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The Wolves of Gehenna

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The Wolves of Gehenna

A Thesis

Submitted to the graduate faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film & Theatre Arts
Creative Writing (Low Resident)

by
John Shinholser
B.S. Champlain College, 2010

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Dedication

To Judge Jim Sprouse

As you asked, so shall I live.

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Chapter 1

The nights were too dark in the Gardens. One by one the lamps on the streets of the village had been covered. With no stars and no moon through the clouds and no flames on the street corners it was as if the world, like the lamps, had been shuttered. To all the drunkards in the Hoary Stag, Fulkton Gardens was black like ink. To all the world the town was black. To all the world the world was black, but it was not black to Taim. To Taim Corwin the world was muted colors. He wished that what he saw was black, as well. His golden eyes shone in the bar room's candlelight.

Taim had been so proud to come home two months ago. He had spit in his father's face that day. The broken, formerly sharp edged man had done nothing. Regid Corwin's son was a soldier, now, of the King's army. Taim's father had ruled his procession of wives and all of his children with his fist raised above all, but two months ago Taim had been the one to raise his fist and his father had not dared to raise his own. Not even Regid Corwin would raise a hand against a werewolf of the King's Army. You did not bite the hand of the King. He was god vampire and ruler of the nation of Gehenna.

Taim had polished his brass the day he'd spit in his father's face. It had not gleamed. The sun had not been shining. It rarely shone in Fulkton Gardens. He'd hated the town then and worn his black and brass to spite them all. And now? To all the world Fulkton Gardens was black like ink, but to Taim. To Taim the shadows were not dark enough. He drank and blurred the focus of his eyes.

"Taim, I wish you'd tell me what's got you in such a mood," Hellory Vance said.

Hellory was wiping down an earthenware mug behind the counter of the Stag's bar. She was plump and cheerful in a linen dress. A moment of attention from Taim and he had memorized every detail of her: pale, blue eyes, black hair—she was of local stock. Taim's brother, Tordric, might love her, but Taim could not stomach Hellory tonight.

"An ale, Hellory," Taim said.

Hellory rocked forward onto the wide counter surrounding the bar and took hold of Taim's empty mug. She turned and went to one of the two kegs of early sweet spring ale by the inn's entrance and filled it, and then returned the mug to him. Taim turned his gaze to stare into the head of his drink and watch it die. Hellory moved down the bar counter to talk to some of the other customers. She was coaxing them to leave. Taim wondered, was it that late already? She did not talk to him, though. He knew she wanted to, after the customers were gone.

Hellory returned to him. It had been twenty minutes and the rest of the drunks had gone. All of the candles but one had been guttered. It didn't matter much to Taim.

"Are you going to be here for the wedding, Taim?" Hellory asked.

Taim's ale was half empty. He had come in late tonight, after the final staff shift had turned over. He had gone through glasses of ale without stopping until he couldn't care about his thoughts. Now he was drunk. He only wanted to stare into his mug.

Hellory was sitting barefoot beside him. Taim's focus wavered for only a second, but he had memorized each of her details again. He could see her naked calves. He wondered when she had slipped her shoes off. Taim noted discrepancies in her appearance before rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm and going back to his drink.

"Tord would be happy," Hellory said. "Are you listening?"

"Yes. Ale, Hellory," Taim said.

"But you've not finished the one you've got," Hellory said. She got another ale for him, anyway.

Once Taim had the second ale he moved it close to the first to consider. He'd never realized how hard it was to stop thinking. If he would stop thinking perhaps he would not be sitting still. Perhaps he would not be sitting and getting ready to kill his lover, who was sleeping upstairs. He would not have a knot of silk in his back pocket prepared to strangle the life out of her two year old daughter.

"You're not listening. Is this about Lili again?" Hellory asked. "You two are always getting into fights. How bad can it be?"

Hellory gave him a shove on the shoulder. It was a playful shove. She knew Taim and she knew his moods. He was a dark one, and a wild one. Taim knew that was how she and the rest in Fulkton Gardens saw him. Even as a soldier. Especially. You did not bother a man like Taim Corwin. Hellory Vance was his brother's fiancé. She had decided, for tonight, at least, to ignore his darkness.

Taim thought she was a vile woman tonight. He did not bother to look at her. Still, Hellory must have sensed something in the cast of his shoulders. She went stiff. He could smell her sweat, now, with his animal nose. She smelled uneasy.

Taim closed his eyes.

"Hell. I don't like talking," Taim said.

"This isn't about Lili," Hellory said.

Hellory's voice was tighter. Taim turned his eyes from his glass to regard her. He did not bother to lift his head.

"It is about Lili," she said. "Taim?"

Taim stood up. His black uniform pulled tight across his chest as his shoulders fell into alignment. He had been hunched over the bar for too long. He had forgotten that feeling of tightness. He was too broad for standard dress. Like his father.

"I'm going," Taim said.

"Taim?" Hellory asked.

That was the only way Taim could think, now. Now that he had risen it was too late to think of different things. Lili was sleeping in one of the rooms upstairs. The brown, foreign, gentle woman with the lavender eyes and the unusually tall body was waiting for him. She had given him a reason to love Fulkton Gardens. Now he had to kill her. But not yet, he told himself. Just a little longer.

"I'm going for a walk, Hellory. Leave the Stag open for me," Taim said.

"As you wish, Taim," Hellory said. She pulled something from a pocket in her apron. "Could you give this to Reah when you see her tonight, Taim?" she asked.

Taim had turned to go to the door, but he turned back now. Hellory had a black fall lily in her left hand. They were delicate things, growing in only the deepest parts of northern forests. This one had somehow survived in Hellory's pocket through her entire shift. Seeing it Taim wished it hadn't. When Taim did not reply, Hellory pressed onwards.

"For her to give to her mother," she said. "I didn't get to see the girl this evening and it's too late to visit now."

Lili loved flowers. They were something she loved and so Taim had tried to love them, too. Now he felt sick. He caught a scab as he moved his fingers through his brown hair. He was too dead drunk and tired to wince over it. Hellory stepped forward, quiet, and put the flower in

his hand. Taim placed it above a nearby table, on one of the chairs that had been stacked on top of it.

"Taim!" Hellory said.

He walked out the door.

There was a stream flowing on the far side of the town of Fulkton Gardens. The hardpack thoroughfare running past the Stag bisected it, running north. The road faded into the woods north of Fulkton Gardens. The barbarians ruled, in those northern woods, and no civilized man had had reason to travel there in a long, long time. The bridge which had crossed the river where the road traveled was collapsed, a ruin, and the river had worn it into rounded stones. Some of the stones still stuck out from the water. They were gray in the night while the river was dark. Taim could not see its bottom. It was the first thing like that he'd found.

Lili was a witch—a mage—and she had revealed herself to Taim. The taint of magic was punishable by death in Gehenna, by the King's decree, and Taim was one of the King's soldiers. Taim had loved Lili's perfumes and had never guessed that she was hiding her identity from his heightened senses. The smell of magic was familiar to all of the King's werewolf soldiers. It was a testament to the strength of Taim's denial that he had not recognized that scent for so long. He'd wondered why Lili had scorned him, at first. Now he understood.

Taim could feel himself sobering. He had stuck his boots in the stream. It was warm for Spring, but this far north the streams were still only a few weeks clear of ice and snow.

Taim wanted to warn Lili. He wanted to run away from Fulkton Gardens and never come back. He had already revealed Lili's secret to the vampire that he served. Taim's lord had commanded him to kill Lili—"to preserve Gehenna," she'd said, "as always." The vampires had made Taim what he was. He could not abandon that.

"I should go, now," he said, with no one around to hear him.

Still, he sat there. Taim's feet had gone cold. They felt clearer than any part of him had felt today. Time passed. Taim realized that he could barely feel his feet at all. He tried to sense his pulse in them but he was ice from the ankles down.

Taim could turn into a wolf to sober and regain feeling. The possibility terrified him. He pulled his feet out from the stream and crossed them under his legs and they began throbbing after a minute of waiting. That was enough.

He and Lili could run, he thought. Take her daughter Reah as well. But the young Lord Jasper Fulke would kill Taim's family for his betrayal. Fulke wouldn't want to. He was a good man. He'd kill them, anyway, at a vampire's request. Taim's family would be killed, as well. Regid, Taim's father, and Joyce, his mother; Tordric, Joyce, and Kit, his older brother and young sisters; and Tordric's surviving children—they would all be culled, and for what? No one had run from the King before. Not with a mage. Not and lived.

Taim looked at his boots. They were muddy and the mud was on the back of his pressed black pants.

Someone was coming up behind him.

"I don't want to worry you, Taim," Hellory said.

"You can't," Taim said.

Taim turned around to look at Hellory. She had slipped on shoes and come out to look for him. Lili must have told her about Taim's favorite spot.

"Lord Fulke sent me to get you," Hellory said.

Taim got on his throbbing feet and started to walk back to The Stag. He did not bother telling Hellory what he was going to do. He did not know what he was going to do. There was

brightness over the horizon, flickering, like the wick of a lamp. Taim was walking with his most even strides but his heart was beating in different tempos with every step that he took. He smelled smoke. He thought that he was walking. He could hear Hellory running to keep up with him. She was falling behind.

The Hoary Stag was on fire. The inkeep and his beautiful son and his ugly wife and their four surviving servants were standing outside of it as it burned. Jasper Fulke was watching it, as well, his face pink. He turned and looked at Taim, steady, and said nothing as Taim passed him and went into the burning inn.

"Wait!" Hellory cried. She was somewhere behind Taim in the night. He ignored her.

No fire burned in the bar room yet, but the heat was intense and Taim could barely breathe. The air rushed through the rafters to feed the conflagration on the floorboards above and a breeze passed through the Stag's open front door, whistling.

Taim ran. The stairs to the servants' floor were in the far corner of the bar, by the counter. The stairs were an upward spiral to the second floor and the fire had not yet traveled down them, but Taim could see the light the fire cast on the stairs' farthest visible wall. His boots steamed as they flicked off each step and then Taim burst into the hallway and all the walls were orange and red and moving like a swarm of living things. The fire had just started to creep across the floor.

The sight of fire nearly blinded Taim, it was so close. And there was so much of it as well. The ceiling was being devoured by an oily cloud of smoke and his eyes were driven to memorize the contrary patterns of ash floating through it.

The heat was agonizing, but Taim ignored it. Taim was frozen, looking, and the hair on his arms and his face and his close-shaved scalp was shriveling away. He could feel the grease in his skin prickling a moment later. The fire was baking him alive. Taim bore it. It barely

registered. His body was an object and he had treated it as such most of his life, trading it away in beatings and unpleasant favors. To Taim there was only one thing he could notice in the heat of the burning hallway.

His ears tortured him with a sound—a murmur—heard through the roar of the flames. It was a babble, like from a brook: a child's whispers.

Each step Taim took down the hall hurt. He kept moving. The whispers were in Lili's chambers.

"Ma-ma? Ma-ma? Ma-ma?—Mama?—Mama?—"

The fire licked Taim's boot heels and the smoke was now at the level of his eyes. He had to stoop. The murmur was a scream, now, and the roar of the fire made it feel as if it was trying to devour his ears. The fire was everywhere. How could she still be living?

The door had warped, but was still intact. Taim was almost to it. He turned sideways and rammed his shoulder against the thick oak door to Lili's room and the door fell to pieces. His right arm felt as if it had fallen to pieces as well. It hung limp at Taim's side. He used his left arm to shield his eyes from a sudden blast of heat.

Nothing remained of Lili's life but the bed in one corner where she and her daughter Reah had slept. Everything was devoured but that.

Taim stopped. The heat-split hairs on the back of his neck shivered in response to magic. It must have been Lili's. Was she alive? Taim memorized the details of the room in a moment, and then he knew. Lili was dead.

She was in the middle of her fourposter bed. The edges of her bedsheets were on fire. The rest of them were slick and red. There. There. Lili's body stole the focus of Taim's senses.

He could smell Lili's perfume and her inert blood and the cold sweat of a struggle. Her neck must have been snapped. Taim wondered if Fulke had hung her from the rafters. Fulke couldn't have. He was human. He was not strong enough to murder her that way. Lili's head perched loose on her neck. Her neck was swollen and black. Reah must have positioned her mother's head on the pillow in as natural a position as possible after Jasper Fulke had departed. Fulke would not have stayed long enough to do it himself. Reah lived. She must have hidden while her mother died. Lili's head did not look like it wanted to stay where it was. There was a swelling on one side of her neck and Taim could see a gaping O in her skin there, breached by a separated chunk of spine. He felt numb. How close was he to—when he had loved Lili each of her movements had been music—he could hear them, not just see them—but there was no music now. All that remained of Lili was her daughter, lying on top of her, murmuring to her corpse.

Reah had stopped screaming. She must have exhausted herself with it. She was small. She wore a white dress. Her night dress. It was oversized. She had her mother's dark skin and dark brown hair and what must have been her father's odd brown eyes. Taim had teased the girl that her mother had fashioned her from an otter's pelt and that that was what made her all one color. Reah had asked him what an otter was.

Taim stepped forward. The charred floorboards were sinking beneath the weight of Taim's feet. Was he really walking through fire? Was this what it felt like when you could feel no pain? Smoke rose from the floor and the bed to the ceiling and Taim could see that Reah's hair was about to ignite. The bed was sinking into the floor. Just like Taim was sinking into the floor. Taim could not smell anymore. His other senses would follow shortly.

But he heard the floorboards when they ceased groaning beneath the weight of the bed, before the roar and the fire took away his ability to hear. Reah looked up and Taim could not see

if there was anything in the little girl's eyes as the floor collapsed beneath her, and then he could not see at all. The smoke and the heat made everything black. Taim leaped into the air and the floor collapsed. The heat and the pain grew unbearable, and then they disappeared, but only for a moment. Taim called out to the beast inside his body. Sensation flooded in. Every nerve in his body cried out as it ejected his humanity. Taim was terrified. He vomited his unnecessary human organs. His skin tore open. The blood loss made him dizzy. But only for a moment. His sight returned and he saw Reah more clearly than before. With clear purpose. He was close. He reached for her as she fell into the fire below.

Taim's hands were in front of his eyes:

They were turning into claws.

Chapter 2

The children had driven Reah into a corner.

"Have you heard this one, yet? I heard they cut off her mother's legs to make her fit in her coffin."

"Oh? That's nice. So what do we do with her?"

Reah hadn't been fast enough. King take her, she didn't have time for this. She knew where things would go if she did nothing. She spoke out.

"Why are you doing this, Jocelin?" she asked.

"Hey! I was talking to you. Show some respect," one of the boys said.

"Shut up, Lawrance," Jocelin said.

Reah was trapped in a corner of a hallway branching off in the direction of the girls' quarters. The children were trying to look as if Reah was with them. The sisters of the Convent of the Frozen Blood had a habit of appearing without making noise on the Convent's slate tile floors.

Blythe was the youngest of the children. She was thirteen. She had brown hair cut short and green eyes. She was born local, but she'd been in the orphanage since she was five. Her father had murdered her mother and three younger sisters. It was said he'd wanted sons. He'd become a High Blood vampire's dinner a month later and Blythe had been sent to the Sisters of the Frozen Blood. Reah knew that Blythe hadn't been a part of this group last week. She was watching the hallway, now, perhaps concerned.

Owen was fourteen. He was blonde. His blue eyes had a pale aspect to them. He had been found in a rubbish ditch outside a town in Southern Gehenna four months travel away, while still

a toddler, pawing along the ground like a beast and searching for scraps of food. He was poor-sighted and always squinting. Reah thought he was probably an imbecile. He had been chasing after Jocelin for years, now. He was as far away from the girl as he could be, as always, standing in the shadow of the wall to which Reah had pressed her back. Blythe was next to him. Owen and Blythe were a weak point in the circle surrounding Reah, but she had yet to determine a way to exploit that weakness.

Next there were Sarah and Locke, whispering to each other as always. Sarah was fourteen and taller than any of the other girls, blond and blue eyed. She had been found outside the orphanage as an infant. She was uninteresting, but wholly Jocelin's creature. There would be no avenue of escape there.

Locke was the oldest of the group, almost sixteen. She should have been out of the orphanage by now. Reah didn't know why she had decided to stay instead of moving on. It didn't matter, anyways. She had dark brown hair, much like Reah's own, and pale blue eyes. She was short, though still taller than Reah. Another obstacle.

And then there was Lawrance. He was a wall. Huge. He had blonde hair and green eyes. He was a local boy, not an orphan. A farmer's son. Almost a man. If he wasn't here escape might have been an option for Reah, but, then, there was a reason he was here. Reah directed her attention to Jocelin.

"What is it?" Jocelin asked, meeting Reah's eyes. She wasn't very good at sounding sweet. "Don't you like our company, Reah?"

Jocelin had been at the Orphanage of the Sisters of the Frozen Blood for twelve years. She was nearing the orphanage's age of maturity, now. Reah didn't know her family history. It was well known in the halls that the sisters had decided to keep Jocelin's past to themselves.

"You know Elvene won't like you any more for doing this, Jocelin," Reah said.

Reah had only two courses of action, begging and revenge. Not a difficult choice.

Jocelin took a step toward Reah, breaking the circle Reah was trapped in. Lawrance was the one Reah needed to worry about now. He was standing just behind Jocelin, within reach of the hole the girl's movement had made in the children's circle. No space for Reah to run, of course, but that was to be expected. More importantly, Lawrance was in arm's reach of Jocelin. That wouldn't do. Reah did a quick calculation in her head.

"You mongrel little bitch," Jocelin said, taking another step forward. Her voice was vitriol: good. "Why would *I* care about Elvene?"

Reah took a single step forward. The space between herself and her tormentor was closing. If she could get her claws into Joceline she could get some retribution, and the group around her would be bound to make noise. The Sisters weren't exactly hard of hearing. Or slow, for that matter. Reah would make out all right. First, though, Jocelin had to take one more step closer.

"Because," Reah said. She took another step forward. "Everyone knows, Jocelin. You've been trying for a chance in Elvene's dresses since the day you met her."

"Take that *back*," Jocelin said.

Jocelin was the palest girl Reah had ever known. She was red now, though. Good. She had a wide thin lipped smile like a hatchet wound to the face. It was always an empty smile. But those green eyes of hers were sparkling beneath her short brown hair. She took a step forward.

Locke cut in. "We're not in the woods this time, Jocelin," she said. "That Corwin boy's got nothing on a Sister. Back off."

"Take. That. Back," Joceline said.

Reah bared her teeth. "I won't."

"Apologize, Reah. Jocelin's not like that," Owen said. He was trying to defend Jocelin again, of course, and trying to calm her down. What an idiot, Reah thought. She kept her eyes on Jocelin.

Jocelin turned a dozen shades darker red. Reah had known Jocelin for a long time and knew she had gotten to her. Jocelin was always convinced that her friends were stupid and that they wouldn't catch on to things. She hated being wrong. She spun around.

"Shut up, Owen!"

Reah smiled, then took one last short step forward.

"I'll fit *you* in a coffin," she said.

Reah spared a glance for Lawrance. He hadn't caught on yet. The tow headed boy wasn't even a ward of the orphanage. He was a farmer's son who shouldn't be here. Why was he going through the trouble? Reah cleared her mind. She wouldn't have long once Lawrance started moving.

Jocelin started to turn back around. Reah didn't bother to wait for a look at her face. She lunged forward, crying out, and wrapped her hands around Jocelin's neck. Her nails dug into flesh. So odd. She had cut them yesterday. It didn't matter. She dug harder. She saw Lawrance moving forward from the top edge of her vision.

"You violent, stubborn child," Sister Meri said.

The world was a blur for a second after Reah opened her eyes. Her head was swimming. What had happened? Reah's vision cleared. She was in the infirmary, apparently. She didn't know anywhere else in the world with a ceiling made of blacked glass.

The Convent of the Sisters of the Frozen Blood was a behemoth: a unified mass of brick and ash-tinted glass rising above the squat, sod-roofed homes and stores of the village of Fulkton Gardens. Taking up a corner opposite to the manor of the Fulke estates on the big hill to the south of the village, and the cemetery hill at the village's far eastern edge, the Convent had originally been composed of separate buildings, each with their own purpose. Those buildings had grown together over the millennia that the Convent had existed and, like barnacles heaped by tides on rocks, it was now impossible to tell the parts from the fused mass.

The convent had been built as a prison, originally. It had been a place where the King could store women of the noble caste who had stood against him in his conquest of the nations which had become the Gehennan Empire three thousand years before. The King had turned these high ladies to vampirism personally. This was an honor he had otherwise deigned to give only to his four greatest vassals, known collectively as the Hands of the King. He had bound these highborn ladies to eternal confinement in the Convent's walls. The King was nothing if not cruel in his justice: those first dozen Sisters of the Frozen Blood had had ample opportunity over the three millenia since their turning to dwell on their mistakes.

Over the years, however, the purpose of the Sisters' prison had changed. The life of a Highblood vampire was not an easy one. Many a Gehennan noblewoman turned by one of the King's four chosen overlords—his Hands—or by the products of their turnings, the Highblood lords of Gehenna, had chosen a life of contemplation over that of death and intrigue in the halls of the King's great capital city, Gaterau. As the population of the Convent of the Sisters of the

Frozen Blood had increased, the buildings on the promontory just north of Fulkton Gardens had grown to suit their population's needs.

The Orphan Annex was one of the newer additions to the convent. Housing at any one time one hundred or more orphans of mixed ages and genders taken from across the nation of Gehenna, it served not only as a symbol of good will between the vampiric Sisters and their human neighbors, but also as a mercy to the Sisters themselves: providing them with a distraction from their eternity trapped within the convent's walls.

Sister Meri had been one of the original sisters of the convent. She was mistress of the convent infirmary. She was the first sister Reah had met, treating her after the fire which had nearly killed her. Meri seemed to actually care for Reah. Reah had not wanted to see her today.

Reah was lying on something soft: one of the infirmary's beds. She was not under the bed's covers, though. She must have been unconscious for only a short time. She tried to rise. A white hand with long, sharp fingers pressed down on her chest and she fell onto the mattress.

"You are not ready to be up yet," Sister Meri said. "Stubborn."

Reah's eyes followed Meri's hand up to the tight black sleeve which met it at its base. Up the sleeve and past the sharp outline of the shoulder it led into. Up the long, soft white neck beyond it and past the pursed lips hiding the shark's smile which did not belong under the kind gray eyes of the strawberry blonde matron of the convent's infirmary. Reah felt red on the base of her neck and averted her eyes.

"I'm fine, Sister," Reah said.

"You should know better, Reah," Meri said. She placed her hand under Reah's chin and then tilted her head to look back in her direction. "After two weeks ago. Your birthday is coming."

Reah's mother had never shared the birth date of her daughter, but Meri had given Reah a date and time to celebrate. Reah supposed it had been in an effort to cheer her up during her first months in the convent. She had trouble remembering back that far. Reah was fourteen now, or fifteen. She didn't know. And her birthday was three weeks away.

Fifteen was the age of adulthood in the Convent of the Sisters of the Frozen Blood. If Reah proved her maturity, then she would be allowed to decide to leave. If she did not she would lose another year trapped behind the convent's walls. That was not acceptable.

"I'm sorry, sister," Reah said. She was.

"That Breeden boy knocked your head into the floor. He's not allowed here again. You! Do you know what you did to poor Jocelin?" Meri said.

Reah sat up, guilt and caution forgotten. She bared her teeth, staring into Sister Meri's eyes.

"I don't care," she said.

The woman blinked, and then she laughed. Sister Meri's laughter was beautiful—joyful, even—but it showed all her rows of teeth. Reah ignored it. She rubbed the back of her neck.

"Sorry," Reah said.

"Ha! I'll bet you are, girl," Sister Meri said.

Reah rose on shaky feet.

"Is church over?" Reah asked.

"No such luck for you. There is still half an hour's wait for that," Sister Meri said.

Reah grimaced. The black fall lilies had begun to blossom in the deep parts of the forests near Fulkton Gardens and she had been planning to gather them to place on her mother's grave.

There was no way she could pick flowers for her mother and still manage to get to church on time. Not if she still had to make it to her room. She took a few steps towards the door.

Reah opened her eyes. Meri was looking down at her, worried.

"What...?" Reah asked.

"You fell again. It did not take much effort to revive you, but I do not like this, Reah, you had just recovered—what have you been doing to yourself these weeks?"

Reah sat up again. Carefully. She'd take things slower this time.

"Nothing," Reah said. Sister Meri was looking at her still. She hated to see Meri when she was like this. "I've been having trouble eating."

"Boys?" Meri asked.

Reah blushed. "No, no. Nothing like that. I just haven't been able to keep things in my stomach."

Meri turned away from her and there was momentary silence. "Ah," Meri said.

Reah had run away from the orphanage nearly two months ago, into the woods, after a particularly nasty fight with Jocelin. It had proven a stupid decision. She had come back, delirious and starved, two weeks ago, and, though she now felt recovered, Reah knew that she had come back a different person than when she had left.

Reah had never weighed enough to begin with. She couldn't afford to lose any weight. And yet, since her return, she had barely been able to eat at all. The only thing that she could stomach was mutton and beef and chicken: animal flesh. Even that was proving difficult to hold

down. She used to love vegetables. She'd vomited the day before when she'd tried to force a piece of cabbage down her throat.

It was more than the food or the weight loss, though: she'd been feeling tense. Her mind and her gaze were constantly straying beyond the convent's walls and she had been having trouble keeping her thoughts focused. Every little detail seemed to spring up in her sight and demand attention.

And her eyes. Everything else Reah could explain away, but her eyes were impossible to ignore. They were changing. There was a mirror along the wall opposite to Sister Meri, circled in iron flowers covered over in peeling white paint. Reah snuck a glance at herself in it. Yes, right there, on the edges of her irises:

Flecks of gold.

"You will not be going to church today, Reah," Sister Meri said. "I want you on bed rest."

Reah started, then rose from the bed.

"No," she said. "The black fall lilies have just bloomed, Sister. I've never skipped them before. I have to give them to Mother."

"Oh? And have you collected these flowers?"

Reah shook her head, but she didn't drop the subject. "I'll pick them after church."

"You have chores after church, Reah," Meri said.

"I've never missed the first bloom before, Sister!" Reah shouted.

Sister Meri did not reply for a second. She had turned back around and was regarding Reah. Judging her, Reah guessed. She had to understand! If she didn't understand—

"Very well. You will make it to church on time?" Meri asked.

The vampire's stare did not leave Reah. There was no way that Reah could make it to church at all, not if she went out deep enough into the woods to find the secret places where her mother's favorite flowers grew. Meri knew that.

"Yes, Sister," Reah said.

"Very well. Be on your way, girl," Meri said.

"Sister, I..." Reah said, then stopped. It didn't matter, anyway.

In three weeks Reah would be leaving Fulkton Gardens with the blessings of the Sisters. She could leave by the roads this time, not the wilderness, and with a small stipend that she could use to establish herself. There was nothing north of the town but wasteland and barbarians, but endless possibilities lay to the south. Reah would say goodbye to Sister Meri, at least, when that time came. But first she would see her mother.

Reah lay in the forest and looked at her reflection in a pool of water. Right about now Pastor Oliver would be describing the glories of the King in church. Reah didn't miss it.

This deep in the forests of Northern Gehenna the tree-cover stifled almost all light, even in mid-day, and the still, early spring melt-water trapped in the gully that Reah rested by was dark. Reah had stripped down to bathe in the cold water to clear her mind and now she regarded her image as she dried herself.

Reah had brown skin, where the skin of all the people she had ever met was pale. Her hair was brown and held close to her head in tight curls, where the hair of the ordinary people of Fulkton Gardens was straight. These were both traits that she was supposed to have inherited from her mother, who had moved to Fulkton Gardens while Reah was very young.

Reah was unusually short, even for the conservative estimate of her age, and petite. This, she had been told, made her very different from her mother, who had been nearly a giantess by the accounts of those who remembered her. Where all the people of Fulkton Gardens had green or blue eyes, Reah's eyes were brown. Or they had been. Even in the black pool that Reah stared into she could make out flecks of glowing gold. Reah's mother's eyes had been lavender. They were the only physical feature of her mother that Reah still remembered.

There were three things that reminded Reah of her mother. The first was the color lavender, and how it had felt staring into eyes that were that particular color. The second was a long, complicated scar moving up from Reah's left hip to just under her breasts, its ridged, gray slopes approximating curling vines with little bell shaped flowers. This scar was all that remained of the burns she had suffered from the fire that had devoured her mother's remains. (And how could Lawrance *possibly* say they'd needed to butcher Reah's mother to fit her in a coffin?) The final thing that reminded Reah of her mother was black fall lilies, which Sister Meri told Reah was her mother's favorite flower, and which Reah had been gathering to place at the foot of her mother's grave at the beginning of each spring since she had been old enough to sneak away.

When Reah thought about her mother she could remember little. When she thought about her mother's murderer, however, she could remember the placement of every hair on his head. Jasper Fulke had killed Reah's mother. Reah remembered the sight of him coming out of her mother's room. She could remember the feel of his hands as he had grabbed her by the wrists and thrown her into the room where he had murdered her mother. It was Reah's earliest coherent memory, and, beyond those details of that day, Reah could remember nothing of that time at all. It tortured her.

Jasper Fulke, the lord of Fulkton Gardens. Every Sunday Reah had to watch him in church, sitting with his spoiled daughter, Elvene, and their myriad psychophants, and every Sunday Reah had to say nothing. Every time she spoke out against Fulkton Gardens' human lord Reah suffered and she had learned long ago to say nothing about him at all. Still, though, Jocelin and the others tormented Reah. Reah assumed that they did this to curry favor with Elvene. She could no longer be certain, however. She thought, perhaps, the other children of the town had hated her for so long that they now tormented her out of habit.

Reah got back into her clothes. She chafed her torso in order to warm herself then continued her journey to the glade where her mother's flowers were to be found. The massive trunks of the trees hemmed her in, their boughs devoured the sunlight, and their branches cracked above her. Reah felt unease, walking through the forest—it had nearly killed her, two weeks ago—but she suppressed the feeling. She knew where she was going, and she knew where the other girls of the convent were right now, and she had no reason to feel uneasy. Despite this her pulse was quick as she listened to twigs cracking somewhere to her left as a small animal startled.

She made her way around the rotting, two story stump of a particularly large old tree, and the glade was there. It was as she remembered. The dark of the forest gave way to a curtain of light where the massive tree had fallen years ago and taken down other, smaller trees, rolling down a slight incline before coming to a stop. Reah could make out its rotted hulk, as her eyes adjusted, on the other end of the clearing. Scattered around the bases of the flattened stumps in the glade, just erupting from the crust of melting snow that covered everything over in winter, Reah found what she was looking for: black fall lilies basking in the gray light of day.

Reah made her way through the stumps. She picked the flowers until she had filled both fists, placing them carefully in a satchel she had brought just for this purpose, and then she turned to leave. Her gaze fell on the enormous stump she had passed by on her way into the glade and she froze. There, sheltering just on the cusp of the forest's veil of darkness, was a large, starved looking wolf. Its body was a shadow—an outline—but its eyes reflected the sunlight on the other side of the tree line, glowing gold.

Wolves did not normally attack people, but this one looked old, and sick, and very hungry. And Reah was unarmed. Reah crouched and glanced around her, never letting her attention wander from the animal for more than a half second. There had to be something nearby she could defend herself with.

Then, suddenly, the wolf howled and disappeared into the forest.

Chapter 3

Mattock Corwin fidgeted on the hardwood bench as he tried to survive yet another three hour sermon on the honor and greatness of the King and his followers. Every Sunday he sat here, on this bench, next to his plump, black haired best friend Elvene Fulke. Every Sunday the bleak eyed pastor Oliver would stand at the head of Fulkton Garden's church behind his polished black wood pulpit, talking, for three hours, about the glories of the King and his children, the High Blood vampiric lords of Gehenna.

Some of Pastor Oliver's stories were interesting. Mat enjoyed the descriptions of ancient battles, and the exploits of the King's Hands—especially those of the wily Guy Guillame—could be entertaining, but those were exceptions to the typical endless procession of dusty morality that Mat was otherwise subjected to. There were very few things that Mat enjoyed doing less than going to his bleak church with its subdued candlelight and its single, morbid window. He sighed.

Elvene kicked him in the shins without looking like she was doing anything. Mat could almost hear what the pretty young girl was thinking: "Mattock Corwin, you're a man of almost sixteen years and still you insist on behaving like a child caught with honey smudged on his cheek every time you sit down."

Mat tried to concentrate. He really did. He just never had had much of a mind for church words. He straightened up on the bench and tried to pay attention to what the pastor was saying, boring as it was, to placate Elvene. The girl's tongue could make a headsman's axe seem welcome at times, and she had been spoiling for a fight with him for the past two weeks.

For three thousand years the people of Fulkton Gardens, and Gehenna in general, had been unified in their worship of the King. He was the originator of all vampires: a powerful

conquerer who had ground half the continent of Ios under his heel before finally being satisfied, founding the nation of Gehenna on the lands he had conquered. Sequestered in his cathedral city, Gaterau, no living citizen had seen him in such a length of time that he had for all intents and purposes passed into mythos: become more a figurehead god than a ruler. And so the worship of him had gained in strength. And so Mat now sat, bored and unquestioning in an ancient church. He did not fear the King any more than religion proscribed, but he did not want to deal with Elvene's temper today. He was going to see his mother.

Pastor Oliver droned on, "...and for the users of magics. For those who harbor an anarchistic heart. The wrath of the King will descend upon them who turn beneath His easy yoke, and the great armies of the dark shall find them who harbor darkness in their souls. All of these shall find their flesh rived from their bones and their arteries cast about amongst the trees to rain their lifeblood to the ground..." That's about as far as Mat got before he found himself fidgeting once again. To keep himself occupied he stared past the good Pastor Oliver's balding head and out through the thick stained glass window behind his head.

In the right light you could see trees through the white rose frozen in blood in the center of the window—the symbol of the King. You could never see through the four faces of the King's Hands that surround it, of course: crafty Guy Guillame of the Pure Mind, who had once tricked a human monarch into marrying a goat; vengeful Anastasia Joblokof of the Furious Sword, who could drive fear into the greatest of rulers and lords with a single glance; wise Joyce Armante of the Crystal Sword, the only mage gifted with vampirism in all of history; and delicate, romantic Esteille Kroftford of the White Lily Crown, who was the subject of over a thousand sonnets and rumored to be the lover of the King himself. Their painstakingly rendered

faces were pale, but not so pale as the rose, and too dusky to see through in the early hours of the morning with the sun still on the opposite horizon of the west window of the church.

Still, with the shadows of trees dappling the glass and a flash of green in the pale pink of the window's center, Mat could daydream about being outside in the crisp day—perhaps somewhere far away and exotic, perhaps somewhere close by and familiar, but certainly somewhere better than church on Sunday. He could daydream and wile away the tedium of the hour left in sermon and Elvene would never have to know. This, of course, is what he did.

Once the sermon was over all the people sitting at Mat's bench besides the good lord Jasper Fulke, Elvene's father, started shuffling towards the door. Lord Fulke was a member of the Lower Blood: descendents of those lords who had stood aside in the King's drive for conquest during the founding of his kingdom and not been granted the gift of vampiric immortality upon his ascension to the throne. They had been left with their lands, however, and Lord Fulke was also head of the town council. Members of the town council always stayed after church to discuss current issues and disputes with the Sisters of the Frozen Blood.

As usual, the Sisters were just now streaming in from a concealed door. Mat ignored them as he broke off from Elvene and her family, who were moving towards the town square to converse with the citizenry. He nodded towards his brothers and sisters and stepmother, who were just now emerging from the peasant's floor, and, grasping the wrought iron cemetery gate and pulling it open, Mat went to see his mother.

“Herein lies Molly Corwin, Beloved of Tordric Corwin.”

It was a good enough gravestone, Mat supposed. It didn't mention him or his sister but, then, when the stone was carved the two of them had just recently been born, and it was ill luck to mention such young children on a grave while the likelihood of them drawing breath the next year was still so much in doubt. That consideration hadn't saved Mat's sister, who had died in a barbarian raid two years after, but Mat was still around, so he supposed it had worked well enough.

The grave was in a poor location, too, stuck at the bottom of the hill closest to woods in the entire cemetery. Fenced or not, scavengers had been known to find ways to the graves during the middle days of spring when the ground had thawed enough to dig in but before food was in ready supply. The wash off from spring thaw did nightmarish things to graves at the bottom of hills, too, and there had been a number of times growing up when Mat, dragging a protesting Elvene along, and some of the more adventurous boys of the town, had had the opportunity to take a few quick pokes at a corpse that was partially ground up through the mud before the caretaker discovered it. Mat was pretty sure none of those corpses had been his mother's but after a few years you could never be sure.

Still, the stone was nice enough, and on warm days when the wind blew just right you could catch a cinnamon hint of summer-apple from the top of the hill. Mat thought his mother would have appreciated that.

Mat shifted in front of the tombstone uncomfortably: visiting the cemetery always made him think morbid thoughts. He turned his mind to the task at hand.

"Hi, Mom," Mat said.

That wasn't enough. Mat sighed.

“It’s been another week, eh? Summer’s coming in a few months. I bet you’ll like that. Umm... Dad’s fine. A little grumpy that his hip still hurts from that kick the steer gave him last month. I say he doesn’t have much right to complain, of the two of them, though: he got out of the exchange with a thrown hip. That cow’s steak now.”

Mat chuckled uneasily, and sighed again. He was never very good at this, but he’d be damned if he let his mother turn into another of those forgotten stones half buried in the earth and snow.

