

PREDATOR & PREY

JURY



GHERBOD FLEMING

WEREWOLF
THE DOOMSDAY

HUNTER
THE RECKONING

BOOK FOUR OF SIX

PREDATOR & PREY

JURY

Nowhere to Hide

Undead monsters prowl the city streets, hidden from the eyes of an oblivious world. Those few humans aware of the threat face an uphill battle. Douglas Sands has seen his fellow hunters die. Fleeing monster and law alike, he and three other survivors seek refuge beyond the city — only to discover that the wild forests hold their own secret horrors.

Kaitlin Stinnet also sees the monsters for what they are. But are the bloodthirsty, raging beasts that much different from the humans she has known? Is there middle ground to be discovered, or are the answers all black and white, merely to be confirmed by blood?

Predator & Prey: Jury is the fourth in this series of six novels that explores the Hunters newly arrived within the World of Darkness and the supernatural foes they believe they have an obligation to confront. In the course of the series, the line between hunter and the hunted continues to blur. The series continues with Predator & Prey: Mage.



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PREDATOR & PREY

JURY

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JURY

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Part One: Flight

CHAPTER 1

The motel room was on the rear, more private side of the building. Not that Douglas Sands expected prying eyes on this godforsaken stretch of Route 27. Having lived most of his adult life in Iron Rapids, he tended to forget what lay beyond the perimeter highway, namely the nether regions of rural Michigan: snow-covered fields with stiff, brown stalks of grass, stretching into the haze; frozen lakes; dairy farms, fields empty, the cows at this point in the early morning probably hooked up to behemoth milking equipment. Except for the occasional rumbling passage of semis on the highway, on the other side of the motel, the world was asleep.

Sands wished that he were. He wished that he could wake up to find that everything that had happened over the past several weeks was nothing more than a long, disturbing, torturous nightmare.

"Any time you're ready, Pete Sampras," Clarence said to Douglas, slamming the car door behind him.

Clarence and John, holding Julia under the arms and knees, hustled her into the motel room. John had already unlocked the door so they wouldn't have to putz around in the parking lot with a limp body while they fumbled with the key.

Sands had trouble bringing the past and present into proper focus. Half of his face was cold to the point of numb; he'd been sleeping with his cheek pressed against the window. The other half, he wished were numb; the entire left side of his head throbbed, and blood trickled from beneath the saturated bandage just below his eye. His clothes were stiff and reeked of sewage, but a fouler, more insidious stench clung to the inside of his

nostrils, mouth, and throat: the pungent odor of death, decay, corruption of that which was natural and right.

Standing up out of the car, sharp pain assailed Sands' abdomen and back, muscles still tender from recent spasms. Surreal flickers of light danced before his eyes. His knees threatened to buckle until he reached out and steadied himself against the hood of the car. Heat radiated from the metal, but tiny flakes of snow were landing on his face; the incongruity panicked him for an instant—nothing made sense anymore, nothing was like it should be, like it was before. He sucked in a cold breath. The anxiety receded, slowly, and not far.

The wind was pushing his hair over his face. When was the last time he'd gotten a haircut? he tried to remember. The idea seemed strangely absurd: walking into a business and paying someone to cut his hair; it was part of the old world, of normal life, which no longer existed. Not for him. He needed to look respectable why? To keep his boss happy? His wife? Sands heard the caustic bark that was him laughing. He leaned over the rapidly cooling hood and sucked in more cold air, fighting down the nausea gaining strength in his gut. He began to shiver from the wind. At least the wind *was* just wind—not a voice, not a little boy calling out to his father. After a moment, Sands staggered into the hotel room.

"Yo, Pete Sampras, shut the damn door," Clarence told him.

"Stop calling me that," Sands said. He closed the door and locked it.

The heat inside the dingy room was stifling. John Hetger had stripped Julia to the waist and was swabbing iodine on the stab wound above her

left breast. Lying there on one of the beds, unconscious, with her mouth slack, she looked much older than her frumpy mid-thirties; she looked tired, pale, half dead. With both hands, Hetger pressed down on her and put his ear near her chest, listening for air escaping from the wound. After doing this three times, he seemed satisfied, though his expression remained grim. The cleft in his chin seemed deeper somehow when he concentrated so intently. Clarence was in the bathroom soaking the white motel towels in hot water. One at a time, he wrung them out with his strong, dark hands, and brought the towels to Hetger.

Still walking unsteadily, Sands made his way to the bathroom. He shoved past Clarence, who was coming out with another towel.

"Damn," said Clarence. "You look green as..."

Sands dropped to his knees and threw up into the toilet. There was hardly anything left in his stomach after having vomited in the sewer earlier. Even so, the stinging bile, dripping from his mouth and nose, served to purge most of the taste of death.

"That would explain it," Clarence said, shaking his head and tsking. "And you make a mess, you clean it up. I ain't touchin' your—"

"Clarence," Hetger said, "give him a break."

Sands rested his face against the cool porcelain. He stayed like that, trying to ignore the renewed pain in his back and stomach, as Clarence soaked the last of the towels and then took a seat in the room. By the time Sands managed to climb back to his feet and leave the bathroom, Hetger had covered Julia with several blankets and elevated her feet with the pillows from the other

bed, the bed onto which Sands now crawled and then sprawled in exhaustion.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Could be better," John answered. "Could be a lot better, but could be a lot worse, I guess. I'm not a doctor, but I don't think her lung was punctured. I think when that thing stabbed her, it hit bone, maybe the edge of her sternum, or a rib. Too low for her clavicle. If it had gotten her lung—or heart, of course—she'd probably be dead by now."

When that thing stabbed her... Sands tried to block the images those words evoked. He had been right there in the tunnel when the monster had stabbed Julia—with a bone, a rib...a rib it had just pulled out of Jason's chest.

"Shouldn't we get her to a hospital?"

"Too many questions," Hetger said, shaking his head. "With the explosion in the sewers and the break-in at Ms. Vinn's apartment, the police might have put two and two together. My hope is that when she regains consciousness, she'll be able to—"

"To heal herself," Sands cut him off. "Like she healed me, when I was at Albert's house." Hetger nodded. "And you're willing to risk her life on that hope?" Sands asked incredulously, growing indignant. "When she regains consciousness—if she regains consciousness..."

"There are too many risks at the hospital, Douglas," said Hetger, remaining infuriatingly calm. "It's a chance we all have to take. You need to understand that, if you're going to stay with us."

"You've got it all figured out, don't you?" Sands said, unable to block out any longer the fury of his wrecked life, his wrecked marriage, of all the pain

he had endured. "So why is Jason dead? And Julia might be dying. And Albert—"

"Hold it right there, you," Clarence snapped, pointing and leaning forward in his chair. He'd shed his jacket, and his arms and chest practically bulged through his shirt. His eyes were dark and angry. "You're the one who got Albert killed."

"Clarence," John said evenly with a raised hand. "It's all right to talk about these things. This is all new to Douglas. It takes some getting used to."

"Getting used to?" Sands repeated, not believing his ears. "People are getting killed left and right around here, and you want me to get used to it?"

"You know," Clarence continued, "we have been doing you a favor. We have been watching over your wife, and your girlfriend—while you were busy gettin' Albert killed."

"Douglas," said John, still not raising his voice, "we learn more every night. Sometimes the price is high. Last night's lessons...the price was high. Too high."

