loudly flapping wings, as a portly, balding crow flopped onto his shoulder.

“So, old man, where do you think you’re going now? I presume you’re still lost.”

“Do you have any suggestions, crow?”

“I am a Raven. A bird of Arcane Knowledge and Endless Wisdom.”

“I presume you know how to get out of the forest?”

The Raven snorted.

“I have lived here for longer than your human mind can imagine. Of course I know how to leave the forest.”

Rhon grinned, shooting the Raven a quick glance.

“Well, every old Storyteller deserves a pet Raven. Lets see if we can actually find our way, then.”