“Have you heard about Elvene, Mom? She's turning seventeen, soon. Lord Fulke's got a bunch of big galas set up for her, to find her a husband. Lots of people are excited, though..." Mat felt tense, for some reason. It was a bit like heat, right under his skin. He rushed forward with his thoughts.

"She's angry with me right now. Um. I've been thinking a lot lately, Mom, and, well—you know how I told you I'd never leave Dad to tend the farm on his own? Well, Jim and Pierce are old enough that they can help out now, and the girls are certainly old enough to help Ma Hellory with home things."

Another pause. Mat was digging with his toes again. He stopped himself—he'd catch it from his dad if he wore out the fresh leather of his dress shoes on the still-frozen earth. He was feeling agitated again today and he couldn't figure out why.

" I know I'm still too young to be wandering the world. But it won't be more than a year before I'm not... I... I just don't think I'll ever be a farmer. The steer have always jumped at the sight of me and the last time I shepherded dad nearly killed me for losing that lamb out behind Big Burrough. He said I was like... well, I couldn't grow a cabbage to spite myself, too. I've got no talent, Mom, and..."

Mat stopped for a second—what was he saying? It wasn't like his mother would jump out of her grave and start arguing with him. For that matter, what was Mat doing telling his plans to her in the first place? It wasn't like she'd start worrying if suddenly he just disappeared.

Mat had turned away from the gravestone while thinking, rubbing the back of his neck in his frustration. Something flickered in the corner of his vision and caught his eye, and he turned around. Crescents of light like wet white flower petals were stirring up from the ground at the base of his mother's grave. In the still relatively heavy snow that clung to this part of the cemetery Mat was able to convince himself that what he was seeing was a trick of the light. Still, he decided that it was time to end his visit.

Mat turned around to pick up a cluster of red gossip flowers that he had pressed the previous spring. He jumped. Reah had slipped in while he was distracted. She was staring at him with hands on hips, one eyebrow lifted over an unsettling brown eye. Her eyes shone with an odd yellow tint in the weak daylight.

All of four and a half feet high at the most and slender as a reed, you wouldn't think Reah would cut an intimidating figure. Something in the walnut colored girl's carriage, though—the way she held herself like she was waiting for a challenge, and with a sense of assurance that she was quite ready to handle anything such a challenge had to offer—made it so that she clearly did. Reah tossed her head a little and tucked a loose brown curl of hair behind her ear.

"Hi, Reah," Mat said.

"You done, *boy*?" Reah asked.

Mat raised his own eyebrows for a second. What was she so angry about? Then he noticed that Reah was standing in front of her mother's gravestone. She must have been waiting for him to stop babbling like a fool so she could get on with her visit with her own mother. Mat

should have realized that as soon as he saw her. Reah had been visiting the cemetery each Sunday since he could remember.

Mat would always show up first, and he rarely stayed for very long—often dropping his flowers, saying a few words, and departing before Reah even arrived—so it was easy to forget. Still, seeing Reah here should have been enough to remind him. Troublemaker though she was—picking fights with the other orphans at every possible occasion, and so quick to anger in even the most mundane of circumstances—she was the only person Mat knew besides himself who came to the cemetery so often.

Mat blushed. All things considered, the girl deserved a few quiet minutes without some fool babbling about cow and kin and—

—was that dirt on her pants?

"*Hmmm...*" Mat said. He leaned forward, inspecting Reah. Reah blushed and the creases around her lips and eyes drew tight.

"What?" Reah asked.

"*Hmmm...*" Mat said.

"What?" Reah said.

Certainly not church attire. Mat grinned as he realized the truth.

"You skipped out!" Mat said.

He laughed and looked up at Reah's face. He would have never guessed that infamous Reah—serious, crazy Reah—would be the type to risk being caught skipping out on church.

Reah did not smile.

"I'm not talking to you, *boy*. Are you done?" Reah asked.

"Aw, come on, Reah. You'd think that after two weeks ago you'd at least be grateful e—" Mat said.

"Grateful!" Reah said.

Mat blinked. She'd just cut him off.

"But—" Mat said.

"Grateful!" Reah said again, this time with less volume but with just as much heat.

Reah looked like she was about to jump over her own mother's grave. And she'd cut Mat off again!

"Listen, Reah—" Mat said.

"No *you* listen, boy," Reah said. "If I so much as hear a word from you again, *ever*, I will beat you so many ways at once that the Sisters won't know which way to turn you to put you back together again! –Grateful!"

Mat couldn't believe it. Even the girl he had rescued was angry at him about it! And she'd cut him off *again*! He'd found her starving in the woods and saved her. It had taken Mat a full week to get back on speaking terms with Elvene. Mat opened his mouth to give Reah a piece of his mind, but a movement caught his attention. Elvene was approaching the fence behind Reah. She must be looking for him. Mat grimaced at the thought of what would happen if he gave Reah and Elvene a chance to start arguing.

"I'll, umm..." Mat said.

Reah was growling.

"I gotta go," Mat said. If he didn't escape quickly there was bound to be some sort of confrontation. He didn't want to deal with that.

"Elvene!" Mat yelled. "Just one second."

Mat scooped up the deep red flowers that he had gathered and turned around. The floating white from before had gone.

“Goodbye, Mother,” Mat said.

Mat placed the flowers in front of his mother’s gravestone and hurried past Reah, whose eyes were darting between Elvene and himself as if she were trying to decide who to claw with her nails first. Likely she was. Elvene looked like she was about to say something choice. She wasn't the type for physical confrontations. *She*, at least, had a sense of propriety.

“Mattock,” Elvene said, “you never told me you had to truck with fi—”

“Nice to know, Elvene,” Mat said. “Let’s go! Short day, you know.”

Mat clambered over the cemetery’s fence, jumping the last bit of the way, and wrapped an arm around the young Lady of Fulkton Gardens, pulling her into him. Elvene grunted and shot him a look, but it had no heat in it. He smiled easily and, letting go of her, sketched a bow.

“Truly m’lady is of outstanding beauty,” Mat said, putting on airs. “Why, I feel as if this cemetery has suddenly come alive in your presence. Shall we go some place to make, perhaps, livelier still?”

Elvene giggled and then punched him lightly on the arm, then extended her arm for him to take, Reah temporarily forgotten.

“Yes, let’s,” she said.

Mat smiled, quite pleased with himself. He took Elvene's arm and, ignoring her scornful backwards glance and the silent fuming behind him, fled the cemetery.

"Hey, Mat—Mat?"

"What?" Mat asked.

Mat opened his eyes. It was an hour after his visit to the cemetery and his mind felt blank. Had he just been dreaming? His friend, Owen, was standing in front of him.

"Owen?" Mat asked.

"Are you all right, Mat? You've been acting strange lately," Owen said.

Mat was in a forest.

He and Elvene had come out into the woods a bit to meet up with some friends.

Mat smiled. Owen and some of the girls were well enough, but Mat didn't get along well with some of the others. He felt, sometimes, that Elvene needed to learn to be a bit more careful about who she let near her.

They had all come out into the forest. There was a thrill in exploring the woods, Mat guessed. The way things were it was a bit dangerous to be out in the wilderness. There had been worg sightings.

"I'm fine, Owen," Mat said. "What's your problem?"

Owen smiled at Mat. He was worried he'd hurt Mat's feelings for some idiotic and Lords awful reason, again. That was always the reason Owen smiled.

"The problem you're having that you wanted to ask me about, Owen?" Mat asked.

"It's stupid," Owen said.

The boy was squinting and it wasn't very flattering. Mat decided not to mention it.

"Well, you woke me up for it: let fly," Mat said.

"Ah. So you *were* sleeping. You need to sleep better, Mat," Owen said.

"Owen!" Mat said.

Owen smiled again. Mat rubbed up and down on his face with his hand. He had a terrible headache.

"Owen..." Mat said.

"I was just wondering if you had any advice to help with my..." Owen said.

"Chances?" Mat asked.

"Yeah," Owen said.

About thirty paces away the girls were standing around, talking about whatever girl things girls talked about. Jocelin was leaning in close to Elvene. She had one arm wrapped around the waist of that Lawrance kid. He must be the reason Owen had screwed up enough courage to ask Mat for help.

"What happened to her, anyway?" Mat asked.

Jocelin was wearing a black woolen dress with a collar that covered most of her throat. It was pretty nice: still church dress. Mat had dragged Elvene home with him so he could change before going into the woods. He knew to avoid his father's anger. Jocelin was wearing a high collar but her neck had an unusually padded out look to it. Mat thought he could catch a glimpse of gauze beneath the wool.

Jocelin glanced up from her conversation with Elvene and, suddenly, she was staring directly into Mat's eyes, smiling. Mat turned his gaze away. Owen was being awfully quiet.

"Owen?" Mat asked.

Mat looked over and saw that the boy was balling his hands into fists.

"That *girl*," Owen said.

"Ah," Mat said. Owen was talking about Reah.

Mat tried to stop it, but he couldn't quite help himself. He started smirking the moment he heard the reason for Jocelin's neck injury. Owen gave him a look, likely thinking Mat was crazy. Mat had been leaning against a tree while he was daydreaming, and he was leaning against it still. He turned his gaze up and stared into the branches above him, trying to calm his mind. The tree was a pine with a strong coat of needles. Meaningless. Why did everything these past two weeks keep coming back to that girl? Mat let slip a laugh.

"Oh, Owen," he said. "Come on."

"You think it's funny?" Owen asked. "What the *hells* has gotten into you recently?"

Mat wasn't sure. It had been getting harder for him to think like he was still in Fulkton Gardens, lately. He kept feeling like he needed to escape. Mat had always felt wanderlust, but the feelings he had now were more frantic than he had ever felt before. Mat continued staring up at the branches in the tree he was leaning against. The branches swayed in the wind.

"Listen, Owen," Mat said, "it's no good with her."

Mat pointed towards Joceline. He didn't bother to look at the girl this time.

"Why don't you try it with that one instead?" Mat asked.

Mat moved his finger. He was looking down his nose, to turn his face to regard Owen. Owen was really a decent sort. He just had terrible taste.

"What? Blythe?" Owen asked.

"Yeah. That one," Mat said.

"But..." Owen said.

"Mat!" Elvene called out from her place with the other children. "We're leaving!"

"Sorry, Owen," Mat said. He eased himself off the tree he had been leaning on and smiled. "I've said it before: that sort of advice is the best I can give for a thing like this." Mat glanced at Elvene. She stalked toward him, obviously not happy.

"Come on, Mattock," Elvene said when she was close enough to speak to him normally. Her voice was cold.

"Ma'am," Mat said.

Elvene had already passed him and was disappearing into the woods. It wouldn't be smart to let her get lost in the woods right now, Mat thought. It was usually fun when Elvene got lost: she was convinced that, since her father owned the land, she had nothing to be worried about and could go where she pleased on it, and that everything would just sort of bend to her will when she wanted to go somewhere but didn't know the details concerning how to get there. Mat had a feeling, though, that this was not a good time to let her antics catch up with her.

"Yeah? You'll regret this!" Jocelin called after them. She was screaming again. Owen was already running back to her, Mat was sure.

Mat caught up with Elvene.

"What in Gehenna is Jocelin yelling for, now?" Mat asked.

"Hush, Mattock," Elvene said. "Let's just..." she trailed off, glancing in Mat's direction. She drew him deeper into the woods.

"Yeah, all that's great and all Elvene, but... why don't we just do something fun instead?" Mat asked.

Elvene repressed a sigh as she finished buttoning up her dress. She had only been alone with Mat for an hour and already he was giving her a headache. Mattock could be completely reasonable when he wanted to be, but she could barely tolerate him when he didn't.

He was hanging upside down from a tree, at the moment, obviously pleased with himself, dangling right over the sluggishly flowing water of the frost flow river. If he fell in she'd just have to let him freeze to death and drown to teach him a lesson in maturity.

Mat was average height for someone his age, though shorter than most of his family. He had blond hair that was just a bit unruly. It was hanging down from his scalp like a tassled curtain right now and she had a perfect view of his face and his green eyes.

Who would have thought a farm boy could be so attractive? Smart, attractive, and funny—Elvene hadn't noticed when she was younger, but as she aged she realized: fate had given her the rare pleasure of growing up with the man she was meant to marry.

He had noticed her looking at him. He was making faces at her now, of course. Wonderful. Elvene humphed with the complete authority of the patient but overtaxed woman.

Mat just refused to act his age. Ever since Elvene's father had informed her of her scheduled coming of age party she had been trying to prepare him, but he seemed willfully oblivious of her intentions. Every time she started to bring up visiting *her* father's estates, or taking on some of *his* well respected father's town responsibilities, *he'd* start goofing off or mention plans for one of *his* fool pranks. The fact that he got caught almost half the time when committing those pranks didn't seem to faze Mat at all, either.

His bullheaded insistence on maintaining his childish lifestyle was endearing, certainly: Elvene had always sort of liked the way Mat fell in and out of trouble with the drop of a hat. Events like the lard covered pig incident at church last year were cute, but time was running out.

Everyone knew that the young Lady Elvene was close to coming of age—her father most of all. If Mattock failed to prove himself marriagable material to her father by that time... well, Elvene simply refused to be married off to some slouching nobleman. Elvene Fulke, only child of Lord Jasper Fulke and Lady of the Fulke estates, knew what she wanted, and she'd be damned if she let some fool peasant boy, however much she might love him, get the best of her.

Elvene planted her fists on her hips, and took a few steps towards Mat. Her nose was a scant few inches from his, which was still upside down.

“You know very well that I'll be the only unescorted woman at the entire affair, Mat,” Elvene said. “You *must* accompany me.”

“Let off, Elvene,” Mat said. “Your father might look the other way with me but he's got as much interest in letting a peasant escort his only child to one of his fancy galas as he does letting a pig trample his rose bushes.”

“I've explained before, Mat,” Elvene said. “This party of father's is very important. I very much doubt he'll make a fuss if you show up. So long as he doesn't find out beforehand you should be fine.”

Mat lifted an arm. At first Elvene thought he was going to brush her cheek, and she started to blush, but he was just swinging it up to flip himself off his branch and land neatly on the very edge of the river, cocky as you please. He had to be deliberately trying to frustrate her. She blushed more furiously. Mat went on, apparently unaware of the angry pink blooming on Elvene's skin.

“I'd stick out, Elvene,” he said. “Even in my best suit they'd be sure to notice a peasant.”

“Oh, please, you have far too little confidence in yourself, Mat. You have far better tact than any overblown country lord. You’d be fine. And... if Father saw how well you could do with nobles... well...”

Elvene smiled coyly and placed a hand on Mat's shoulder just so. There. He had to get *that* hint. Mat wasn’t stupid, just willful.

Elvene squealed: Mat had snatched her hand from his shoulder and was twirling her through the melting snow. He was guiding her in an elaborate dance—she must have taught him this! He *had* been listening. He was looking into her eyes.

“And if I were to escort m’lady to this puffed up ball would she then expect me to sweep her off her feet at the end of the night? Perhaps propose to her on top of the grand parlor stairs before all invited?” Mat asked.

He was leaning over her, still looking into her eyes. Elvene could feel her breath coming in gasps. She was puckering her lips, ready to kiss him. Silvery imp's lights flashed in Mat's eyes. Elvene let out another squeal as he opened his arms and let her fall.

Mat had dropped her into a mud puddle! And he was grinning!

“Mattock Corwin!” Elvene said.

Mat started laughing and Elvene flung a handful of mud at his face. It hit exactly where she wanted and Mat spluttered as mud went into his open mouth. He slipped and fell into the mud, sending it out in waves and covering her even more. Mat started laughing even harder, and Elvene had to try very hard not to join him. She managed, though. At least *she* had a sense of propriety.

Mat pulled himself onto one side and looked at her again. His eyes were as intent as always, but there was something off about them. Was he sick?

"So what was that with Jocelin, earlier, anyway?" Mat asked.

"Huh?" Elvene asked.

"She yelled after you—" Mat said. He scrunched up his face and pulled the edges of his lips backwards toward his ears. "'Yeah? You'll regret this!' Remember?"

Elvene huffed and drew herself up a bit in the mud. "Well," she said.

"Well?" Mat asked.

"It was nothing, of course," Elvene said.

"Of course," Mat said.

Mat was looking incredulously at her. And smiling. Of course. Bah! Elvene stuck her tongue out at him and then forced herself to smile back. That *girl* was involved. If Mat had just been where he was supposed to be two weeks ago instead of wandering about the woods dodging his responsibilities none of this would have ever happened.

"I can kill her, if you want," Jocelin had said earlier. As if Elvene cared about that... *girl*... at all. That... *girl*... was miserable. Elvene had made sure of that. And she was coming of age just like the rest of them. Reah wouldn't be in Fulkton Gardens much longer. Whatever she might claim Elvene's father had done to her mother, it wouldn't matter then. Elvene's humiliation would be over. Her patience would pay off. Elvene looked over at Mat. He was lying down in the mud, now, not paying Elvene any attention at all. Everything was going Elvene's way. Mat would be Elvenes and that Reah girl would be gone. There was only one thing left to move into its proper place.

"Will letting her go leave you... satisfied, Elvene?" Jocelin had said.

Elvene shuddered.

"Skip it," Mat said.

“Huh?” Elvene asked.

“The ball,” Mat said. “Skip it. You said it was in a few days, right? There have been some really savage worg attacks in a bunch of the fields lately and Uncle Taim got called up from Gaterau to deal with them. You know that means excitement, and I have it on good confidence that he’s going to arrive and start tracking within the week. Skip the ball and maybe we’ll catch him in the act. How cool would it be to see *Uncle Taim* fight wolves? Come on, you want to, don’t you, Elvene?”

Mat knew how to jump back and forth in conversation, Elvene thought. That was certain. Elvene would have to teach him how to hold a proper conversation once she had made him into a lord of the lower blood.

“Mat,” Elvene said, “this is important to me.”

“*Uncle Taim*, Elvene,” Mat said.

“I don’t care a wit about a bunch of worg or your mangy werewolf uncle, Mattock, This is about our *future*,” Elvene said.

Mat’s face hardened and he stood up, holding his hand out to Elvene. She shouldn’t have insulted his uncle. Mat was very proud of the gruff old man—Taim Corwin was the only member of Mat’s entire family ever to find success outside a farm. Elvene knew this, but Mat *had* to be made to understand.

“I’m not going, Elvene,” Mat said.

“Mat!” Elven said.

“No,” Mat said.

Mat was a fool. A fool who was going to have to learn some wisdom. Elvene— everything depended on making Mat understand. Elvene took Mat's hand and allowed him to lift her up, then she puffed herself up as well as she could.

“Mattock Corwin,” Elvene said, “you’re an incuragable ass!” She then stormed off, hiding her frustrated tears until she was out of sight.

Chapter 4

Somewhere, deep in the forest, a wolf cried.

Reah shivered.

It was cold out, but her wools were warm enough. It was nearing the middle of the day and the sun was approaching its zenith and she was not bothered by the chill. That cry, though, had drifted out of the trees, and Reah could swear it felt as if the wolves were calling her home.

Reah didn't feel like her home was in Fulkton Gardens. The gaggle of young children she had been watching were pleasant enough, but Reah had slipped away anyway. The responsibility of watching them could not mask the pangs of longing Reah felt while staring towards the woods.

Reah hadn't said goodbye to her mother today. She told herself it didn't matter. *Mattock Corwin* had gotten her hackles up and she had forgotten. It wouldn't happen again. Reah had two more weeks in Fulkton Gardens. She'd say goodbye some other day. Reah looked back out into the woods. Running away had proven impossible, anyway.

"Ah! So there you are," a familiar voice said, drifting up from the woods.

A figure emerged from the woods in front of Reah. Reah knew it the moment she saw its wide, thin lipped smile.

"Hello, Jocelin," Reah said.

"Lawrance and I have just returned from a talk with the young Lady Fulke," Joceline said. Lawrance emerged from the woods behind her. "I've been looking forward to seeing you again. You want to know why, freak?"

Jocelin could be cruel when there was no one around to stop her. Events two weeks ago had demonstrated that. Reah thought she could handle Jocelin in a fair fight, but Lawrance had changed things. Reah started to back away, carefully. She was still hiding a painful lump on the back of her head from her fight with Jocelin earlier in the day.

"I'm not interested, Jocelin," Reah said.

"I was telling Lawrance, here," Jocelin said, coming completely free of the brush at the edge of the trees, "that I'm really going to miss you after you're gone."

Jocelin and Lawrance were now on the grass at the base of the small hill Reah had been sitting on. It was a quiet place tucked into a corner of the convent's grounds, facing north. Few of the sisters were interested in or able to come out this far on their property, and so it had become a place for the servants and orphans of the convent to go when they were seeking time alone. It was midday, now, and the residents of the convent were currently busy with chores and projects. Reah had been the only one here, until now.

"You know there have been wolf sightings in the woods, Jocelin," Reah said. "You shouldn't be going out there."

Reah could still feel the wolf cries she had heard earlier reverberating in the back of her mind. Jocelin and Lawrance were getting closer to her. She couldn't back up fast enough without turning her back to them. Reah knew she shouldn't have gotten this far from the convent. She was going to suffer for her carelessness.

"I always used to think," Jocelin said, suddenly, still smiling and still getting closer, "that I hated you, Reah."

"If you try to hurt me, Jocelin," Reah said, "I'll scream."

"I used to think that, but now I know. I don't hate you," Jocelin said.

Jocelin and Lawrance were too close to Reah. Reah startled as she realized she had started growling. When had that happened? She turned her back to the forest. She ran. Reah could hear laughter and heavy breathing behind her. She wasn't fast enough. She could feel panic rising in her mind. The top of the hill was just a few paces away. She'd be in sight of the orphanage, then. Whatever Jocelin had planned would not come to pass today.

Lawrance's strong arms wrapped around Reah and lifted her off the ground. Reah gulped air into her lungs to scream but his arms went around her throat, crushing into her face. Muscled flesh and stiff blonde hair chafed Reah's skin. Lawrance had one arm clasped around her chest and the other pressed into her jaw. It felt like he was trying to tear her head off. It was getting hard to breathe. She was blinded by Lawrance's flesh.

Jocelin had proven two weeks ago that she was beyond pranks. She wanted to hurt Reah. Reah didn't want to find out how badly. She screamed into Lawrance's arm. The scream turned into barely a whisper and became nothing beneath the sound of the farm boy's heavy breathing.

"Bring her back down a bit, Lawrance," Jocelin said. "We're going to go for a walk."

Reah was spinning, and then she was facing the woods. Downhill. Away from the convent. Lawrance's arm was huge and it was blocking her mouth and crushing her nostrils. The black spots in her eyes were growing deeper.

And then the panic that was baking Reah from the inside out turned on its heel. Reah felt rage, a fire rising inside her, and her hot muscles hardened and bulged and her hands, which had been scrabbling blindly for purchase on Lawrance's arms, found a new purpose. Her nails caught the flesh of the arm crushing her chest and she drove them into it. Reah felt them go deep into flesh and muscle. She felt Lawrance's skin begin to stretch and tear.

"Hells!" Lawrance cried out. He dropped Reah to the ground.

"Lawrance, you idio—" Joceline began to say.

Reah rolled and cast her gaze in a circle. In a second she had found her quarry: Jocelin, still in her black wool Sunday dress. Reah's shoes had slipped off in her struggling and she could feel each individual blade of cold brown grass beneath her feet: she memorized the locations and numbers of the striations running outward from the spines running down their middles, and tracked the movement of each blade against her skin. Her body went from hot to clear and cold. Reah could feel a pulsing coming out of the nearby woods. It fueled her.

Reah moved forward. She felt like she was running on air. She could make it to the peak of the hill, now. Somewhere in the back of her mind a voice was screaming at her to do so. Reah screamed at the top of her lungs. Her thoughts were raging: she was going to *kill* Jocelin. The voice inside Reah begging for flight begged for nothing.

Jocelin became an object to Reah: a thing on which she could beat out her pain. Jocelin turned at the sound of Reah's scream and the smile that had split her face in half seemingly forever crumbled and, immediately after, Reah was on top of her. Lawrance had yet to gather the wits to move. Reah and Jocelin tumbled down the hill and towards the woods.

Reah's fingers wormed their way into the wool covering Jocelin's neck and brought Jocelin's face up into contact with her forehead. Blood seeped up from Jocelin's broken nose. Reah pulled again, nearly blinding herself with the black dots brought on by the impact of Jocelin's face against her skull. When she let Jocelin's face fall back down this time Jocelin's left eye was bloody and swelling. Reah felt dizzy. Next, she decided, she'd break Jocelin's jaw.

Lawrance grabbed Reah by her waist. Reah struggled to keep hold of Jocelin. She saw Jocelin's hand held up defensively over her broken face. Reah grabbed it with both her own. As Lawrance pulled Reah away she bit down into Joceline's hand. Reah tasted the welling of

Jocelin's blood in her mouth and then she was again under Lawrance's control, dangling in the air.

"Are you okay, Jo?" Lawrance asked.

Jocelin didn't reply. She was too busy crying. Snot and blood ran down from her crushed nose to her chin and then to her black dress. Her nose looked like it wanted to bend in three different directions at once. Jocelin's blood mixed with her tears and her face was a mess. Reah had beaten the King's hells out of her. She felt the clearness in her body slowly draining. She looks as ugly as a Worg Hound, now, Reah thought. She started laughing hysterically into Lawrance's arms. The clearness in her body drained completely. Reah felt that instead of laughing she ought to be sobbing.

"You think this is funny?" Lawrance asked. "*You bitch.*" It didn't stop Reah's hysterics.

Reah found herself on the ground. When had she gotten on the ground? And Lawrance was on top of her. He drove one of his large, splayed-knuckled fists into her stomach. The air whistled out of Reah's lungs and she couldn't breathe anymore. She stared into the sky. It was cloudy again in Fulkton Gardens. Blank. And even when she couldn't breathe Reah couldn't stop her body from moving like she was laughing.

"*I'll kill you,*" Lawrance whispered. He sounded calmer, now.

The clearness and the coldness had left Reah and in its place the hot panic was coming back. It was different this time. This new panic was calculating. All that it would let her do was think about how to survive. As Lawrance beat her Reah believed with her entire heart that she was going to be murdered. She would be dead, a pulped corpse, in the next ten minutes. Her new breed of panic grew stronger and stronger. It was stubbornness, maybe, or maybe anger from

years of torment. Like a geyser blasting ice Reah's panic obliterated all thoughts outside those seeking to keep her alive.

She was *not* going to die here, Reah decided. Lawrance was pounding her with his fists. Again: again: he must have broken half her lower ribs by now. Reah couldn't feel anything below her chest and her lungs were starting to feel heavy and wet. She could see the boy's face looming above her. It was broad like a spade and smoothed over with a form of purpose Reah had never recognized before. She thought, for a second, that a short time ago she might have recognized it in herself.

The gray sky was dull and stupid above Lawrance. *He* was dull and stupid. He wasn't paying any attention to anything beyond his need to crush Reah into two halves and to callous the knuckles on his fists.

Reah desperately ran her fingers through the grass around her. She was on a rocky hill. It was the start of spring thaw. There! There was something broad and coarse under her left hand's fingers. Reah dug at it with her nails and grabbed it up, desperate. It came free. It was unusually heavy: a rock. Reah jerked her body upwards against the pounding of Lawrance's fists. She thought she might be screaming. She was starting to feel her abdomen, again. It was agony. Her stomach felt full and hot and heavy, like it was filling with blood. It had to be. Reah twisted and her arm came up, hurling the rock toward Lawrance's face. Lawrance was looking at her. He wasn't throwing punches anymore. The truth of it almost made Reah want to cry.

Clearness again. This time in the muscles of Reah's arm. She could feel her arm coiling and bulging and tightening to the degree that she thought it was going to explode. The hard missile in her fist moved forward to burst her assailant's skull and to kill him. Kill him. If Reah

could do it she would do it. Reah drove herself forward, blind as she could make herself to herself to complete what she was doing.

The rock was in her arc of sight. It had a point at the end coming to meet with Lawrance's face. Reah did not stop herself.

She memorized the sight of the rock's point just beginning to pucker the skin on Lawrance's face. She memorized the feel of her hand kissing hard stone kissing Lawrance's friable bones. Reah memorized the judder of hard resistance that came after. Lawrance's head whipped to the side and Reah memorized the feeling of no more resistance, immediately after. Then she memorized the sight of Lawrance's blood. Time caught up with Reah. She closed her eyes. Her ears rang from the aftereffects of listening to Lawrance's skull shatter.

A girl was screaming under the ringing. Jocelin? Reah stood and ran. She didn't hurt anymore. Reah wondered how she wasn't dead. She had never felt so broken before. Her eyes were still closed. She felt the blades of frozen grass beneath her feet. They were soon replaced by the feeling of something softer, and wet: the Fulke Estates' forest floor in thaw. Reah traced the veins on the groundcover's leaves with the bottoms of her feet.

Reah was in the woods. The screaming had stopped.

Reah opened her eyes and realized that she was running and dodging through the trees. She couldn't go back. She had to get away. What had she done? Murder. Reah had to have just done murder. Reah could feel it in her chest. Murder was a poison slowly spreading out from her heart. It was going through her and filling her entire body: propelling her deeper into the wilderness.

Reah ran for what seemed forever. Her mind was filled with terrible images of death and with feelings of remorse. As a child she had once been half burned to death by fire and she could

still not shake the fear of being touched by it again. In her anguish and terror it was as if she was learning to live with her burns again, lying in the medical ward of the Convent of the Frozen Blood and begging for the pain to go away.

The forest had grown thick around her and the light of the northern sun was dimming. Two months ago Reah had been fleeing, too, under less desperate circumstances. The forest had nearly killed her.

Reah stopped, suddenly aware.

She had no idea of where she was or where she was going. She had to flee from Fulkton Gardens, now. She started walking deeper into the forest.

She considered for a while as she walked. She had to survive. She had to put as much distance between herself and the convent as possible. Even if Lawrance was still alive the justice of the King was hungry: violence of the sort Reah had committed could not be mitigated. Reah would become a meal for one of the King's highblood children if she did not escape.

Reah had gotten lost the last time she had run. She knew this. And she had been a coward and come crawling back to the convent. She could not do that this time. Reah looked up at the sky: the sun was setting, a full moon was rising, and the best course of action for her tonight would be to find a well hidden place to sleep.

It took Reah until the sun was almost completely down to find the right place to hide. It was an evergreen with no low branches and heavy branches and a thick coat of needles high up at its top. She shimmied up its trunk and nestled herself in a crook about halfway into the cover. She slept and, as she slept, she dreamed, and the moon rose swollen above the trees.

Chapter 5

In her sleep Reah dreamed. In her dreams she remembered.

Reah was filthy, and tired, and sore from insect bites. The thaw had been early this summer, south of the Gardens: why hadn't it waited just a few more weeks? Reah could feel an intense hunger inside her stomach, though it felt painfully full.

Reah realized that she was dreaming, but she could not seem to take control of her own thoughts. She did not want to relive this day. This was the day she was taken back to the convent. This was the day Jocelin had first tried to kill her. She closed her eyes and turned her thoughts away. Something itched deep inside of her. It was more than the pain of a month and a half of running through the mud, though that was there as well.

Reah opened her eyes. The moon was rising full. It had been midday but now it was night and the moon was rising. She looked down at herself and realized that she was still filthy. She was sprawled on the ground. Where was she?

"Lords! Reah?"

A voice called out from the trees, hidden in the night's shadows. It had been midday when this had happened. Reah knew she was dreaming. Why was she still here?

A girl emerged from the woods nearby. Despite herself Reah felt a familiar mixture of emotion: regret and, also, gratitude.

She had felt this two weeks before when she had seen the girl emerging from the woods. Now, the girl's face was hidden in the shadows of the night. The moon was still just rising on the horizon, huge, brooding, and insistent. Then the girl had been easy to see: Locke.

"H-help..." Reah said. Her mouth had opened. She hadn't wanted it to, this time. Where was her strength? Locke took a step towards her. Now Reah could barely make out a hint of her in the dark. The full moon was hiding in the woods.

"Stop," Jocelin said, stepping forward from the darker part of the evening's shadows. Even in the night Reah could see her teeth gleaming.

"But, Jocelin—" Locke said.

"We've found a runaway, huh?" Joceline said. She came towards Reah and squatted over her. In her mind Reah was growling. In reality she was too stupid with gratitude at being found.

She had run from the convent two months previous. Reah had not wanted to wait to escape any longer. She had run away from the convent many times as a child, but this time had been different. She had been prepared. She had decided, then: she would not wait nearly three months to be free. She would cut through the woods to avoid detection. This time would be different.

Reah had never been away from the convent for more than a week, before, on one of her attempts.

After her first week of running through the woods she had realized she was lost.

After her second week she had run out of food.

Now, in this dream, Reah could barely remember how she had survived the four weeks after that. In the woods, in the time and place she was dreaming, she knew that that survival had been all that she could remember.

"Why did you come back?" Jocelin asked, whispering. She was on her hands and knees, looming over Reah, now. Reah could feel Jocelin's hot breath on her face. The moon was closer, now. The trees glistened like wet bones in the night.

"Please—" Reah whispered.

Jocelin kicked Reah. Reah curled into a ball. Jocelin kicked her again and again.

"Why aren't you dead?" Jocelin asked.

The shadows were being devoured by the moon as Reah curled tighter and tighter. And still there was Jocelin's smile. And still the moon rose higher and higher. It was nearing its apex, now. It rose above the horizon and swelled in Reah's eyes, though her eyes were closed as she tried to survive her beating. Through the sound of the impacts of Joceline's turnshoe with her back Reah heard the shivering of the trees. A wolf howled.

"Foreigner!" Joceline screamed. "Freak!"

And then a boy's voice called out from the woods: "What in the hells!"

Reah was growling in her mind. She was growling and raging. Why wasn't she moving? She was trapped in the way things were. This was her dream, damn it. Why?

And there he was. Mattock Corwin. Wandering out from the woods, witnessing Reah's humiliation entirely by chance, and jumping in to rescue her.

Jocelin, suddenly calm, leaned down to Reah's face again, and whispered "We'll just have to get you later, then." Reah saw Jocelin's smile split her face once again.

Reah screamed in her own mind. Now was the moment when she had stopped thinking and fallen to pieces. Here. Now. Her eyes were producing the tears she would soon be crying. But instead of that Reah was spared. Everything was turning black. She was being devoured by the moon.

The moon was full.

A dream: the moon, and nothing else. It was everywhere around Reah—in every corner of the night. The trees had turned to moonstuff and the creatures had shriveled away in its pale glare. The people and places of Reah's life shriveled away. All that was left was Reah. The moon. And Reah. The moon.

A feeling of itching deep beneath her skin.

A shedding of identity. A calling of a new song.

There was pain, but the girl could do nothing to stop it. She attempted to climb down from somewhere, though she could not remember where. She slipped and, now, she was falling as if from a great height, and as she was falling her skin was bursting with a hundred drops of blood trailing from unfurling black silk hairs. She hit the ground and as she impacted she felt as if all of her bones broke at once, their fragments twisting like serpents. She opened her mouth and what appeared to be her organs landed wet on the ground.

More blackness. The girl was no more.

The wolf woke and sought to hunt.

A caribou moved somewhere in the distance. The wolf could smell it. The scent of the caribou was all that mattered. She stalked it in the night.

The woods were well lit by moonlight. She knew, somehow, though, that she was seeing in darkness that she should have been blinded by. The pale gray trunks of the trees around her were washed in moonlight. The wolf's tongue lolled. She caught a flash of movement: the caribou was just ahead.

She was downwind, which was to her advantage, but even she needed to run with wariness beside her when facing a male caribou. This one was beautiful, hoary and huge. Its thick brown coat was streaked with gray, the naked pink of its nose crusted with snow from rooting through the ground cover in the deep woods. She would howl, freezing it with her call, and then leap on it and rip out its throat. Her mouth salivated. She closed it to keep it from chapping her lips.

She wriggled through the brush, working her way towards the unwary beast. It twisted around to look at her just as she rose from the groundcover. Before it could flee she lifted her head toward the moon and howled.

Her voice was perfect. The long, low note ululated in tandem with the beating of her frantic heart. It wrapped itself around the stag and bound it. She lunged and the blood she craved poured into her mouth. The Caribou had no chance.

The wolf gorged, bloating her stomach and filling herself with the caribou's strength. Her muzzle was red with its blood, as was the snow at her feet. The dead beast's soul rose in a steam from its gnawed entrails.

She dreamed that she fought beside the cooling corpse of her kill. Worg, aberrations devoid of odor and trailing hellfire nimbuses from their grinning maws, came upon her as she feasted. A pack was drawn by her baying in the night. She knew them, now. They were old enemies. She had been unwary and eager. It had just cost her. They bit, and tore; she ripped and dodged; she was taken down. She continued to fight on the ground but her vision soon turned

dark. Worg liked to play with their food. The wolf trembled, sightless and in pain, and then she lost consciousness.

Chapter 6

A heavy thudding came up the stairs leading to the room Mat shared with his brothers. Obviously, his Uncle Taim had arrived. Likely, he would go out hunting tonight. Therefore, Mat had to act.

Mat slipped out of bed. He held a finger up to his lips at the sight of his three younger brothers doing the same. They knew what he meant: if their dad caught them sneaking around he'd send them straight back to their rooms. There would be no chance that Mat could use his golden tongue to convince him and Uncle Taim to let Mat go worg hunting with his uncle, much less the other boys.