"You're damn right," Sands said. "We never should have gone down those—"

"You were the dumbass blabbing all over the line that we had to kill the thing!" Clarence yelled, exploding from his seat. "So which is it? Kill it, or not go down after it? You can't have it both ways."

Sands opened his mouth, ready to respond with equal vehemence, when he realized to his shock and horror that Clarence was right. But realizing and admitting were not the same thing at all. "I...I don't need this crap," he said, overcoming his stumble. "I thought you guys knew what you were doing. I thought—"

"And another thing," Clarence went on, still fuming, jabbing his finger at the air in Sands' direction, "you are not the victim here. You need to get that through your skull."

"Why don't you shut the hell up?" Sands said. "There's nothing you have to say that I want to hear." He was too worked up to consider whether it was wise to speak that way to somebody who carried around a sawed-off shotgun and grenades.

"Douglas—" Hetger said.

"Don't you try to soothe me, John," Sands insisted. "And don't think that I'm going to stick around with you and your band of merry men. My problem is taken care of—that vampire is dead. Dead for good. Burned up and blown all to hell. I don't have to throw away my whole life. I'm not going to." As he said the words, he suddenly thought that it might be true: He could go back to Iron Rapids now; he could patch things up with Faye and try to make a real go of their marriage.

"You want to walk out of that door?" Clarence asked him defiantly. "You want to walk down the street with nobody to watch your back? You go right ahead. We'll see how long you last. Get yourself killed, instead of us. Suits me just fine."

Sands was up from the bed now, trembling with rage. "You think I won't? You think I can't?"

Clarence stepped closer—then past him, to the door, and opened it. "There you go, Mr. Got-All-the-Answers. Good luck to you, and don't forget to write."

Sands felt a hand on his shoulder—Hetger's, firm, steady. "Clarence," John said, "close the door."

"What the bloody hell...?" came a new voice, weak, strained. All three men looked to Julia. She

grimaced and bit her lower lip as she tried to take a deep breath. "Can't a girl get some sleep around here without...?" She waved her hand vaguely but didn't have the strength to finish her thought.

"Of course you can," said John, quickly at her side.

Clarence, scowling, shut the door. Sands, like Julia, felt his strength ebbing. By necessity as much as by choice, he sat back down on the second bed.

"We all need some sleep," Hetger said, relieved that Julia had regained consciousness.

Struggling to keep her eyes open, she looked around the room. "Did we...did we get it?"

"We did," Hetger said. "We got it."

Julia peered at them as if she were trying to see through the dark. "Jason...?"

"You need to sleep," John said quietly, smoothing her hair with his fingers. "Just sleep."

Julia nodded once and then closed her eyes. Watching her slip beyond consciousness again, Sands felt that he was being dragged with her. Gingerly, he lay back on the bed. *Where are the damn pillows?* he wondered, then remembered that they were propping up Julia's feet. Hetger had been afraid she was going into shock. The bed vibrated slightly as a semi roared down Route 27. And then Sands was asleep.

CHAPTER 2

Riding in Mr. Robesin's car—Floyd's car—makes me uncomfortable as hell. It makes my skin crawl. It reminds me of the worst time in my life. I stare straight ahead at the patches of asphalt moving through the beams of the headlights. The road is a black river, no lines painted this far out in the sticks. I remember the stink of bubbling tar, a hundred times worse than burning rubber. I picture the hardtop beneath us turning liquid, swallowing the car, seeping in around the window seals, through the vents, choking the life out of me. Maybe there *were* lines painted on the road. Maybe the road already swallowed them and left no trace. Maybe I'll end up like some stupid dinosaur, nothing but a pile of bones at the bottom of a tar pit, waiting to be discovered however many thousand years from now.

I look out the side window—the passenger-side window, never at Floyd. The woods seem close enough that I could touch the nearest trees if I rolled down the glass. The branches almost meet overhead, like we're driving through a tunnel. The trees, the tunnel walls, can only hide what's out there in the dark. They can't make it go away. They can't make me forget. I hear the howls echoing off the moon. I remember the snarling only feet away, jaws strong as a bear trap snapping shut, tearing through flesh, crushing bone. I can still feel the blood splattering across my face.

"Are you too warm, Kaitlin?" Floyd asks. He sees me wiping my face.

I look at him despite myself—to spite myself, maybe. How many middle-aged white guys did I climb into a car with during my time in the city? I never would have guessed there could be so many,

playing hooky from the wife and kids in the suburbs and cruising through the bad part of town looking for a young squeeze. Floyd could be any of them. He's balding; he's got the old, ugly glasses, desk-job gut and desk-job butt.

"I'm not too warm," I mumble, but he's already turning down the heat.

I thought he was like all the others when I met him. I assumed he must be. Why else would he help me—buy me groceries, give me a job—unless he wanted a little brown sugar? But maybe not. Frances at the office likes him well enough. But maybe she just doesn't know. She hasn't been where I have. She hasn't seen the men that I have. Maybe this whole lame excuse of Floyd's wife wanting to have me over for dinner is just a ploy, a lie he made up to get me alone.

I've just finished thinking that when he pulls into his driveway. There's a lamp post by the garage, and the porch light is on too. The darkness of the forest seems impossibly far away, but it's still there, always there, waiting. I see faces ruffling the curtains, trying to get a good look. Two little girls. Then they're gone, and only the swaying curtains are left. I feel like an asshole for being suspicious of Floyd. I want people to accept me. Why can't I accept them?

Or maybe Floyd and his wife want something really kinky.

We go inside. The kids don't come out right away. They're shy. I can hear them giggling in the other room. Anne says hi from the kitchen, says she'll be right with us. Floyd takes my coat for me and hangs it up. The place is nice—not showy nice, comfortable. Not that different from my home growing up. The kids could have been me and my

brother—a few years before I ran away. Floyd is burbling about the red wine stain on the carpet, and the front hallway needing painting. I'm thinking about how much of a dump my place is. Even so, it's mine, and I can hold on to that. Floyd doesn't mean it as a criticism of my place; he's just nervous and trying to think of something to talk about. A lot of those white men in the city were nervous too—the ones that weren't mean, the ones that felt guilty. Does Floyd feel guilty about something?

Anne comes out of the kitchen—and my jaw about hits the floor. She's a beautiful black woman, just a few inches taller than me if not for the clogs she's wearing. She doesn't look like she's been cooking; she looks like she just got back from the office, in her tan vest and pants suit. She's wearing a funky fish necklace, and lipstick that accents her deep almond eyes. I feel like a slob: boots and torn jeans, hair doing whatever the hell it wants. But she doesn't seem to notice. The girls are braver now that mama's in the room. They're lighter skinned than she is, a smooth, perfect chocolate. I look at Floyd, dumpy and out of shape. He's nice and all, but how did he get this gorgeous woman? How did he make these beautiful girls?

"This is Jenna," Anne says. "She's fourteen. And this is Melissa."

"Mel," says the younger girl. "I'm eleven. How old are you?"

"Melissa," says Anne, mildly scolding. "That's not polite."

"You told her how old Jenna is," Mel insists.