The four of them snuck through the door to the boys' room, which Mat had "accidentally" left propped open before they had gone off to sleep. They made their way the short distance from the small attic room that the four of them shared to the balcony leading down to the stairs. Mat's numerous sisters were already crouching and laying down on the rough wood plank floor and looking down at the bottom floor through the one good spot where you could see the front door without your view being obscured by the down-sloped ceiling of their home. They were arranged with the two youngest and smallest in front and the two eldest behind them. Mat pushed his way through the older girls and lay down amongst the younger. He stuck out his tongue at the reproving looks this earned him. His oldest sister, Lyra, smacked him on the back of the head, cutting off his smirk.

Mat looked down. His father was bending down to unlatch the low door's brace. The doors into Tordric Corwin's farmhouse rose only to chest height on a fully grown man. Many of the farmhouses in Fulkton Gardens and the surrounding area had these low doors. This close to

the cold line—the imaginary line in Gehennan topography that indicated where the relatively temperate environment of Northern Gehenna gave way to the frozen wastes of the far north—and so far from Gatterau, the law of the King was lax and the barbarian attacks relatively frequent. A man with ill intent in his mind would have to kneel to gain access to Tordric Corwin's home, rendering himself temporarily vulnerable to assault from those inside.

Once the door was unlatched Tordric opened it and stepped back, holding an axe at the ready to lop off the head of any stranger foolish enough to bend through and enter without announcing their name and intentions first. He tensed for a second when a man started coming through, but relaxed. Mat couldn't see through his father's back, but he could only guess it had to be his uncle Taim. His stocky uncle didn't hold much interest in social niceties.

Mat's father gasped. "Darkness and the King's Hells, Taim," Tordric said, "what happened?"

"Just a spot of trouble, Tord," Taim said, voice coarse. "All will be well,"

Mat's stepmother, Hellory, had been standing behind his father when the man had opened the door, but now she moved around her husband to get a look at what her husband had seen. Mat could tell she'd had some choice words prepared for his uncle concerning his barging in on her family in the middle of the night—she didn't like Uncle Taim much—but whatever she saw when she got into sight of him cut the words off before they were even out of her mouth. She rushed forward, whispering questions Mat couldn't quite make out.

Mat started to feel uneasy. Had Uncle Taim had a run in with brigands? Worse: could he have already dealt with the worg? That didn't bear thinking about.

Taim trudged into Mat's field of vision with Ma Hellory close behind, darting her head like a worried bird. Taim was covered in blood. He seemed barely injured: it couldn't be his own. He had the orphan Reah in his arms.

Mat felt his sister Lyra's hand on his shoulder, pulling him backwards, but he shrugged it off. He started for the stairs and she tried to head him off, but he was too fast for her. He rushed down into the entrance room.

His dad turned around at the sound of him pounding down the stairs.

"Boy..." the man said, eyes on Mat, hard and empty.

Mat ignored him, running up to his uncle and keeping pace as the man made his way first into the family's entertaining room to the left of the entrance to the house and then, taking a right, into the kitchen.

"Is she okay?"

"Injured badly, but I'll fix it. Don't worry, boy, it looks worse than it..." Uncle Taim glanced over at Mat. His face was as inscrutable as Mat remembered, but Mat detected a subtle pause when the man looked over to him. "...is." Taim shot a look at Tordric. It made Mat uneasy, for some reason.

"We'll talk later, Taim," Mat's dad said. Taim grunted and said nothing.

Mat's attention was soon drawn back to the injured girl in his Uncle Taim's arms. In the center of the darkened kitchen was a massive, roughhewn pinewood table that had been carved by hand by Mat's father for his first wife when the two had still been in their teens. Tordric Corwin's first wife had died giving birth to their first child and then Mat's father, desperate to find a wife to help care for his newborn daughter, had courted Mat's mother, Molly, with flowers in one hand and a baby in the other.

Uncle Taim carefully laid Reah down onto the table before pulling a pouch out of a hidden location in his blood smeared doeskin jacket and riffling through it. Mat turned his eyes back to Reah.

Mat had seen gutted steer shed less blood than the orphan had. Her unusual light brown skin was dark and shiny with the slick of the stuff. There was a gash on the side of her face, running down her jaw, and her exposed jawbone grinned out at him in the shape of a hook. Lacerations ran down one side of her body, deep and brutal, and a chunk of muscle had been torn completely off of the rear of one of her legs, sheered by the teeth of whatever had attacked her.

Each of the open wounds marring Reah's body was turning black along its edges as if her wounds had been cauterized. This was likely the reason that she was still alive, but it was also the reason, Mat thought, that there was no chance Uncle Taim could possibly save her.

Mat looked over at his uncle. The massively broad, bearded soldier looked almost frantic as he worked. Mat had never seen Taim as anything but in control before.

Worg poison, Mat thought. That's what the rapid black-turning of Reah's wounds meant. You couldn't cure worg poison. The beasts were cowards, and their attacks on humans were rare, but when they did attack a person that person always died. Pastor Oliver claimed they were the escaped souls of convicts from the third darkest of the King's many hells. They were always hunting, but the fire of the hell they had escaped was still inside of them and anything they attempted to eat would be burned by it to nothing before it could give them a moment free from their hunger.

Mat didn't know about the pastor's words, but he did know the look of those wounds: bite marks and lacerations, all burned up so that the blood loss wouldn't kill right away. Whatever was in the worg that burned never left its victims. Reah would be slowly devoured by the fire

that had kept her wounds from killing her until she was burned alive from the inside out. Mat's father had taught him to kill any creature he found with the mark of a worg attack on its body, no matter how small the wound. It was a mercy.

"Dad—" Mat said.

"Oh, Lords," Ma Hellory said. Mat looked over at her: she was pale to the point of being gray and shaking.

"Send the boy upstairs, Hellory," Mat's uncle said.

"Uncle Taim, there's no way she could survive this. Dad said to—"

Taim looked Mat in the eyes, then. It was a long, hard look. Mat stopped talking. He couldn't draw his gaze away from the flickering in the man's gold eyes.

"You don't always know everything, boy," Taim Corwin said. And then he pulled a satchel of herbs from the pouch he had been searching for.

"Get me a bucket of water, Tord," Taim said.

"Upstairs, boy!" Tordric Corwin cried. He was bellowing, now, with the full volume of his lungs. Hellory was still standing by the entranceway. Regid took Mat by the scruff of the neck—Mat was nearly fully grown, but he was tiny compared to his father—and threw him up the stairs. Mat sprawled and turned around. He had banged his knee on the way up, but he ignored the pain.

"And send the rest of the children to bed," Tordric Corwin said.

Chapter 7

Reah woke feeling groggy. Why was she so hot?

More importantly, where was she? Reah looked about her, not moving, eyes darting back and forth. She had been sleeping in a tree. Hadn't she? Where was this, now? There were rough-cut slats of honey colored wood, starting to gray but well cleaned, and hanging pods of garlic swaying gently above her. She was staring at a roof, but who's?

Reah was laying on something soft but could feel something firm beneath it. A bench of some sort, perhaps. She tried to sit up.

It felt like the muscles of her stomach were clenching around a white hot core of iron. Reah tried to lift her head to look at herself and find the source of her pain but cords of it shot molten up the tendons on her neck. The soft hollows behind the lobes of her ears juddered in sympathy with the suffering of her body. Reah relaxed. The pain had cleared her mind.

Reah suppressed the dark possibilities which flashed before her eyes as she wondered what had happened to her. Just because she was a fleeing murderer didn't mean she had necessarily been taken prisoner. She had been sleeping in a tree, hadn't she? That was the last thing she remembered. Perhaps she had fallen out and been taken in by a passing trapper or woodsman.

Reah needed to take stock of her circumstances before she could decide on a course of action. She couldn't observe her surroundings just yet. She couldn't even lift her head. She would have to feel out her body, first. She had obviously been injured somehow, but how? More importantly, how badly? She closed her eyes.

Reah felt hot, as if she were suffering from fever. She should feel a sticky residue of sweat on her body, but she felt dry as bone. Too dry, actually. Her skin was parchment, aged and brittle, pulled tight to the point of rupture over the outline of her swollen flesh, and she *was* swollen. She could feel that much—trace the tenderness that seemed wrapped around her like thick gauze.

Perhaps she had fallen from the tree and injured herself. But there was something familiar about the sensations she was experiencing. There was something in the image Reah had in her mind's eye of a girl with tender flesh packed tight beneath burning parchment skin: a girl fit to crack open if disturbed and leak her fillings into whatever she was laying on. There was a sense of *deja' vu*. Reah had trouble placing the feeling—she could not put it into context—but something about her crawling, bone dry heat and swollen tenderness disturbed her on a fundamental level. With a start Reah realized that she felt as if she were suffering from burns. She quelled the tide of panic rising within her. No matter her circumstances, Reah was still a murderer, and she knew that she must move if she was to escape.

Determination. That was all that Reah needed. She gazed at the garlic swaying against the backdrop of the rough silver pinewood ceiling above her head, to calm herself and clear her mind. Her emotions swelled around the edges of her empty thoughts. She closed her eyes for a second, breathed in, and shoved them violently out of mind.

Reah imagined her body in an empty void. She visualized lifting herself and, slowly, the muscles of her abdomen clenched around the fire in the pit of her stomach. More and more of her muscles and tendons pulled taught against her fever and her pain and, slowly, Reah began to feel the upper curve of her back lifting off the softness below her.

Her vision broke clear of the ceiling. A sliver of particulars appeared on the bottom horizon of her line of sight, though she could not determine what it might be. Was there a quilt laid over her? Reah groaned: there was nothing in her but purpose and fire and pain.

Reah could not remember the last time she had put air into her lungs. She pushed every muscle in her body until she was certain that each one was working against the other and that, eventually, they would tear each other apart. The view in front of her hadn't changed. She was pushing herself beyond her limits and she had not moved in what the focus of her mind was sharpening into an eternity. Pain took over and her muscles turned to liquid and she fell back onto what she had decided must be a hard mattress.

"Oh..." Reah heard.

A warm hand grasped Reah's shoulder. Reah traced its source with her eyes.

"Careful, dear. You were badly hurt last night," a woman said.

The woman was leaning over Reah. She had blue eyes and plump features slightly leathered by the passing of time. She had black hair that had just started to give over to encroaching silver and it was cut to what Reah thought must be shoulder length and pulled back into a loose bun. There were creases on the edges of her eyes and lines of worry drawn beneath her smile.

Reah felt heat beneath her fevered cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she said, though she didn't know why.

"Whatever for?" the woman asked.

"What happened?" Reah asked.

"Ah," the woman said. "A miracle of sorts, child. I could have sworn last night... well, no matter. You are alive and well and that's all you need to worry about right now."

The woman's voice was guileless. It was obviously straining her to lie. Reah tested her body once again. She could not ignore her alarm any longer. The pain she experienced in repayment for her efforts was prohibitive. All that could be waiting for Reah, now, was death beneath a highblood's fangs. It suddenly became clear in Reah's mind: she had to move immediately or die.

Reah moved as quickly as she could, to surprise her body. If she surprised her body perhaps she could surprise her pain. Her muscles clenched and the pain she felt made her nearly want to scream. Sliver by sliver the threads of her body reverberated with the violence of her motion. She lunged upwards and the reverberations swelled out of her mouth and she screamed.

The hand which had been on Reah's shoulder pushed painfully into the skin of her shoulder before falling away. The sliver of color she had found on the bottom equator of her vision in her previous attempt to rise shot upwards in response to her movement and resolved itself into quilt covered legs falling outward into the image of a room. The room was well kept and all of the same silver-colored pine timber that made up the ceiling. Reah was in a common area of some sort. There were no windows on the walls, so she could not tell if the house was located in-town or out in the woods, but she could catch a glimpse of a short doorway leading to another room in the far left corner of the wall she was facing. It looked like a kitchen, which would likely lead outside. To freedom.

It didn't matter. Reah was now slumped forward on her quilt covered legs. Her body seemed to have given up moving. The pain had fallen, again, and now she was left with only her fever and her dull ache, but where the pain had gone, now she was gripped by a new source of concern: her arms were in her field of vision, now, lying at her sides. Her left arm was covered in bandages, but some of her right had been left unconcealed: the naked patches of skin were not as

swollen as she had thought they were. They were not burned in any traditional sense. Worse: under the slivers of brown skin peeking out from between the linens on her right arm she could see a flash of crawling black.

"*Oh, Lords...*" Reah whispered. The perspective which Reah had been looking for came to her. She was being devoured alive.

A gentle hand pressed onto Reah's tender flesh out of Reah's line of sight. Reah could not lift her head to see but she knew who it was, anyway. Her caretaker braced her back and shoulders and slowly lowered her back onto the bed.

"I'm sorry, child," the woman said. "It's really not as bad as it seems."

"Please," Reah said, "I need to know what's happening to me."

"You were cornered by worg in the woods last night," the woman said. "No, please don't worry: I don't know what Taim did, but he saved you and then brought you here. The worg rot is eating you, now, but it's failing. You're not nearly as bad as you were... well, I'll go to get him and have him explain."

"Wait," Reah said. "Who are you?"

The woman smiled. "Hellory Corwin, dear, now let me find the man who will explain this all to you."

Hellory's face disappeared from Reah's sight and she was left to stare at the ceiling again. Reah heard the scraping of the toughened soles of feet on smoothed down wood. It fell in intensity as its maker retreated from Reah's ears.

Reah had seen the results of worg attacks. Children of the orphanage and the town had been caught by them, sometimes, out in the woods, and none attacked had ever survived. Reah could remember the sight of their blackening bodies, already dead, moldering and still being

eaten by the worg poison in Sister Meri's infirmary. Reah had spent much of her later childhood helping Meri tend to the ill and dying while avoiding the attention of the other children in the convent. She was used to the sight of them. The victims of worg attacks, though, had always disturbed her.

A door banged and was followed by a loud bustling.

"Ah! Mat—" Hellory said.

"—Ma, so wonderful to see you. Is our guest still..."

"Awake now," Hellory said. "You rush on out and get your uncle. He should be in the barn or the stables with that fool father of yours. And—tch! No touching that, you've got your lunch coming in later."

Reah cringed as she realized just where she was. There had been a moment, after Reah had heard of her injury, where she had forgotten the other danger that she was in. It did not seem that the Corwins were aware of what Reah had done to Joceline and the farm boy, yet, but that ignorance could only last so long. Corwin was a common family name around Fulkton Gardens, but Reah knew the voice that had been making a fool of itself in the area of this home's kitchen, and if Mattock Corwin didn't know that Reah had dashed out the brains of a local farm boy *Elvene Fulke* certainly would. Reah did not believe that Elvene had yet run off to tell the news to her favorite pet peasant. Hellory Corwin had not acted as if she was caring for a condemned prisoner. Reah did not believe her luck would hold for long.

The warm, leathered face of Hellory hovered over her again.

"Do you think you have the strength to be sat up, child?" Hellory asked. Reah nodded.

Hellory wedged her strong arms under Reah's back and Reah suppressed a groan. Her vision shifted once more, less violently, as Hellory helped her sit up, and the Corwins's common

room came back into view. The arm slipped away from beneath her and then she was laying back on a stacking of pillows.

Reah was laying on a bed. Beside it, on the side on which the matronly Hellory Corwin was standing, was an end table. On the end table was an earthenware bowl with steam rising from its top. Hellory bent over it and lifted it, then lifted a spoon from it with her free arm and, blowing on it, presented it to Reah. It contained a clear brown fluid. A light draft passed the smell of it to Reah. She inhaled and salivated at the smell of copper and earth and a burst of something hard, like salt. It was beef broth.

"Do you think you can eat this, dear?" Hellory asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Reah said.

Reah found that opening her mouth wide enough to eat wasn't painful, though it seemed to pull her skin. The spoon passed under the cross-eyed ache of her nose and then she felt the steam and metal of the spoon in her mouth. She closed her mouth and swallowed and then Hellory pulled the spoon away. Reah looked up into her caregiver's eyes. They seemed to be searching her.

"Your name is Reah, isn't it?" Hellory asked.

Reah didn't reply. The woman smiled at that. She looked a little tired. She brought another spoonful up to Reah and Reah ate it. They continued on in silence for a time.

"Tell me," Reah said again, after the bowl of beefstock was half empty, "what happened? Who is this Taim?"

It was Hellory's turn not to answer for a time.

"Do you know the wolves of The King's hounds, Reah?" Hellory asked, finally. Her matron's voice had changed. She sounded firmer, now, her voice solid with purpose.

"I..." Reah started. She stopped herself from responding. She wasn't sure she liked where this was going. Hellory leaned in close and whispered to Reah, as if she were worried about being caught by spies in her own household.

"I knew your mother, once," she said.

Reah started and looked up into Hellory's eyes. They were blue eyes: pale eyes: the eyes of a native of Fulkton Gardens. They were soft. There was kindness in them. But Reah was not the sort to trust kind words. Actions defined her perception of the world, and Hellory had already demonstrated her capacity to lie. Reah said nothing to the admission. The food in her stomach was somehow easing her pain. She had strength, now. She turned her head away, refusing to wince.

"Reah..." Hellory said.

Hellory's hand fell over Reah's crossed hands. Reah memorized the feel of the caloused ridges on the woman's fingers as they pulled across the parchment flesh of the soft undersides of her wrists. Was this woman trying to comfort her? Reah tried not to think about it. She closed her eyes. She still said nothing. The feeling of Hellory's fingers drew away.

"I won't tell you any more than you need to hear, then," Hellory said. "Your mother would not forgive me, Reah—" at this Hellory's voice dropped farther, "do not trust Taim Corwin."

Reah heard a door open and close in the vicinity of the kitchen. She opened her eyes and looked. A wide, worn out, graying man with a seamed, clean shaven face walked into the common room. There was a brown plaster of mud and hay on his doeskin boots and he tracked them on the house's white-worn wood floor. He had the look of a tracker. Hellory left Reah's side and made for the door to the kitchen.

"Taim," Hellory said. It sounded more like a warning than a welcome.

"Hellory," the man, Taim, said.

Hellory disappeared into the kitchen. There was the sound of a door opening and closing again. Reah turned her gaze back to Taim. He was near her, now. He took a chair from a table in a corner of the room and turned it around, then sat on it with its back to his chest as he faced Reah. His gaze had been on Hellory earlier, but now it was on her. He had golden eyes.

"Tell me," Taim Corwin said, "what do you remember about last night?"

Reah did not respond for a second. And then: "*I didn't mean to kill the boy,*" she said, whispering. "*He would have ended me.*"

Taim Corwin gazed at Reah without speaking. His eyes burned, but Reah did not allow herself to look away from them. Her luck had curdled, as it had her entire life, and now she was going to die. Reah would be damned if she'd let the life she'd led fall off without a show of backbone.

"If you're going to take me away as fodder," she said, no longer bothering to whisper, "after saving me as that woman said you'd done, so be it. I've nothing to be ashamed of."

"Do you remember last night, Reah?" Taim asked. The way the muscles of his face were drawn together made it impossible for Reah to predict his feelings. "The King doesn't care now whether you've killed a man or not."

That shocked Reah. She felt a thrill run through her. It was an odd contrast to her feelings of fever.

"What do you mean?" Reah asked.

"His will stands above human life, Pup," Taim said. "His will says you're to come with me."

"Ah," Reah said. She dared not contradict a Soldier of the King. She had seen enough of the King's soldiers to know the strength of their authority. "Why?"

"Because," Taim said, "it is clear you're one, now. You're a werewolf. One of us, and His. You're safe from the hunger of the high bloods for as long as that is true."

Chapter 8

Trees were everywhere.

Reah could not escape them. It was the closing of day and the vast conifers native to Northern Gehenna cast black shadows on the surface of the wagon's tarp ceiling as it rested on the side of the road where her party had stopped for the night. There were holes in the material closing Reah off from the rest of the world and every glance through opened a view of scraggly red-brown bark or bleached moss. She could feel the early spring pollen affecting her as she rubbed at her tear ducts and cleared the slow build-up of mucus in her throat.

There were sounds around Reah. They had been vague two days ago when those shadows had first fallen over her as her party had left the little bastion of cleared ground and new-growth forest surrounding Fulkton Gardens and its farms. They had been difficult to define: echoes in deep tones coming to her consciousness in hushed spurts just at the bottom of her ability to hear. They had swelled around her as time had progressed and now they nearly drove her mad, they were so loud, with clearly defined edges and always audible: burbles, all around her, above and below. It had taken Reah a while but she had figured out what those sounds were. They were the trees—the entire forest—drinking the melt off of winter's ice and snow. Every detail of those sounds pierced straight into her mind. It ought to give her a headache. It didn't, but it ought to.

Speaking of headaches...

Reah's bandages were tightening painfully.

"*Careful*, Mat!" she said, quelling the urge to look over her shoulder to yell at the boy.

"Sorry, Reah," Mat said.

"And no peeking!" Reah said.

"Sorry—" Mat said.

"Hush!" Reah said.

Reah had decided Mat was a pig. It was not surprising. Why Taim had given care of her over to him, Reah did not know.

"Reah," Mat said, "how in the hells am I supposed to bandage you if I can't even *look* at you to do it?"

"It's indecent," Reah responded.

"You're one wounded girl with only two men here to care for you," Mat said.

"One man," Reah said.

"And one werewolf, I know," Mat said.

"No. And one boy," Reah said. Taim had decided to take Reah to the King's capital city, Gatterau, and, for some reason, he had decided to take Mattock Corwin with them. Mat was currently trying to botch a career as her nursemaid and doing a fantastic job at it. Reah felt the bandages about her loosen a bit. "Tighten it up!" she said. "How do you expect that slop you slathered all over those bandages to draw out the worg poison if you don't get some pressure on my wounds?"

"But—you—just... !" Mat said.

Mat continued working and Reah gritted her teeth through the pain. What was Mat trying to do, crack her ribs? He had no medical sense, either: he was using crushed bitterwort to draw out the poison in her when everyone knew the stuff was useful as an astringent and not a drawing salve.

"You know, Reah, you're a lot easier to talk to than I thought you'd be," Mat said.

Reah felt heat on her cheeks. That had been a random comment. Why would he say something like that? Mat sounded amused. He was looking down on her for his own amusement. That was it.

"Just finish with those bandages and get out, *boy*," Reah said.

"Aw, come on, Reah!" Mat said.

Reah looked over her shoulder at Mat. It must have been dark in the wagon because he had his face inches from his hands as he worked on tightening her bandages. To her it was not so dark yet. She knew that her vision was better than human, now. Better and getting better all the time. Taim's gift to her, she thought, when he made her into a werewolf in the woods and saved her life. It did not occur to her to wonder about the symptoms she had experienced prior to her encounter with the worg.

Reah could vaguely make out the color of Mat's gray eyes, staring over her shoulder in the gathering dark. They hunched in the shadows of his perfectly proportioned forehead. They were staring holes in her bandages but somehow she could still feel his gaze crawling over her back.

"You're worthless, boy," she said. She didn't want him near her, anymore. "You know it. I could have done a better job on *myself*, by now."

Reah felt excruciating pressure as Mat tightened her bandages. Reah could hear her ribs creak. Her head snapped forward in response to the sudden pain and she let out a soft chuff. She smiled, though: she had caught Mat's face turning a bright red right before her vision had spun around.

"Fine," Mat said. He sounded angry. The wagon rocked slightly and Reah listened to a faint rustling and shivered at the touch of cool air on her neck: Mat had left. She was alone in the wagon once more.

Now that they were finally tied, Reah's bandages had slacked their pressure a bit. The way she was bound was unpleasant but, knowing her condition, Reah thought the bandages were probably tied about right. She grudgingly admitted, in her own mind, that Mat had done a good job.

It didn't matter. Reah was alone again, that was what mattered. The heat that Mat's body had infused into the tent was departing, but the air trapped in the tarp would be muggy for some time now, anyways. Muggy and cold. What a wonderful combination. At least Mat had gone.

Reah sighed and rubbed her bandages against the skin of her arms, using the friction from the act to warm herself against the damp cold of the wagon's interior.

Alone in the wagon that the Corwin family had given to Taim so that Reah could be transported while recovering from her wounds, Reah found herself resenting Mat for leaving so suddenly. Stupid, she knew. *She* was the one who had driven *him* away. But there it was. The boy had that effect on her. She could never feel good when she was around him. She growled to herself to chase her thoughts away. There was no point to that way of thinking.

Reah scooted backwards in the gloom and then pressed herself against the gray wood backing running up from the wagon's base. She eased her right leg underneath her and then leaned over to grab onto her left. It was tender to the touch and she winced as she moved it to a position tucked underneath her so that she could sit cross legged. She winced, too, at the misshapen feeling of the limb as she eased it around.

That had been the worst part, as usual, tonight. To see her leg like that. Two nights ago she had been convinced she'd never walk again. The whole back of her lower leg had been scabbed over, scaled and black and oozing. Where her muscles had been there had only been the scabs, sunk in toward the bone.

That had been the first night she'd been able to watch as her bandages had been changed. Mat had done it. Taim had put him to it. Mat had been sick to see her leg. She'd been able to tell. She'd driven him out so she could change her bandages herself. It had hurt so much she had cried and she'd done a botched job because of the pain. She'd let Mat change her bandages the next day and had forced herself not to think about whether he looked like he was falling ill at the sight of her or not.

Once she had her leg pushed up underneath her body Reah stopped thinking about it. Taim said she'd walk again in a couple of weeks, and that she'd never be able to tell she'd been injured in about a month. That was good enough for Reah. She'd be completely healed in a month. She wouldn't even have any scars. No new ones, anyway. Reah just wished Taim's nephew wasn't the one who got to see her wounds until that day.

Reah's ears pricked up as she caught the sounds of soft leather boots crunching on thawing needles. She still couldn't shake the sound of that mad burbling.

"Uncle!" Mat said, his voice sounding thin through the wagon's tarp.

"Boy," Taim replied.

"That's all you found?" Mat asked.

"Yes," Taim said.

"Awful long time to be hunting for a single brace of rabbits," Mat said.

"One for you and the girl. You've got those fruit cakes, still?" Taim asked.

"Yes. But what about you, Uncle?" Mat asked.

"I already ate," Taim said.

"A-ah," Mat said.

Reah found that she was smiling. Mat sounded a little green around the edges at that turn in the conversation. Likely he was imagining exactly how a werewolf could have eaten without cooking something over a fire.

"I'll, uh, get to skinning those, then," Mat said. "Thanks, Uncle Taim." Taim grunted in reply.

Time went by. The dark in Reah's wagon deepened and she knew that the sun must have set. Reah listened to the soft wet scraping sounds of Mat skinning the rabbits. She listened to the muffled crunch of wet needles as her two traveling companions moved about outside.

"Lords it's cold tonight!" Mat said. He got no reply.

Reah listened to a series of cracks, and then to a fast hissing, and then she heard the crackle of a fire. A faint orange smear grew over the shadows on the canvas at her back. She glanced backwards through a hole in the fabric and she thought she could see Taim's black outline crouched like a ghoul over the fire he had made. She turned her gaze back to the dark of the wagon's interior.

She heard more of the crunching of wet needles and then the rubbing together of coarse fabric as the back flaps of the wagon entrance were pulled open. Reah glanced sideways and found herself caught staring into Taim Corwin's golden eyes.

"You want to come out, Pup?" he asked. He *sounded* like he wanted to be cheerful, maybe.

"No," Reah said. She didn't really want to be a part of things. Taim nodded at her response and retreated, leaving Reah alone.

"She's not coming out?" Mat asked. His voice placed him somewhere near Taim's fire, but his shadow did not fall on the wagon's tarp.

"No," Taim said.

Mat grumbled at that. Reah decided not to listen to what he was saying under his breath.

More time passed. Reah was strung out between the urge to sleep and the urge to cry out for something to eat. The wagon's entrance opened, again, and Mat made his way inside. He had a tin plate held out in front of him in one hand and two passably well roasted rabbits were piled unceremoniously on top of it. Reah kept herself from looking at him as he came in. Her mouth salivated as the smell of the seared flesh wafted up to her nostrils. There was something odd underneath the smell of cooked meat, though. Reah hadn't noticed it before, so it must have come in to her little sanctuary at the same time that Mat had entered. She couldn't place what it was, or what it could belong to. It was faint and nearly impossible to make out under the greasy roasted flesh smell from her dinner. There was just enough of it to notice, though, and something about it made Reah uneasy. She ignored it as best she could. She doubted her new constitution would have trouble with bad rabbit.

Mat dropped the plate in front of Reah and seated himself so that he was directly in her line of sight. He didn't pick up his share of the meal. Reah turned her head so that she was looking away from him and started paying very close attention to the way the orange smear of the fire outside danced against the coarse linen fibers of the wagon's wall. What *was* that smell?

"Reah," Mat said.

Reah jumped at how loud Mat's voice sounded. She spun around to regard him and something brushed against her nose. Before her vision had cleared her hand was rising to her face to rub at it, but it stopped half way. There was a pale blur in front of her eyes, covering all the vista of what she could see. It resolved itself into the image of Mat's face. His face was inches from Reah's own.

Was Mat trying to kiss her? Reah's heart raced. Mat's eyes were a cold gray. Or parts of them were. Or... there was something off about his eyes. He was too close to her. Reah couldn't make him out. Her back was against the linen.

"Reah," Mat said. He sounded deadly calm. "We have a long trip ahead of us. You can't keep up like this."

Reah tensed. Mat gripped her shoulder with one hand.

"Reah..." Mat said.

Something snapped in Reah. Mat was too close! She needed space! Reah closed her eyes to blot out the sight of him. Before she knew what she was doing she was throwing a fist. Something hard like brick smacked into her knuckles and then was gone. There was a crash and a terrible snapping sound and suddenly Reah's eyes were open.

Mat was tumbled against one of the wooden spines on the opposite side of the wagon. He was hidden partially in the darkness but Reah could make out blood on his face. His eyes were closed. Mat's mouth was open but he wasn't saying anything. Reah felt panic again. It was a different kind. She closed her eyes to shut out the image in front of her. What had she done?

Reah heard laughter. She opened her eyes.

"Whoo! Guess I deserved that one, huh?" Mat asked.

Mat was picking himself up, with difficulty. There was still blood on his face, trickling down from his messy dirt-blond hair, but his eyes were open.

"Wha—" Reah said.

"Sorry, Reah," Mat said.

He was sitting again, now, cocked up on one elbow. He was looking at her with his weird gray eyes.

"You need to consider it, though: coming out to the fire with us. Sitting in here moping can't be any good for you," Mat said.

"What in the hells!" Reah shouted. She couldn't believe it!

Reah was furious! How could Mat have done something like that? The boy was smiling now. He sat up all the way, pushing off of the arm he was propped on.

"Sorry," he said. "Consider it." The skin on his forehead pulled down with his eyebrows for a second as the blood trickled down from his scalp. Mat lifted the arm he had been resting on and probed under the front line of his hair with two fingers. He winced and sucked in air with a small hiss.

"Ow..."

Later that night the fire danced. Reah winced. Mattock Corwin was picking at his scalp, again.

She'd done a good job with his stitches. They were hidden perfectly under his bangs. His cut had been deep and nasty, right along the edge of his hair line. That sort of injury was often prone to infection, but Reah had dealt with its type often enough while growing up. He should be fine.

Except for the fact that the jerk didn't know how to leave his injuries alone.

Reah couldn't stand to look at him, but she couldn't seem to look away. The organic movement of the light falling outwards from the fire was gray to Reah, bleeding out into the gloom. The night was not quite bright like day, but it was close enough to kill the illumination of the fire. Still, it highlighted Mat. His dun and gold hair seemed to glow, vaguely, and every few seconds the tip of a pale dirty knuckle would peek out from between his bangs. Pick, pick. Scratch. Swish and grit: strands of hair rubbing between forehead and finger. Reah could *hear* him working at his wound.

"Mat!" Reah said.

Mat was seated opposite her. He squinted at her through the fire.

"What?" he asked. He stopped picking at his wound.

"Just... never mind," Reah said.

Mat shrugged. "You think Uncle Taim will be back soon, Reah?" he asked.

"I'm sure he has his reasons," Reah replied.

"Yeah, I *assumed* that," Mat said.

Reah decided not to say anything more. She *was* awfully defensive around Mat, and she would be traveling with him for a great deal of time. Whatever history they might have, their journey would be torture if Reah couldn't find a way to get along with him. She poked at the fire with a stick and stared, intently, anywhere that wasn't where Mattock Corwin happened to be. For his part, Mat seemed to get the hint. He went about the business of digging through the dirt with the toe of one of his traveling boots.

After a short while Reah couldn't handle the silence. "Tell me, boy, why did Taim Corwin invite you to come along?" she asked, not bothering to look up from the fire. "What will you do in the Southern Empire?"

“Mat,” Mat said.

“Huh?” Reah asked, looking up.

“If we’re going to start a friendship, my name’s Mat. ‘Boy’s’ not nearly as endearing as you’d think,” Mat said.

“I’m not looking to start a friendship,” Reah said.

“I am,” Mat said. Reah said nothing to that and, after a pause, Mat continued speaking. “It’s a long journey, Reah. At least three months by horse, weaving through forests and over the Dragon’s Teeth Mountains. All I’m asking is that you call me by name. And not punch me again.”

With that Mat brushed back his hair with the hand that had been picking at his stitches and smiled at Reah. He wanted her to laugh, she guessed. “All right,” Reah said. “Mat. Why are you here?”

“Ah, well,” Mat said, standing, removing an imaginary hat from his head, and bowing to her over it. “Adventure, of course. ...and I’m not quite certain what I’ll do when we get there, but I’ll figure it out. I’ve been thinking about it. At first I thought that I would travel to the Southern Emprie, but now I am thinking I might travel with you both to Gaterau, and then go on to Haviel’s Swallow. That city’s pretty close to Gaterau, and I think I could make something of myself there.”

“I’m sure you could,” Reah said, stifling a snort. The trade city, Haviel’s Swallow, was famous throughout Gehenna for its beauty, but it was also famous for its prostitution houses. Reah had overheard some incredible stories concerning it during her years in the convent’s girl’s dormitories.

“Anyway,” Mat said, “I think I’m going to turn in for the night. Would you like help getting to the wagon?”

Reah’s cheeks went hot. “I’ll be fine walking ten feet,” she said.

“Well, all right,” Mat said. “If you think you can make it.” Mat watched as Reah pulled herself to a standing position using a walking stick that he had whittled for her the day before. Reah always seemed determined to hide how she felt, but Mat could tell she was hurting. The tendons on her jaw were standing out in the light of the fire, and her face was flushed. If he tried to help her she’d likely sock him again. Best not to get a werewolf into the habit of doing that. Mat was still surprised at what his uncle had apparently done. Who would have considered *Reah* as a candidate for becoming one of the King’s soldiers?

Mat stood and turned to regard the black outside the campfire. His uncle was somewhere out there. What was he up to? Mat wondered.

Taim had invited Mat to tag along on his journey south. To give Mat a chance to do some growing up away from the farm, he’d said. Mat was beginning to question whether that had been his uncle’s true motives. He stared off into the darkness and he wondered what his uncle was doing. Why had Uncle Taim come all the way to Fulkton Gardens? If the Army of the Dark wanted Reah, couldn’t they have sent a request that she come to Gaterau on her own? Mat had been certain that his uncle had been sent north to handle the worg, but the man had been so dismissive of that part of it. And, as happy for the chance to escape the farm as he was, Mat had started to catch some of Reah’s fabled paranoia: why *had* Uncle Taim invited Mat to come along? It certainly hadn’t been for the company. Taim had been avoiding Mat since they left.

Chapter 9

“Are you listening, Mat?” Taim asked.

“Yes, Uncle,” Mat said. “I have to beat the pulp out of Reah with a staff. Would you like me to find some kittens to kick after?” Taim didn’t respond.

“Listen, Mat,” Reah said, flashing him a smile that looked more designed to reveal her teeth than to put him at ease, “I’m fine now, really. I wouldn’t be here if I weren’t.”

It had been three weeks since the party had departed Fulkton Gardens and Reah was certainly in better health—the muscles on her legs were somehow, miraculously, regenerated, and the worg poison was completely expunged—but Mat hardly felt Reah could be called “fine.”

“Two weeks ago,” Mat said, “you couldn’t even walk. Two *days* ago you were still having trouble walking. And now you want to hop around getting wacked by a staff? Uncle.” Mat turned to his uncle. “You can’t be serious about this.”

“Her healing will suppress her change this month, Boy,” Taim said, “but not next month. The pup has to learn how to control herself by then or there will be trouble.”

Mat, Taim, and Reah were gathered in a small field of heather by the side of the road leading to Balaric. Balaric was a fort city and served as the primary hub for the transportation of lumber from the far northern portions of Gehenna to the other reaches of the empire via the inland sea it abutted, Ice Flow Lake, which fed many of the greatest waterways in Southern and Northern Gehenna. It was not the most direct route from Fulkton Gardens to Southern Gehenna, but Taim had business to attend to there before they could continue on. Mat was beginning to think it would be a long while before he actually saw Gaterau.

At the moment Mat was less concerned with where he was going to end up after his journey with his uncle and more concerned about what he was going to end up doing while getting there. Beating up Reah was first on his list of things *not* to do.

“Afraid, Mat?” Reah asked.

“This is crazy!” Mat said.

“This is going to be a very long trip if you’re not willing to do what you’re told, boy,” Taim said. “Werewolves derive their powers from their primary emotions, and there is no more potent an emotion than aggression. The first step to teaching Reah to control her power is to teach her to control her emotions, and it is easiest to do that by channeling her aggression. She needs to spar, and she needs a sparring partner who isn’t me. You’re it.”

“Fine,” Mat said. “Why not tomorrow?” Taim frowned and Mat’s blood went cold. “Nevermind,” Mat said. “Fine.”

Mat turned to regard Reah. She was still wearing bandages around her torso and her one leg, and she still noticeably favored the leg. She was holding the walking staff that Taim had given her like it was some sort of club. “Are you ready?” Mat asked.

“Try me,” Reah said.

Mat lunged for Reah. He had expected to take her by surprise, but she was fast. Reah moved out of the way of Mat’s initial thrust and swung her staff towards his gut. Despite her speed Reah had no formal training, and Mat had read her intentions the moment she stepped out of the way of his thrust. He set his body and turned his own staff to deflect Reah’s swing then, as she was struck by recoil and thrown off balance, he stepped forward, behind her, and then swept his staff between her legs, knocking her sprawling into the heather at their feet. He turned to regard his uncle, but the man was unreadable.

“Again,” Taim said.

“Sorry,” Mat said, turning to Reah. “Dad wanted me to join the village militia in a year or so. I’m one of the better in town with a staff, actually, so don’t feel bad.” He held out his hand.

“I don’t need your help,” Reah said. She had been regarding Mat with a surprised expression after he knocked her to the ground, but she started scowling the moment he held out his hand. She leaned on her staff and, with a grunt, pulled herself to her feet.

Mat sighed and rubbed the tension from the muscles on the back of his neck with one hand. He regarded the sky. The trees had been cleared far enough back from the road in this part of the forest that he could make out a sliver of gray clouds through the canopy.

“All right, then,” Mat said. “Again.”

Mat turned his attention back to Reah and set himself in a neutral stance, feet spread. This time Reah didn’t wait for him to make the first move. Mat noted with respect that she had managed to learn a bit through observation, as her stance was pretty close to correct now. She lunged forward, trying to jab Mat with the end of her staff. She let go of it with one hand to extend the jab, however, and Mat sidestepped, smacked her extended and exposed hand with his own staff, and then hooked her uninjured leg again as her weapon went flying, sending Reah tumbling to the dirt.

“That was a pretty good jab, but extending yourself like that is pretty risky,” Mat said. “It’s better to use conservative movements until you can start predicting what your opponent’s going to do.” Mat then looked at his uncle. “It’s just going to be more of this, Uncle Taim,” he said. “She’s in no fit condition for me to be knocking her to the ground.”

“Again,” Taim said. Mat groaned and rolled his eyes.

Mat turned back to Reah. She was standing again, but her whole body was shaking. She looked like she was in pain to Mat. “Are you okay, Reah?” Mat asked.

“Just you wait,” Reah said. Her eyes were slits.

Mat moved into his stance and, the moment Reah looked prepared for him, he stepped forward. He thrust the flat of his staff at Reah, anticipating a counterstrike and planning to overpower it then maneuver Reah into another fall. Reah chopped downward with her staff, just as Matt had anticipated, but with such vicious force that it nearly knocked Mat sprawling.

Strong! Mat thought. His staff dropped from his numb fingers. As Mat’s staff dropped Reah moved forward, spinning the staff in a semicircle that brought it inches from Mat’s ribs before stopping.

“All right, Reah,” Mat said. “You take this round.”

“Never assume your opponent’s weaknesses, Mat,” Taim said. “It will kill you. A werewolf has the strength of a dozen men.” Mat grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry,” Mat said.

“As for you,” Taim said, turning to regard Reah. She was leaning on her staff looking tired. “You’ve got a long way to go to control that aggression. For the next week you’ll—” Taim stopped mid-sentence. “I have to go hunting,” he said, suddenly. “Go back to the wagon.” He moved quickly into the woods, not sparing them another glance.

“Pretty good spar,” Mat said, turning to Reah. “Want to go find out what the old wolf is up to?”

“What?” Reah asked.

“Uncle Taim. He’s clearly up to something,” Mat said.

“And now that you’ve shouted it out for the world he likely knows you think so, too,” Reah said. “Let’s go back to camp, Mat.”

“This is our chance, Reah,” Mat said. “You know there’s something we don’t know about this trip.”

“And if there is?” Reah asked.

“We have to find out!” Mat said.

As the trip had gone on, these past few weeks, Mat’s uncle had gone from being taciturn around both Mat and Reah to outright avoiding them both. This spar was the first time he’d talked to Mat in three days.

“I’m surprised you’re just going to trust Uncle Taim, Reah.” Mat said, turning his back to Reah to gesture toward the trees. “I mean, Uncle Taim’s great, but he could be doing *anything* out there. Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Mat waited for Reah to respond, but she didn’t. He turned around. She was standing, staring at the ground, fists clenched.

“Umm...” Mat said. Reah mumbled something that Mat couldn’t hear. “I’m sorry?” Mat said.

“That man,” Reah said, “Taim Corwin. He saved my life.”

“Well, yeah,” Mat said, “but...”

“No,” Reah said. She looked up from the ground and walked to Mat, poking him in the chest. “Taim Corwin saved my life. If you don’t think you can trust him, that’s too bad. I do. Your uncle says to go back to the wagon, Mat, and I think we should do just that.”

“You,” Mat said, “Are the most determinedly boring person I have ever met.” Reah didn’t respond. “Well, I saved you, too!” Mat cried out.

“That,” Reah said, “is not the same.”

“It’s exactly the same!” Mat said.

“You don’t understand,” Reah said.

“Yes, Reah, I do,” Mat said. “*I* find you lost and hurt in the woods one day and help rescue you and you think I’m some kind of monster. *Uncle Taim* rescues you from the woods and he can do no wrong.”

“That’s not it at all!” Reah said.

“You’ve got no sense of gratitude!” Mat said.

“Gratitude for what?” Reah asked. “Being the only person too scared to go through with murder in a group of murderers?”

“That’s a bit much, Reah,” Mat said. “Joceline’s pretty crazy, but she wasn’t going to *kill* you.”

Reah was quiet for a bit.

“She was,” Reah whispered. “She nearly did, rather.”

“What?” Mat asked. “You can’t mean in the woods, can you?”

“Not really,” Reah said. “Later. The day before we left.”

“My friends aren’t murderers,” Mat said. “That’s just crazy.”

“Listen,” Reah said. “Let’s just—nevermind. Let’s go back to the wagon.”

Reah walked toward the road, and Mat, unable to think of anything to say, followed.

“What happened the day before we left?” Mat asked. The pair were hunched together over their camp’s fire.

It was late in the evening and Taim still hadn’t returned. Though Reah should not have been—Taim was often gone for long stretches of time—she had to admit that she was starting to

become concerned. There was something about the forest near their camp that put her ill at ease. The smell that had bothered her when they began their journey had grown stronger and stronger. Reah thought that it might be the reason that Taim was so ill at ease as well.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Reah said. She stared into the campfire that Mat had made. Mat had tended her for the past three weeks. He didn’t need her telling him the sorts of people his friends were.

“You at least owe me—” Mat said.

“No, I don’t,” Reah said. “That’s your problem, Mat. You’re always convinced people owe you things. They don’t.”

“Fine,” Mat said. The two of them had made camp in an established waypoint and, so, their fire was in a firepit ringed by stones, for the night, and the halved logs that were arranged around the fire were long and broad enough to lie down on. Mat was already laying on one, staring up at the forest canopy. He likely couldn’t see anything—it was night under the trees—but still he watched.

“It’s my birthday today,” Reah said, after a pause.

Mat sat up. “Really? You should have said something, Reah! How old are you?”

“Fourteen or fifteen,” Reah said. “It’s not my real birthday. Just a day one of the Sisters made up for me. It was to be my age of maturity this year.”

“A birthday’s a birthday,” Mat said. He grinned at her over the fire. “We should celebrate.”

“And how should we do that?” Reah asked.

“Well,” Mat said. He rubbed his chin. “I know!” He stood, then bowed. “I’m afraid there’s no music, but, nonetheless, would m’lady like to dance?”

“I—” Reah started, about to say something tart. Before she could finish, however, one of the shadows outside of the campfire rushed forward and, the split second before it got to Reah and everything went black, she realized what it was. It was a werewolf.

Reah awoke some time later in an unfamiliar campground. Mat was beside her. The two of them were tied at the wrists and ankles and in the middle of the werewolf’s camp. The werewolf had disappeared for the moment and now was the time for her to take stock of her situation and make a plan for escape. She and Mat were in a clearing, somewhere deep in the woods. At least, Reah thought it was deep in the woods. She didn’t see the road. There was no fire, nor firepit, but their kidnappers had obviously been making camp for some time, because the tall grasses that dominated the clearing were well trampled in the area surrounding the camp’s tents. Their captor would know this area well, then, and it would be virtually impossible for them to find their way back to their own camp.

“Mat,” Reah whispered, “are you awake?”

Mat grunted, still unconscious. Reah had tested her bonds earlier and she thought that she could break free with the help of her newfound strength, but there wasn’t much reason to if she were spotted and captured again.

“Mat!” she said, getting to her knees, wiggling her way to Mat and poking him in the ribs. “Wake up!”

“What?” Mat asked, stirring. “Wait—Reah!”

“Mat,” Reah said. “We’re being held captive by werewolves. If you’ve got any ideas for escaping I’d really appreciate hearing them.”

“Ah,” Mat said. “We should wait for Uncle Taim to rescue us?”

Reah rolled her eyes. “Relying too much on others is a quick way to get yourself killed, Mat,” she said.

“Well,” Mat said. “I see no other choice. When do you think Uncle Taim will come to rescue us?”

“Come to rescue you?” A voice came out from the darkness. “Now why would Taim Corwin do a thing like that?”

A man in a black uniform emerged from the tall grasses. Reah flinched. She hadn’t sensed him at all. The man rubbed his long, sharp fingernails against the brass buttons on his uniform jacket as he regarded them. The buttons gleamed a dull gray in the night and his fingernails clicked each time they passed over them.

“What do you want with us?” Reah asked.

“Us?” the uniformed man said. “You? I want nothing with you. If Taim Corwin wants a feral puppy underfoot, he’s our mistress’s favorite and he can do what he wants. He can have you. I don’t want you. I want *you*.” As the uniformed man spoke the last word he turned to look at Mat.

“Well,” Mat said, getting on his knees, “you seem to have me.”

“When Taim Corwin finds out that I’ve executed an unstung mage that’s been living right under his nose,” the man said, flicking his teeth in excitement. “...Well, it will be wonderful, anyway.”

“What?” Mat asked.

“That boy with you’s a mage,” the man said, looking at Reah. “I can smell it. Just waiting for a witch to come along and turn him.”

“You’re mad,” Reah said. Mat said nothing.

Reah had heard stories about mages: changelings, hidden by monsters in small towns and farming communities throughout Gehenna, waiting for the perfect moment and then going on a murdering spree. They used foul magic and could cause the skies to boil and crops and livestock to die. Mages were said to be rulers in the Southern Empire, and they had been credited with feats that rivaled even those of the King’s Hands. The King had left standing orders in Gehenna for all mages to be killed along with their families. Reah did not believe for one second that *Mattock Corwin* was a mage.

“I’m surprised you hadn’t noticed,” the man said. “What has Taim been *teaching* you?” He tittered, and then moved toward Mat, drawing a knife.

“Wait!” Reah said.

“Oh dear,” Mat said. “Sir, I come from a very superstitious people,” Mat said. “If you would but give me a few minutes to commend my soul to the King’s service I am certain it would please the spirits. Consider it my last request.”

“The King wouldn’t want you. I’m just going to slit your throat right here,” the man said. He was pressed up against Mat’s body, now, buffing his fingernails on Mat’s chest. His breath was rank.

“If you’re going to kill him, you’ll have to kill me first,” Reah said. The man did not respond.

“Then perhaps you could cut my bonds and let me run for a few paces before hunting me down and killing me?” Mat asked. “You’re a werewolf, after all, wouldn’t you like to make a sport of this?”

“Time to die, kid,” the man in the black coat said. He drew his knife up to Mat’s throat and Mat traced the line of sharp heat the blade made under his chin.

“And what is this, Garrad?” a deep gravelly voice said, calling out from the darkness. Taim emerged from the grass. Mat’s captor tensed and the response caused him to pull the knife backward slightly, pressing it into Mat’s neck. Mat lifted his chin and looked into the night sky. For a second he thought that he saw a shadow pass over the stars, but then he forgot about it. He could feel the blood in his common carotid artery pulsing, through his skin, against the knife at his throat. It felt to Mat like his blood was hammering his veins and the knife was an anvil. He could swear the whole world must be able to hear the pounding.

“You’ve lost your right to this one,” the man, Garrad, said. And then he slit Mat’s throat.

Chapter 10

Mat's blood spurted out of his neck in a high arc, but it made no sound. Had Reah's senses been human, she might not have noticed him die. As a werewolf, however, it was impossible for her to ignore the presence of death. The glint of the knife sliding across Mat's throat was like a slice of star falling. Reah could not ignore it and, almost against her will, she memorized it. She memorized the grimace of effort on Garad's face, the smell of Mat's blood as it first entered her nostrils, the sound of his veins whispering with the whispering of the trees, and the flabby way that his body fell to the grass. She cried out a second later, but it was a second too late. Mat was dead.

"Well," Garad said. He wiped his knife clean on Mat's corpse then brought his blood-covered knife hand up to his lips, licking it. "I suppose that's it."

"You bastard," Reah said. She tensed her muscles, preparing to break through the ropes that bound her.

"Calm, Reah," Taim said, coming fully into the clearing. Reah relaxed, confused. Taim knelt to the ground next to Mat's body and dipped his fingers into the wound on Mat's neck, then brought his fingers up to his mouth, tasting Mat's blood as Garad had. He grimaced.

"What *were* you doing keeping company with a mage, Taim?" Garad asked. He had taken a step away from Taim and was currently in the process of picking at his sharpened nails with his knife.

"There's a witch in these woods," Taim said, "come down from the Northern Wastes, I think. Very powerful."

“And you thought to use the whelp there to draw her out,” Garad said, whistling. “Brave move.”

“Reah,” Taim said. His gaze was on Garad and it did not waver.

“The witch’ll depart now that her quarry’s dead, I’d bet,” Garad said. “Our mistress will be in your debt again.”

“Sir?” Reah asked.

“Remember this,” Taim said. “Pay attention to the details of a person’s actions. All people lie in similar ways. They glance upwards as they conjure fantasy to block reality. Their sweat turns a particular brand of sour. Even the most well trained liar will reveal their own lie if you know how to pay attention.”

“Sir?” Reah asked.

“Very nice,” Garad said. He buffed his fingernails on his brass buttons. “Your story checks out, Taim. A witch this deep into Gehenna. Using a mage as bait.” Reah caught a wiff of something rank and sour as the wind carried his smell to her nostrils. It drowned out the stench of Mat’s death. She memorized that as well.

“There are no lies between wolves,” Taim said.

“A mage, as bait,” Garad said, “who just happens to be your *brother’s son!*” Garad lunged at Taim with his knife.

“Run, Reah!” Taim cried, rolling backwards with Garad on top of him. Reah tensed her muscles, shredding her bonds with her enhanced strength. She stood paralyzed, body humming with adrenaline, unable to decide between going to Taim’s aid and running into the woods as he had instructed. She watched as Taim curled into a ball as he fell backward, tucking his boots into the bottom ridge of Garad’s ribs and kicking upward, hurling Garad into the grass. Garad landed

in a heap, then rose, body contorting and twisting in an unnatural way. He tilted his head to the black sky, his face twisting just like his body, melting upwards as if searching for the moon, and he howled a single long, low note. Reah's skin prickled at the sound. "Run, damn you!" Taim cried, rising from the grass and rushing the transforming werewolf. Reah's paralysis broke and she ran for the woods.

Two men in black uniforms emerged from the woods in front of Reah, holding knives. Reah bolted sideways, trying to escape, but her bad leg twisted under her, feeling as if it had caught fire and causing her to tumble to the ground. She backed away from the two men on her hands and knees, but they made no move to follow. "Seems Garad's finally found an excuse to kill Taim," one of them said. "Impressive." Reah did not respond.

Garad's howl became a snarl and Reah heard the distinct sound of a struggle behind her. She turned to see what was happening, but the uniformed man who had spoken to her stepped forward and grabbed her by the hair, lifting her to a standing position.

"Now, now," the man said. "Don't think about getting involved. This is a fight for dominance and it's been coming a long time."

"What are you going to do?" Reah asked. She twisted on her good leg, trying to get a look behind her, but the man's grip on her hair was too strong.

"I'm going to watch," the man said. A howl of triumph emerged behind Reah. "But not for long," he said, smiling. His smile lasted only for a second, however, and then it was replaced by a look of confusion. "What in—" he said, and then his voice was drowned out by a roar of such magnitude that Reah thought the world would be ripped asunder.

The shock of the sound knocked the man who had been holding Reah off his feet, throwing him backwards. Reah gritted her teeth as he pulled her along with him. As he hit the

ground a short distance in front of the tree line his grip on Reah's hair loosened and Reah was flung into the trees. She turned to see what was happening and then froze once more.

A monster squatted in the center of the clearing, victorious, but it was not Garad. Garad, still in his half-wolf form, was unconscious on the ground. Nor was it Taim. Taim was prone on the ground, staring upward and staying very deliberately still. The monster victorious in the center of the clearing was enormous, easily the size of a two-story building, and its body was covered in spines. They glimmered a dull silver in the darkness and its eyes were like liquid pools of the same substance. It had enormous leather wings which it beat against the air, stretching its body, yet it made no sound. Its tail curled around Mat's corpse and the end of that tail, a bloated, chitinous barb easily the size of Reah's torso, was buried in Mat's chest. A glowing white steam rose from it and Mat's body pulsed, convulsing rhythmically as the creature ministered to it. Reah met the monster's eyes. She then fell senseless to the ground.

Mat woke up to find Reah sleeping next to him.

He took a finger and drew a line across the expanse of smooth, white, healthy, unmarred flesh at the base of his neck. Last he remembered, he had been watching his own blood bursting out from his neck. And now he was uninjured. He rubbed his eyes.

"You're not dead," Taim said. Mat looked up. Taim was standing above him.

Taim pointed to Mat's left. "He is," Taim said. Mat looked, then rubbed his eyes again. The werewolf, Garrad, was collapsed on the ground. His skin was chalk white. His head had been ripped from his shoulders.

"What happened?" Mat asked, looking up at Taim.

“I don’t know,” Taim said.

“Where are we?” Mat asked.

“I don’t know,” Taim said.

Mat looked around. They were in an ancient, time worn stone pavilion. The trees surrounding it were chalk white and twisted in regular intervals—tortured into brooding human postures. The stones beneath Mat’s feet were dark gray and veined with what appeared to be quivering silver. He touched one of the veins and it was solid but strangely warm to the touch. Small square black obelisks stuck out at random from the pavilion floor. In the center of the pavilion was a gray stone building approximately as tall as a hut and perfectly circular. Darkened brass spikes stuck out of the building wall without noticeable pattern.

“We can’t go in there,” Mat said, surprising himself. Reah stirred beside him. “It’s dangerous.”

“What *is* this place?” Reah asked, looking at Mat.

“I don’t know,” Mat said.

“These are ruins from the times of the Ioric,” Taim said. “I know this place, now. We’re a day’s journey from where we were before.”

“How did we get here?” Reah asked, standing and rubbing her neck.

“I don’t remember,” Taim said.

“I remember nothing after Mat was hurt. Maybe you really *are* a mage, Mat,” Reah said.

“What’s a mage?” Mat asked. “I’ve heard the word. Why did that werewolf want to kill me?”

“Mages aren’t human,” Taim said. “They’re something more, like me and Reah, or like the King and his children. The King despises them. I and every other soldier in Gehenna have standing orders to bring mages to the highblood for execution.”

Reah had been observing the small building in the center of the pavilion, but she turned to regard Taim now.

“You knew Mat was a mage, didn’t you?” she asked.

Mat straightened when Reah said that.

“Uncle...” Mat said, backing toward the building in the center of the clearing.

“Mat,” Taim said. “Stop. Come here.”

“Were you taking me to be executed, Uncle Taim?” Mat asked, backing into the building, apparently heedless of his previous advice.

“I was trying to save you,” Taim said, following. “I am. You can’t live in Gehenna. You’ll be discovered eventually. I’m taking you to the southern border city of Arelcrys so that you can escape to the Southern Empire.”

The interior of the ruined building was dominated by a large, empty well on a raised dais. The stairs cut on each side of the dais were filled with an indecipherable scrawl made of bronze gilding, as were the stones composing the rim of the well. A jagged hole with seven points allowed faint moonlight to filter down from the ceiling. Mat glanced down into the hole and it seemed to go down forever. Nevertheless he backed up against it.

“I don’t know if I can trust you, Uncle,” Mat said.

“I can’t believe this,” Reah said. She walked up to Mat and prodded him with a finger, nearly knocking him into the well. “Are you really that dense, Mattock Corwin?”

“Reah—” Mat said.

“No, listen: if Taim Corwin wanted you dead, Mat, you would be dead already. He could throw you down this well and be done with it.” Reah turned and looked Taim in the eyes.

“There’s something wrong here, but it’s not him. I trust him,” she said. “So should you.”

“Uncle Taim,” Mat said.

“Mat,” Taim said. He held out his hand. “Let me help you.” Mat made his decision. He took hold of Taim’s hand.

Chapter 11

Elvene sighed as she ran the fine horse-hair brush through her carefully feathered raven black hair. She placed the brush on the edge of her armoire. Looking in the silver inlaid mirror she batted her big blue eyes and pouted. She hated these galas of her father's. Ever since her coming of age party a month and a half ago life at the Fulke manor house had been one long gala after another.

Elvene removed the pout from her face and put on an entertaining smile. Pouting was going to get her nowhere, and she was of the host's party, after all, even if the party being hosted was anything but what she wanted.

She opened her door and started down the hallway leading from her room to the stairs. The party was being held in the ballroom, of course, which was at the bottom of those stairs. The worked wooden angels embossed on the green velvet walls of the hallway, normally so beautiful to her eyes, seemed this night to be staring at her with a lazy malevolence.

Elvene passed a number of serving women hiding from work in the shadow of a marble bust. She frowned at them. It was obvious that they were gossiping instead of working. At sight of her they scurried off. Her father had been so overburdened with entertaining this past month that he had been unable to keep the sort of tight shift with the servants with which Elvene's household was accustomed.

Elvene put her smile back on her face. She had reached the stairs. She descended to the ballroom directly at their base.

The ballroom was spacious, filled with fluted jade painted wooden columns like a forest of trunks rising up from its imported, well polished, dark wood floor. She greeted the guests at

the bottom of the stairs and then made her way into the room, deftly dodging the plethora of young country lords who wandered about like wild beasts stalking prey. Elvene's smile turned genuine for a second. Unfortunately for these puffed up buffoons, Elvene Fulke was hardly timid prey.

An old man approached, herding a weak chinned young man of approximately twelve years toward her as if the child were some sort of prize winning goat.

"Oh, Lord Barthaines! Such a pleasure to see you!" Elvene said, speaking firmly and quickly so as to not give the old man a moment to say anything at all. "This is your son? It is truly wonderful to meet you, kind sir. Have you met Lord Alexander's son, Gerrald? If I might say so, I can tell by the cut of your coat that you're a hawker. So I was correct? Delightful! Why, young Lord Alexander's son Gerrald is quite taken with Hawking as well. Perhaps you could exchange notes? No? I insist, really I do. Gerrald dear! Oh, there you are. I was just talking to—Eiric—that is your name, isn't it? Oh, thank you. I was talking to Eiric here and it just so happens that he is a hawker as well. Really, I must leave you two to exchange notes. Oh, no, don't worry about accompanying me. I should be perfectly safe in my own home, I think."

Elvene glided away, leaving the two young men to stand about, paralyzed by the awkwardness of their situation. Lord Barthaines belonged to one of the most established Lower Blood households in Gehenna, he was one of the greatest mortal landlords in the nation, and he was well known to be a stickler for observing the niceties of position. Lord Alexander, on the other hand, was from a household only four generations old, and it was well known that the ambitious Lord had set his eyes on one of the more lucrative lumber woods in Lord Barthaine's territory, directly adjacent to his own.

Elvene had deliberately given the meek Gerrald preference of position over the slightly younger and equally meek Eiric. The older couldn't back down, lest he draw his father's ire, and the younger would be forced to attempt to take precedence of position lest he draw that of his own. Elvene could see Lord Alexander already weaving his way through people and pillars to come to the assistance of his son. The lot of them would be stuck in that neat little tangle for the rest of the night, unable to bother her.

Elvene swept through the room, positioning one lordling against another until not a one could do much more than squeak without her help. Her work then done for the night, she slipped from the ballroom to the veranda just outside. She leaned against the veranda's railing and looked out onto her family's garden. The estates were starting to thaw, now, and some of the earliest flowers were already in bloom. A lone custodian swept in the dark at some snowpowder which had drifted over one of the flower arrangements. Elvene reached down the deep V of her dress and pulled out a crumpled wad of paper. She sighed. Mat could have at least found some decent paper to write his note on.

Elvene, it said, I have heard tales of a great chance for fortune in the Southern Empire and have decided to accompany Uncle Taim to Gaterau before heading to Arelcrys so that I might claim my share. If you desire to meet me before I can return to you in proper financial condition I will go to the Tiled Bridge which connects the Gehennan and Empire side of the city every third Sunday of every other month after I arrive in Arelcrys.

Mat had left, without coming to see her, and in the company of that dark cursed orphan girl as well. At first Elvene had been furious, just as she had been furious upon finding out that his family had taken the girl in after her run-in with the other orphan, Joceline. That Lawrance boy had still not woken up, and, had Joceline not disappeared of her own accord only a few

weeks later, Elvene was certain she would have had to resort to extreme measures to keep things under control.

Elvene had been furious, but Mat's letter had changed things. Mat's stepmother had slipped it in Elvene's hand at post-mass the Sunday following her love's departure and Elvene had decided that getting upset was to no use, not after her first week of loneliness storming around the manor.

Mat *loved* Elvene, it was obvious now. What other reason would he go south to seek a fortune beyond making himself worthy of Elvene's hand in marriage?

It mattered little to Mat, obviously, that he already had Elvene's love, and through her her family's fortune. Mat had to be worthy in his own Lords' cursed right. Perhaps he thought that she would fear to marry him out of worry of disownment from her father? That was foolishness, of course. Elvene's father practically treated Mat like a son... a lesser son... but still. And he must have known she'd throw away everything for him if she had to, that she'd been willing to since the day that they had met.

It had been shortly after the unfortunate incident with Reah's mother. Elvene's father had wanted to strengthen his ties to the countryside—make his person more accessible to the masses to disabuse them of any of the foul rumors the events surrounding the death of that girl's criminal mother had spawned—so he had taken to letting Elvene play amongst the peasant children after church. At first Elvene had tried to lord over them all—they were her inferiors, after all, and she had been too young then to fully understand, yet, how to manipulate them. Most of them had taken her abuse stolidly; some had even tried ingratiating themselves to her.

Not her Mat, though. *He* knew injustice when he saw it and *he* was going to fix it even if it got his whole family hung. Mat had punched Elvene in the churchyard in plain sight of the

entire town's population, knocking her into the mud. Then he had given Elvene a flower and told her she'd be a lot better, for a girl, if she'd start acting like a girl instead of some sort of puffed up hog. Elvene's father had said nothing.

Elvene smiled as she thought of that incident. She still had that flower, and countless others. Mat had always been easy with flowers when it came to girls.

No, Mat had not abandoned Elvene. She simply had to wait for him. He would return for her once he had found this fortune of his. Until he did, though, Elvene was going to have to do something about her suitors. She'd tell her father after tonight's gala in the most polite manner she could manage that she had no intention of marrying a country lord. She'd make her intentions clear and that would be that. Her father could be prickly at times, but he loved her dearly, Elvene was sure. She might be the only child and sole inheritor of the Fulke estates, but it was a lesser household, and Elvene was certain that it would take very little discussion to make her father realize that the new blood and eager mind Mat offered would infuse the Fulke family line with fresh strength.

The music in the ballroom behind Elvene had died down and the lights had started to dim, servants of the house guttering one candle and then another, before she decided that it was safe to return from her private excursion in the veranda. It was not so safe in the ballroom as Elvene had thought, however, as there was one suitor who had not yet left. An unfamiliar shadow lurked at the edge of the light cast by the last lit candle in the room, at the expansive bottom of the ballroom's stairs. It moved towards her.

"Why, Harl Camfrey," Elvene said, putting on her smile as the old man's outline became clear in the dim light, "whatever has kept you so long on our estates? Surely you wish to be back to that hunting lodge of yours?"

The dumpy, pinch faced man—almost three times her age—tried to smile at her. It was obviously not something he was accustomed to. He was a widower a number of times over and Elvene had heard from certain sources that not all of his wives' deaths had been natural.

“Why, truly I am glad to see you, my lady,” Harl Camfrey said. “I had hoped your father would be with me to give you the good news, but it seems that he was forced to take leave to one of his outer estates a full hour ago. Something about barbarian attack. Truly, I am glad to live closer to the heartland and away from those feral beasts you Northern Gehennans seem to take so much in stride.”

Elvene's smile wavered uncertainly for a moment as she scrabbled desperately to hide her alarm. “Truly, tale of Barbarian attack is unfortunate—” Elvene said. There were any number of outer estates which could be the one that Lord Camfrey was talking about. Elvene had a sinking feeling she knew which outer estate would be important enough to draw her father so rudely from his position as host, though. Mat's father, Tordric Corwin, had always been a Fulke man, even after that incident involving a woman some said his favorite brother had been courting. And after the Corwins had lost so much to barbarian attack fourteen years ago...

Barbarian attacks were always vicious. There were usually few survivors.

“Truly it is, my lady,” Lord Camfrey said, cutting into the silence Elvene had drawn the conversation into. He was smiling at Elvene like she was an idiot. With a start, Elvene realized that she had stopped mid-sentence. She cast her mind back to what they had been discussing.

“Truly, tale of Barbarian attack is unfortunate,” Elvene said, “but what is this good news you speak of, Lord Camfrey?”

“You know of my nephew, my lady Elvene?” Lord Camfrey said. “The good Sir Jory? Very strong lad, our Jory. Handsome as well.”

And a woman beater as well, Elvene knew. She motioned for Lord Camfrey to go on, maintaining her smile.

“Well, he was unfortunately laid down in a border skirmish with certain of the tribes of savages living in the mountains adjacent to our estate. However, he made me his emissary in this most wondrous of circumstances and, after careful discussion, your illustrious father and myself have decided that House Fulke and House Camfrey are long due to be joined.”

The man beamed at her. Elvene felt like she had just swallowed a live badger.

“Surely, this is wondrous news, my lord Camfrey,” she said shakily, “and have the appropriate papers and signatories been dealt with?”

“Not to worry, my lady,” the evil little man said, smiling, “everything has already been dealt with. If you wanted you could come with me on the hour so that I might entertain you in my humble lodge until we leave for my estates.”

Elvene had very little time. “And when *will* we be leaving for your estates, my lord?” she asked.

“Why, tomorrow at dawn of course,” he said.

Elvene had no time. Even if her father were to return from the site of the attack in time for her to talk with him before being taken away, something she very much doubted, the chances of Mat’s father... *oh, Mat!* Surviving the attack were slim to none. Likely the entire farm had been burned to the ground and salted, and all of those living there impaled. Mat’s father’s land was gone, Mat’s father was dead, and with the passing of the two had gone any chance that Elvene could convince her father that their influence would best be permanently tied to the Fulke estates through marriage. Elvene wanted to cry.

Instead, she said “I think that I would like to spend one last night in my childhood bed chambers, My Lord, though I appreciate your offer.” Lord Camfrey would likely have forced his way into Elvene’s garters within an hour of getting her alone on his own property.

“Very well,” Lord Camfrey said, trying without success to hide a frown, “I look forward to our reunion tomorrow. I will have a carriage take you up at dawn.” He left.

If you desire to meet me before I can return to you in proper financial condition I will go to the Tiled Bridge every third Sunday of every other month after I arrive in the city, Mat had written.

Elvene went to her room to pack all the provisions she could think of. She would not have long before the chaos caused by her father’s absence from the Fulke estates would settle down. She had to escape before that happened. When the carriage arrived the next morning Elvene would long since have gone.

Chapter 12

“You must remain indoors, Mat,” Taim said.

“Why do you always drink two beers instead of one, Uncle?” Mat asked.

“Listen, Mat,” Taim said. “Do not leave our room again.”

“I just wanted a change of scenery,” Mat said. Mat, Reah, and Taim had been in the city fort of Balaric for ten days, now, and all that Mat had been able to see of his first real city was the short walk from the fort’s outer gates to the Parched Ogre, the inn where the party was attempting to lay low while Taim determined their next move. Mat was currently enjoying a dark honey mead in the common room of the Ogre and Taim was currently looming over two dark ales and not enjoying the fact that Mat was doing so.

“You can’t be seen, Mat. Sheppard and Wyle are in this city, now,” Taim said, referring to two werewolves that he and Reah had encountered, apparently, while Matt had been occupied with being dead. “I’m certain of it. We’re lucky no others of my brothers are in this city. Those two won’t force a confrontation unless they can get you alone.”

“Why not just leave?” Mat asked. “I bet we could lose them, Uncle Taim, with you around.”

“It will only be a while longer, Mat,” Taim said. “To reach the Dragon’s Teeth Mountains and Southern Gehenna we must cross Ice Flow Lake, but it is a difficult crossing under even the best circumstances. I must gather supplies, and we cannot make the trip while those two harry us.”

“What if I went with you?” Mat asked. “Helped you gather supplies?”

“No,” Taim said.

“What if I stayed with Reah? The two of us, surely—” Mat said.

“No,” Taim said.

“Well then why does she get to go and do what she pleases—” Mat said.

“Reah is not their target,” Taim said.

“And what makes you think they’re targetting me, Uncle?” Mat asked. His uncle only looked at him. Mat sighed. He looked past Taim’s head toward the bar. There was a long, unadorned mirror backing the Ogre’s bar, and Mat could see the entire common room in it. It was mid-day but Mat had chosen a dark corner of the room to sit in in a fruitless attempt to avoid drawing his uncle’s attention. He would have been easy to overlook were it not for one feature: his eyes were now a burnished silver. Even in the relative darkness of the Ogre’s most obscure corner Mat’s eyes shined like beacons.

“Go back upstairs, Mat,” Taim said, rising from the table. “I need to be going.”

“I’m going to explode, Uncle Taim,” Mat said. Once again Taim did not bother to answer him. Instead he walked out the front door of the Parched Ogre, probably intent on doing something incredibly fun and exciting. Mat briefly considered staying where he was to spite his uncle, but he knew that Taim was looking out for his well being. He downed the last of his dark, sweet alcohol and made his way to the back of the inn to once again secret himself away and rot.

When Mat got to the party’s shared room he threw open its door, intent on taking his frustration out on *something*, at least. Doing so did not help Mat at all, but it did succeed in causing him to forget his frustration. Reah had returned from her training in the Ogre’s back alleyway and was currently standing naked in the middle of their room in the act of changing clothes.

She stared at him, golden eyes wide, too startled to yet be angry. Mat registered the sight of her brown, slender body. She was fit, her body coiling with tightly packed muscle, and attractive in a way that Mat had never noticed before, when she had hidden beneath her layered clothes, or in the dark, or with her self conscious posturing. He found himself fascinated most, not by the parts of her that he had always assumed would fascinate him, but by Reah's discordant elements: by her now fully golden eyes and the slender, trellis-shaped scar moving up from her left hip to her left breast. Mat blushed. Reah blushed. Mat slammed the door as he backed out of the room.

After a few moments of hearing nothing but his own panicked breathing, and of desperately observing the wood grain on the door he had just closed, Mat heard shuffling behind the door. He knocked on the door.

"Yes?" a small voice said.

"Umm—Reah—" Mat said, "Can I come in?"

"One moment," Reah said. "I'm not decent." Oh Lords, Mat thought. Reah's going to *kill* me. "Come in," Reah said.

Mat entered the room, closing the door behind him with barely a whisper of sound. Reah was still in the center of the room, now in her leathers, wools, and jerkin. Mat could not seem to make himself look at her. He looked at the floor and blushed.

"Sorry, Reah," Mat said.

"It's fine," Reah said, taking a seat on one of the room's beds. "You've seen worse, changing my bandages."

"Sorry," Mat said.

“Mat,” Reah said. “Shut up.” Mat looked up at that, and saw that Reah was looking directly at him. Their eyes locked. She was still blushing, and she looked furious, but she was acting surprisingly calm.

“Umm,” Mat said. He slouched back into the door. “Uncle Taim said I should come back to the room. To stay hidden.”

“Ah,” Reah said.

“I’m sorry, Reah,” Mat said, “I should have knocked—”

“Shut up!” Reah yelled. “Mat,” she said, “just—shut up. You didn’t see anything.”

“Umm,” Mat said. “I sort of saw everything.”

“Yeah?” Reah asked, voice harsh. “So you didn’t see anything.”

“Reah,” Mat said, forgetting his embarrassment. “There was plenty on display.”

“Then I hope you liked the show, Mat,” Reah said, grinning at Mat. A shiver ran down Mat’s spine. “Be sure to tell your friends.”

“I didn’t mean that—” Mat said.

“I know,” Reah said.

“No—I mean, you’re a very pretty girl—” Mat said.

“No I’m not, Mat,” Reah said. “There’s nothing about me like that.”

“That’s not true!” Mat said.