"It's okay," I tell them. "I don't mind." I kneel down and straighten Mel's collar. "I'm twenty-three." The girls nod, impressed by what to them

must seem an age so distant in the future as to be unattainable. Mel is still very much a little girl. Jenna, give her a year or two and boys will be knocking down the door. She'll have all the attention she wants, and then some, probably. I wish I could save her from that. From the probing stares, the pawing hands. Without meaning to, I start to tear up. I stand, look away from the girls, pretend to look at the pictures on the walls.

I want to say something, to tell them what a great place they have here, really nice. But I don't think I can keep my voice from trembling, so I just swallow and stand there blinking back the damn tears.

"Dinner's not quite ready," Anne says. "Girls, why don't you take Kaitlin in the den."

Floyd comes along too, of course. Anne has everything under control in the kitchen. We sit down and he clicks off the TV. How long has it been since I've watched TV? Literally years. I almost ask him to turn it back on, but that wouldn't be polite, and the girls are watching me. The den, unlike any part of my house, is so warm. It has carpet and furniture. I remember the days when that sort of thing didn't seem at all unusual to me. So long ago. That was part of the normal world, the mundane world. I think of the man who might or might not be waiting for me when I go home. There's nothing normal about him. He's part of that other world, the one I don't seem able to claw my way out of. Would anything be different if I painted my house, if I had carpet and furniture and a TV and heat? Would that change anything? Or would I still see dead people walking, ghosts, monsters?

Floyd is making conversation. The girls are joining in, waiting for me to say something, but I'm not any good at pretending I'm normal. I'm so out of practice. I needed a few years to get a grip on my sanity, and I'm only just starting to crawl back out of that deep hole. I see Jenna and think again of who she'll be in a few years, of what she'll go through, of what I've been through. I try to smile at her, but it doesn't feel right. I look at Mel. She's watching me like a hawk; kids aren't shy about that kind of thing.

"I like your braids," I tell her. It's true, and I manage the compliment easily enough.

"I can do yours," she says, excited. "It's long enough."

I don't know what to say. She's just a little girl, but I can't seem to answer. I'm embarrassed again about how scruffy I look.

"Dinner's ready," says Anne, coming into the room. "Melissa, don't you be bothering Kaitlin."

"After dinner," Mel says. "I can braid it for you after dinner."

I nod. I find a smile; it feels a little better this time. Jenna and Mel laugh. I laugh with them.

CHAPTER 3

The next stone wouldn't budge. Black Rindle wrapped his fingers around it and pulled. His arms and shoulders and back burned, but the stone would not move. The strength of his rage-form would have made quick work of the wall, the shrine; he refrained from that expediency, however. This task was one not of rage, but of penance.

Black Rindle was not alone; the others watched from nearby, but he refused their help. The Sept of the Wailing Glade was little more than a pack now. He was alpha of the pack, and thereby, by default, grand elder of the sept. This responsibility was his and his alone. They watched him—their hunched, deformed leader—with varying degrees of shame, bewilderment, resentment: Claudia Stands Firm, warder of the caern, klaive hanging from her belt, she who had supported Black Rindle when no other would; Cynthia Slack Ear, tribal sister to Claudia but friend and lover of another; Shreds Birch, a Red Talon who would have gutted Black Rindle if given the chance, she now rested back to lupine back with Cynthia; and Barks-at-Shadows, moon-calf rejected by his inbred brethren, he seemed physically pained with each stone Black Rindle removed from the wall.

"Why?" Barks-at-Shadows asked sullenly, like an aggrieved youth. "Why must you destroy it? This makes no sense."

Black Rindle paused in his labor, not overly displeased to do so. But it was Claudia Stands Firm who spoke: "We must atone for our failures, moon-calf." Her words were strangely gentle; from her lips, even the pejorative *moon-calf* carried no sting,

was not mocking as it often was from others, as it often had been from Black Rindle.

"But Water Snake has always been with us," Barks-at-Shadows insisted.

The new alpha, speaking firmly, without hint of either condescension or coddling, addressed his answer to all of the pack; they all must understand: "This is no shrine I destroy," he said. "Nothing of spirit remains. It is only a pile of stones. Water Snake has already left us. When my mother died, the spirit departed as well. None remained who were worthy of its protection." Black Rindle looked down at the curving wall that resembled a snake slithering from the bank into the stream. His mother, Galia Rainchild, had built the wall; she had infused the shrine with the servant spirit of Uktena.

"Owl, too, has left us," Black Rindle said. "Wisdom has long been absent here. I am as guilty as any. We have closed our eyes to the corruption spreading through the land."

"But why destroy the shrine...the wall?" Barks-at-Shadows wanted to know. "Don't we want Water Snake to come back?"

"If Water Snake or Owl or *any* spirit is to return," Black Rindle said, "it must be because of our faithfulness, not that of those who have gone before...those who have died." He fought down the lump in his throat. To speak of his mother that way, to face that she was gone, still caused him pain. "We must purify ourselves, and then we must purify the caern. Only then will we be worthy of spirit guardians. But first," he said, turning away from the Garou, away from his people and back to the stones arranged by his own dead mother, "first I must finish this."

He lifted the stone that had resisted him, removed it from the pattern of the snake, and rolled it down the bank into the stream, where it came to rest, partially submerged. Black Rindle pulled away another stone, and another, scattering them into the woods, into the stream. Several times, he scraped his cold fingers raw, but the abrasions healed as quickly as his blood could rise to the surface. Determined to ignore his burning muscles, he fell into a rhythm, and like a convict chained and busy at hard labor, he took up the words of a chant, if only within his mind:

These are my people.

This is my caern.

I will see to their safety.

They will come to no harm.

These are my people....

Gradually, as the night grew colder and darker, what had been the shrine to Water Snake grew lower, shorter, its physical integrity increasingly corresponding to the defunct spiritual component of the shrine.

These are my people.

This is my caern....

Through it all, and despite his mantra, however, Black Rindle was not able to achieve the unanimity of mind he desired. Though his body ached and his spirit was consumed by the plight of his sept, distracting thoughts, however long he managed to keep them submerged, consistently returned to dog him.

You must forgive the past and look to the future. I impart to you that gift. Those were the words that the spirit wolf, with his patchwork coat, had spoken to Black Rindle. Some gift, he scoffed inwardly. Although he had to admit that the dream

ugly Meneghwo had brought had helped Black Rindle overcome his hatred, his resentment. He had not bested his own father and become alpha out of a sense of malice, but rather to fulfill the caern's need. But when resentment had been a way of life unto itself, could mere admonition change that?

The future. Though he had been an exile, Black Rindle's future now lay with his people, his caern. Just a night ago, he had hoped that it would lie in a different direction. With each stone that he took from the wall, despite his internal mantra and his striving to achieve single-mindedness, he thought of the girl, the human—and resentment flowed more swiftly than the stream at his feet. How *dare* she reject him after he had saved her life?

Let it go, he told himself. Look to the future.

These are my people....

But not only had she rejected him, she'd gone back to that place, the incinerator, after he'd shown her the obvious Wurm-taint. That had nothing to do with personal feelings; there was nothing petty about the magnitude of that betrayal. Perhaps she had been right to reject him—after all, if she'd gone away with him, he never would have come back to the caern, never would have faced his father and taken leadership of the sept—but to go back to that defiled place, the source of the corruption spreading through the land, how could he forgive that? Yes, she was human, despite whatever strange affinity allowed her to see the Garou for what they were and to avoid the madness of terror which that knowledge should have struck in her heart. No, she was not

Garou. But he had shown her the corruption. And yet she had gone back.

So I must go back to her, Black Rindle thought. If she is tainted, knowing what she does about us, about our caern...

These are my people.

This is my caern....

From the wall, he lifted another cold stone, raised it in both hands over his head, launched it into the stream. *If she is tainted, then I must destroy her.*

Behind Black Rindle, Shreds Birch raised her face to heavens and howled a low, mournful note to Luna. Cynthia joined her friend. In turn, Claudia Stands Firm and then Barks-at-Shadows dropped to all fours, took on the aspect of lupus, and joined their howls to the chorus. They mourned the past of the sept, the ways that they had known, the ways that must now change so that they might faithfully serve Gaia. Black Rindle looked upon the wreckage of the shrine. Still a low wall remained, a collection of stones, the handiwork of his mother. It was enough.

Look to the future, he thought, as his body changed and he stood as a great dire wolf, back bent with deformity, eyes cast to the ground. He would look to the future as soon as the wrongs of the past were avenged.

CHAPTER 4

The ride back home is not as bad as the earlier ride. The road is just a road now. The warmth and security of Floyd's family carries over to the car. I don't think of him as another of those middle-aged white men, another John who I have to put up with for an hour so I can afford my next fix. Now he's Floyd, Anne's husband, and Mel's and Jenna's father. He's a bit on the goofy side, but harmless. Part of me says not to give in so easily, not to trust him. But it feels so good—*not* to be afraid. I can't remember the last time I felt that. I can't think about it, or I'll cry again. I turn on the radio, go through all the stations. Nothing but country and oldies, but just to hear it, to hear *anything* after so long...

My hair is braided. There were a few times when I thought Mel might snatch me bald-headed, but aside from those, it felt so good to have somebody else doing my hair. I'd forgotten it was like that. Fewer tangles and she might have put me to sleep. I like the finished product. I almost didn't recognize myself in the mirror when she was done. For a long time now, my hair has been pretty wild—more wild than pretty—but now it's in lots of skinny rows, each with a red or purple tie on the end. Mel had plastic beads too, but I think the clicking would have driven me crazy. Small steps.

I like Anne. She's about fifteen years older than me—I didn't ask, but Mel volunteered the information—but she didn't talk down at me, didn't make me feel like I need to get my act together. We just talked. There aren't a lot of black folks in this part of the state, and I think she appreciated seeing a similarly complected face. Probably the girls liked that too. They must feel like they stick out among all the rural white kids

around here—kind of how I feel whenever I go into town.

I think Floyd has to be okay to be with a woman as cool as Anne. But that other part of me still isn't convinced. Would a wife know? How many of those respectable wives knew that their respectable husbands were seeing prostitutes on the side? Would Anne ever find out if Floyd tried to force himself on me—he'd *have* to use force, because I don't do that crap anymore—and I refused? All she'd ever know was that I didn't work out in the job, and it was time for a new girl at the office. How many girls have been there before me? No way to tell who you can trust.

Damn, I *hate* this. I *want* to trust Floyd, to like him. It's been so long since...

But that's what happens when you've seen a dead man lumbering down the street, blood and pus seeping from open wounds, skin peeling away from bone. He's dead, damn it. And I know he's dead. Maybe he even knows that he's dead. But nobody else sees it. So many blind people. *That's* how I know that you can't trust what you see. Maybe I do see more than most people, but do I see everything? Do I see Floyd's heart, his soul? He may not be the same as every other comfortable white man with a wad of cash and a hard-on—but he ain't that different.

We're almost back to my house now. We pass the little bar just down the road, no lights on, the window on the front door is boarded up. I try to pretend that the building doesn't exist. There's my house. What does Floyd think about it: that it's a wreck, a firetrap, that it should be torn down?

"Thanks for coming over tonight," he says in that sincere way he has of saying everything. "I

know Anne enjoyed meeting you, and the girls did too. I hope you didn't mind—"

"I've gotta go," I say. "Thanks for... thanks for everything." I hop out of the car before he can say anything else, before he has a chance to ruin what I *want* him to be. I don't give him a chance to ask himself in or feel me up. I only look back at the car once, and I see the light from the dashboard reflected in his glasses. He waits to leave until I open the front door and step inside. He backs out of the driveway and, just like that, he's gone.

The house is quiet all around me. Cold, dark, empty. I look back to the driveway, where Floyd's car was just a few seconds ago. How can I be such a bitch to him? He doesn't deserve it. Then again, of all the crap that's been dumped on me, how much did I deserve? Still, I should give the guy a break, even if it's just so that he'll invite me over again, and I can see Anne and the girls. Maybe that's manipulative of me, but I refuse to feel guilty about it. I do what I can to get by.

I'm still standing by the door. The house seems unusually intimidating. My own house, damn it. Like the darkness, the wilderness, that I was able to forget about for a few hours has moved in here. It's been waiting for me the whole time. I let my coat slip of my shoulders and fall to the floor. The sound of the nylon sliding down my arms and onto the hardwood floor breaks the quiet like shattering glass. I shuffle my feet—to hear the noise, to assure myself that I matter, to announce my presence. But there's no one to announce it to. I would know. I would feel his breathing like now I feel the emptiness of the house. I said I wouldn't leave this place, I'd run as far as I could run, so now I stay here alone. I can't go on turning my back on the world. I needed to for a while, but it can't go on

forever. If only I could turn my back on that other world. As much as I want that, I want not to be alone right now.

I force myself to move, to inhabit my own house. Before I get to the stairs, I glance through the doorway to my right, into the front room, the one under my bedroom that gets the afternoon sun. Front room. That's what I call it. In most people's houses it would be the living room, or the parlor, or the den, or what the hell ever. There'd be furniture, a couch, a coffee table, maybe a TV, a lamp. Mine is empty except for dust, a couple of leaves against the far wall—they've been there for over a year.

I like the creak of the stairs under my feet, and the sound of the toilet flushing after I pee, water rushing through the pipes. I could take a bath—the pipes clank when I run the hot water—but I'm too tired. In my bedroom, the one part of this house I've really made my own, I step over the blanket on the floor. I imagine that I can see the bloodstains on it, but it's too dark, I know. Even so, something is wrong. My bed, mattress, pillows, sheets, all are in tatters, shredded, torn, twisted, in total disarray. My breath catches in my throat. I can't hear over the pulse pounding in my ears, but I strain to listen.

Could I have been wrong? Is he here after all? I force air into my lungs. I breathe the man-scent, the wolf-scent, that I've grown used to—the scent that brings equal parts comfort and fear. I stand frozen. The passage of time has little meaning when you're so completely alone, but eventually I realize that, yes, I am alone. He is not here. I crawl into what's left of my bed, without bothering to undress except for my boots, without ever having turned on a light.

CHAPTER 5

Sands was asleep when Hetger stopped the car. John shifted into reverse and backed up slowly, until the headlights illuminated the numbers on the mailbox by the road.

"This is it," Clarence said from the back seat.

Julia, next to him, didn't wake up. They had rested at the hotel until she was strong enough to do whatever the hell it was she did, to heal herself. Even though she had magically repaired Sands' own injuries more than once, he'd looked on in amazement as Julia had closed her eyes and the stab wound in her chest *healed*. The skin grew back right before their eyes; it reminded Douglas of time-lapse photography, except it happened in real time. He touched his hand lightly to the bandage on his face: the second deep, painful laceration he'd gotten at the claws of the lurker. The vampire had tried to kill them, *had* killed Jason, would have killed Faye and Melanie if the hunters hadn't killed it first.