“I’ve got the scars to prove it,” Reah said. She stood from the bed. “Get out of the way, Mat. I’m going to go do anything else I can think of.” She moved forward, but Mat blocked the door.

“You’re gorgeous,” Mat said. As he said it he realized it was true. Mat had appreciated girls before. He had even seen a few naked, sneaking out to watch them bathe with some of the

other boys in town, and slept with one, experimenting with his best friend Elvene. The sight of Reah had been different. It had caught Mat completely unprepared. He found he was angry, though he didn't know, exactly, why.

"I hate you," Reah said, looking Mat in the eyes.

"I know," Mat said.

"Get out of my way," Reah said.

"I like your scars," Mat said.

"You should," Reah said, fists clenched, "they belong to *you*." She finally broke her stare into Mat's eyes, looking down at the floor.

"What?" Mat asked, voice incredulous. "They most certainly do *not*."

"No," Reah said, sighing and rubbing her forehead just above her right eye. "No," she said, looking up into Mat's eyes again. "You're right. They do not, Mat. Can I have some space, please?"

"I'm not moving, Reah," Mat said.

"You just saw me naked," Reah said, smiling. "You owe me for not ripping your arm out of your socket and beating you about the head right now."

"Reah," Mat said. He took a hold of her shoulders. She flinched at his touch. "You're *gorgeous*."

"Stop," Reah said, shrugging him off. "I'm not interested. Open the door."

Mat sighed, then opened the door for her and bowed. "As my lady wishes," he said. It was late in the night when Reah returned. Mat had been laying on one of the room's beds, staring at the ceiling, thinking about her. He didn't think it was right for him to do so. She hated him.

She'd said as such. He couldn't seem to help himself. Reah walked through the door and closed it behind her.

"Taim's not here?" she asked.

"Reah," Mat said, trying to sound cool. He could feel himself blushing. His eyes had been drawn to her the moment she had walked through the door.

"Mat," Reah said.

"Reah," Mat said.

"Taim?" Reah asked.

"Yes," Mat said. Then: "I mean, yes. Yes he's not here. He hasn't gotten back yet. He's out."

"Yes," Reah said. She made her way to one of the beds that Mat was not laying on and lay down on it. Mat had only lit a single candle as night had fallen and it was difficult to make out her outline on the bed, now that she was not lit from behind by the lights in the hallway, but Reah said nothing for a long time and Mat assumed she had gone to sleep. He turned his gaze, with some difficulty, back to the ceiling.

"Mat?" Reah asked.

"Yeah?" Mat asked.

"Thank you," Reah said.

"No, I'm sorry, Reah. I should have shown some common sense," Mat said. He had been thinking what to say for a while now and that was the best he could come up with. Reah didn't respond for some time.

"No one has ever called me gorgeous before," Reah said, finally.

“That’s because they’re dumb,” Mat said. He turned in the bed to regard Reah’s outline and was startled to see her golden eyes glimmering in the dark, turned to regard him.

“Mat?” Reah said.

“Yeah, Reah?” Mat asked.

“I like my scars, too,” Reah said.

Mat grinned. “They’re pretty,” he said. “They almost look like they’re there on purpose.”

“They remind me of my mother,” Reah said.

“Ah,” Mat said. “I... don’t remember my mother.”

“You don’t make any sense, Mat,” Reah said. “You’ve got Hellory.”

“Ma Hellory’s not my *mother*,” Mat said.

“I know,” Reah said. “Maggie Corwin was your mother.”

Mat blinked in the darkness. “How did you know that?” he asked.

“The cemetery, remember, Mat?” Reah said. He could almost *feel* her smiling in the dark.

“Right,” Mat said.

“Hey Mat,” Reah said. “Want to go practice with staves?”

Mat lunged forward, stave in hand. Reah accepted his advance, but only for a moment, and then she was spiraling backwards in the dark, her own stave in-hand and her eyes searching for any sign of weakness in Mat’s movements. They circled each other, equal combatants. Reah had gotten incredibly good with the staff in a very short period of time. Mat was impressed.

The two of them were in a courtyard located in an alleyway between the rear of the Parched Ogre and another inn. There was a small stables in one corner of the courtyard, with a

lantern hanging from one of its ceiling beams, and a single mule layed down within it, eyes closed. There was a larger stables near to Balaric's gates where the party's horses and wagon, recovered after their encounter with The King's soldiers, were being kept.

"You still have a long way to go," Mat said, puffing. "You're sloppy."

"I'm going easy on you," Reah said, smiling. "I could break you in two with my bare hands."

"Ha!" Mat said. He lunged for her, catching her off guard, and smacked her in the ribs, then darted backwards out of her reach. "Sloppy." Reah's smile turned into a scowl.

"Look what we have here," an unfamiliar voice said from out in the dark. It sounded garbled. Somehow off. It was coming from the stables.

"Who's there?" Mat asked.

"Oh no," Reah said. "Mat, come here."

"Oh no?" Mat asked. A figure emerged from the darkness that had spawned the strange voice. "Oh, no," Mat said.

A werewolf with bristling, dark brown fur and contorted, inhuman features had stepped into the halo of light cast by the single lantern hanging from the stables. Its snout was covered in blood, as were its claws. "It seems," the wolf said, "that Taim's left you alone, little mage. After what you did to Garad." It reached one clawed hand up and caressed the alley's lone lantern, just barely scratching the glass.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mat said. Reah had placed herself between him and the wolf. "Reah, no," Mat said.

"We don't remember," the wolf said, pulling the lamp down from its perch and slowly crushing it, plunging the alley into total black. "What you did, exactly. How you lived. You never

remember, with mages. But there's always corpses." Howling erupted to Mat's left, deeper in the city. The werewolf in front of Mat, hidden in the black, howled in response. The werewolf crushed the lantern and Reah's sight of the alley went from muted colors to gray. It would be impossible for Mat to see in this, Reah knew. His eyes were a liability. They showed who he was, but they didn't provide him with any enhanced sight. Reah was on her own. The werewolf stalked forward, its movements completely silent. It was one of the soldiers that had accompanied Garad, though Reah could not tell which one it was. She wondered where Taim was, for a moment, then quashed the thought. She was best served assuming he would not come to her rescue. As the werewolf stepped forward, Reah stepped backward, angling her staff toward it without giving it an easy angle to grab hold of her only weapon and smash it into kindling.

Reah desperately wished she could transform—challenge the monster in front of her as a monster in her own right—but she didn't know how. Taim hadn't shown her how. When she had asked, he had told her she would not have the ability for some time.

"Reah?" Mat asked.

"Back up toward the inn, Mat," Reah said. "Slowly."

The werewolf looped forward and reached for Reah. She sidestepped, smashing the point of her staff into the ridge between its arm muscles. Her staff skidded as if impacting brick. Reah gritted her teeth as her hands went numb and put more force into her follow through. The wolf snarled, its arm spasming, and it backed away from Reah—and from Mat—circling them from a distance.

"Reah, let me help," Mat said. Reah pinpointed his location based on his voice—she had memorized, as she seemed to be doing constantly now, all the disparate elements of the alley while she and Mat had been practicing—and she struck him lightly in the gut with her staff. She

could hear his exclamation of surprise and the sound as he jumped into the air, straight backwards, and landed a foot closer to the inn.

“You can’t see anything out here, Mat,” Reah said.

“Run away, run away, boy,” the werewolf said. It stopped, cocking its head to one side and grinning at Reah, teeth gleaming in the dark, then began advancing again. Reah was certain, though she couldn’t quite figure out how, that it was herding them toward the inn. She was certain also, however, that their only chance against it was in the light of that inn, where she could work together with Mat rather than protect him.

“Follow me,” Mat said, as they reached the edge of the light being cast out from the back of the inn, then he sprinted into the inn. The wolf, seeing Mat’s flight, rushed Reah, bowling her over as it gave chase. Reah was on her feet again in moments and chasing after them, but they were already out of sight.

She followed a trail of destruction through the inn, weaving through corridors with walls crushed in by the wolf’s bulk and with floors splintered by its claws. She could hear it snarling and barking as it chased after Mat and, under that, she could hear the sound of Mat’s frantic breathing. Soon after she heard the werewolf howl in triumph.

Reah turned the corner and entered the inn’s kitchen to discover Mat pressed into one of the room’s corners, near to an array of pulleys. He had one hand on the rope of one of the pulleys and his other hand was holding a scullery knife. Reah realized she was too far away to reach Mat in time. She was going to watch him die again.

“Mat!” Reah yelled.

“Nowhere to run,” the wolf said.

“Exactly,” Mat said, then, bizarrely, he smiled, and he cut a deep gash into the rope he was holding.

The floor fell out from under the werewolf and Mat shot up into the air as the rope he had been holding split under the pressure of holding up the werewolf’s weight. The wolf had been standing on top of a rubbish shoot. It tumbled downward, hands reaching up for Mat as he rocketed upwards above it. Mat flipped in the air, avoiding the werewolf’s grab, landed on his feet only a short distance from Reah, and held out his arms to present his achievement. He was then carried by the force of his momentum into a nearby wall. He impacted it with an audible thud and then slumped to the ground groaning.

“Wow,” Reah said. She stooped down to help Mat, the werewolf temporarily forgotten. A large, furred hand grabbed her by the waist and threw her backwards into the hallway she had just entered from. Reah looked up in time to see a second werewolf, this one black, emerged from the hallway and holding Mat, lifting him with one arm. Mat twisted in its grip, but the werewolf did not relent. The first wolf clambered out of the rubbish shoot.

The black werewolf exhaled into Mat’s face, holding him close to its maw. Then a crossbow bolt slammed into its arm. It yelped and jerked backward, dropping Mat.

“Uncle Taim!” Mat cried. Taim was walking through the kitchen door, crossbow in one hand.

“Taim,” the black wolf said. Its compatriot moved to its side. The two of them loomed in the small kitchen.

“Wyle,” Taim said. “Thank you for saving me the trouble of tracking you down.”

The wolves moved in tandem, both lunging toward Taim. Taim dropped his spent crossbow to the ground and removed his shortsword from the scabbard at his waist. He lunged

forward, striking with unnatural speed, and buried his sword in the black werewolf's heart. It toppled, arms flung outwards, fingers twitching post-mortem. Its companion leaped over its corpse and swung at Taim, catching him before he could recover from his own maneuver. Its claws raked into his exposed side, drawing blood, and it sent Taim slamming into the kitchen's cast iron oven. Taim righted himself with a soft "chough" of effort, one arm holding the wound to his side and the other arm hanging limp.

Reah recovered her wits and took hold of her staff. She lunged forward and swung her staff upward, catching the werewolf in the groin with all of her strength. The beast groaned, but did not falter, and before Reah could react it took hold of her weapon and broke it to pieces. She lunged forward and buried the splintered end of her staff in the monster's gut, but it ignored the horrible wound. It was on her before she could do anything further, toppling her to the ground. It loomed over her, all hair and muscle and teeth, blocking out Reah's sensation of anything else, and Reah began to feel a familiar sense of panic, but then it was off her, crying out and clutching at its eye. Mat had recovered his uncle's sword and stabbed it into the werewolf's face.

The beast swung backwards, enraged, ripping the sword out of its ruined eye socket with a spray of blood. It hunched over, preparing to leap, but was thrown backwards as a massive mottled object hurtled into it. A third werewolf, twice the size of any Reah had seen, covered in bald spots and patchy, gold and black fur, and innumerable scars, had emerged from nowhere. It overpowered the brown werewolf with claws the size of sabers and tore it to pieces in a brutal slaughter. The smaller werewolf howled in anguish and surprise, but only for a moment. It was quickly rendered down to a shredded mass of hair and gore and it then made no sound at all.

Reah backed away from the monster on her hands and knees, looking up at it in horror. Mat was frozen in place. It turned, regarding them, then opened its mouth.

“Go,” it said.

“Uncle Taim,” Mat said, voice overawed. The enormous werewolf was, in fact, Taim.

“Go!” it said. It moved forward, mouth open, saliva dripping from its open mouth, then backed up, shaking its head and covering its eyes with one enormous hand. “Take only what you absolutely must. We cross Ice Flow Lake tonight.”

Chapter 13

Elvene felt thirsty, tired, sore, and cold. All of these were things she was not used to. Over the course of the past week of travel she had come to greatly regret not thinking to pilfer some of her father's coffers for food money. Still, she had found ways to survive—mostly by stealing from local farms, which had so far not cost her much more than lost pride. Once she arrived at the first city on her path to Gaterau and then Arelcrys she was going to have to find some form of job to finance the rest of her trip. She had given everything up for Mat. She was certain he would wait long enough for her to make her way to him.

The snow which had been falling for the past four days was ankle deep, unmelted in this part of the land. It still fell here, too, wetly. Elvene had brought a modicum of heavy clothes, but they were now all soaked and reduced to barely better than rags and she very much doubted they'd survive the next month or so that she was going to have to travel before she could finally make her tortuous way to some semblance of civilization.

When the sound of a carriage approaching from behind reached her ears, her first impulse was to jump into the bushes at the side of the road, but she was so tired, and thirsty, and cold, she just couldn't be sure she could keep from falling into the snow and sleeping if she were to stop walking now. Sleep in this weather would kill quickly. So she walked and forced herself to hope that the carriage behind her contained none of the individuals who must by now be searching her out.

The carriage that eventually pulled up beside her held the crest of some household Elvene had never encountered before—a raven eye dripping blood onto a field of poppies. The symbol was still somehow vaguely familiar. The miserable looking driver stopped it slightly in front of

her with a shout from within, and the door opened. A tall, pale faced young man stepped out and sketched Elvene a bow.

“It is a sad thing indeed to see such beauty stranded in the snow,” the man said in an odd, lisping, care-free voice. “Perhaps, if My Lady is not a mistress of the winterborn sent to ensnare my soul with her enchanting beauty, she would care to take shelter in the warmth of my coach? As long as we are favored to travel in the same direction.” Elvene could not quite make out the man’s face in the heavy snow, but she thought that he was smiling. She tried her best to force a smile on to her weary face in return.

“I am no lady, My Lord,” she said in as meek a tone as she could manage, “just a simple milk maid, but I would dearly appreciate the kindness of your company in the comfort of your fair carriage.” The man disappeared into the carriage as she approached. Elvene was not overly concerned—there was no way a man such as this could be connected to her father or the family of her betrothed. When a long fingered hand appeared out of the gloom of the carriage’s pink silk draped interior she took it with relief. That hand swept her into a world of nightmare from which she would never wake.

The man ravaged her for hours. His long, cold hands felt like a corpse’s and his looming, insistent mouth seemed made of red worms and needles. His dark eyes regarded her with no emotion as he tore her clothes from her body and his seed, when he finally released it within her, seemed made of ice. Her screams elicited no response from the driver outside and she noted, somewhere in her panic addled mind, that the tossing and turning of the wagon came only partially from her struggles.

When he was done with her he sat back on one of the coach’s silk lined benches, legs spread wide to show a partially engorged phallus still connected to a thin streamer of semen. He

gave her a lazy smile which never touched his eyes. It revealed rows of impossibly sharp teeth. The man was a vampire.

Elvene huddled in a corner, clasping at the wounds perforating her body and trying to twist in some way that would hide her from the man's dead eyes. She panted from the exhaustion of her three hour long struggle. Her tongue lolled drunkenly and she thought she might vomit into the sticky circle of blood expanding along the silk beneath her. She was filled with revulsion. She wanted to kill the man for what he had just done to her. She wanted to kill herself rather than live with the memory of what had just happened to her. She wanted to fall backwards into the carriage walls and through, and then through everything and into whatever oblivion would bring her. Her entire body pulsed in a painful rhythm as her blood coursed out of her, and she could not force herself to close her legs. She thought the vampire might have dislocated them from her hips in his eagerness. He had been impossibly strong. She felt cold, colder than she had ever felt in her life, and she was getting colder every minute.

"I am going to enjoy the next few days, miss milk-maid," the man said. An insane grin spread across his face and she could see his pale genitals stir. Her eyes failed her. Her last thought was a vision of a letter being read by an *idiot* girl.

That girl's dead now, Elvene thought.

She then lost consciousness.

Elvene woke in a lavishly furnished bedroom. She was naked and chained to a bed by a collar. She was sore, but her legs moved when she tested them. She did not have the strength to sit up. She was colder than she had ever been, and thirstier than she had ever been.

"Water," she said in a voice that seemed to flake to dust and disappear.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, my miss milk-maid,” the man who had raped Elvene said in a loathsome, familiar lilt. Elvene searched the room and found him sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, dressed now, and in clothes far finer than any she had ever seen.

A desperate giggle escaped Elvene’s lips, and she began to cry.

“Yes, dear milk-maid,” the man said, “I can see that you are hysterical. I wish you to know that this is to be expected. I wish you to know that I am not disappointed in you—very few indeed were the women whom I gifted who were not at first much as you now are. Look above you.”

Elvene looked up and her gaze froze. There was a huge mirror suspended from the ceiling. Lords, she looked more like a shredded corpse than a lady of the lower blood.

Elvene was revolted. She felt hate both for the man and for herself. But, though she had not yet managed it, the dark thing inside of her—that hidden selfishness which had festered and driven her since the day her father had been accused of murder—was already shoving her emotions deep within her and out of sight. Elvene was readjusting her reality. Cool, murderous intent flashed behind Elvene’s tears.

“I will kill you one day,” she said. In her mind it was a simple fact. The man seemed to not have heard her at all. That was fine to Elvene. He was obviously insane, and it would be for the best if he did not remember her promise. It would be easier to kill him, then. She shivered. She could not stop crying.

“I wish for it to be known to you,” the man said, licking his lips with a pointed tongue, “that I am going to enjoy watching you as the change takes you. It is a hobby of mine.

"I wish for it to be known to you that I have given you the privilege, as I have always done, to observe yourself as the change takes you.

"How kind is it of me, not only to gift you with life eternal as my servant, not only to lovingly guide you through the process instead of turning you wild onto the streets, but also to let you revel in your transformation, able to observe as you slowly take in the incubus and shed your mortal coil?"

Elvene spat at him. It was a pitiful thing, with her weakness, and the loss of spittle was physically painful with her monstrous thirst, but it was worth it. The man's face seemed to change slightly, or Elvene told herself that it had, and that that meant he had been insulted.

"In three hours you will drink from me," he said, "and every three hours after for the next three days. I wish for it to be known to you that if you do not do this you will die, painfully, and you will be beyond my abilities to bring into unlife."

When the three hours came and the man exposed and slit a vein on his arm, giving it to her, Elvene drank desperately. She was repulsed by the feel of his flesh against her mouth, but she would *not* die. Not before bringing his life to misery and then death. She would have her revenge. It would be impossible to take it dead. She clung to this thought and forced herself to partake of the man's blood every time that came for her to do so.

She had thought that with the intake of blood the impossible cold she felt would disappear, but the man's veins were rimmed with frost and every time she drank from him she ended feeling colder still. She could see in the darks cursed mirror that was suspended above her that what little flush had been left within her had long since gone. She had thought that he would feed her lest she starve before his forced transformation of her was complete, but he did not bother to. Though she assumed that she was still technically alive she felt no hunger, only fevered cold and vague malaise, and she could see herself visibly thinning as the first day passed, and then the second. Her ribs and the bones of her face became plainly visible, though her body's

curves seemed not to shrink with her weight loss, and her lips plumped, perhaps with the oceans of blood the man seemed to hold within himself. By the end of the second day they seemed obscenely bloated on her withering features. She spent the third day in a terrible fever.

Elvene woke on the dawn of the fourth day addled, remembering a faded dream of Mat riding through a dark forest, searching for her. Tears had frozen to ice along the edges of her eyes. Elvene scraped them away with the edge of a nail.

The collar which had chained her to the bed had come unlatched and the door to her room was open. The man who had raped her was nowhere to be seen. Elvene crawled to the edge of the enormous bed and placed her feet tentatively on the ground. She was still cold, colder than she could have imagined, but she couldn't seem to shiver. The terrible thirst she had endured so long seemed to have receded to the back of her mind. She stood and realized that she was stronger than she realized, for she found that she could walk, carefully. She was still naked, and had no idea where any clothes might be found, but she doubted an opportunity like the one she now saw before her would present itself again. She gathered some sheets about her and started to stagger out the door.

She made it all the way through the manor, which was slightly smaller than her home, poorly lit and filled with stuffed and mounted beasts of all sorts, most in various states of decay. She nearly fell as she made her shaky way down a wide wooden staircase, but she managed to make it, somehow. She made it to the door in front of the staircase and opened it as cautiously as she could, then slipped out into the morning light.

Elvene stopped for a second, an image of her skin bursting into flames at exposure to the light of day forming in her mind, but, besides a light tingle of goose bumps on her skin, she seemed unaffected by the sun. Folk tales concerning the Higher Blood said that they could not

come out during the day, but this did not seem true in Elvene's case. She breathed a sigh of relief as she clung to the railing of another staircase leading from what could only be described from the outside as an enormous hunting lodge to a wide paved road leading off through the woods which surrounded the manor. Elvene pushed through the melting slush, which had finally given up to spring's advance, and tried to ignore the fact that her unshod feet seemed completely unaffected by the freezing snow.

She made it a half mile down the road before, upon following a sharp turn in the road, she was nearly ridden down by a carriage. The rider drew rein with a curse and the horses stopped inches from trampling her. Elvene felt a moment of panic at sight of the carriage before realizing that, while the carriage of the man who had turned her was black and silver, this one was white with pink trim. As Elvene edged around the carriage, trying to get behind it before the driver or whoever was within could stop her and question her on why a naked woman was wandering through the snow down this particular road, she caught sight of the Carriage's crest—a crown of white lilies on a plain gray field. The symbols on the carriages came together in Elvene's mind. Elvene ran.

Elvene tripped and fell into the snow. For a half-second all she could see was the slush and mud, and then she raised her head to find a woman's feet in the snow before her. They were wrapped in high heeled white lace shoes obviously made to show off their owner's finely turned calves. When she looked up all the way, Elvene blushed. The woman who had come out of the carriage was the most beautiful creature Elvene had ever seen. She had ice blue eyes and a tight set mouth and Elvene thought that the woman was the coldest creature she had ever seen as well. She was dressed in a simple white silk dress, despite the weather, and her straight black hair was threaded with white ghost-lilies. Elvene's mouth went dry. She needed a drink.

“Tell me, child,” the woman said in a brisk voice, “did you come from the house on the far end of this trail?”

“No, My Lady,” Elvene said, trying not to show the panic that was clawing at her from the inside. The woman’s face hardened until it seemed etched from cold steel.

“I dislike being lied to, girl,” the woman said, and motioned for Elvene to stand. Elvene began shivering violently. She tried to calm herself down, to think of a plan, but the memory of those corpse fingers and that worm mouth and the terrible cold which gripped her even now ate away at her, making it impossible to think. She started sobbing, though no tears fell.

“Please,” she said, crawling on her belly to the other woman and wrapping her arms around her perfect legs, “please don’t make me go near that man again. He... He...” She broke down into unintelligibility, insensate with panic. The dark drive inside of her was temporarily silent. When she regained a small semblance of composure she realized that she was in the woman’s arms, in her carriage. The woman was stroking her hair and making cooing noises, treating her like a three year old child might be treated. It was oddly comforting.

“Hush now, dear,” the woman said, her brisk voice tinged with sympathy, though her face seemed incapable of emotion. “He used you, didn’t he?” Reah broke down sobbing again and it was a full ten minutes before she could be comforted enough to listen.

“It was a terrible thing my Guy did to you, dearest,” the woman said, her voice hardening again, “even insane as he is, he should have shown more sense. Don’t worry your head. We’ll put things to rights.”

Elvene’s eyes widened, she kept them pushed into the woman’s chest, “you don’t mean to say that he is... the real, you know?”

“Guy Guillame, the pure minded, third of the Four Hands of the King? Yes, that is who he is, and little help his pure mindedness has done for him. Or either of us, for that matter.”

“I want to kill him,” Elvene said, frightening herself.

“I understand, dearest but you will not. The man is not in control of his faculties anymore, but he must be kept safe—for Gehenna. You see this, don’t you?”

The woman said it like it was obvious. Elvene nodded and wiped at her face, trying to stop the shivering in her eyes. She understood how the welfare of Gehenna could be more important to this woman than Elvene’s own desires, but, even so, some hard part of Elvene, something dark and bristling which had been born those first fatal hours of her descent into the hell of her unlife, was already planning out the exact method of the great Hand’s demise.

“You’re Esteille Kroftford,” Elvene said, looking up at the woman’s face. The woman mussed her hair.

“Right you are, child,” said Esteille Kroftford, the Fourth Hand of The King, and then the carriage stopped.

Guy Guillame was waiting for them in the courtyard outside the hunting lodge. His smile widened when he saw Elvene peeking around Esteille’s shoulder as the older woman exited the carriage. He shot Elvene a lecherous wink. Elvene huddled close after Esteille, trying not to think about how she felt. No matter how hard she tried to steel herself, the man terrified her. She tried thinking of all the different things that she would do to him before he died and, while she still felt the fear, it seemed to diminish enough that she could hide it behind a cold mask.

“Why, Esteille, darling! So kind of you to drop by—is that a peasant girl I see behind you? A milk maid, perhaps?” The man asked. Then he giggled.

“You dissemble, Guy, you know exactly who this girl is—you turned her,” Esteille said.

“Why, it might just be that I do know her, Esteille. It might be I turned this girl,” Guy said.

“You know our rules, Guy. Only one turning a decade, and no peasants. Do you realize the trouble you’ve caused me?” Esteille asked. Elvene tried not to relish the sight of the shorter woman haranguing the bastard Guillaume. She denied herself satisfaction of that sort until she could get it herself.

“Are you going to kill her, Esteille?” Guy Guillaume asked, suddenly deadly calm. He didn’t seem very insane, now. He seemed calculating, but not insane. Calculating, and very, very dangerous. Elvene looked at Esteille, suddenly feeling fear again.

“Well I can’t do much else, now, can I?” the woman asked. Elvene paled. Guy laughed and turned around, waving his hand at Esteille in a way meant to welcome her to his home.

“Have it as you wish, my dear, but I don’t think that girl’s father—Lord Jasper Fulke, of the Fulke Estates?—I don’t think that girl’s father will much appreciate it. Especially not after I inform him that you took her from me when I had changed her of my own free will.” The man shot a look over his shoulder and smiled at Esteille in a way that was not warm at all. “How many years has it been since you’ve let me keep one of my pets, again? I didn’t even bother to lay a binding upon her—slip of the mind, I suppose, you know how my mind has been lately, but there’s nothing I can do to control her, and that makes killing her even more dangerous—more... prone to complications—doesn’t it, Esteille?” The man laughed loudly as he disappeared into his house. Esteille sighed, and turned around to a worried Elvene.

“That makes you my responsibility, then, since Guy can’t be bothered with you, the way he is,” Esteille said. Elvene thought that if her heart hadn’t stopped beating when she had become a vampire it would have started up again after skipping a beat right then.

“Please, M’Lady,” the man said, pulling himself away from Elvene one halting inch at a time, his legs too shattered to hold his weight, “I have children.” He was sobbing.

“No, Elvene,” Esteille said, grinding one of her dainty feet into the man’s pulped left leg, stopping his crawling. He cried out in anguish. “This will not do. Observe.”

Esteille moved to the man’s front and crouched down in front of him in a few swift, efficient maneuvers. She took hold of the man’s dirt streaked chin with one finger and lifted his gaze to meet her own. Within a few moments he had ceased sobbing as he stared rapt into her eyes.

“See?” she said. “Like this.”

Esteille, Elvene, Guillame, and the man with the broken legs were in the courtyard outside of Guillame’s manor house at mid day. Esteille was teaching Elvene how to feed.

“Please, M’Lady,” Elvene said, holding a knife in one shaking hand, “let me try again.”

“Very well,” Esteille said, standing. After she had broken her gaze the man regained his senses. He curled into a ball, clutching his useless legs to his chest, rocking back and forth on the ground.

Elvene moved toward the man. Her body was so wracked with thirst that she could barely move without palsied shaking. As she reached her prey—he was a petty criminal who had been added to Guillame’s larder some few days ago when Elvene had still been human—the man reached out to her with one hand and took hold of her ankle. He looked up at her, eyes shining.

“My name is Garrot,” he said. “I—have family. Please.”.

“I—” Elvene said. She looked to Esteille, who motioned for her to continue. Elvene looked down at the man, Garrot.

“Let me help you,” Elvene said. She locked eyes with Garrot. He did not look away.

“He-lp?” Garrot asked, after a moment. His voice was slurring, just the smallest bit, as if he were drunk.

“Yes,” Elvene said. She smiled and got on her hands and knees in front of him, never breaking eye contact. “Help you.” Elvene reached one hand out to Garrot’s face and he hesitantly, gropingly nuzzled into it. With her other hand she raised the knife above her head, trying not to drop it through her shaking.

“I—would like—that—” Garrot said. He smiled back at her. There was a look of absolute calm and happiness in his eyes. Elvene hated it. She watched his face with total focus. The muscles on his jaw line and under his eyes were tensing, just a bit, through his torpor. She thought he might be about to say something else. She brought the knife down into his throat.

Her hand shook so badly that when she had pierced halfway into Garrot’s neck her grip slipped. She left the knife dangling obscenely from the gash in his throat, unwilling to take hold of it again, and buried her mouth in the crevice between it and his flesh. She gulped as much of the blood gushing out of his throat as she could manage. Most of it soaked into the ground and smeared her body.

When Elvene was done and had backed away from Garrot’s body, unable to look away, Guy Guillame clapped. His clapping was soon followed by Esteille’s and the vampiress squealed in girlish delight and rushed forward to take Elvene in her arms.

“You did it!” Esteille cried, rubbing up and down Elvene’s shoulders and grinning at her, revealing row upon row of razor sharp teeth.

“I—I did,” Elvene said. She looked up from the corpse of the man she had murdered and into Esteille’s eyes, then smiled shily.

“Bravo, Miss Milk Maid!” Guillame said, still clapping. Elvene shot him a look of pure hatred and he motioned with one hand as if catching a kiss from her then brought it to his heart.

“Thank you, my lord,” Elvene said.

“It really is a wonderful accomplishment,” Esteille said. “Your powers are coming along wonderfully.”

“I want to feed like you do,” Elvene said. She stepped away from Esteille and glanced down at the corpse of her recent meal. “This is messy.”

“And that, my dear button, is half the fun!” Guillame said. He cawed laughter as Elvene’s eyes tightened and she began shaking.

“Guy!” Esteille said. “Inside!”

“M’Lady,” Guillame said, bowing. He then disappeared back into his home.

Esteille walked up to Elvene and took her in her arms again. Elvene had started to cry without tears.

“Shh,” Esteille said. “Shh, it’s all right. We’re all right, Pet, you’re fine.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Elvene said. “It’s too hard.”

Esteille leaned down to look into Elvene’s eyes. “Of course you can,” she said. “It’s always hard, the first time. Your teeth haven’t come in. You still need to use a knife. But it gets easier.”

“It does?” Elvene asked.

“Yes, darling,” Esteille said. “Easier and easier. You’ll see.”

“Thank you,” Elvene said, wiping at her dry eyes. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“I do,” Esteille said, breaking her embrace with Elvene. “Believe me.” “Now, come!” she said. “You have packing to do.”

“Packing?” Elvene asked, following Esteille toward the cabin and away from the corpse.

“You do,” Esteille said. “We’re going on a trip tomorrow. Gatterau, The King’s great capital city.”

“Just us?” Elvene asked.

“Just us,” Esteille said. Elvene smiled. “I thought you’d like that,” Esteille said. “—And the driver, of course,” she said.

“Of course,” Elvene said. “Oh—thank you, thank you, thank you!” she said, grabbing Esteille, unable to contain herself at the prospect of escaping Guillame. “You know how I hate that man!”

“That man,” Esteille said, suddenly firm, “is the Third Hand of The King.”

“Ah—yes, My Lady,” Elvene said. She felt warmth on her cheeks and she realized that she was blushing with Garrot’s blood. “I should not have assumed. I am deeply sorry.”

Esteille’s face had been severe, but it softened when Elvene blushed. Esteille leaned down, smiling sweetly at Elvene, and she looked into her eyes. Then she kissed Elvene on the lips.

Elvene was so surprised at Esteille’s advance that she did not react to it all. She simply accepted the older woman as she pressed into her, hands exploring her body, smearing them both with the blood coagulating on Elvene’s body and running her lips over Elvene’s blood covered lips. When Esteille was done, a few seconds later, seeming to bring herself into control with

great effort, she readjusted Elvene's dress, then her own, and then she took Elvene by the crook of her arm and gently ushered her into the house.

"Thank you," Esteille said. "It gets so lonely, some days."

Elvene and Esteille were seated on a bench in a large tiled room with an inset bath, watching as Esteille's footman let out the bathwater through a drain at the far corner of the room. They had come here and bathed together, not really saying anything or doing anything at all. Now, though, it seemed Esteille wanted to talk.

"I am honored, My Lady," Elvene said, still staring off in the direction of the empty bath. "I—don't know what to say. But—"

"But?" Esteille asked.

"I am—" Elvene said.

"Elvene?" Esteille asked.

"Yes, My Lady?" Elvene asked.

"Do you ever miss someone?" Esteille asked.

"My Lady," Elvene said, trying to think of a way to not answer the question, "I have only been gone a few days."

"You are dead," Esteille said. "You are dead. Guillaume killed you. You'll never know anyone again."

"My Lady," Elvene said, looking at Esteille and smiling softly. "I know you."

"You'll only *meet* them," Esteille said, ignoring Elvene, still looking in the direction of the bath. "You'll *meet* them and *meet* them, but you'll never *really meet* them."

“I don’t understand,” Elvene said.

“Of course you do not,” Esteille said. She looked up at Elvene. “I feel things—vivid things—remembering when I was alive. Everything is more crystal clear than even when I was living it. But those are the only things I feel. Everything else is like—dirty bath water.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand,” Elvene said.

“You will,” Esteille said. “Give it time. I’m glad to have you here.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Elvene said.

“I discover a new lover every few decades,” Esteille said. “They help me remember.”

“Ah,” Esteille said. She realized that the blood in her system had begun to break down. She could not blush.

“My current lover is away,” Esteille said. She was once again looking in the direction of the bath. Her footman had finished draining the bath and was looking at her, waiting for further instructions. She lifted one arm in his direction, gesturing languidly, and he left the room.

“Where is your lover?” Elvene asked. She was relieved to no longer be the center of Esteille’s attention.

“Some place to the north,” Esteille said. “I don’t know. It does not matter when he’s not here. He was meant to meet me here, but he is late.”

“I miss my lover,” Elvene said, thinking of Mat.

“I have to leave,” Esteille said. “I cannot wait for the man. It will be until Gatterau, now, before I see Taim Corwin again.”

Chapter 14

“We’ll leave the horses,” Taim said, now returned to human form, clothed, and under control. “They wouldn’t survive the journey.”

Taim, Reah, and Mat fled Balaric and crossed onto Ice Flow Lake. Ice Flow Lake was one of the greatest natural wonders in all of Gehenna. Ten days journey to cross on horseback from any direction in the winter, and seven by boat in the summer, there were no freshwater bodies larger than Reah had ever heard of. It was almost an inland sea. Its depth, too, was enormous, so great that none had been able to measure it. Its water descended seemingly forever, fading into darkness. These things were not what it was most well known for, however. The frost line, which marked on Gehennan maps the area where lands of great cold bordered those of a slightly more temperate climate, and was almost straight where it crossed through all of the known lands, seemed to dip southward countless miles to encompass Ice Flow Lake so that, even in the summer, the deep black waters of the lake were covered in ice and slush and snow. The lake was nearly impassible in the summer and difficult traveling on foot in the winter. In autumn—and spring, the season in which Reah and her companions now crossed it—it was widely considered to be impossible to cross.

For four days and nights they struggled to find a way across the lake. Taim would lead them first one way and then another. The slowly melting icebergs always seemed to block their path. The sometimes hairline thin and sometimes huge expanses of slushy water under their feet were constantly churned by the icebergs’ movements. A rain which had begun to fall as they had left the city froze into snow over the lake, and their already wet clothes were soaked and then frozen both with the blizzard which buffeted them and the upsurges of slushy water which burst

upon them as they made their way across the maze of thin cake ice that composed the lake's geography. As the fourth day of their attempted crossing waned and the fifth night began to purple the sky in the slivers between the ice, Reah was despairing that they would not survive. It was that night that they found the city.

The ruins were similar to the Ioric ones which they had woken in before, but only in the sense that a city is similar to the huts of a near lying village. The place was huge, sprawling over a sizeable island nestled between the icebergs. The snow diminished and then was gone as they walked within. Buildings similar to the one they had seen, of various sizes and states of decay, were spread throughout the island. That odd stone floor was present everywhere, but carpeted in bronze patterns. The cubes once again stuck out of its paving stones in odd intervals.

The ancient Ioric city, for that was surely what they had stumbled upon, was dead. There were no residents within it, but it was alive with activity. Brass orbs of differing sizes swirled through the air above the city in intricate loops. Pale grey nimbuses, which twisted like ribbons as they flew, passed between them.

They had explored the ruins for several hours before they came upon the monument. In the center of the town, towering over all else, an odd, three dimensional triangular structure of semi translucent black stone hovered, slowly rotating clockwise. Every one of its tri-corner facets was of the same perfectly measured proportions and its lowest point twirled lazy over an Ioric Deep Well easily three times the proportion of the one Reah had seen in the other ruins.

Mat panicked when he saw the thing. Reah tried to calm him, but nothing seemed to work. He insisted they leave, only willing to talk about his desire to leave, and he did not stop insisting until they had put a good five minutes distance between themselves and the enormous Deep Well. Even then he refused to turn around for any reason, lest he catch a glimpse of the

reversed pyramid or the well. Reah was overawed, and her mind was still muddled with regards to her feelings concerning Mat, but she was certain she was annoyed by his apparent overreaction to the well's appearance.

They camped that night in a courtyard. The walls around the court held a fresco depicting savage looking warriors locked in combat with beasts Reah had never seen or heard of before. The silence that had largely held the party in its grasp since their flight from Balaric had begun ended as they settled down to eat their rations in the shelter of the courtyard.

“What is this place?” Reah asked. Mat looked sick and shook his head.

“Dos'Dorlan,” Taim said. “The Witch's City.”

“The Witch's City?” Reah asked.

“Myths,” Taim said, “that when the moon is full the city disgorges its dead. Drunken specters revel in the streets and corpses tap dirges with their bones. Those caught in the revel are forced to dance until they themselves are corpses.”

“Oh,” Reah said.

“This city is dangerous,” Mat said. He had placed his back to the pyramid, which still loomed above them, clearly visible, and was looking with obvious longing toward the death trap that was the maze of icebergs beyond the island's shores.

"I'd hold little stock in those stories, though," Taim said. "The ruins are enchanted by some old magic, that I know. I can count on one hand the number of people I have met who have seen this place beyond ourselves, but that is quite a number for something like this. I have met no one who has seen Dos'Dorlan and believes the myths.”

“Maybe...” Reah said.

Taim produced a ration of hard cheese and grains for the three of them to eat, and they did so, not saying anything glancing around them at the bizarre landscape. Eventually, however, they were done with eating.

“I am going to sleep,” Taim said, wiping his hands on his leather pants. “You both should sleep as well.” He rose to leave.

“Uncle Taim,” Mat said, “are there going to be more—you know?”

“No, I do not,” Taim said, stopping.

“Attacks,” Mat said.

“Ah,” Taim said. “I... did not want you to have to see that.”

“You were incredible,” Reah said. “I wish I could be like you.”

“I was a monster,” Taim said, growling deep in his throat. “You won’t be.”

“Uncle Taim?” Mat asked. Taim sighed.

“Yes, Mat,” Taim said. “There will, most likely, be more incidents like this one. The lands beyond the Dragon’s Teeth Mountains are heavily populated and well regulated.”

“What will happen to us, Taim?” Reah asked.

“We will do what is necessary to bring Mat to the Southern Empire, then we will return to Gatterau,” Taim said.

“After months of being gone?” Reah asked. “After killing your companions?”

Taim was silent for a moment. “They will not be missed,” Taim said, finally, “nor will I be.”

“How?” Mat asked. “It sounds impossible, Uncle. Why not come with me?”

“If you love our family, Mattock, you will understand why I cannot betray the highbloods,” Taim said. “I will make certain that we are not discovered.”

“But, Sir,” Reah said. “What if we are?”

“We won’t be,” Taim said.

“What if we are?” Reah asked.

Taim paused again. “We won’t be,” he said, then he went to a corner of the courtyard, turned away from Mat and Reah, and went to sleep.

Mat’s eyes opened, that night, long after the others had fallen asleep, and he shuddered. He knew what he was about to see. He briefly considered pretending sleep, rather than confront the thing, but he discarded the idea. He stood.

The thing was not so different from a living man, he thought. Its proportions were all right. All of its parts—at least those not covered by the flowing gray veil it wore—were there. It was pale, though, inhumanly pale, and something about it just didn’t seem to be quite there. Mat’s stomach clenched as he saw a portion of the thing’s arm fade into the night and then reappear.

“You’re not real,” Mat said.

Mat had seen them as they had gotten closer and closer to the center of Dos’Dorlan: hundreds of corpses, invisible to Reah and Taim, worshipping something at the city’s heart. He couldn’t share what he had seen with his companions. He had hoped it was nothing—just a figment of his overstressed mind. But now one of the invisible corpses had come to summon him. The creature cocked its head sideways as Mat spoke to it, then fell backwards and away from him. Despite himself, Mat found himself following it. He made certain not to wake the others.

The specter continued to fall away from him and Mat followed it. It led him exactly where he had expected.

“No,” he said. The full outline of the deep well and the upside down pyramid floating above it came into view. “No way. I’m not going there.” He stopped, but the specter continued onwards, quickly disappearing out of sight. “I said no,” Mat said. He sighed as he ran to catch up.

When they entered the courtyard of the deep well, the pyramid towering above them and bathing them in shadow, the specter stopped, looked back at Mat, then disappeared. All of the worshippers Mat had seen before were gone, but that didn’t matter. Mat could see what he had been brought here for, what his companions had seemed unable to notice when they passed this spot by, and it took all he had not to curl into a ball from fear.

Floating in the space between the pyramid’s point and the rim of the deep well was a beautiful, sleeping woman. Most of a beautiful sleeping woman—a large teardrop shaped hole was gouged into her stomach. The edge of her ribs poked out around the top edge of the rift and a few segments of her spine reflected the frenzied light of the city’s wisps from deep within the pit of congealed, shredded organs where her gut should have been. The flesh in her wound was desiccated as if it had been subjected to a thousand years of rot.

Floating within the woman’s terrible wound was an ivory inlaid mirror. It glowed dully. Mat shivered and stepped backward. The woman’s eyes opened—they were a liquid silver.

“*Come*,” she said.

“No way,” Mat said. “I have no idea what ‘come’ means, but I want nothing to do with it. If you want someone to avenge your death or something look for another boy—I’ve got enough on my mind already.”

“*Come, or die*,” she said.

The woman's hands started to rise. She looked as if she was going to embrace Mat. Her mouth opened and a terrible black steam rose from it. Mat wanted to scream. Petals of white floated upwards around the corpse woman as she began to lean toward him. Closer. Closer. Mat could feel her closeness though she was still far away.

"Fine!" Mat cried, and he lunged forward. He ran across the courtyard and shoved his fist into the open wound in the corpse woman's gut. He shoved his hand in her wound, fighting the urge to wrench at the feel of her ancient rubbery innards against his bare flesh. Slowly, painfully slowly, her arms moved to encompass him. He grasped the mirror and pulled as hard as he could. It came out easily and Mat was thrown to the ground, outside the reach of the corpse woman's waiting arms. The creature's mouth stretched ever more open in a grotesque facsimile of a mouth contracting around a scream and her skin blackened and then turned to ash. The white petals slowly settled to the ground.

"See..." the corpse woman said, nearly gone, "*yourself*."

With that she disappeared. The city was still.

Mat stood and dusted himself off, then he glimpsed into the mirror, despite his better senses telling him not to. He spun in a flash, eyes wide, dropping it. He would never find the mirror again, but that didn't matter. In the mirror's reflection Mat had seen himself, eyes silver but otherwise the same as he had always been. But, just for a second, too fast for him to determine quite where, he could have *sworn* he had caught a glimpse of glittering silver scales.

When the party woke the next day Dos'Dorlan had disappeared. They broke down their camp on a deserted island. They journeyed well that day. The snow had stopped the night before

and the sun shone, if weakly, as they journeyed, brightening their moods. Now that the storm had passed, though the slushy water still soaked them to their bones whenever it had the chance and, though the icebergs that covered the lake still loomed above them, Taim seemed to have found a safe path.

In the middle of the third day after they had stumbled upon the ruins of Dos'Dorlan they stepped onto the Lake's far shore. They had arrived at the Frozen Marshes. Mat smiled at the sight of thousands of red gossip flowers blooming on the lake's shore.

"They're beautiful!" Reah said, running out into the flowers.

"Yes," Mat said. Mat thought that Reah looked beautiful, too. The sight of her body contrasted with the red of the flowers made him forget, for a moment, the things he had witnessed while out on the lake. He had still not told Reah or Taim about them. He did not think he was ever going to.

"They're growing on swampland," Taim said. "Follow me carefully. The ground will thaw, now that we are south of the lake."

They made their way out into the flowers. True to Taim's word, the hardened ground that they had encountered at the coast of Ice Flow Lake gave way to a soggy black alluvium. The red gossip flowers burned above it, little bowls of blood. Mat's mother had loved red gossip flowers, and they *were* beautiful, but they grew over dangerous places. There was treachery beneath them. Even with Taim's guidance travel across the flowers was slow. The Dragon's Teeth Mountains did not come into view for three days.

"They're so large!" Mat said. He had never seen mountains before.

"They are old mountains, Mat," Taim said. "Worn down. There are much larger, in other parts of Gehenna."

“Oh,” Mat said. “I guess I’ll never get to see those.”

Taim, sensing Mat’s deflated sense of wonder, smiled at Mat. “There is a mountain range made entirely of crystal in the Southern Empire,” he said. “Twice the size of the mountains here.”

“Really?” Mat asked.

“I’ve seen it myself,” Taim said.

“I’m going to go there,” Mat said. “I want to see it.”

“I think you will see it, Mat,” Taim said. “I am certain you will. –Here should do. We’ll make camp for the night.”

After they had finished setting up their camp, laying tarps on the few firm pieces of ground they could find, Taim rose from their task, dusting off his knees. “It is time for me to go scavenging,” he said. “Our food supplies will run out if I do not find something to supplement them.”

Reah stood as well. “Let me help you,” she said.

“No,” Taim said. “You are better off here, with Mat.”

He began to walk away, but Reah ran up to him and took hold of his shoulder. “The full moon is soon,” Reah said. “Teach me how to control my transformation.”

“No,” Taim said. “You are not ready.”

“When will I be ready, then?” Reah asked. “Taim, you have not taught me a thing since the day Mat was attacked.”

“I will make certain that you are safe this month, Reah,” Taim said, shaking off her hand. “I will teach you more next month.”

“We almost died in Balaric,” Reah said. Taim only looked at her, then turned and walked off into the marsh. Reah balled her hands into fists at her sides, mastering her frustration, then stomped back into the party’s make-shift camp.

“Sorry, Reah,” Mat said, watching her from his position of relative comfort on his bedroll. Reah was walking around the campground in circles.

“And what if Taim isn’t there to save us next time, Mat?” Reah asked, still walking in circles. “He doesn’t trust me.”

“Uncle Taim’s always been a bit odd,” Mat said. “I don’t think he trusts anyone, not even himself.”

“He trusts you,” Reah said, dropping onto her bedroll and glaring at Mat.

Mat snorted. “I doubt that,” he said.

“He trusted you enough to let you wander off into that ‘Witch’s City’ alone,” Reah said.

“Ah,” Mat said, suddenly going cold. “You, ah... noticed that?”

“Noticed you getting up and wandering off to the place you refused to go to, earlier in the night, then running screaming back into camp an hour later? Yes, Mat, I think even the *corpses* in the city noticed that.”

“I was--” Mat said. Reah was still glaring at him. “I was going to the bathroom.”

Reah laughed at that, a short, sharp laugh, and Mat chuckled in response.

“Sorry,” Mat said.

“You’ve really got to stop saying that, Mat,” Reah said, reclining on one elbow. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about.”

“I don’t know,” Mat said. He fell onto his back and looked up into the sky. The sky was clear, but dusk was falling, so he could only see an impression of gathering clouds.

“Reah?” Mat asked.

“Yeah, Mat?” Reah asked.

“Do you ever think about Fulkton Gardens?” Mat asked.

“No,” Reah said.

“I... know we had a few disagreements, back there,” Mat said. He looked over at Reah.

Her outline was gray in the falling light, broken up at the bottom by clusters of red flowers turned black as the sun fell. She seemed to be looking up at the sky like he had been doing.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Reah said.

“But—” Mat said.

“I like you, right now, Mat,” Reah said. “Don’t ruin it.”

“Okay,” Mat said, looking back up at the sky. It was black, now. He couldn’t see anything in it at all. Some time later Mat asked: “Is there anyone you miss, at least?”

“There is,” Reah said, “in the graveyard.”

Mat rolled his eyes, thinking that Reah wouldn’t be able to see him in the dark, then he winced, remembering she probably could. He glanced over, but he only caught a sliver of her golden eyes in profile, barely glimmering in the diffuse light of nightfall, staring up at the sky.

“There’s a matron at the orphanage, too,” Reah said. “Sister Meri.”

“A vampire?” Mat asked.

“You never got to know the Sisters,” Reah said. “Some of them were nice.”

“I miss my family,” Mat said, “and my friends.”

“The Fulke girl?” Reah asked, voice harsh.

“Elvene, yes,” Mat said. He was keenly aware of Reah’s tone as she said his friend’s name. It hurt to hear Reah say things in that tone of voice, so Mat tried to ignore it. “I guess I’ll never see them again,” Mat said.

Reah made a noise.

“What was that?” Mat asked.

““Good riddance,”” Reah said.

“My entire family, Reah,” Mat said. “My dad. Ma Hellory—my mom? Good riddance to them, Reah?”

“No, Mat—” Reah said.

“Goodnight, Reah,” Mat said.

“Listen, Mat, I’m sorry, I just meant—” Reah said.

“Goodnight,” Mat said.

Chapter 15

The pass was eerie, walled high on both sides with boulders the size of cart horses. The sky was dark above the party. Rain threatened, perhaps snow. Reah smiled weakly at Mat, who ignored her. She exhaled, her breath rising in a cloud in front of her in the cold hill air. It had been three days—they were now at the Dragon’s Teeth Mountains—and Mat had refused to say more than two words at a time to Reah since their argument. Reah looked to Taim for some sort of support, but the older man was gazing right and left, searching the pass for signs of danger.

Reah growled deep in her throat and rubbed furiously at the back of her neck as she thought about the night of her fight with Mat. She hadn’t meant to insult Mat like that. She used to think he was one of the regular types in town, the types that hated her and were best forgotten, the good riddance types. Now that she had traveled with him she knew he wasn’t. But he was still *of* Fulkton Gardens. Reah couldn’t seem to pin down how she felt about that. She thought that she shouldn’t have insulted him. Now he wasn’t giving her the chance to apologize.

“Care,” Taim said, raising one hand to warn Reah and Mat to stop. A tall, thin object had appeared in the distance.

“What is that?” Mat asked.

“That wasn’t here before,” Taim said. “Follow me. Don’t fall behind. Keep your eyes open.”

Taim approached the object and Reah and Mat followed. As they approached it it came into greater detail. It was a single human skull perched on a narrow stacking of flat rocks. A hillock of bones sloped around the bottom of the smallish structure.

“Darkness cloak us,” Reah said. “What *is* that thing?”

“It’s a warning,” Taim said. “An old tradition of the denizens of these mountains. A town, Morrow’s Gulf, is only a mile or so into the pass. I had thought we would be able to go through without notice, but that might not be possible now.”

“Why’s that, Uncle Taim?” Mat asked.

“Murder.”

The town of Morrow’s Gulf was worn down by time, just like the mountains around it. Nestled in a curve of cleaved stone on one side of the small, nearly forgotten path that Taim had chosen for the party’s journey across the Dragon’s Teeth Mountains, it had always been populated more for its lack of reasons to exist—for its stolid, out of the way quality—than for any of the few reasons that might have existed for its initial establishment. Now, though, it seemed hardly populated at all.

Reah looked about her as she followed Taim down the main street of Morrow’s Gulf. There were no children; in this sort of village the margin between survival and death was small, and so Reah was not surprised that there were no adults in sight—they were likely out hunting or tending to animals or the few gardens they could coax out of the mountains—but there were no new mothers out with their infants, nor young children performing household chores; there were no elderly. Morrow’s Gulf seemed deserted.

She looked above her. Just rising into the skies above the mountains she could discern the upper hemisphere of a silver moon caught between clouds in a stone gray sky. The moon was full tonight. Reah considered the severe profile of Taim as he trod on Morrow’s Gulf’s main gravel

thoroughfare, just in front of her. She did not like the idea of transforming into a wolf in the middle of a town, heavily populated or not. She hoped that Taim knew what he was doing.

“Here,” Taim said, and the party made their way into the gravel choked yard in front of the largest house in town—a small, half-rotted two story cabin with only a single window, with no glass and no light coming through it, and a single door. “The head parishoner of Morrow’s Gulf lives here.”

Taim knocked on the door, rattling it on its frame. It slit open and a woman’s voice called out: “What is it?”

“Mother Genna,” Taim said, not bothering to declare himself. The door cracked open just the smallest bit wider and Reah caught a glimpse of an elderly lady with scraggly gray hair and yellowed eyes watering badly. They looked like broken egg yolks. Her eyes roamed up and down, considering Taim for a second, and then the woman disappeared behind the door and it opened to admit them.

“Taim,” Mother Genna said, settling the party at a table by a fire in a small room that was acrid with smoke. She nodded to Taim. “You’ve come at a bad time.”

“There is a warding on the outskirts of town,” Taim said. “Thank you,” he said. Mother Genna handed him a bowl of warm, watery chevon soup. Reah thanked and Mat nodded at the elderly lady as she handed each of them a bowl of soup in turn. It was almost painfully delicious, to Reah, after having lived off of rations and scavengings for so long.

“It started last year,” Mother Genna said. “A bad storm came through the pass. Twelve people died. All indoors, not from the storm, and with no sign of a struggle. We thought it was disease.”

“Go on,” Taim said. He had finished his soup almost as soon as he had been given it. He was leaning forward on the table, now, staring at the elderly woman, not blinking, rubbing the pointer finger of his right hand forward and backward, forward and backward, on the table’s gray wood.

“I quarantined the town,” Mother Genna said. “It did no good. When Gerard Handry was found dead with—well—I finally realized what was happening.” She looked at Taim for a second, not speaking, as if she was expecting him to say something, but he did not. “I’ve got a man,” she said, “staying in the room at the back of my home, who I think should talk to you,”

“Then go,” Taim said, and the elderly lady did, passing through a door by the fireplace and closing it behind her.

“What’s going on, Uncle Taim?” Mat asked. Taim glanced at him, then pointed, not lifting his hand from the table, toward the walls. It was clear what he intended Reah and Mat to understand: say nothing; the walls might have ears.

After a short time the woman reemerged with a severe, malnourished looking man trailing behind her. He was wearing heavily patched clothes of various grayed out colors.

“M’Lord,” the man said. Reah observed the man carefully, memorizing his details. He was shaking, though almost imperceptibly.

“Townsmen,” Taim said. “There is something you need to tell me?”

“Yes, M’Lord,” the man said. “My child, he disappeared.”

Taim glanced at Mother Genna, standing behind the man. She said nothing. Taim looked at the man. All of Taim’s body was still except for his finger jerking backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.

“Phillip was always a good boy,” the man said. “He—he’d never hurt anybody. Too young to hurt anybody. But he liked to wander, y’see.” Taim said nothing. “I caught him out, one night, before the murders started,” the man said.

“Murders?” Taim asked.

“Yes, yes sir,” the man said. “Murders. That’s what they are. Not a disease. There’s a monster eating the people of Morrow’s Gulf.”

“And how do you know that?” Taim asked.

“I watched it eat my little boy,” the man said. His voice sounded anguished, his face looked anguished, every part of him screamed anguish, but as he said the words Reah knew that his words were lies. His eyes had flickered upwards, infinitesimally, as he spoke, and he stank of both fear and deception.

“What’s your name?” Taim asked.

“Basil, M’Lord,” the man said. “I saw it. My boy went out to meet it. I don’t know why. And it swallowed him whole. You have to kill it, M’Lord. Please.”

“My name is Taim,” Taim said. “It’s Taim Corwin. What’s your family name, Basil?”

“Gage, sir,” Basil said.

“Basil Gage,” Taim said. “Do you have a wife, Basil Gage?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” Basil said. “Molly, sir.”

“A pretty name,” Taim said, glancing at Mat then back at Basil. “Any other children than the one?”

“No, sir,” Basil said. Reah narrowed her eyes. Basil had lied again.

“Very well, Basil,” Taim said. “Where was the last place you saw this monster?”

“I’ll take you to it, M’Lord,” Basil said. Taim rose.

“Come, then,” Taim said. “Let us end it.”

“Taim?” Reah said. “The moon is full tonight.”

“It is,” Taim said. “Do you have a room with a sturdy door, Genna?”

The old woman nodded. “A few. You wish for us to lock up your protégé?” she asked.

“What?” Reah asked.

“Take my two companions to that room,” Taim said. “Give the boy the key. I’ll be back before there is a problem.”

Mother Genna bowed and motioned for Reah and Mat to follow her as she opened the door from which she had emerged with Basil. Taim left through the door to the front yard, disappearing into the gray light of day, a nervous looking Basil before him, constantly glancing back at him.

Mother Genna led Mat and Reah down a short, cramped corridor with unpainted and unadorned pinewood walls. There were several doors along the way, each of pinewood, but she did not stop until she reached a door made of ironwood and reinforced with wrought iron bands.

“This is the town treasury,” she said, handing Mat the key to the room. “This key has been lost for a while, but I found it just today. I wouldn’t just give it to strangers, but a King’s soldier and his retinue is different.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Mat said.

“Don’t steal anything,” Mother Genna said. She walked down the hallway a bit, stopped at one of the earlier pinewood doors, and went through it, closing it behind her.

“I—” Mat said, rubbing his forehead with the knuckles of one hand, “all right.” He turned to Reah. “I guess we should lock you in, then,” he said.

Reah entered the room where she would be locked away for the night and Mat followed her.

“This is it,” Reah said, looking about the room. It was small and there was very little of value in it: a few chests, closed and musty, likely not opened for years, and a few stockpiles of crude iron weapons.

“Yes,” Mat said.

Reah turned to Mat. “Will you stay until it starts?” she asked.

“Fine,” Mat said.

“Mat,” Reah said. “Please talk to me.”

“About what, Reah?” Mat asked. “There’s clearly nothing we have in common to talk about.”

“That’s not true,” Reah said. She moved forward and put her hand on Mat’s wrist. “I was wrong,” she said. She wasn’t sure how much she believed that she was, but she wanted to believe it. Mat was the closest thing to a friend she had ever had.

Mat shrugged, shaking Reah’s hand off of her wrist. He went to the treasury’s door and closed it, ignoring Reah’s hurt look, then leaned against the door.

“There are people I *love*, Reah,” Mat said, “and you hate them.”

“I was wrong,” Reah said.

“You don’t believe that,” Mat said.

“Jasper Fulke killed my mother,” Reah said. She stepped forward, suddenly angry. “How am I supposed to feel about that?”

“The whole town calls you a liar, Reah,” Mat said. “How am I supposed to feel about that?”

“D-D-D-Daddy?” the little boy said. Reah and Mat spun to regard him.

The boy was hideously malformed, attempting to hide his deformity in a dark corner of the room, in the shadow of a particularly large and musty chest. His body was twisted and the skin on his face and his limbs taken with a peculiar looseness, hanging off of his features like limp pudding. He was clothed in patchy, grayed clothes and Reah immediately knew him as Basil Gage’s lost son. He was running his fingers up and down the skin of his arms, scratching deep red runnels into its loose folds, and staring in the direction of Reah and Mat. His eyes were a deep, monotone red, fogged over with cataracts, and he was obviously blind.

“Lords,” Reah said. As she took in the sight of the child she could feel invisible hackles rising on the back of her neck. The child was shaking as if taken with a fever and his mouth was open, his teeth chattering. Mat moved forward to comfort the child and Reah growled and took hold of his wrist. “No,” she said. Mat shook her off once again and moved toward the child.

“It’s okay,” Mat said to the child. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” An invisible force lifted him off of his feet and slammed him into a wall. The wall vibrated and continued vibrating even after Mat had slumped down to the floor. The floor began vibrating as well and Reah had to fight not to fall to her knees.

The boy stood and turned to regard Reah, blind red eyes staring directly into hers. Then he burst into flames. The boy’s body was completely engulfed in fire and the hairs on Reah’s arms prickled at the heat he cast. She burst into sweat and her heart started hammering. Her mind was gripped by blind terror. Reah could feel the fire moving toward her. So many moments of her life she had been tormented by the thought of fire. She bolted for the treasury door.

Reah grabbed the doorknob then cursed, jumping backward. The door's handle was white hot. It had burned her hand. She turned around and she realized, suddenly, that the fire really *was* coming toward her. At that moment Reah's second transformation into a werewolf began.

Reah's limbs twisted beneath her and she fell to the ground. The fire rolled forward, off of the boy, and Reah watched it, certain she was going to die. It was inches from her now. She could feel herself burning and she could feel her transformation into a werewolf regenerating the burned flesh before it could actually register as damage on her body. She felt the searing pain but did not show it. It rolled around her. It was moments from engulfing her. Then Mat was on top of Reah, come from nowhere. He threw his arms around her and shielded her with his own body.

For agonizing seconds all that Reah could see was roaring inferno and Mat's black outline pressing against her in a corona of curling flame. All she could feel was burning and Mat's body, thinned and hardened by two months of difficult adventures. Her mind was blank, white with agony and terror and confusion and concern. She did not think. She felt. And then the fire went away.

Mat leaned backwards, sitting on his legs and letting Reah go. Steam rose off of his body and his clothes fell away, incinerated from behind, but he was miraculously unharmed. He was barely even singed. "Are you okay, Reah?" he asked, looking at Reah. Reah could feel her insides churning and, though the fire was gone, her mind was still scrambling to put itself back together again. "Seems we're even now," Mat said, glancing down at himself. He put a hand over Reah's hand, his fingers brushing her wrist, and he squeezed her hand reassuringly, then he stood and turned to regard the boy.

"I'm not dead, somehow. You don't really want to hurt us, do you?" Mat asked. The boy was unharmed, or not anymore harmed than he had been before exploding into flames seconds

before. The walls looked like they had been reduced to charcoal, but they were still standing. Reah thought that she could hear pounding at the ironwood door.

“D-D-D-” the boy said, scratching deeper and deeper lines in the flesh of his arms. His skin was stretching farther and farther away from him with each second and worrying pink lines were erupting on its most protuberant parts.

“You want your Daddy?” Mat asked. “My uncle’s with him right now. He’s safe.”

“D-D-D-” the boy said. Mat stepped a little closer.

“My uncle Taim will be able to help you,” Mat said. “That’s what he does. He helps people. We just need to wait for him to arrive.”

Reah could feel her bones and organs contorting within her. Behind Mat’s back she began bleeding as fine black hairs erupted from every inch of her skin. She jerked on the ground, wracked by her transformation, but made no sound.

“D-D-D-Don’t!” the boy said.

“It’s all right,” Mat said, stopping inches from the boy. “We can help you. I’m certain we can help you.”

“Stay away!” the boy cried out. He fell to the ground.

“Lords,” Mat said. He moved to help the boy. Reah retched with a wet, staccato loudness and her internal organs came spilling out of her mouth. Mat spun around at the sound, then paled. “Lords, Reah!” he said.

Reah watched as the boy split open behind Mat, his skin sloughing off to either side of his frame. She tried to cry out as she saw the large, reptilian creature emerge from the red froth that the splitting boy’s body disgorged. She howled like an animal as the spined monstrosity uncoiled like a snake hatching from an egg and opened its mouth, revealing two hinged fangs.

The beast hissed, rearing up, and Reah tried to understand the sound of it as her half-transformed ears pulsed and ached. Mat spun around and gasped and Reah ached to go to him and take him away from the threat but she was paralyzed. She blacked out to the vision of a new monster, Taim, fully transformed and huge, but still dwarfed by the thing that had once been a child, hurtling forward, pushing Mat out of harm's way.

She felt a moment of relief. Then the moon took over. Reah forgot who she was.

"When will we be finding Reah, Uncle?" Mat asked.

"Soon, Mat," Taim said. "There is still one thing I need to do before I leave this town."

"I'm worried," Mat said. He glanced at the corpse of the monster that had once been Basil and Molly Gage's son, layed out in a splash of crimson on the gray cobblestone courtyard that served as Morrow Gulf's main square, and he cringed. The thing had looked like a snake, when Mat had first seen it, but that was only an illusion created by the appearance of the monster's long, prehensile neck. It looked more like a horse, in some ways, or a dog. It was easily larger than any animal Mat had ever seen. It was red and covered in spines and pebble-like scales and it had wings that spanned at least fifteen feet and it had a whiplike tail. Its red eyes were gray, now, with death, still open, gone back to the color that ruled in Morrow's Gulf. Though it looked enormous, now, it had seemed even larger when Mat had been staring up at it in Mother Genna's home; it had seemed to almost deflate like a spent bladder after Taim had ripped out its throat.

Mat looked at his uncle and tried not to feel fear. Taim was staring at the monster, face impassive, and Mat could not imagine an ounce of pity in his eyes. He had seemed to have little trouble with killing the thing. “I thought you could help him,” Mat said.

“I did,” Taim said, not looking away from the dead thing.

“Where do you think Reah is?” Mat asked. He looked up into the sky, heavy with clouds but bright with the first tinges of sunlight. It was sunrise in the mountains.

“She’s waking up,” Taim said. “Human again.”

“In the mountains?” Mat asked. Reah had disappeared while Mat had been distracted by Taim’s battle. Taim had assured him she was safe many times—that she was most likely hunting in the mountains and perfectly fine—that she was tougher than he gave her credit for—but Mat couldn’t keep his mind off of her. He worried that there were more monsters in the mountains. He didn’t think Reah could survive, if there were. He didn’t understand how *he* had survived. He had thought, even after the thing was dead, that he was going to die. Taim had seemed barely under control.

“She will be well, Mat,” Taim said. Mat started to say something else, but Taim raised his hand and Mat fell silent. Mother Genna was crossing the square, leaving a collection of villagers gathered around the monster, kicking and prodding its corpse. She was coming to speak to Taim.

“Soldier,” she said.

“Mother,” Taim said.

“Will you administer the King’s justice?” she said.

“I will administer justice as I can,” Taim said. “There are no highbloods in the Dragon’s Teeth.”

The old lady nodded at these words, then went back to the crowd surrounding the monster's corpse. She said something to a group of gaunt, hard looking young men, and they broke off from the crowd, moving in the direction of Mother Genna's home.

"What did she mean, Uncle?" Mat asked. Taim said nothing.

After a short time the young men returned. Between them were Basil Gage and a young, exhausted looking woman. They were both bound in chains. At sight of the monster the woman lunged forward and cried out, but Basil grabbed hold of her, and soon the young men had hold of them both. They were brought closer to the monster's corpse and Taim went to them, Mat following behind him.

"You have betrayed your village," Taim said to Basil and to the young woman, who was currently weeping into Basils arms.

"I deny it," Basil said. His eyes were glazed over and he was grimacing at Taim in a way that bespoke his own exhaustion.

"You have birthed a mage," Taim said. He removed his shortsword from its sheathe. Mat's heart began thumping harder in his chest and his blood went cold.

"I deny it," Basil said. The woman had stopped weeping and was now standing beside him, staring at the corpse in the center of the square, and saying nothing.

"It is your blood," Taim said.

"I deny it," Basil said.

"It is our blood," the woman said, still looking at the corpse. Mat looked away from the sight of her as she said it. There was too much tenderness in her eyes.

"Molly's not right in the head, sir," Basil said. "It is a changeling—it must have been switched at birth—"

“Shut up, you coward,” the woman, Molly, said. She looked at Taim. “He is my blood,” she said. “He’s Phillip Gage.” She stepped forward, once, toward Taim and away from her husband. The young men parted for her.

“Please,” Basil said, looking at Molly.

Taim stepped forward. In one swift motion he struck Basil Gage through the heart with his sword, killing him instantly, then he removed the sword from Basil’s body, pulling it out with a boot to Basil’s corpse, and he sliced open Molly Gage’s heart as well.

“Bring me a cloth for my blade,” Taim said, after, staring down at Molly Gage. He brought his sword hand up to his mouth and tasted the mingling of Basil and Molly’s blood, then grimaced.

“Use the criminals,” one of the men who had retrieved the two said. “Or one of their bastard ch—” he did not complete what he was going to say. Taim looked up at him, staring into his eyes.

“Bring me a cloth for my blade,” Taim said. “Bury the bodies.”

Chapter 16

Reah awoke in the mountains naked and cold beside the mauled corpse of a hill-goat. She could taste its raw blood in her mouth and she lifted herself to her hands and knees so that she could vomit. Only bile came out. She had used the goat's flesh as fuel for her transformation back into a human being. Reah stood. Her knees were still shaky after vomiting, and she felt drained, but she had the strength to conjure up the presence of mind required to realize that she was alone and exposed in the wilderness. She was below the cold line, but she was also in the mountains. Reah took stock of her surroundings. She was at the peak of a copse of gray, lichen covered boulders surrounded by scrubland on the side of a tall mountain. The village of Morrow's Gulf was nowhere to be seen, but she thought she could make out the ravine that gave the town its name, far to the south.

Reah looked up. The sun was high in the sky. There were no clouds in the sky, today, and the sun and the sky were a steamy white, fading into each other. Reah shivered and chaffed her torso with her hands. She would not likely die. It was not that cold. But she was uncomfortable. She would need to find some sort of shelter until Taim came for her, if he was coming for her. Reah remembered the last thing she had seen the night before, just before her mind had gone. She tried not to think about it. Thinking about it would do no good.

Reah made her way down the side of the mountain, off the copse of boulders, and climbed in the direction of the ravine to her south. She made slow progress. She picked her way with extreme care. If she injured herself there was a serious chance that she would die. Over the course of several hours the white sun descended toward the western mountains and the sky turned from white to pale lavender. Reah was, perhaps, only an hour's further travel from her

destination, but her visibility was suffering. Her vision was slowly graying as night fell over the mountains and she did not trust her night vision enough to bet her life on it. Reah decided to look for a place to shelter for the night.

Thirty minutes later she discovered a cave hidden behind a boulder. Reah stopped and stared, trying to make out any signs that an animal might be living in the cave, but she did not know enough about these mountains to know for sure if anything had made it home. Reah chaffed her torso again with numb hands. As night had fallen the temperature on the gravel studded mountainside had plummeted. If the cave was deep enough, Reah knew, its temperature would equal out, like the dungeons and cellars of the convent she had grown up in. She could weather the night as long as she continued moving.

Reah entered the cave and sighed in relief—the cave was narrow, but it went deep into the mountainside, turning out of sight perhaps fifty feet away from Reah's vantage point at the cave's mouth. Better yet, she could not see anything in the cave to indicate it had ever been inhabited. Reah made her way deeper inside. As she turned the corner she discovered that her night vision failed as she looked deeper into the cave. Away from the light of the outside world the cave was completely black.

Reah sat in the cave and continually beat her body with her hands, trying to keep warm. She was feeling hungry and, worse, tired, and the world outside the cave was a thin strip of featureless gray from where she was sitting. It was night. She had thought Taim and Mat would find her, by now. Reah began worrying over the image of the reptilian monster in Mother Genna's home. She remembered the fire it had summoned out of nothing and shivered more desperately.

“I hope he killed it,” Reah said. “That monster.” A dark shadow fell over the entrance to the cave.

“What is this?” a woman’s voice said. “Is there someone in here?” Reah did not respond. She shrunk deeper into the shadows of the cave, hoping the shadow blackening the cave’s entrance would go away—she did not trust it, she had seen no sign of habitation in the mountains as she had traveled that day. The shadow did not go away. Reah repressed a growl as she picked out the details of a young woman descending into the cave’s darkness.

“I can see your eyes, you know,” the woman said. “If you’re not an animal you might want to let me know.”

“Who are you?” Reah asked, standing. The woman was close enough, now, that Reah was able to make out her features. She was tall—unusually so—and her hair was long and curly like Reah’s own. She was dressed in non-descript traveler’s gear, but she, herself, was anything but non-descript. She was strikingly gorgeous.

“One second,” the woman said. She fumbled through a parcel she had on her hip. “A-ha!” she said, smiling, not even keeping half an eye on Reah. There was a hiss and a fire suddenly jumped to life in the woman’s hands. Reah flinched. “I’m Madeline,” the woman said, then: “Oh, you poor dear!”

Reah did not answer. She felt she could not. She felt paralyzed. The woman, Madeline, had pale skin, which was common for the people of Gehenna, and was covered in freckles, which was not entirely unknown. Her hair was red, which was uncommon, but Reah had seen red hair before. Red hair was odd, but natural. Sister Meri had had red hair. The woman’s eyes were a uniform red just like her hair and just like the eyes of the monster in Mother Genna’s home.

“Give me just one second,” Madeline said, apparently unaware of Reah’s horror. She shrugged a backpack off of her shoulders and rummaged through it.

“I am a werewolf,” Reah said, backing into the cave wall, “one of the King’s soldiers.”

“Oh,” Madeline said. “How nice. Here.” Madeline handed Reah a thick wool lined dress. “You must be bitterly cold,” she said, and smiled again.

Later, after Madeline had used the small brand she had been holding to light a fire to warm them, and after she and Reah had shared a meal of stale flatbread and dried fruits, Madeline spoke again.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Reah,” Reah said. She glanced at Madeline. Madeline was looking at her intently, but there was nothing about her that made Reah feel she might be a threat. Reah knew that, if Madeline was a threat, Reah’s best chance at survival was to present no threat herself.

“Reah,” Madeline said. “You’re not from around here, Reah.”

“No,” Reah said.

“Where are you from?” Madeline asked.

“North,” Reah said.

“Are you?” Madeline said.

Reah and Madeline had gathered dried scrub brush from the lip of the cave, when Madeline had made the fire, and Reah pushed some of it into the fire. The way the fire flickered on Madeline’s face was uncanny. It made her eyes look black.

“Where are you from?” Reah asked.

“Elsewhere,” Madeline said. She sounded distant, and reflective, though Reah couldn’t figure out what she was being reflective about. “I didn’t expect to see another person out here,” Madeline said.