Her flesh knitted back together, Julia's chest rose and fell with a deep heartfelt sigh, then she drifted out of consciousness again.

Hetger combed her hair with his fingers. "She just needs more sleep now. She'll be fine." He noticed the way Sands was staring at her, at the patch of skin on her chest that was no longer a bloody hole. "A lot of hunters call them *edges*," John said. "Hers, one of hers, is that she can heal herself, and others."

Sands nodded, almost imperceptibly. He'd experienced Julia's healing touch, the warmth that started in her fingers and soaked deep into muscles and bone. He just hadn't seen it displayed so...so

incontrovertibly. His injuries had, for the most part, been internal, or else he'd been unconscious when Julia had tended him, but this... To watch torn flesh grow back together...

As the old saying went, seeing was believing. Well, Sands had seen, but he still couldn't believe. As John pulled up the blanket to Julia's chin, the entire scene took on a surreal aspect for Sands; the motel room seemed fake, a theatrical set, the phone, TV, beds, chair, all props. Sands felt that if he peeked around the right corner, he would see backstage: dark curtains, idle actors waiting for their cues.

The explosion in the Iron Rapids sewers had made the Lansing local news—and the police had found a body, not yet identified; Jason—so Hetger and Clarence decided that the foursome shouldn't stick around the motel for too long. John had paid in cash, and made up an out-of-state license plate for the registration card, but better safe than arrested. Even though, according to the news, the police didn't have any suspects yet. Listening to John and Clarence discuss the arrangements, Sands was mystified by how they could concentrate on such finite, pragmatic details when the world around them was going to hell. Maybe literally. Vampires preying on innocents, dead people passing themselves off as living, ghosts possessing their spouses, and God knew what else. The present was completely crazy, yet somehow the past—marriage, work, family, normal routine—was equally inaccessible. If the motel room struck him as fake, his old life, too, was a lie, never real. Before, he'd simply never seen.

They carried Julia to the car and then drove north through the night. They tossed out the window a wad of bloody bandages and towels—

not the kind of thing they wanted to leave in the waste basket at the motel; as litter along the highway, the evidence might go undiscovered for days, or longer.

Sands had slept fitfully in the car. The gash on his face was throbbing, and all the ibuprofen in the world didn't seem to do much good. He wished he had more of the pain pills from when he'd been in the hospital. As unsatisfying as his slumber had been, he didn't seem fully able to throw off the veil of sleep now that the car was stopped.

"Should we come back in the morning?" Hetger asked Clarence. "It's almost 4:00 AM."

"She won't mind," Clarence said. "Even if she does, she's my cousin. Wait here." He got out and closed the door behind him.

Hetger eased the car forward a few feet onto the shoulder. Against the backdrop of the snow, Sands could just make out Clarence's dark shape advancing across the deep front yard toward the looming silhouette of a large frame house. The dwelling was hemmed in by trees and impenetrable darkness. Clarence climbed the few steps to the front porch and stayed there what seemed a long time; Sands thought he saw Clarence's hand rise and knock on the door, but the only sound within the car was Julia's gentle breathing. Douglas rubbed his eyes; he wasn't awake yet, and the world beyond the car seemed artificial, much as the motel room had. Clarence had walked away and become part of an immense canvas backdrop painted in ominous tones of black, purple, gray. When Sands looked back, Clarence was gone. Sands flinched. He peered into the darkness trying to catch sight of the black man until he thought his eyes would

cross. The touch of his forehead against the car window startled him.

"Where is he?" Sands asked.

"Inside." Hetger hadn't looked away.

"Is she...did she...did she let him in, or did he...?"

"I'm not sure," Hetger said. "I think she opened the door for him."

"She didn't turn the lights on."

"No."

For no reason he could identify, a wave of anxiety swept over Sands. He couldn't sit still any longer after hours in the car. He turned and glanced at Julia in the back seat. Clarence's sawed-off shotgun was on the floor back there. *Did he take grenades in with him?* Sands wondered. He saw a sudden vision of fire bursting forth through the windows of the old house, scattering glass and splintered wood in all directions. Clarence was half a step ahead of the explosion, rushing toward the car, the brimstone legions of hell on his heels....

Clarence was coming back to the car, jogging, not running, not fleeing; the house wasn't an inferno behind him. Sands' forehead touched the window again. His breath fogged the glass as he sifted reality from fancy—no longer a simple feat.

"Pull up by the house," Clarence said, opening the rear door and sliding in behind Hetger. "Around the back, as much as you can."

"She happy to see you?" John asked. Clarence shrugged.

After hours of the hypnotic hum of pavement, the tires crunching gravel and snow sounded like fireworks. As they drew closer to the house, Sands kept waiting for the backdrop to drape over the

hood of the car and the windshield, but the structure was three dimensional, and the painted darkness retreated temporarily before the headlights.

"Douglas," said John, as he and Clarence lifted Julia from the car, "can you get whatever's in the backseat? We'll leave the gear in the trunk until morning." He glanced at the sky, at the clouds not much higher than the treetops, looking for signs of that morning which was only a few hours away.

Left alone outside, Sands gathered the sleeping bags they had laid out to make Julia comfortable, as well as Clarence's shotgun. He handled the weapon gingerly. Was it loaded? Sands didn't even know how to check. The irrefutable proof of his ignorance angered him; it was the reason—part of the reason, at least—that Clarence treated him so dismissively, called him Pete Sampras. Sands was a weekend hack pretending he was in the big leagues, and *these* big leagues could get people killed, *had* gotten people killed. Sands tried to hold the gun like he knew what he was doing, a task made more difficult by the sleeping bags trying to slither out of his grasp. He paused in his collection, alerted by...by what? Did he hear something? Did something move? He scanned the darkness, waiting for whatever had caught his attention to reveal itself against the painted backdrop. The silence pressed against him.

"Need any help, Douglas?" Hetger had come back out.

Sands looked back and forth between John and the surrounding wilderness. "No." Best to get some sleep, he decided. He'd see what everything looked like in the daylight. "No, I'm fine."

Following Hetger inside did little to dispel Sands' disquieting sense that nothing around him

was real. No one had turned on any lights, and Clarence's cousin didn't seem to be anywhere. The lack of furnishing downstairs added to the unreality. There was a card table and folding chair in the kitchen, but that was it. The next room was piled full with boxes and crates. The other rooms were all empty. Hardwood floors dusty and dirty enough that grit crunched underfoot. The place made Melanie's hellhole apartment look like a palace.

Thoughts of Melanie inexorably led to thoughts of Faye, of home—of places where it would make sense for Sands to be, of people it would make sense for him to be with. Not this dilapidated tinderbox of a house, not these people who took for granted vampires and shotguns and grenades in the sewer and dead friends. In the end, there was nothing for him to do except spread out one of the sleeping bags on the cold, hard floor and try to sleep.