“You don’t usually expect to find naked girls in caves,” Reah said. Madeline laughed at that and Reah joined her.

“What *are* you doing here, Reah?” Madeline asked.

“I was in Morrow’s Gulf,” Reah said. I—got lost. My comrades will be looking for me. Is it near?”

“Morrow’s Gulf?” Madeline asked.

“Yes,” Reah said. “A little town, near to the ravine perhaps an hour south of here.”

“Forgive me if I’m wrong,” Madeline said. “I do not, rather, I am not the best with geography. I saw no town when I passed that ravine.”

“No?” Reah asked. She leaned forward, bending around the fire. “You came from there?”

“Not exactly,” Madeline said. She blushed. “I meant only that I had seen it. There was no town there.”

“Oh,” Reah said.

“There was a town near to a ravine a day’s journey north of here, though,” Madeline said, after a couple seconds.

“King’s Hells!” Reah said. “I mean—sorry, I got turned around.”

“When were you there?” Madeline asked.

“Just yesterday,” Reah said. “I can’t believe I went after the wrong ravine. No wonder Mat and Taim didn’t find me today.”

“Mat and Taim?” Madeline asked.

“Yes,” Reah said, cursing herself inwardly for having said more than she ought to have around a potentially dangerous stranger. “My companions.”

“Companions,” Madeline said. “I apologize, I’ve been distracted.”

“It’s fine,” Reah said.

“Tell me, Reah,” Madeline said. “It has been a while since I visited the village to the north. Is it doing well?”

“Are you from there?” Reah asked.

“Elsewhere,” Madeline said. “I am only curious.”

“It is fine,” Reah said, thinking about the monster she had seen, and its similarity to Madeline. She had to be extremely careful about what she revealed.

“Really?” Madeline asked. “I’m glad,” she said.

“What *are* you doing here?” Reah asked.

“Nothing,” Madeline said, looking into the fire and smiling. “Do you love someone, Reah?”

“What?” Reah asked.

“If you do, you should love them,” Madeline said. “It can be hard to remember that, sometimes. There’s always reasons not to love someone. But when you love them, you should be free to love them. Don’t regret it.”

“I guess,” Reah said.

“I am going to go out, now,” Madeline said.

“I’ll go as well,” Reah said.

“No,” Madeline said, “you will not.” She waved her hand in Reah’s direction and Reah immediately fell asleep.

“I am getting tired of waking up after strange things have knocked me unconscious,” Reah said.

“It *is* pretty funny, though,” Mat said, flashing Reah a quick smile. She scowled at Mat and he grimaced. “Nevermind,” he said. “Where do you think Uncle Taim is?”

“Out hunting for that woman,” Reah said. When Taim and Mat had discovered Reah the next day, only a short distance from Reah’s cave, Reah had revealed her encounter of the night before. Taim had been grim even before he had heard Reah’s story, but he had looked ready to kill someone when he had heard about Madeline. He had left Reah and Mat with instructions to set up camp, even though it was only mid-day, and had gone into the mountainside without a single wasted word. The two had not heard from him since. It was late into the night, now, and Reah and Mat were huddled next to each other at the lip of the cave, rubbing their hands over a fire.

“Uncle Taim scares me, sometimes,” Mat said.

“Don’t start that again, Mat,” Reah said. She glanced to her side. Mat had stopped rubbing his hands together, as he had started speaking, and had started covertly scratching the sides of his upper arms.

“Reah?” Mat asked. “How do you feel about me?”

Reah blushed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Mat dropped to his knees beside Reah and he took her hands in his own, rubbing them with his thumbs. “I’ve had some time to think, Reah,” Mat said. “I’ve been thinking, since you disappeared. I don’t want you to disappear again.”

Reah opened her mouth to shoot Mat down. It was clear what his ambitions were. But she thought about the night before. She thought about what Madeline, the strange woman in the mountains, had said, and she looked at Mat—*really* looked at Mat—and she stopped herself from saying what she was going to say.

“Mat,” Reah said. “Remember? I hate people that you love.”

“Reah,” Mat said. He reached up, cupping the back of Reah’s head with one hand. “There are terrible things, so many terrible things, what happened to that boy, what happened in Fulkton Gardens, but there are wonderful things, too. I realized that, two days ago. There are so few of them. I want one, Reah, I want to grab one before it disappears. You.”

“Me?” Reah asked. She and Mat were staring into each others’ eyes and Reah felt as if there were a string pulling taut between them, pulling them together. Her head felt heavy, and Reah craned her head forward, closer to Mat’s head. She rested her forehead against Mat’s and the tension in her body drained away. She felt herself falling toward Mat, and she felt Mat taking her in his arms, letting her do it.

“Yes,” Mat said.

They made love next to the fire. It was awkward—Mat was so eager, and he was barely able to control himself enough to remove his clothes. Reah had never had sex before, had never really thought about it before, and responded to his advances with animal instinct. He lifted her skirt, and she opened her legs, and, after maneuvering for a few seconds, trying to negotiate with him, to understand what he was doing and to make him understand what she was doing, she felt him slip into her. It hurt, and there was blood, just a little bit, and Mat said he was sorry and Reah told him to shut up and pulled him in deeper.

Ever since she had transformed into a werewolf for the first time Reah had been compulsively memorizing the things around her. It had driven her to distraction. But now she relished it. She memorized the feel of Mat's body, so much like two days before, tight against her, straining, protective and comforting, but now with new context. She memorized the way he groped her petite features, not quite certain of boundaries until she let him know where and what was okay, and the way she had to accommodate for the fact that she was stronger than he was. She memorized the gummy taste of his spit and the feel of his tongue. She memorized the ringing in her ears and the fire in her belly and the feeling of her grinning and the way tears ran down her eyes, for a few seconds, in between her grinning.

When they were done, and Mat had spent himself inside her, they lay beside each other. Reah cupped Mat, memorizing the feel of his body, and Mat stroked her cheek with one finger while looking up at the cave's roof.

"That was—" Mat said.

"Thank you," Reah said. She suddenly found herself crying.

"Reah," Mat said. He shifted sideways and stroked her cheek with his full hand. "Don't do that."

"I'm sorry," Reah said, still crying. "I'm so sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Mat said.

"It's just—" Reah said, "no one has ever loved me before."

"I love you," Mat said. He drew her face to his own and kissed her again, then pressed his forehead to her forehead, and then he let her cry until the fire started to die.

"It's getting cold," Reah said, finally, wiping at her eyes.

"That's true," Mat said.

“We should stop the fire from dying,” Reah said.

“That’s true,” Mat said. He stood and held out his hands to Reah so she could stand and smiled at her. She took his arms and rose to her feet, then readjusted her dress.

“You should probably put on some clothes before Taim gets here,” Reah said, grinning at Mat.

“Eh-heh, yeah. That’s true,” Mat said. He clothed himself while Reah fed the dying fire, bringing it back to life.

They sat next to each other, after, and said nothing. The waning moon had almost totally set by the time Taim returned to camp.

“Did you find her?” Mat asked, blushing as Taim regarded him.

“No,” Taim said. He sat down next to the fire, resting his back on the wall of the cave’s entrance, and took off his boots, shaking the dirt out of them. “No sign of her.”

“You never told me,” Reah said, unable to hide her smile as she went over and over the night’s events, “what happened in Morrow’s Gulf?” Taim did not respond. Reah looked at him, and she memorized the cast of his features—the almost violent way he was beating out his boots. The way he stared into the fire. “Taim?” Reah asked.

“He killed that kid’s parents, Reah,” Mat said.

“It was an execution,” Taim said, putting his boots back on.

“You killed that child’s parents?” Reah asked. She thought about Madeline, and the way she had seemed so pleased to hear that Morrow’s Gulf was safe.

“It had to be done,” Taim said. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, resting it against the cave’s wall.

“You never told me why, uncle,” Mat said, voice sobering.

“‘Why?’” Taim asked, not opening his eyes. “If a family has mages in their blood, there’s a chance, later on, that there will be more mages. The King’s law requires a mage’s direct family be purged alongside the mage.”

“No,” Mat said. “Why me?”

“You’re family, Mat,” Taim said.

“And that makes it all okay, Uncle Taim?” Mat asked. “Suddenly it’s okay to leave my Mom and Dad, and all my brothers and sisters alive with that—that monster in their veins? When you kill others? To leave me to turn into that monster?”

“It doesn’t always turn out that way,” Taim said.

“‘Doesn’t always’ doesn’t help me if it does,” Mat said. He stood up, scratching furiously at his arms.

“Stop that, Mat,” Reah said, standing and grabbing Mat’s arms. “It won’t.”

“You can’t guarantee that,” Mat said. “Before yesterday I’d never—I couldn’t have imagined—Reah, I don’t want to *hurt* anybody.”

Reah looked to Taim, but Taim said nothing. He still sat with his head on the cave’s wall, eyes closed.

“Mat,” Reah said. “I turn into a monster every time the moon is full. If that’s really what’s going to happen to you then we’ll find a way to deal with it—won’t we?”

Mat looked at Reah, really *looked* at Reah, and Reah felt her heart beat faster. “Yes,” Mat said, finally. “Yes, Reah, we will.”

Chapter 17

Haviel's Swallow was an ancient city. Even more ancient than the intrepid vampire, early on in the days of Gehenna's founding, who birthed its name. The city had existed in countless iterations and, as far as could be told, those iterations had always had one thing in common—they had all been home to the worst kind of predation.

Haviel's Swallow, back in its earliest days, days when it had gone by a far different name, had been established far to the north of civilization in the shadow of endless wilderness. Its original existence was as an encampment for loggers attempting to push great tracts of forest out from the green hills of their homes. That forestland was impenetrable, then, and they were quickly driven away by the place's terrible isolation from civilized life. By the end of its first hundred years Haviel's Swallow had decayed into a haven for thieves and murderers—home to only the cruelest and most desperate dregs of humanity. It would remain this way for countless thousands of years.

Occasionally it would be razed out of existence by natural disaster, disease, or the law. Always, though, the shacks and rotting cabins of the town would pop up once more, in a hulking sprawl, as if the land itself had vomited up the ashes in an attempt to purge itself of the foulness that had seeped into it.

This altered with the coming of the King and the founding of Gehenna. The dark, grubby city became the bright, terrible one, changing everything and nothing about itself like the spinning backgrounds of a harlequin's stage.

At that time, nearly three thousand years before, Esteille had told Elvene, the man named Haviel arrived in the town. For days the inhabitants went on with their daily lives, cursing and

drinking and murdering and not bothering to notice that a greater than average number of hopeless fools were disappearing into the night. They did not bother to notice as the odd, tall, pale man who had taken residence in a local inn and who, at first, had seemed lethargic and easy pickings for the city's countless slew of impudent gangs, slowly gained strength and vigor—the mad, wandering fever of his eyes growing sharp and steady. That man, Haviel, later known as The Beast of the Waste, had been newly turned by Guy Guillame, who had himself only recently been gifted with vampiric unlife by the King himself. Within three weeks he and his “children” had turned the entire city, enslaving them to the King's will. Haviel “swallowed” the city whole. Thus was born the first echelon of the King's soldiers. It soon grew into the feared Great Army of the Dark and swept through the northern lands of the continent of Iora, bringing them under the King's control.

This was not the death of the malignant city, though, for soon the King began construction of his capital Gaterau, and the slaves he brought in needed housing, and their masters needed grand manors and entertainment halls, and the whole process required a waypoint for supplies. Haviel's Swallow was nearby and, thus, Haviel's Swallow, the city of the dead, became the city of slaves. It prospered greatly and strict order, of a form, established itself.

Even now, long after the completion of the massive palace and the absorption of the slaves who built it into the general populous of Gehenna, Haviel's Swallow's status as the city closest to Gaterau made it a key trading center for those mortals enamored with the King's great wealth, but not enamored with the idea of braving his children in the Palace itself. The city, located on the very edges of Gaterau's shimmering shadow, at the edge of the outer rim of the Blight that surrounded it, was said to be a place of great romance and passion, and many of the tales Elvene had been told as a child featured it prominently.

In it now, however, Elvene instinctively felt through the veneer of beauty which covered the city and into its shadowed heart. Haviel's Swallow was a beast played out in white washed wood, hunched over a hill with one greasy foot in the sands of Gaterau's desert and one in the endless plain of heather leading towards the forests that she knew so well. The high, intricately worked, honey colored wooden fence wrapped around the city, so often talked about in stories, seemed little defense against the feral thing which bode its time inside. A faint brown haze wafted out of it, trailing in a rolling nimbus out into the Blight. But Elvene did not care about the city's nature. She was dead. It did not matter. And the prostitution houses of Haviel's Swallow were dark, and secret, tucked away from such things, and safe and inviting.

Elvene primped, looking into a mirror, flaunting her enhanced features. Her vampirism was fully matured and the allure that it bred in all of its children had been more than generous with Elvene. She was plump, in all the right places, and thin, in all the right places, and her fangs, two pairs of elongated canines as sharp as razors, peeked out between perfect rosebud lips. Her cheeks had swept upwards and filled out and her blue eyes were like jewels taken on new luster in the setting of her fine, pale features. She smirked, and turned this way and that, regarding herself, and played with her long, black hair. She giggled when she felt two thin, strong arms wrap around her, draping over her lower body.

"Are you ready, Pet?" Esteille asked, pressing her chin into the hollow of Elvene's clavicle.

"Will they like me, do you think?" Elvene asked, looking at the empty spot in the mirror where she knew her friend to be. Only the Hands, and the King, apparently, could hide from mirrors.

“They are chattel, dearest,” Esteille said. Elvene could feel her frown against the side of her neck. “They will not comprehend you.” She spun Elvene around in her arms and kissed her on the nose. “Come,” she said. “There is a prostitute in this town that can satisfy your desires. Let us find them.”

They left the room that the prostitution house had provided for their repast and descended further, traveling through hallways and stairways unified by thick felt walls and the floating presence of indiscernable humanity. There were no lights in the halls Esteille led Elvene through, but Elvene did not need light. The darkness was her bosom friend. In it she knew, perhaps through instinct, or something greater, exactly where to go. It had begun telling her things shortly after she had first drank blood. Esteille passed through a passage concealed behind a slit in the fabric on the walls and Elvene followed. Elvene emerged in a lighted room filled with painted men. Esteille had gone.

“My name is Albec,” one boy told her. He had gray eyes. Soft features. He longed for Elvene. She despised him.

“My name is Mallory,” one boy told her. He had blue eyes. Strong features. He was more a man. Older than Elvene. He played cool, but she felt his lust. She could not stand him.

“My name, My Lady,” a young man said, “is Devon.” His eyes were green. His hair brown, and long, like a woman’s. He was perhaps sixteen. He wore a mask of blush and khol, but a thrill ran up Elvene’s spine as she took in his features. He feared her. She adored him.

“Dear child,” Elvene said, stepping forward and presenting her pale hand for him to kiss, “you are mistaken.”

“I am sorry, My Lady,” Devon said, taking up her hand and kissing it. “My error is my burden.”

“My name is Elvene,” Elvene said. “And you are not Devon.”

“No, My Lady Elvene?” Devon asked.

“You,” Elvene said, smiling at him and drinking in the fear she saw in his eyes at sight of her teeth, “are not Devon. Tonight you are Mat.”

Mat took her to his room. It was lit, like the room where she had found him, but she had him snuff the lights. He had only just arrived, he said, talking into the darkness. He was of the Southern Empire, he said. He hoped to please her, he said. Elvene barely listened.

“What I want, Mat,” Elvene said, “is not to be pleased. I want you to frustrate me. Can you do that?”

“Yes, My Lady Elvene,” Mat said. “I am well learned in the arts of both pleasure and frustration.”

“Are you?” Elvene asked. She reached out and placed two of her fingers to the vein under Mat’s chin. It juddered, telling Elvene how he felt. He was well trained, pleasant, meticulous, and unassuming, he would have to be, but Elvene knew that she already owned him. He did not react to Elvene’s aggression, though he was blind to her movements. Elvene was blind, too, but the darkness told her that he wanted her to remove her hand.

“Show me,” Elvene said. “There is much, I think, we could learn from one another.”

When Mat made love to Elvene on the enormous bed in the center of his room he did not know how to please her, as Mat did. He maneuvered his body and manipulated her body as an expert would. He knew all of a woman’s erogenous zones. The love he made to Elvene was ten times better than she had known, but Elvene hated it. Mat was beautiful. Mat was perfumed. Mat was practiced. Mat was not Mat.

Elvene pulled backwards, grabbing hold of Mat, and steered him away from her body. She sat up in his bed and turned, dangling her legs over its side. Mat sensed her mood and backed away from her.

“My Lady is not pleased,” Mat said.

“No,” Elvene said. “Would you let me cut your hair, Mat?” she asked.

“As My Lady desires,” Mat said, “so shall I be.” The darkness told Elvene that Mat would rather die.

She had him reinvigorate the lamps and then sat him in a chair. He had a pair of scissors in a drawer of an armoire by his bed and Elvene took them and turned them on Mat’s hair. She cut with only vague precision. Mat had never stood still for proper grooming. When she was done Mat looked up at her.

“Is My Lady pleased?” Mat asked, looking up at her.

“Elvene,” Elvene said. “No. Let us remove that khol.”

There was a silk swab on Mat’s armoire, and a jar of alchohol. Elvene used it to remove Mat’s makeup. Mat did not move from his chair. She looked down at him.

“You are still eager for me,” Elvene said.

“Yes,” Mat said.

“Turn out the lights, then,” Elvene said. “Let us try again.”

This time, in the dark, Elvene ran her hands through Mat’s hair as he made love to her. She tasted the sweat on his unpowdered body. He groaned as she took him into herself, controlling his movements, and growled deep in his throat. Elvene smiled and closed her eyes and the dark stopped talking to her long enough for her to forget herself, for a moment.

Elvene cried out Mat's name and dug her nails into the wings of Mat's shoulderblades and Mat cried out, again, and pounded her with unrelenting force, and she lost herself, and Mat did everything that he had done before, and, for just one moment, he was infinitely better than before, because he was Mat, and then the balance between Elvene and Mat shifted. Mat did something that Mat would not do, and Elvene tried to correct him, and he moved, correcting himself, but again he was wrong, and Elvene tried to correct him again, and he moved, becoming someone else, and suddenly Elvene wanted him to be anywhere but where she was. He jostled her, repositioning her body against his own so that he could kiss her neck, misunderstanding what Elvene wanted, again, and a flash of spines and blood and silk ruffled the carefully recomposed fabric of Elvene's mind.

Elvene pushed Mat and he fell backwards, and she took hold of him with one arm, and he struggled, and he was twice her mass, well muscled, built for his trade, but Elvene was Elvene, she was not human, and she was his master. Elvene pushed Mat onto his back, straddled his chest, and pressed her hands to Mat's nose and mouth. He struggled, grabbing at her arms, but she held him, and she thought about him, sitting in his carriage, ruining her, and she smothered the life out of him, and she pressed up against him and pierced his neck with her teeth and drank his blood while she smothered him, and he died. Then she was done.

Elvene rose onto her haunches, and then she scooted away on her perfect backside, in the large bed's sheets, and then she hid in the dark on the far side of the bed from the prostitute's corpse as it bled out onto the sheets, and then she wrapped her arms around her knees and wept into them, though of course no tears fell.

When Elvene had recomposed her mind again she rose from the bed and redonned her clothes. She left the prostitute's room. She had forgotten his name. The darkness in the

prostitution house told Elvene where Esteille was, almost as if it was Esteille's serving man, inviting Elvene to find the other woman. Elvene went to another prostitute's room and found Esteille naked and in bed, drinking a glass of wine and staring off into nothing while an ugly, musclebound man massaged her body. He did not bother to look up when Elvene entered.

"Hello," Elvene said.

"Were you satisfied, Pet?" Esteille asked, still staring off into nothing.

"He frustrated me," Elvene said.

"Is he dead?" Esteille asked. Instead of answering Elvene made her way to the bed and lay down besides Esteille, burrowing into a position nuzzled against Esteille's side. Though Esteille had been physically intimate with Elvene since Elvene's transformation had begun, she did not respond to her body this time. "We cannot always do what we want, Pet," Esteille said. "There are powerful individuals connected to the prostitution houses of Haviel's Swallow."

"I love your history lessons," Elvene said, kissing Esteille on the cheek. Esteille had been teaching Elvene the doctrine and history of the highbloods of Gehenna since they had left Guillaume's mansion.

"You will die," Esteille said. "Again. If you do not act with caution."

"You are stronger than me," Elvene said. Elvene worked her hands up and down the side of Esteille's body, but Esteille did not respond. Elvene wanted the other woman's attention, right now. She felt she needed it. She wanted Esteille to treat her kindly, as she had been doing since she had rescued her from Guillaume, and to validate her.

"Yes," Esteille said. "I am stronger than you."

"I am stronger than most," Elvene said.

“Yes,” Esteille said. “You are a direct descendant of a Hand of the King. In the population of the King’s children only a few are so. Only they are your equals.”

“I am stronger even than they,” Elvene said. This got Esteille’s attention. She rolled onto her side, regarding Elvene, and her masseuse backed away from her.

“What makes you believe that?” Esteille asked.

“I do not know,” Elvene said. The darkness told me, she thought. Esteille frowned at Elvene and her eyes tightened. The darkness told Elvene nothing about how Esteille was feeling. It had not said anything, ever, that Elvene did not believe Esteille wanted her to hear.

“Come with me,” Esteille said. Esteille donned a robe. She went out, back through the room with the painted boys and into the lightless hallways. Elvene followed her. Esteille went out from the prostitution house and into the middle of the wide white-stone street that its front was pushed up against. It was night. The few people on the street had fled when Esteille had stepped out and Elvene was alone with her. The full moon was shining. Beneath it the dark monolith of The King’s capital, Gatterau, blotted out the sky.

“Let me tell you about Gatterau, Pet,” Esteille said, “though it is a long story.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Elvene said.

“Gaterau,” Esteille said, “is an ancient city. Its construction was started three thousand years ago, and it took a thousand years and the lives of tens of millions of slaves to complete it. The final year of its construction, with the completion of the King’s forbidden palace at its apex, took the lives of over a hundred thousand of the descendants of those lands wretched or stupid enough to stand against us when we still weaved our influence into Gehenna.

“I tell you this and what comes to follow,” Esteille said, “not to overawe you, but to help you understand the power that you now represent as a member of the highblood. Do not let your

inexperience be your downfall. You must get a sense of the danger of your brothers and sisters amongst the King's children.

“Gehenna was once many different lands. They were crushed by the King's power and all those living within them were brought under our control. Any who resisted were enslaved to our purposes once defeated—and they *all* were defeated. The sixteen lands who stood against us supplied the labor which built that wondrous structure,” Esteille said, waving vaguely at the dark shadow looming on the horizon. “A castle of stained glass the size of a mountain. It was an impossible construction. Deliberately so. The bones of nations of men, driven in spirit crushing labor for a millennia, generation by generation, until they knew nothing but their horror, were ground into dust as they fell dead as they labored and that dust was turned to pavement so that the King could step on them even in death. Only the eldest of the highblood remember them.

“The walls surrounding Gaterau are built with inset pikes all along their length. Half are topped by the heads of those who have irked the King at one point or another throughout his long reign. The others are still empty. You hear these failures wailing in pained undeath for a full day before you see them, when you approach Gaterau.”

The woman stopped for a second, and then crinkled her nose at Elvene. “Gaterau is a dangerous place to call home, my dear Pet,” she said. “It is, perhaps, more dangerous than any other in the world. I think I have gotten that across to you. Any highblood that enters the city cannot expect to leave unless they are finally, permanently dead or they have risen to a position of power amongst our kind. It is a kind of test The King has created for his children.

“You are dead, Pet,” Esteille said, looking to Elvene, “but you are not finally, permanently dead. It would be a surprise to me, a pleasant one, if you could survive your first month within the walls of my home.”

“My Lady,” Elvene said, repeating words the darkness whispered to her. “I know I can rise in Gaterau.”

“Elvene,” Esteille said. Elvene started. She had never heard Esteille use her name before. “It would take you centuries to curry the influence necessary to see me again, if you entered Gaterau. I could not keep you with me. It would take you centuries more to gain the power necessary to leave.”

“My Lady—” Elvene said.

“Esteille,” Esteille said. She pressed her finger to Elvene’s lips. “Given our little shared secret, it would sadden me to see you locked away in Gaterau.”

“Yes,” Elvene said, suddenly feeling like a fool. “I do not have centuries, now.”

Elvene had told Esteille about Taim and Mat. She was certain Esteille’s Taim Corwin was her Mat Corwin’s uncle. Esteille had seemed certain, too. Esteille’s lover was with Elvene’s lover, even now. Elvene would go to Arelcrys, where Mat had said he would go, and she would stop Mat from leaving Gehenna. She would turn him. Esteille had said she could. Elvene would make Mattock Corwin into a vampire, as she was, and she would send Taim Corwin back to the vampire he belonged to.

“I will do as you asked, My Lady Esteille,” Elvene said. “When you go to Gaterau I will go to Arelcrys.”

“Wonderful girl,” Esteille said. She mussed Elvene’s hair and Elvene blushed with a dead man’s blood, again, drawing a look of hunger from Esteille. “Taim Corwin has stayed away too long. He knows he cannot stay away. You will give him back to me.”

“Yes,” Elvene said.

Estelle laughed her giggling, girlish laugh, and took Elvene in her arms and hugged her fiercely, then looked back towards the shimmering black outline of Gaterau. “I will go there, now,” Estelle said. “The King will want me given back to him.” She glanced at Estelle. “I will see you again, Pet,” she said, then her body broke up into mist and she disappeared.

Chapter 18

A month passed. Reah, Mat, and Taim traveled swiftly, aided by horses Taim had procured for his services to the town of Morrow's Gulf. They passed south through the Dragon's Teeth Mountains and into the temperate forests of Southern Gehenna, sticking to logging and game trails, avoiding the centers of civilization that rose up everywhere in Southern Gehenna.

They had left the forests a week ago and traveled, now, through seemingly endless plains of heather dotted with farmland. Reah had never seen so much open space before in her life. She glanced at Taim, seated in heather, outlined by a fat, full moon rising on the opposite horizon to that of the rapidly setting sun. Taim said they would pass into the the Outer Blight, soon. They would pass into a desert—a great plain of sand and glass. Reah had trouble imagining it.

“Having second thoughts?” Taim asked.

“No,” Reah said. “There's no more time. I need to learn tonight.”

“That's true,” Taim said. He did not glance at Mat, but Reah did. They were going to have to do something foolish. There was no time for anything but.

“I'm fine, Reah, really,” Mat said, rubbing his hands up and down his arms. “Worry about yourself tonight.”

“I'll try,” Reah said. She made eye contact with Mat and then broke it, memorizing his features again. The month since the Dragon's Teeth Mountains had not been kind to him.

Mat's skin did not hang off of him, like that of the boy in Morrow's Gulf, but it was still obvious that something was happening inside Mat's body. He had become arthritic, like an old man, and his silver eyes were dulling. He did not say it, but Reah knew Mat was in pain, and when he moved too sharply, some times, she heard him hiss and would catch a glimpse of his

skin shifting wrongly as his body moved. They had lived the first two weeks of the last month for the moments when they could find time away from Taim to explore each other's bodies, but that had stopped by the end of their third week. Mat could no longer summon up the strength.

"Reah," Taim said, snapping Reah's attention back to the task at hand. "Do you remember what I told you?"

"After I have drunk the blood, don't give in to the beast," Reah said.

"That's right," Taim said. "When you drink my blood the power within you will go mad. You will need to master it. Remember what I said about aggression, when I was first teaching you. You cannot let the beast control you."

"I'm ready," Reah said. "The moon is rising, Taim."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Mat asked.

"Of course I want to do this," Reah said. She kept her gaze on Taim, sitting with his back to the rising moon and drawing a long knife across his wrist to let his blood run out. She pled with Mat inside her own mind not to ask her that question again.

Taim had made it seem very simple, when he had explained it to them. Most mages in Gehenna did not go through the sorts of changes that they had seen in Morrow's Gulf. Cases like that were the exception, not the rule. It was obvious, now, that Mat was an exception as well. They needed to get Mat to the Southern Empire so that the mages there could help him before he was consumed by the thing inside of his body. Mat was changing rapidly. They had, maybe, a month at the most to get him to the Southern Empire. There was only one way to get to the Southern Empire that quickly. They would have to cross through the heart of Gehenna, pass through the catacombs directly under the King's capital, Gaterau, and follow the main thoroughfares to Arelcrys.

It was suicide. There was no chance they could pass so closely to the King's city without being forced into a confrontation like the one that had occurred in Balaric. They would need every chance that they could get. So Taim had finally relented and revealed to Reah the nature of the trial that she would need to undergo to take control of her powers.

The ritual was simple. Reah would drink Taim's blood, taking in the power that the King had given to the first werewolves of Gehenna, as Taim explained it, and she would be forced into a direct confrontation with the animal she harbored inside her body. If she could master it—prove she was greater than her animal nature—she would gain total control over her abilities as a werewolf. If she failed to master it there was a very real chance that her humanity would be destroyed.

"Come," Taim said. "Drink."

Reah went to Taim and took his arm in her hands. "Do I just lick your arm or something?" she asked.

"You only need a small amount. You could bring it up to your lips with your hands, now," Taim said.

"Oh," Reah said, looking down at her bloody hands, "okay." Reah brought her right hand up to her mouth, then looked at Mat, steeling her resolve. Taim took hold of Reah's arm as she brought it the last few inches to her mouth.

"Wait, Reah," Taim said. Reah looked at him. "I'm sorry," he said. "Good luck." He let go of Reah's arm and she started the ritual.

Reah brought Taim's blood up to her mouth and stuck her tongue out, tentatively licking it. It had a dirty, metallic taste and Reah wrinkled her nose at it. She looked at Taim, and he looked at her, and he said nothing. She looked at Mat, and he looked at her, and he smiled a

pained, worried smile, but he said nothing. Reah looked at Taim again. His body was dark, outlined by the full moon.

“Is something more supposed to happen?” Reah asked. Taim, again, did not respond. Reah started to say something again, but she stopped. Something was different. As she looked at Taim she realized that his body was pulsing, almost imperceptibly, shifting in front of the moon.

“The moon,” Reah said, but her mouth did not open. “Taim, you are being devoured by the moon.”

Taim’s body was elongating, as Reah watched, being stretched like bread dough and pulled upward toward the moon. Everything that Reah saw—the trees grayed by the fallen night, the dark ground, the thousands of little purple flowers on the stalks of the heather sticking up from the ground—all of it was being pulled upward toward the moon. Reah opened her mouth and, this time, she did not say anything. She howled. Her howling was pulled upward toward the moon, as well.

Reah felt her body become like bread dough, her limbs and organs rearranging within her and falling upwards as the moon pulled. She fell to the ground and she opened her mouth and she vomited out her human organs, as she had done each time she had transformed, and steam rose up from them, mingling with the rest of the world as it fell upwards. This is the moment, now, Reah realized, when I will black out. She braced her mind for a now longed-for oblivion, but it did not come. Instead she became acutely aware of a pulsing in her veins, which quickly became a burning.

Reah convulsed on the ground and she felt as her body reconfigured itself, the bones in her face twisting like a bubbling fluid as her mouth pulled forward, upward, becoming a muzzle rather than a human mouth. She opened her muzzle and screamed and it sounded almost human.

Reah felt something coming up from inside of her, a powerful urge to aggression, an animal will, and it was howling, through her mouth, against her own will, and scrabbling inside her own mind, against her own will, and being wrapped around by the pulsing fire of Reah's veins. It was taking up more and more space inside the cage inside Reah and Reah was finding less and less space for her own thoughts. She felt as if her identity was being crushed to paste.

Reah ratcheted her head to one side, on the ground, and looked for Taim, but everything around her had been pulled to such extremes by the moon that Reah could not tell where he was, and she looked for Mat, and could not find him. She whimpered, and the animal inside of her whimpered, and Reah prayed that the moon would devour her perception, as it did every month, but the fire coursing through her veins spread over her mind. She could not embrace oblivion. Reah felt her mind fracture.

Mat watched as Reah brought Taim's blood to her lips. His vision had been blurring, lately, and, in the dark of twilight, as with now, Mat had trouble making out anything more than general outlines. He squinted as he saw Reah shift, slightly, and smiled. She was looking in his direction. He wanted to show her that he supported her. When Reah turned around again, likely to speak with Taim, Mat scratched at the sides of his arms through his shirt's sleeves. He had been doing that a lot lately. He had thick red wheals all along his arms, now, from his constant incessant scratching, and Mat knew that he should stop, but the feeling of his skin had become maddening. He could not help himself.

It was as if there were two of him, one layered over the other, and the him *inside* was the real him, moving the him *outside* like a puppet. Every time that he moved he simultaneously felt

his skin rubbing against something within it and that something within it felt its rubbing back. Mat tried to ignore it—there was nothing to be done about it—but, still, he scratched. The image of the monster rising out of the child would come to him unbidden, at times—it came to him now—and Mat could never quite banish the memory before breaking into a cold sweat.

Mat scratched at his arms and watched as Reah drank Taim's blood. At first she was still, doing nothing, and then she collapsed to the ground and began to shake violently.

"Reah!" Mat said. He moved to stand, cursing the halting way his muscles responded to his efforts.

"No," Taim said. He was wrapping his bleeding arm in the moonlight, but he stopped just long enough to speak. "If she breaks concentration she will die. Do not interfere, Mat."

"Uncle Taim!" Mat said.

"No," Taim said. "Sit, Mat."

Mat stood, paralyzed, and watched as Reah jerked backwards and forwards on the ground, flattening the stalks of heather rising around her. She propped herself on her arms just long enough to vomit, then collapsed and returned to jerking back and forth. Mat moved to her side.

"Mat," Taim said.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," Mat said, "just—just let me be near her, at least. She's doing this for me."

"Fine," Taim said. "You will not touch her under any circumstances, do you understand?"

"Yes," Mat said. He knelt next to Reah, just outside the reach of her thrashing.

Reah's body was changing. Her limbs twisted and elongated and her hands became paws. Her skin bulged and darkened and then split in a thousand places as she sprouted fur. She lunged

upwards toward the moon, once, and Mat cried out, because he saw that the structure of her face was changing.

This went on for nearly an hour. Eventually Reah was done, transformed into a wolf the size of a small horse. She looked black in the moonlight, but Mat thought that she was closer to a dark brown color. Her eyes were still gold, but they glowed like twin lanterns in her animal face. She rose on four shaking legs, then collapsed, covering her face with her forepaws and whining.

“She’s amazing,” Mat said.

“She’s dead,” Taim said, rising to his feet. Mat looked up at his uncle. Taim was shaking and his voice was heavy. “She failed the trial. There’s no human in her. The animal has won.” He drew his sword.

“Uncle!” Mat said. He stood and placed himself between Taim and Reah.

“No,” Taim said. His lambent eyes were *too* lambent. The white light of the moon quivered in patches in them, shifting this way and that. Mat realized that Taim was crying. “I shouldn’t have done it,” Taim said.

“Uncle Taim,” Mat said. “What are you doing?”

“Out of the way, Mat,” Taim said. “My blood has killed her. If she had succeeded, she’d be human by now. The animal has won.”

“I don’t believe it,” Mat said.

“Mat,” Taim said. “There can be nothing left of Reah in that animal. We can’t let it endanger the countryside.”

“I won’t let you hurt her,” Mat said.

“Turn around, Mat,” Taim said. “Get behind me.” Mat suddenly realized that the wolf behind him, Reah, was growling deep in its throat. Mat turned around. The wolf was on its legs,

now, more steady. Standing at its full height its shoulderblades were level to Mat's own. Its enormous golden eyes were boring into Mat, its hackles were raised, and it was backing away from him.

"Reah," Mat said, stepping toward the wolf, "stop."

The wolf backed away from the silver eyed man. The man was dangerous, she knew. Its scent was wrong.

"Ray-ah-uh," the man said, "St-oppuh."

The wolf growled, and dropped onto its haunches as it backed away. Another man, a golden eyed man, also wrong smelling—smelling like herself but looking like a man—was stepping around the silver eyed man. The wolf could smell its intent to kill.

The wolf growled, again, and puffed up its fur, trying to threaten the golden eyed man. He did not seem threatened. The fire feeling inside the wolf was still pulsing and it seemed to feed off of the golden man as the man stepped closer to the wolf. The cage around the wolf's mind constricted at the sight of the man, and the sight of the moon in the sky, drawing the wolf upwards to it, pulling it constantly into the cage of fire, was driving it mad with rage. The wolf leaped at the golden eyed man, but the golden eyed man backed away, swifter than a man could ever be, wrong, and then lashed forward with a piece of thin silver, like a shard of the moon that was driving the wolf insane, and the man pricked the wolf's side. The wolf cried out, and backed away, and began circling the golden eyed man, preparing to attack once more.

The wolf had to destroy the fire in its blood. It had to destroy the golden eyed man. Everything was wrong. The world around the wolf was wrong. The man was wrong, the man was wrong, and the wolf was wrong. The only way to end it was to attack until something died.

The silver eyed man appeared out of nowhere and took hold of the wolf. The wolf howled in surprise and darted backward, trying to break free, but the silver eyed man did not let go. They tumbled backwards in a heap and the wolf lunged backwards and forwards, trying to break free. It rolled onto its back, trying to crush the silver eyed man, forgetting the golden eyed man, then it bit at the silver eyed man, but could not reach him. It whimpered and cried and the fire in its body and the foreign presence of the silver eyed man drove the wolf to madness. The world was wrong. Why was the world wrong? What had become of things? The fire and the feeling of the man's body came together, suddenly, and the wolf understood.

“Mat!” Taim cried. “No!”

Mat ignored him.

“Reah,” Mat said, holding onto the thrashing animal with all of his diminished strength. “Reah, wake up. Wake up Reah.” Mat realized that he was crying, but he didn’t care. He didn’t care. Reah was dead, Uncle Taim said, and Mat couldn’t imagine that being true. She had done this for him. He refused to believe it.

The wolf rolled onto its back and all the air in Mat’s lungs deserted him as he was crushed beneath its bulk. He could hear his ribs creaking. Then the wolf snapped its head backwards, glittering white teeth the length of Mat’s hands passing a scant inch from Mat’s eyes. “No,” Mat said. “Wake up, Reah. Reah, stop, wake up.” He repeated the words, and the wolf

repeated its thrashing, and Taim ran forward, sword in hand. Mat tried to maneuver so that he was draped over Reah's body, but she was too strong. In her panic she would keep Mat from protecting her and Taim would slice out her heart just like he had done to those people in Morrow's Gulf. Mat squeezed Reah's body, trying to memorize the feel of her before his uncle killed her, trying to compress his entire life into this one instant because he did not want to think for a second about what would happen in the next, and, suddenly, the wolf, Reah, stilled. Mat opened his eyes, expecting to see his uncle looming above him, bloodstained sword in hand, but Taim had not reached them. He had stopped, a black outline encapsulated in a white corona of moonlight, golden eyes watching.

Mat looked down. The wolf had stilled in his grasp, but it was still breathing. Mat let it go and it rolled, slightly, and brought its massive face to regard his own. Their eyes locked. "Reah," Mat said, "wake up."

The wolf closed its eyes, shivering, and it rested its head in Mat's lap. Mat placed one arm on the crown of the wolf's head and began stroking its fur. The wolf's shivering stopped, it whined, once, then slowly, over the course of half an hour, it changed, its body twisting in Mat's grasp and taking on a horrific shape. It became like the werewolves that Mat had seen before—a nightmare stuck halfway between animal and human. Mat ignored what it became. He stroked her head, and whispered kindly to her, and an hour later he was stroking Reah's hair. She was unconscious but once again human.

A hand came to rest on Mat's shoulder and he looked up. Taim was above him. Taim fell to his knees and took both Reah and Mat in his arms. "I was wrong," Taim said, "Lords, I was wrong."

"Uncle Taim," Mat said.

“Thank you, Mat,” Taim said, almost crushing Mat between his arms. “Thank you.”

They travelled in silence in the desert, several days later, fleeing across the barren waste of the Outer Blight. They ran in the night. The cold light of the moon fell across the sands in motley patches and shivered, mournful, behind the oppressive shadow of the massive but still distant palace of Gaterau.

The days were terrible, hotter than anything Reah had yet experienced. The sun blasted down upon the land and, when it fell behind the pale glass of Gaterau’s distant spires, tripled its intensity until the sands themselves seemed to hiss in fury and spit out great clumps of glass and steam. It was impossible to drive the horses under such conditions, and so they spent their days huddling with the animals in stone shelters burrowed deep within the sand.

For three days this went on—Reah, Mat, and Taim traveled through a twisted, madcap landscape, in the heart of the King’s land, only stopping when the heat of the oncoming day became too much to bear. Finally, when Reah was certain that she would fall from her horse, exhausted and gasping, Taim would call them to a stop. He would raise his hand and then disappear behind a dune near the strange too white hard packed road that they travelled on. Reah, then Mat (who was always in the rear) would follow him around the bend to discover a cleverly concealed threshold made of an odd, shining black stone behind which a creaking passage of the same material trailed deep into the ground and out of sight.

Taim would already be disappearing down into the depths of the sands by the time Mat arrived, Reah milling slightly outside and looking back for her laggard companion. Mat would dismount and lead his horse after the shrinking figure of his uncle. When Reah was certain he

was going to make it she would follow. They would spend the day deep in the heart of the stone passage.

Mat and Reah would sleep fairly close to the entrance of the passage, horses nearby, huddling against the odd chill of the deep underground chamber. Taim would always take his horse a ways away to sleep on his own.

After their second day of travel, Taim took them off of the main road leading into Gaterau, circling around the city just as they had planned. They had been lucky—the few carriages traveling along the main road to Gaterau did not stop to accost them—but their luck would not hold out forever. The small trail between the dunes that they followed was trying for their mounts and they were forced to rest often, but no others traveled it. They must soon enter the catacombs that passed under Gaterau and attempt the journey that could save Mat's life.

The end of their fourth night traveling through the blight they arrived at the entrance to the catacombs. A black obelisk strove upwards in the sand. It looked small, when compared to the King's stained glass city-palace rising up from the center of the Blight, but it was still impressive. It was easily larger than any of the buildings Reah had known in Fulkton Gardens—a great basalt pillar pitted by ages of disuse in a dead land. As Reah reached the base of the obelisk, taking her place beside Taim, she realized that the obelisk was covered in symbols. They were vaguely reminiscent of the shapes she had seen in the Ioric ruins that they had visited.

"Wow," Mat said, coming up beside Reah, pulling on his reins and bringing his horse to a stop. "Is this what we've been looking for, Uncle Taim?"

Rather than respond Taim jumped off of his horse and stepped forward, pressing his palm against the base of the obelisk. A door slid open, revealing a curling ramp descending out of sight. He led his horse down the ramp, disappearing into the darkness. Mat frowned and looked

at Reah, shrugging his shoulders and then wincing at the pain doing so caused him. Reah winced in sympathy.

“It’s okay, Mat,” Reah said. “Taim is being Taim.”

“Yeah,” Mat said. “Let me light a brand and then we’ll follow.”

As Reah led her horse down the ramp into the catacombs under Gaterau, following just after Mat, she thought about Taim. He had been even more reserved since Reah’s ordeal. It had been a full week, now, and he was still avoiding Mat and Reah. He seemed almost ashamed of himself. Reah didn’t understand it, but she knew she couldn’t worry about it. There was too much to worry about already.

Reah and Mat traveled down into the catacombs. The only sound was the whickering of horses. The walls and the ceiling and the floor of the ramp were all of the same black rock as the obelisk above, adorned with carved symbols in a language Reah did not know. After a few minutes of descending the carvings on the passage were replaced with brass etchings. They shone dimly in the light of Mat’s torch.

“Reah?” Mat asked.

“Yeah, Mat?” Reah asked.

“If we don’t make it in time,” Mat said, “I just wanted to let you know I’m glad to have spent these last few months with you.”

“Mat—” Reah said.

“No, Reah,” Mat said, “I just wanted you to know.”

They made one last turn and the catacombs proper came into view. It was a black stone room just tall enough for the horses to stay upright in but wide and long enough that its walls disappeared far into the dark. Coming out of the passageway and looking behind her Reah

realized that it had come directly out of the ceiling. Wherever any of the catacomb's walls were, Reah could not be certain.

"Mat," Taim said. "Reah."

"This place is huge," Reah said.

"These catacombs go out far past the desert," Taim said. "They predate Gaterau. If we are lucky we will reach their far southern end in a week. It will only be another week's journey to Arelcrys, then, and the Southern Empire."

"How will we know which way to go?" Mat asked. He was looking this way and that, obviously as fascinated as Reah was. "And what was this place *for*?"

In answer to Mat's questions Taim pulled a small copper object from his horse's saddlebag. It was a compass.

"We will stay within sight of each other at all times," Taim said. "If you get lost in these catacombs it would be nearly impossible to find you again. We will travel until the horses need rest. We will only stop then. We have only enough supplies for the next week and a half."

On their third "day" of travel Mat noticed the phantoms. He was riding in the rear of the party, trying to stay awake, when he felt a hand grab his leg. Mat jumped, hissing in surprise, and looked down, but the hand was not there.

"Are you okay, Mat?" Reah asked.

"Yeah," Mat said. "Yeah, I'm fine, Reah."

Over the course of the next few hours Mat was assaulted, again and again, by invisible hands. Each time he would jump, and hiss, and look about, and there would be no one there. Each time Reah would ask Mat if he was all right, and she seemed more and more concerned by his

behavior each time, and each time Mat would say he was fine and brace himself for the next assault.

When they set up camp that night Mat fed and settled his horse and ate his rations, then went to sleep immediately after, avoiding a conversation with Reah and Taim, worried that they would question his sanity. When he woke the next day he at first thought that the phantoms had taken on visible form.

Mat woke to the sight of hundreds of headless corpses scattered a short distance from the camp like so many trees. They swayed backwards and forwards as if buffeted by wind. Mat opened his mouth to shout out a warning, but Taim took hold of his mouth, quieting him. Reah was already awake, crouched at Taim's side.

"Hush, Mat," Taim whispered. "The Traitors to the King react to loud noises."

"What are they?" Mat asked.

"What's left after the King makes an example of another immortal," Taim said. "The Highblood do not die as men do. Each body here has a matching head screaming somewhere in Gaterau."

Mat stood, careful not to make any loud noises. "What do we do?" he asked.

"We saddle the horses and leave," Taim said. "Make as little noise as possible and, no matter what you do, *do not touch them*, do you understand?"

"Yes," Mat said. He looked to Reah, who was already whispering to her horse, preparing it for the journey ahead. One of the headless corpse-things was swaying only a few feet away from her as she did so. "I'll do my best," he said.

Mat packed his supplies and saddled his horse in silence, then eased himself onto its back, culling his instinctive urge to cry out in pain as sharp heat stabbed through his knees. Taim

was already leading his horse away from camp, Reah following after. The grove of headless bodies was vast. The party traveled for what seemed to Mat forever and they did not reach its edge. Mat had wondered how the bodies had surrounded them while they slept, as they seemed so still, but it quickly became apparent that they did, occasionally, move. A body would twitch, suddenly, out in some barely glimpsed, far portion of the grove, and then it would run in a random direction, careening into other bodies, setting them into motion as well, until a cascade of living, headless corpses were all running together. It would take them some time to settle down, again, having disturbed a vast patch of their brethren, and then, some time later, a new body would twitch and run into the darkness and the process would begin again. At most times the forest was relatively quiet, defined by a sussuration of the dead things' hands blindly worrying at their frayed clothing and by the clicking of their cracking knuckles, but when the bodies were running the sound of their frantic movements was loud enough to drown out the sounds of Mat's own thoughts. Mat shuddered to imagine what would happen if a chain reaction were to occur on top of them. He wondered how their party had been surrounded without being trampled.

Travel through the corpses was slow and arduous. The travelers had to pick their way through with care, and the few areas large enough to make camp, as they stopped to rest their horses each "night," were never secure from the potential of an avalanche of bodies. Either Reah, or Mat, or, most often, Taim, would have to stay up while the others slept, eyes and ears straining for any indication of a disturbance in the equilibrium of the dead. Every day Mat was besieged by phantom hands. It took a full week of travel, after their first night waking up in the forest of bodies, before they finally found its outer edge. By that point Mat's nerves were strained raw.

It was the end of their tenth “day” since entering the catacombs. Taim raised his hand above his head and brought his horse to a stop. Mat and Reah pulled to a stop beside him. Taim pointed a distance further in the direction that they had been traveling and Reah nodded. Mat peered in the direction that Taim was pointing but could make nothing out in the gloom. “What is it?” he asked.

“The exit,” Reah whispered, grinning at Mat. “We’ve made it, Mat!”

Mat grinned back at Reah, then at Taim, who was, of course, not grinning, but who, Mat believed, looked at least relieved. Mat flicked his horse’s reins, urging it to a walk. A hand brushed at Mat’s leg and he kicked it away, certain it was another of the phantoms that had been plaguing him since entering the catacombs. When he heard Reah gasp, Mat realized he was wrong. He looked down. Laying on the ground, thrusting its hands into the air and cracking the joints of its fingers, was one of the headless corpses. As Mat looked up he realized that the faint murmuring of the corpses had stopped. They were all silent, all still, and all turned to regard him.

Mat urged his horse backwards, but the corpse that he had kicked to the ground lunged upward, latching itself onto the horse’s legs. The horse screamed and reared, throwing Mat to the ground, and then it went galloping into the forest of corpses, triggering a cascade of movement. Pademonium erupted.

Taim cried out, and Reah cried out, and Mat tried to catch his breath—the air had been flung from his lungs when he had hit the cold stone ground. Corpses ran in every direction. They ran over Mat, buffeting him, and took hold of Reah and Taim’s horses, throwing them off of the bodies and into the churning maelstrom of flesh that had overtaken them. They fell out of Mat’s line of sight.

Mat rolled onto his hands and knees and he tried to stand, but he was knocked over by the headless corpse of a young woman. It grabbed hold of him and bore him to the ground, ripping at his clothes and face with unkempt nails. Even as it did so a dozen other bodies hurtled into Mat, knocking him about as he fell. Mat beat at the corpse holding him down, trying to break free from it, but it refused to let go. His bones popped as it crushed him with frantic strength and his vision began to blur.

Reah rolled to her feet as she was driven off of her horse. She watched as the poor animal was torn to pieces by a dozen of the panicked dead. Half a dozen bodies crushed up against her, driving her to her knees. Reah reacted to the situation almost instinctively. She reached into her thoughts and drew out the wolf lurking within them.

Reah's body tensed and her skin crawled. As with all of the times that she had become a wolf, her transformation was traumatic and painful, but, now, she controlled it. In the abyss of the catacombs there was no moon, only Reah and the wolf, and they worked in tandem.

Reah's body twisted inside her skin. She remained standing, despite the horror of her transformation and the fury of her attackers. Within minutes she was fully transformed: half wolf, half woman; Reah became a compromise between the two. She opened her mouth, caught up in the rush of power as her muscles filled with even greater strength than before, and howled, standing immovable in the sea of bodies, as a rock.

Her howl was met with another and Reah rushed forward to meet it, knocking aside bodies with ease. Taim was also transformed and he had cleared a circle around the place where he had landed. At twice Reah's size, it seemed impossible for anything to harm the massive

werewolf. Reah took her place at Taim's flank, protecting his back, and they made their way toward the place where Mat had fallen. Reah prayed that Mat was unharmed. When she reached the place where Mat had been Reah's back shivered with fear. At the place where Mat should be there was a pile of writhing corpses. She could not see if Mat was inside it. She rushed forward, reaching out a clawed hand to pull the corpses away, and then an explosion sent her tumbling backwards.

Mat stood up. Headless corpses twitched on the ground for a full yard around him. Mat's heart was beating harder than it had ever beaten before and his vision blurred, in and out, as a searing pain wracked his brain. He tried to remember what had just happened—what he had done that had sent the bodies hurtling away from him like so much chaff from a reaper's sickle. All he could remember was the feeling of being buried alive in a pile of panicking humanity.

Mat brought his hand up to his forehead, pushing into his skull in a vain attempt to alleviate his piercing headache. He looked around him, trying to find Reah and Taim, frightened at the prospect that they might have been hurt in the explosion. He caught sight of them, rising from the bodies, both transformed. Reah loped towards Mat, then stopped.

"Mat," she said, "what have you done?" Mat tried to think, through the pain in his head, of a reasonable answer to Reah's question, but all he could seem to think about was the way her voice, in her altered form, sounded as much like the growling of an animal as that of Reah. He reached out with his unoccupied hand and touched Reah's head, then he collapsed. She picked him up, more gingerly than he would have thought her capable of, and that was when Mat noticed it. In the panicked rush of the corpses the party's lanterns had been knocked over and

crushed. They should have been in total darkness. Yet a vague silver light permeated the air, centered around Mat. Outside the glow Mat could make out the impression of more of the corpse things, still standing, shuffling, and clicking. Inside the glow the corpse things had gone still and dead.

Chapter 19

It was a week later when the party arrived in the city of Arelcrys and Mat knew that he was dying. He could see, but even in the light of mid-day, everything around him had a hazy, graying blurry quality. Mat smiled as he watched Reah marveling at the fine white stone of Arelcrys's architecture. The city was almost as famous for its marble quarries as for its status as the border town between Gehenna and the Southern Empire. Mat could only barely make out the buildings' shapes.

Ever since their encounter in the catacombs Mat's physical deformity and pain had been worsening. Hidden in a long cloak and hood, his wrongness was difficult for an outsider to recognize, but Mat felt it in every inch of his body. They had lost most of their supplies along with their horses and Reah had cut a walking stick for Mat, a few days before, much as Mat had made one for her at the beginning of their journey. Mat leaned on it, now, heavily. He struggled to keep up with Taim, who set a pace that would have been difficult for Mat to manage when he was healthy.

A hand brushed up against Mat's, then briefly entangled with it—Reah's. She had been quiet after their encounter in the catacombs the week before. Mat had been hiding how much worse things were getting. He did not want to worry her.

"Are you all right?" she mouthed to him, forming the words on her lips but not speaking them. Mat nodded. His thoughts turned back, for a second, to the evening before when she had been sleeping on their bedroll and he had vomited something orange and spongelike into the bushes a short distance from their camp.

They moved through Arelcrys's main thoroughfares. Taim had intended to have them blend in with the crowds that were always filling the city, but there were no crowds today. Arelcrys's brickwork streets were deserted. Mat tried not to think about what that might mean. Taim was as stoic as ever, but the pace he set betrayed his nervousness.

They turned a corner and Mat gasped. A huge bridge large enough for ten carts to travel side by side on and never touch crossed a deep blue river wide enough to lose a palace in. The bridge was entirely composed of white stucco and red brick and was dripping with statues of winged men holding lanterns in each hand. The sight of the bridge took Mat's breath away. He pushed his body harder, ignoring his pain, and hobbled up to his uncle, pulling his hood down so that he could get a better look at the wondrous bridge.

"Uncle Taim, is that what I think it is?" Mat asked.

Taim turned his gaze to Mat, disapproving.

"Your hood, Mat," Taim said.

Mat ignored Taim and barreled on, "it is, isn't it? I think I can see people on the other side. Wow! They look so tiny from over here! And what colors!"

"It's beautiful," Reah said. She was standing where they had just rounded the corner. Mat and Reah gaped, overawed. Whatever happens to me, Mat thought, there is my journey's end.

Taim did not seem any less agitated than he had moments before. He leaned in close to Mat and Reah, speaking in a hoarse whisper. "Go on ahead Mat. Reah—you follow him."

"Is something wrong?" Reah asked.

"I will take up the rear," Taim said. "Soldiers of The King approach from the north. I had hoped to be across before they arrived, but that won't happen, now. We have minutes." His face

was hard and reserved, his golden eyes darting, searching for danger in the few shadowy corners along the sides of the massive roadway.

Mat hobbled forward in the center of the brick road. Reah was a small distance behind him. Taim had his back to them, head pivoting left and right. The sun beat down upon them without mercy. Mat's dirty blonde hair shivered, swept by river-born breeze. A black object, likely a carrion bird in search of city refuse, wheeled and tumbled across the sky. The bird's dark shadow coasted along the blood red bricks at Mat's feet, blown up to monster size, mouth opened to caw defiance at the light of day.

Mat felt his heart beating as he took one step and then another. His eyes stayed straight ahead—focused with all consuming intensity on the white stucco bridge rolling forwards into life and freedom. The air around him seemed to tremble with the tension of his body against the panic in his mind. Mat increased his pace to a jog. His vision tunneled inwards on his goal. His body tingled, numbing the pain his exertion wrought in his crippled form.

A phantom hand grabbed Mat's arm and he fell to one knee. He rose and his eyes shifted infinitesimally, unconsciously turning to investigate if, this time, the hand was real. Brilliant blue eyes and a familiar smile caught his eyes, hidden in a dark alley. Raven feather hair and a figure cut from a cloth of sordid dreams.

Elvene crooked a long thin finger, beckoning. Mat stopped and turned.

Mattock, her love, was falling neatly into her hands. Elvene smiled to see that he had hardly changed at all. She had been concerned the day before when Elrick, one of the scouts Esteille had provided for her, returned to tell her that a party of three had been spotted with two

individuals matching the descriptions she had provided of the orphan bitch and her werewolf cohort. The other party member—a wretched and crippled beggar—had not fit the description of Mat at all.

Elvene smiled, now, to know that she had seen through Taim’s clever ruse. Mat was bent over, certainly, giving the impression of a crippled beggar. He was Mat, however, and unchanged. Elvene knew. The fools had thought to dress their prisoner up in peasants’ rags to fool her. They had heard that she was coming, somehow, and they had thought to slip through her grasp and into the endless deserts of the Southern Empire. They had thought to go to a place where no vampire had been able to go in thousands of years with Mat in tow and Elvene none the wiser. They had underestimated her.

Elvene knew Mat, heart and soul. She had been loving him almost since her earliest memories. He was *hers* and she had come to destroy any doubt, in anyone’s mind, that they could steal from Elvene Fulke, highblood child of the King. She smiled wider as Mat came closer. He was completely spellbound by her, by the glamour Esteille had taught her to weave around mortal men the first terrible weeks of her turning. Once Elvene had separated Mat from the others she would have her way with them. No fool would ever *dream* of stealing from her after that. Even the highblood would tremble in fear at the thought of Elvene’s wrath after *this* day was through.

Mat’s captors had discovered that something was amiss now. The orphan bitch, Reah, was tugging on Mat’s arm, speaking to him in low tones. She thought to speak sense to him. Elvene giggled quietly, keeping her eyes on Mat. His captors hadn’t noticed her yet. All things were falling into place. She had wrapped herself in shadow in sight of the bridge. The darkness

had told her how to do it. So many tricks she had learned since Guillame the Rapist had killed her.

Elvene had known that Mat's party would be forced to approach the bridge from the town's main thoroughfare these last few steps and had prepared herself in sight of it. Reah would follow Mat, whispering into his ear, deep into the shadows of the alley. Elvene would slit Reah's throat and then disappear with her prize recovered. Esteille's wolves would deal with Taim Corwin. She would retire to an estate in the wilderness of the north. Then: bliss.

Something massive, brown and gold and black, slammed into Mat. It was Taim, revealed in his true form—fully ten feet tall, hunched and hoary, mouth slavering around teeth like sabers. Mat wavered in the air, knocked off his feet by a strike to the gut which likely could have killed him. Elvene moved to rescue him, breaking free from her summoned shadows—they were *killing* Mat—but the beast, Taim, moved into her alleyway, cutting her off. Rather than give Mat over they were going to kill him. Elvene trembled with rage, allowing her anger to bubble forth to mask the fear born of the small denied kernel of loneliness that was always lurking in the back of her mind.

Elvene screamed, thin lipped and petulant. Her sultry alto voice turned shrill for a second as it broke into indeterminate hissing. She sounded like a beast denied its supper. She didn't care. The image of Mat tumbling through the air filled her mind. Control. Elvene brought herself back under control. She steadied herself and turned her gaze to the transformed Taim. He was looking about in the dark of the alley. She had hidden herself well. She would use this to her advantage.

"If you harm him, you *filthy cur*; I will rip your organs out of that hairy gut of yours and feed them to my mistress's dogs," Elvene said.

“Esteille!” Taim cried, words garbled by his animal mouth. He was still casting about. “Reveal yourself, Esteille!” he said.

“What are you *talking* about?” Elvene asked. Esteille was in Gaterau. Elvene knew this. Taim must be mad to think a Hand would care enough to come running after him personally.

A soft voice echoed down the red brick road. “You have been a very naughty puppy indeed, Wolf,” Esteille said. “What on earth will I do with you?”

Esteille’s voice was a torrid purr. It was devoid of emotion. It carried laughter nonetheless. Taim retreated into the street. Elvene rushed after, looking for Mat. Her eyes found him, coughing, several yards from the mouth of the alley. Taim stood in Elvene’s way still. Reah had thrown herself on top of Mat.

Reah shot a venomous glance towards Elvene. Elvene started towards her, ready to rip Mat’s captors to shreds and save him. She stopped. She was close enough to Mat now to see him clearly. The color on her pale face drained completely. There was something terribly wrong.

“What did you do?” Elvene asked. “How could you do this? *What have you done to him?*” She hissed, looking at Reah with stark horror.

Reah looked up at her. Her face was hard. Her eyes glowed yellow in the summer sun. She grimaced like a feral dog and spoke.

“Do what?” Reah asked. “Lords help you if you’ve brought this down upon us, Elvene.” Elvene’s dead heart stayed still. Something deeper twisted painfully. She opened her mouth to tell Reah that she was lying. That Mat would never have betrayed her—would never have cast aside the faith Elvene had put in him. Nothing came out. She bit back the tears she couldn’t shed.

“How viperous,” a voice said—Esteille’s— “You didn’t even bother to answer the poor girl’s question.” Esteille laughed.

Elvene turned around. Esteille's voice had come from behind her. The elder vampire, beautiful beyond words in a filmy white cotton dress, was walking confidently towards them. Her shark toothed smile dominated her entire form. The charming socialite that Elvene had known was gone. The sauntering thing she stood witness to today was predator mind and endless shredding teeth. Elvene shivered.

Esteille stopped next to her. She grasped Elvene's shoulder as if to hold her back. Elvene was sure it was clear to all involved that that wasn't currently necessary. Esteille's dead black eyes regarded Taim. They reflected anticipation.

"I would think," Esteille said, speaking to Reah as if discussing with her a list of choice wines, "that you should have answered more directly, child."

"My Lady, have you come to aid me?" Elvene asked.

She knew the answer already. The darkness was screaming at her, now, that Esteille was betraying her, too. She asked anyway. Her entire body quivered with horror at the touch of the predator beside her. Esteille laughed and idly waved her free hand. She was still regarding Taim. Elvene realized with a start that Mat's uncle was calmly doing the same.

"My Lady?" Elvene asked, desperate. Reah started growling.

"He's a mage," Taim said. "Esteille's here to kill him."

Elvene's hand went to her breast. She broke off from Esteille's grasp.

Esteille had drawn Elvene's blood as she had gripped her shoulder. She licked one red finger with an impossibly long, sharp tongue and advanced on Mat and his party. Elvene cast about desperately. The situation had gone completely out of her control.

Mat a mage! He had been fleeing death in Gehenna, fleeing to the one place Elvene could never go, now. Vampires could not enter the Southern Empire. The mages of the Southern

Empire had cast a spell on the river that divided their two nations. It would rise up and drag a vampire to its bottom if they touched its far bank, and vampires would lose all of their motive power when submerged within it. Elvene glanced at the older vampire. Elvene had chased Mat down and brought his death beside her. Her tearless eyes shivered. The voice of madness echoed in her mind.

Reah dragged Mat, desperately trying to get him to the bridge before the vampires caught up with them. Taim stood resolute and unmoving. Esteille continued her advance. Elvene followed. Elvene was responsible for this, Reah knew. Darkness take her, Elvene had likely traded Mat for immortality without a second thought. Reah was not certain that Taim could survive against the two vampires on his own. She considered transforming into a wolf and going to Taim's aid, but she could not summon the will to do so. Mat's eyes were rolling in his head as she dragged him onto the bridge to the Southern Empire. Reah whispered to him, trying to pull a response from him, but he said nothing. He seemed barely cogent enough to stand. She couldn't stop herself from comparing him to the boy in the Dragonsteeth Mountains, again and again. She cursed herself for her cowardice, but she would not leave Mat alone. Taim was on his own.

"I never had room to love you, Esteille—is that what you wanted to hear?" Taim asked.

Esteille was still purring, she was almost embracing Taim now. "Ooooooooooh... that *is* what I wanted to hear," Esteille said. "Sadly I never much cared for you, either, my darling. Such a memorable form... but!" Esteille stopped walking and stood straight, posing on heels that were never meant to leave the ballroom. "I cannot let my petty physical attractions get in the way of my business. Such a shame," Esteille said. She winked at Taim then tapped his chest with one

finger. It was a little absurd to watch—the beautiful, pale vampire playing the flirt with the slavering half changed werewolf.

“Business,” Esteille said, still flirting, still with her slave, Elvene, shuffling awkwardly behind her. “Business,” Esteille said, “dictates that I kill *you* for betraying me. Kill *that*,” with this she gestured idly towards Mat, “before it can escape into the southern deserts. And then,” she said, “it dictates that I kill *everything*, just for fun.” Esteille giggled. “You see? Business.”

Taim’s gruff exterior was tightly mastered. Reah knew that if *she* had suffered that creature’s attentions for as long as Taim had *she* would have melted into a gibbering mess by now. He was grim, but seemed unmoved. “Do you expect me to beg, Esteille?” Taim asked.

“Do you expect me to let you stall for time, Wolf?” Esteille said.

“No,” Taim said. He lunged forward, gone from a measured, easy stance, to frantic action with no discernible transition. Reah’s heart jumped in her throat at the sight and she allowed herself to feel hope as Taim ripped the vampire in half, severing her torso from her legs. Her separated body parts hit the ground with twin thumps and she lay still.

Taim backed away from Esteille’s body as soon as he finished his assault. Esteille began laughing. Taim turned to Reah as Esteille pushed herself onto her arms, reclining over her own scattered organs and smiling, revealing row upon row of razor sharp teeth. “Run!” he cried.

Esteille was on him before he could turn around. Her separated body parts turned to ashes in front of Reah’s eyes and the ashes coalesced over Taim’s head, reforming into Esteille, alive and whole. Reah cried out, but it was too late. Taim spun to regard Esteille faster than a human could ever have hoped to do, but Esteille was far faster. She fell onto Taim, pushing herself into him and kissing his misshapen snout, then she pressed her left hand against his chest and inserted it through his ribs, ripping out his still beating heart and crushing it. Taim fell dead at her feet.

“Taim!” Reah screamed. She let go of Mat and took a step forward, then stopped. There was nothing she could do.

“In so many ways you betrayed me, Taim,” Esteille said, regarding Taim’s corpse and dabbing at her uncrying eyes with the hand she had killed him with, smearing her face with blood. “For that woman. Why? Did she ever try to *know* you as I tried?” Esteille moved away from Taim’s corpse and turned her gaze to Reah and Mat. “Now,” Esteille said, “let’s get down to the rest of my business, then.”

Reah helped Mat to sit and then moved forward, placing herself between Mat and Esteille. There was no way she could drag Mat to safety in time. Esteille was too swift for Reah and Mat to flee. Reah bared her teeth, challenging death. She reached down into her mind, waking the wolf within her, and she began to transform. Esteille laughed at the sight.

Elvene watched as Esteille revealed the whole sordid truth. Esteille had been talking to Taim but the entire time Elvene could not shake the feeling that the vampiress’s words had been directed at *her*. Esteille had used her, Elvene now knew, to destroy Mat and to gain some form of revenge against Taim. Elvene’s skin crawled as she thought about what she had done for Esteille.

Elvene watched as the Fourth Hand slaughtered her former lover, laughing. The darkness whispered to Elvene, mocking her. It whispered to her of a weakness—of a plan that would give Elvene everything she desired. It was madness. She was desperate. Elvene made her cautious way to Esteille. Esteille seemed to be cracking jokes. She even started *laughing*.

Elvene wrapped Esteille in her arms and bit down onto the flesh of her neck. She ripped at Esteille’s throat with her teeth, hoping to steal her strength and kill her before she could react.

The older woman hissed in unexpected pain. Esteille's blood, the blood of three millenia of victims, welled up from her wound. Elvene drank it like an elixir.

Elvene smiled. Esteille's blood was intoxicating. It reeked of the ages. It slipped smoothly down her throat. Esteille stiffened in her grasp. Elvene lifted her lips from the Hand's ravaged neck.

"You will be quiet, now," Elvene said. "Die."

"You bitch," Esteille said. She sounded angry, not hurt. Elvene realized that she had gravely miscalculated. Mat did not move. The world spun. Elvene was at the bottom of the Deadblock River. She jerked, once, and then was still.

"I hope you rot beneath that river for a thousand years for that you *worm*. It might teach you to not repay my favors with a stab in the back," Esteille said. The wound on her neck was open and ragged, but rapidly healing. Blood squirted out of her neck at uneven intervals and then no blood flowed at all. "Now, then," Esteille said, "it is time for me to kill you."

Esteille's eyes came to rest on Reah. Reah tried to stand, but she was still wracked by her transformation. She had thought she would be able to transform before Esteille attacked, but she realized she had been wrong. She opened her mouth and tried to curse the vampire that she was certain was going to kill her, but all that came out was an animal whine.

"Oh?" Esteille said. "What is this?"

She was looking at something behind Reah's back. Reah fought against her own body and forced herself to look behind her. Mat had risen from his standing position. His teeth were chattering and his skin was shifting in unnatural ways and he was staring at Reah.

“No, Mat,” Reah said. “Stop.”

“Will,” Mat said. “Protect. You.”

“No you won’t, Mat,” Reah said. “You can’t. Didn’t you see what happened to Taim?”

Mat stepped forward. Reah tried to go to him, to stop him, but her legs buckled under her again. She howled in frustration. Esteille buffed her nails and looked over them at Mat, smiling her predator’s smile. “Do come along then,” she said.

“You—” Mat said, barely able to speak between each labored breath “won’t—”

“I will,” Esteille said. Esteille disappeared, and then reappeared next to Mat. She reached out to Mat with the same hand that had killed Taim. Reah howled again, almost fully transformed. She lunged forward, but she knew she was too far away to do anything. Then Esteille’s hand touched Mat’s chest. Her hand exploded.

“What—?” Esteille said. She was still smiling her insane smile, but she was clearly in shock. Where only a second before Esteille’s arm had been there was now a rotted black crater in the side of her torso.

“You—” Mat said. He was staring at the ground and shaking. He fell to his knees.

“No—” Esteille said, “No—No! No! No! No!” She stepped backwards from Mat. Reah leaped forward and bore Esteille to the ground.

“Won’t—” Mat said behind Reah. Reah tore at the vampire with her claws, trying to prevent Esteille from recovering.

“It won’t come back,” Esteille said, looking up at Reah as if she expected some sort of sympathy from her. “My arm, it’s not coming back.” Reah stopped mauling Esteille. She lifted the vampire over her head, preparing to throw her into the river.

“You *won’t hurt her*,” Mat said. Esteille cried out in terror, writhing in Reah’s grasp. A hundred human lifetimes of the terror brought on by the prospect of death welled up from within her, and then she fell still, obviously dead. Reah didn’t take chances. She threw the corpse in the river.

“Reah,” Mat said. Reah turned around and then she fell to her knees. Her animal will was crushed. Over the course of half a minute she reverted to human form, not moving, staring in horror at Mat. It was obviously far too late. The howl of werewolves echoed from behind Reah on the Gehenna side of the bridge, but Reah didn’t care. As Reah watched Mat’s skin began to split.

Mat watched as his uncle died. He watched as Elvene, his closest childhood friend, was left to rot forever in flowing water. He watched as Esteille Kroftford, the great Hand, was destroyed by his own power. It did not matter. He watched and knew. He saw. He saw in his mind’s eye his onrushing destruction.

It was an image of Reah, her nut brown skin torn: her intestines peeking out from her chunked abdomen. The Reah in his mind was dying and Mat knew that if he could not do something, finally do something after so long doing nothing, that the *real* Reah, the woman he loved, would join her. Mat knew that he was going to watch her die.

Something within him, deep down within, the thing that made Mat—Mattock Corwin—into Mattock Corwin—the farm boy of Fulkton Gardens; the rascal hiding his fear of the pressures and realities of the outside world; the boy who had traveled hundreds of miles and

become more—the thing that made Mattock Corwin Mattock Corwin snapped. It snapped and it coiled deep within him. It changed.

As the terrible events of the day unfolded the heat of that thing which *was* Mattock Corwin grew and grew until it became a fire, a fire inside of Mattock, devouring Mattock. Mattock concentrated on it: on the feeling of tendrils of fire eating away at the inside of his flesh. He grabbed onto those tendrils of fire and he stoked them, forcing them further out. He forced the fires' ravaging apotheosis within him up and out and up and out until they danced just beneath his skin.

As the howl of the wolves descended Mat's skin stretched. The thing that had grown inside his flesh for so many months pushed to break free. Reah, his love, was grabbing onto his arms, yelling at him and crying. He couldn't hear her. He could barely see her. Mat's skin stretched and tore and blood spurted in thin streamers and then Mattock Corwin stretched within his skin and the fire within him exploded within his heart and his skin burned and bubbled and was then incinerated.

The creature, Mattock Corwin, reared, shedding Mattock Corwin, *becoming* Mattock Corwin. Its snake scales, silver, glinted like wet white river pebbles on its dragon body and it roared, shivering its bloody wings. The roar settled in the heavens, tasting high blown streamers of water and wind.

The roar settled in the heavens and then it dove, it dove and it crashed into the souls of the mortals beneath it and those mortals fell, and there was fire beneath the feet of Mattock Corwin's enemies—there was fire in the streets—and Mattock Corwin watched as the world came tumbling down. The streets and buildings of Arelcrys were ablaze and the fire that consumed them moved like a swarm of locusts. Everything that had mattered to Mattock Corwin

fell away as he rose upward. The bridge, the city, and the nut brown girl he had loved became nothing as Mattock Corwin reared, mindless, and then fell unconscious into the Deadblock River.

VITA

JS Harlow is an up and coming writer with a passion for Fantasy, Magical Realism, Science Fiction, and Horror. He is a hard-trained master of throwing rocks off of cliffs and having them come back to him and an avowed dedicatee of baroque wordsmithery. His writing is best characterized by its idiosyncrasies and its use of discordant tone and image-centric scene construction. He is a writer who adores the fantastic and the bizarre, and he intends to contribute his own brand of both to the literary world.

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