The nearly imperceptible growl scraped raw the throat of the dire wolf, every muscle tensed, watching unseen amidst the night-shrouded foliage. Black Rindle's hunter instincts were primed, pricked into awareness by the sight of others entering the house where he had, briefly, found refuge. The humans were so loud: voices carrying in the early morning stillness, the creak of the car doors, footsteps crunching on snow and frozen ground. A deer fleeing through thick underbrush made less noise. The great wolf's nose was as awake as his erect ears; he smelled the sweat and breath of humans crammed in a car for hours, and from the vehicle's open doors wafted the stale scent of dried blood. Black Rindle licked his lips, swallowed the saliva that moistened his tongue.

The growl again. For a moment, the wolf thought that the remaining human had heard. The man who took a gun from the car peered into the darkness, looked in Black Rindle's direction. The wolf edged forward, his instincts and quivering jaw urging him to the kill. But the man did not see, and so Black Rindle waited, on the verge of attack. He was tempted to strike out of spite, as much as instinct.

Finally, he had crept away from the newfound responsibilities of the sept—alpha carried as much weight on his shoulders, perhaps more than, outcast—and come here. He must test the girl, he had told himself. He must make sure that she had not betrayed him to the Wyrn, and if she had, then he must set matters aright. Over and over again, he told himself: He must be sure. And almost he believed it. Almost he could say, and mean, that he didn't want to sit with her, to lie with her, to cradle her in his arms and shield her from all harm with his strong, twisted body.

He was a step closer to believing now. Now that more humans had come. Looking at the man trying to corral an armload of sleeping bags and not drop the shotgun, Black Rindle thought that he could kill them all, he could rip apart all the intruders, and be done with it. But that was the sort of thing that would likely upset Kaitlin; she was so human, so fragile, in many ways. As the clumsy man tromped up the steps into the house, Black Rindle was proud of his own restraint, proud that he had, on this occasion, thought of Kaitlin's feelings, proud that he hadn't killed the intruders. Yet.

Slipping farther back into the forest, he decided that a drink wouldn't be a bad idea. He

had denied his wolf-tongue blood; he should indulge his man-tongue. EveSong's bar was only a few hundred yards down the road, and Black Rindle doubted that EveSong would make use of it any more. So what could be the harm?

CHAPTER 6

In the deep forest, morning was slow to come. Stripped of leaves, still the stark branches of the hardwoods held at bay the dawn, and regardless, the break of day was of little comfort to Ryan Murphy, called EveSong by his people. The fury that ate at his gut like a cancer could not be eased by something so ephemeral as light, itself filtered and weakened by the thick cloud cover of Midwestern winter. Perhaps the heat of a raging fire that left his bones smoldering in the skeletal ruins of the forest might bring him peace, but short of that...

He crouched over the design without pattern of feathers and blood-speckled snow that had been a wild turkey. The meat was stringy; his fangs worried it like a canker sore. Why, he wondered crossly, did Gaia choose to visit such indignities upon him? Why? One after another after another. Had he not served her faithfully since the time of his first change? Was he not the memory of the Garou—not just the memory, but also the conscience!—telling the stories of their heroes so that the young might know the virtues of the people and fulfill their role as Gaia's warriors?

"Hmpf." He spat a grainy strand of gristle onto the snow. So much for the power of stories. So much for conscience.

EveSong eyed greedily the remaining portion of the turkey but left it where it lay. That the tale-teller's fortune had taken a turn for the worse there was no questioning. For three nights and two days now, he had been an outcast from his own sept. And why? Because the others were too foolish to see that thrice-cursed Hunch was the problem, not the *solution*. Alpha—they would call that inbred

mongrel alpha! The idiocy! It was like rewarding a dog for lapping up its own vomit. The injustice left a bitter taste in EveSong's mouth far more unpleasant than the texture of the fowl. He might be forced to suffer fools, but he was far from resigned to his sorry lot.

Rising and leaving behind the remains of the turkey, he made his way to the stream. EveSong's gray coat blended with the pale, pre-dawn forest. He moved like a whisper upon the north wind. Had he crashed through the brush like a charging bear, still he would have come unnoticed upon his companion. Evert Cloudkill sat cross-legged beside the water, eyes closed, unaware of the approach of his last loyal follower or of the straggling morning. His rage-form coat of gray-streaked white was even better suited to the winter surroundings than was EveSong's.

What guidance does he seek? EveSong wondered, his aggravation divided between his own predicament and Cloudkill's infirmity of spirit, which had brought it about. *What remains,* EveSong wanted to yell at his alpha, *but to go back to the caern and thrash that whelp bloody?*

Yet Cloudkill sat. He meditated. He did nothing, much as he'd done nothing as the sept had crumbled around him, as his mate Galia Rainchild had sickened and died, as Wyrmtaint had seeped back into the land. EveSong had chosen to stand behind the alpha, the founder of the sept, in hopes of salvaging so renowned a Garou from the throes of Harano, which had eaten away at his will and left him a tired old man. Did not they owe their leader that loyalty? As Galliard, EveSong could not forget the stories; he could not simply discard the great service to Gaia which Cloudkill had rendered. With time perhaps they

could have drawn Evert back to the path of his calling. EveSong had succeeded, at times, in rekindling the alpha's rage, at restoring purpose to the tired spirit. But in the end, Hunch had challenged Cloudkill, his own father, and exposed their leader's impotence.

He could have done with a bit more impotence back when he got that cursed Hunch on Galia, EveSong thought. But what was done was done, whether EveSong could make any sense of it or not. All that remained was to help ease Cloudkill back, to help him find himself again. Then they would have their vengeance on that metis cur.

Is that all? EveSong asked himself mockingly. The task was more than daunting. As he watched Evert, discouragement swelled within the tale-teller. Despite his Crinos bulk, Cloudkill seemed almost frail sitting beside the stream, his coat dull and listless, muscles slack. EveSong had heard tell of elders dragged back from the precipice of Harano and freed from the spirit-leeching malady, but not many. Silver Fangs seemed most predisposed to the wasting, but Stargazers with their otherworldly predilection, EveSong thought, must be a close second. He watched Cloudkill for a few more minutes and then sighed. No, it wouldn't be easy. The death of Galia had hit Evert hard—so hard, in fact, that the loss of his sept might not yet have taken firm hold in his mind. He might have further to fall before EveSong could pick him up.

Might as well give him a few more hours to meditate, EveSong decided at last. Meanwhile, there was the rest of a turkey, though in truth he wasn't sure that he wanted it. His stomach was already full with bile and resentment.

CHAPTER 7

Sands woke to the gruff note of Clarence's voice from the hallway. Douglas had taken an empty room for himself. The other two men, sharing another empty room with Julia, might feel the need to keep watch over her while she slept, but after so long spent crammed in the car and the motel with everyone, Sands craved privacy, even the privacy of a dirty, dusty, cold, unfurnished room. Waking up in a new place for the first time, he was disoriented for a few moments. The gray sky was visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows, and even through the wavy glass—the kind that old homes like this one tended to have—the forest outside didn't look nearly as ominous as it had last night. Slowly, the voices which had wakened Sands drew his attention: Clarence's forceful baritone and another.

"So we need to stay for a while," Clarence was saying.

"Yeah, okay," said the other voice, female, smaller, quieter, cowed by Clarence's indomitable will.

"Looks like you got plenty of room." There was a drawn-out pause. "So that's okay, right?"

"Yeah, okay. I said okay. Fine," she said apologetically, but still sounding as if she didn't mean it somehow.

"Good," Clarence said. "Cause we need to rest up some. Don't mention us to nobody, least not till we figure out what our story's gonna be. And don't bring nobody home. You got a boyfriend?"

"Uh...no. I won't. I won't bring nobody."

Sands craned his neck to peek through the doorway, but all he could see was part of Clarence's

back, fatigues and a white T-shirt bulging with muscles. Sands started to wriggle from his sleeping bag but quickly realized how stiff a night on the hard floor had left his back. He groaned, and the conversation in the hallway died away. Clarence leaned back and looked into the room. Sands nodded self-consciously. His own T-shirt wasn't quite so muscle-bound, and his gut hung over his boxers, plus he had to piss and had a hard-on.

"Lookin' good, Pete Sampras," Clarence said.

And then exactly what Sands didn't want to happen did. The girl, Clarence's cousin, poked her head around the corner. Sands tried to squirm back into his sleeping bag without being too obvious about it. The girl's large brown eyes took him in like he was an animal in a zoo, studying him, more wary than welcoming. She was lighter skinned than Clarence, and much smaller, but Sands decided that natural hostility must run in the family.

"Thanks for letting us use your floor," he said, hoping to diffuse the uncomfortable silence, but not meeting with much success. The girl never changed expression; she just watched him, like he was some alien creature, and then withdrew from the room. "Yeah?" Sands muttered under his breath. "Well same to you."

"I got to go," he heard her tell Clarence. "It's almost noon. I got to get to work."

"Work?"

Clarence's mocking disbelief made her angry; her voice had a defensive edge to it: "In a office. Filing and stuff."

"Uh-huh."

"Screw you." Her light footsteps receded down the hall. The front door creaked open, and she

paused. "Clarence, are they...you know. Are they...like us?"

Sands could see the back of Clarence's head, nodding. "Yeah," he said. "That's why we're here. That's why we need to stay a while."

She might have said something very quietly to her cousin, but all Sands heard was the door closing. More carefully this time, he started to slip out of the sleeping bag and reached for his clothes.

CHAPTER 8

I shouldn't have to escape my own house. That's what it feels like. Escaping. What the hell does Clarence think he's doing bringing those strangers, a bunch of old white people? What does he think he's doing telling me not to bring anybody home? To *my home*. Son of a bitch. He's helped me out over the years, helped me out a lot, but still...son of a bitch. For damn near two years I've been living off my trust fund. Clarence is the one who gets the check for me each month—I couldn't handle that kind of thing for a while. I could do it now, but he said he didn't mind. So he sends me cash, and pot, and makes the mortgage payments for me. But that doesn't mean that he owns me, or my house. Those are favors he's willing to do for family, and I'm willing to put him up for a while, him and his friends. But he can't tell me everything to do. Maybe I needed a little bit of that a couple of years ago, when I was cracking up, when I had to get away from the city, but that was a different me. I've got my act together now—more than then, anyhow.

I don't mind seeing him. Clarence ain't the easiest person to live with, but I don't mind seeing him. But does he have to show up in the middle of the freaking night, knocking on my door? Scared the hell out of me. I thought at first that it might be Rindle back, but he wouldn't have knocked.

All these damn men invading my house think they're doing me a favor. Floyd was the first, and he did buy me all that food from the store in town, so maybe that was a favor, but I didn't ask for it. I don't owe him nothing. He gave me a job, but I still don't owe him nothing. I do the work. I get a paycheck. That's the deal. That's as far as it goes.

I even enjoy talking with his wife and kids. I admit that. Probably he's got a white man's guilt for plucking a black girl like Anne away from her family, her friends. Probably she feels guilty for raising their girls where there ain't nobody else like them, where they're freaks and everybody stares at them. Well, I'll talk to them all. I'll be their friends. It feels good for me too. I need it, I think. Not to be alone. But that's all there is to it. I don't owe them nothing either.

Rindle showed up the same day Floyd did and always seemed to think that I should be glad to have a big strong man—or werewolf or what the hell ever—to protect me. Never seemed to figure out that I wouldn't have needed protecting if it hadn't been for his rabid friends wanting to tear my head off. Showed me the damn Wyrn-taint stuff he was so worried about. Almost got me killed. That I don't need. Well, he's gone now anyway. So I guess I don't have to worry about him. He was talking about getting away from this place, wanted me to go with him. God, that hurt saying no. But I've done enough running. Can't keep running forever. Still...

And now here's Clarence-knows-best and all his crap. I'm happy to have him, but...man, I should've told him off. Tell me not bring anybody home. I should've told him off. I will when I get back home. I'll tell him who's who and what's what.

Never thought I'd be so glad to be out of my own house. Tell me not to bring anybody home. I should've told him off. Not gonna think about it. Makes me too mad.

It's cold out today. It's *always* cold. I think we get about eight months of winter. I zip my coat and stuff my hands into the pockets. I walk fast, I'll warm up. I got a few miles to go. Floyd said

he'd come pick me up. I turned him down. I don't want to owe him nothing. I walk fast. I don't mind being out during the day. I'm already as far as the bar....

The front door is open. Busted open. Off the hinges. My mouth is dry. I couldn't spit if I wanted to. The door is lying on the ground. What used to be glass on the door is boarded over. I broke the glass. I touched it, and I saw what had happened inside the night before: I saw Black Rindle and his friend kill two other men, except I hadn't met Rindle yet. Hell, I need to keep on walking, pass that place by and never look back. I am *not* going to cross the road. I'm going to stay on this side, the far side. What do I care if somebody busted in to Murphy's Tap House? Murphy was one of Rindle's gang that tried to kill me, tried to kill me and Rindle. Would have if it hadn't been for that Quilt Wolf.

I don't cross the road. I stop, but I don't cross over. Why am I stopping? I don't want to stop. I don't even want to look, but it's like passing a car accident, and I can't help it. Nothing to see. Keep moving. Have to force myself to keep breathing. My chest is all tight, my stomach too. Like that night I first saw him. He wasn't wearing his human face that time. He had a body, dead body, thrown over his shoulder. So did his buddy, the one that tried to kill us later. Nice friends. Thank God it's daylight this time. Those things only come out at night, right? Vampires, werewolves. Only at night.

Nothing to see. Keep moving. My foot rises more slowly than the sun. Heartbeat is so loud, might burst an eardrum. Keep moving. Just keep moving. Creeping along, like one of those dreams when I'm trying to run, but my feet won't do it, won't respond to what I'm telling them. Keep

moving. Edging along. My eyes sting. Need to blink but I can't, not any more than I can run. From this angle, I can see through the door. I don't want to, but I don't look away, don't close my eyes. I see the line of the bar itself. I see bottles, some broken, on the floor. Bar stools knocked over. And sticking out from the edge of the bar, legs, boots. I stare at the boots, recognize them.

I still want to run away. I feel that in my stomach, like I swallowed a rock. I *am* running, finally—but across the road, *to* the bar, to the boots, instead of away. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* says the voice in my head, the voice that I always ignore, the voice that, later, I always wish I'd listened to. I tell myself that it's okay, I'm all right, it's daytime, those things come out only at night, I've seen them only at night. If I say it enough, I might believe it. I'm across the hardtop, across the gravel parking lot. I step on the broken door like it's a welcome mat. Cross the threshold and my momentum slams me face first into an invisible wall of panic. I flinch, like somebody jumps out to grab me, but no one does. My boots crunch broken glass. I feel it more than hear it. I can't hear anything over the pounding of my heart. I'm gasping, sucking in air. With the rush of oxygen, my vision blurs. I see what I saw before: Black Rindle slicing open some guy's belly with switchblade claws, snout and fangs yanking the poor bastard's guts out onto the floor while the guy watches. Blood everywhere. Rindle's pal Murphy has ripped the face off the other guy. More blood. Beneath my fingertips, the pane of glass shatters, spider web cracks splaying outward from ten points of contact. Blood on my finger.

Then it's all gone again, back into the past where it should be. Only my mind disturbs it, dredges it all up again, forces those two bastards to die again and again so I can watch. I try to focus on the boots, but my head is swimming, legs rubbery. I grab the edge of the bar for support. Still thinking something new: I've seen all the sex I could ever want; maybe my brain gets off being a voyeur for other stuff, people getting killed, people who've already been killed. Maybe that's why I see all this. All the death, all the blood.

There's no blood. Not today. Just broken glass and overturned bar stools. The boots. I push away from the bar, crunching glass underfoot with every step. No blood. I come to Rindle's side. He's lying on his back. No blood. If he'd gone back to his friends, there'd be blood. They would've killed him. He must not have done that. But he didn't run away either. He didn't leave. Or if he did, he came back. I feel a glimmer of hope. My stomach, already a mess, does a little jig and I almost puke. This is worse than the fear. Hope is much worse. At least with fear you're already prepared for the worst. Hope just sets you up to kick you in the teeth later.

He's breathing, thank God. He looks human. Nobody would guess the truth about him. I try not to think about it, make sure not to look at him that way, not to see him for what he is. Since nobody has sprung out to attack me, and Rindle seems to be in one piece, I start to breathe a little easier. Just a little. I figure I one-upped that voice in my head this time. Now who's stupid?

I don't see any gaping bloody gashes on him. He does have a scar across his face that's new since I saw him last, but that doesn't account for him being unconscious. No visible bruises, lumps—

except for his hump, which makes him lie awkwardly on his back. I start to feel his arms and shoulders. Have I missed something? He groans, opens his eyes with some difficulty. Even though I knew he was breathing, my heart skips a beat to see again that he's alive. He's not dead, he hasn't run away. Something inside me just snaps, goes haywire. I'm crying. I grab his face with both hands and kiss him—

The taste of liquor floods my mouth, chokes me. I lurch back on my knees, coughing. He works his way up onto his elbows. He's coughing too. A miasma of cheap whiskey spreads, just like in one of those old bad breath commercials. There it is: hope—just waiting for me, and me smiling all pretty for a steel toe cap. Rindle's eyes wander, take a while to focus. He recognizes me, smiles. I slap him, hard.

His eyes go wide, then narrow and angry. He opens his mouth but can't seem to form words. I slap him again to see if that helps.

"You're stinking drunk," I say.

He looks at me, blinks twice. "And...?"

"And I thought you'd taken off, left this place." Left *me*, I want to say, but I can barely admit that thought to myself, much less him.

"I couldn't do it," he says. "But you might've changed my mind." I start to slap him again; he catches my hand this time. "Twice is plenty. More than plenty." I jerk away from him, and he lets go of my hand. "You kissed me," he says.

"Yeah, well, I thought you were dead."

"That kind of thing turns you on, eh?"

I spit on the floor next to him: Same sentiment takes care of the whiskey taste and tells him what I think of his sense of humor. If dead people turned

me on, I could go back to the city and be a walking orgasm. He's pleased with himself. I can't stand it when he's glib, not after he's been throwing the world's biggest pity party ever since I met him. "I don't need you anymore," I tell him. "I've got other friends that showed up."

That gets his attention. "I know," he says, his eyes hard again, not joking. I can't help but remember what he really is, wonder if I pushed the wrong button. "I saw." The way he says it reminds me of how Clarence talks about the dead people he sees: He can't wait to make them dead for good.

"Where the hell have you been?" I ask him. I have to lighten things up. He's too creepy, frightening, when he's like this. I think of the first night, the guy's guts on the floor....

"You went back to the incinerator," he says, accusing me. He's not giving in. He's getting angrier.

"Yeah." I make light of it. "I work there. Remember?"

"Even after what I showed you?"

"After you...you know, none of that...is that what this...?" I can't get myself together. I was terrified that he was gone or dead, relieved to find him alive, afraid of his predator's eyes, and now he's trying to boss me around, just like Clarence...son of a bitch. "Look, you—"

"Why did you go back?" he wants to know.

I don't know what to tell him. I don't know why I went back. I had nowhere else to go, especially after he left. Rindle wants a certain answer, but I don't know what it is. I'd tell him, just to settle him down, if I knew. "Maybe my boss can help. If I tell him about that stuff coming out

of the back of the lab..." His face doesn't soften, not one bit. Nothing's good enough for him. He's not going to be happy unless he tells me exactly what to do and I do it. Scared or not, that pisses me off. "What is it to you whether I go to work or not? What do you care?"

"I care," he says in a cold, stern voice, "because what we saw at that place is what I've spent my life fighting against."

"From the sound of it, you spent your whole life fighting against those friends of yours—you know, the ones that tried to kill us."

"That place is corrupt, through and through," he says. "It can't go on that way."

"Can't go on that way? What do you mean, 'can't go on that way'? What are you going to do blow up the whole freaking incinerator complex?"

He doesn't say anything. I wait for him to make some snide comment, to tell me that I don't understand anything about it, to start telling me what to do again—but he doesn't say anything. Oh my God. I want him to tell me that I'm wrong, that I'm stupid. But he just glares at me.

"You're not..." I can't even say it again, not thinking that it might be true. "You're full of it."

"It can't go on," he says, like that's any kind of explanation of anything.

"Look," I say, trying to drag him back toward some type of sanity—forgetting for the moment that he changes his body into a giant wolf, that he kills people. "Like I said, maybe my boss can help. He's a good guy. Whatever's going on there, whatever is corrupt, he can't be a part of that. He can't. He'll help."

Rindle considered that. Slowly and stiffly, he climbed to his feet, maybe just to look down at me

more easily, he's so damn tall. But the leftover hurt from his drinking seems to have taken some of the starch out of him. I don't feel like he's about to lose control now, change, do to me like he did to that other guy in here.

"I have other responsibilities now," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I challenged my father. I defeated him," he says. I can feel the guilt, the pride, all tangled up in his words. "I have responsibilities now. I must serve my kind. I must rededicate our shrine if we are to have strength. If you were doing something that was going to hurt my people..."

I don't understand. "Hurt your people? Who the hell am I gonna hurt? They were the ones trying to kill me, remember?"

"The Wyrms-taint," he says, "it can change people. Especially you humans. We have to get rid of it."

"I'll help you," I tell him. He's accomplished something, and he thinks I might endanger that. He thinks that I would hurt him. "I'll help you."

He nods slowly, seems to believe me. I hope he believes me. He pisses me off...but I'm glad he isn't gone, isn't dead.

"Your friends," he says. "You can't tell them anything about my people. We talked about that before. Remember?"

I nod this time. I remember. When it came up before, I didn't think I'd ever have anybody that I *could* tell. I wasn't expecting Clarence to show up. Another terrible thought flashes through my mind. "You can't come near them. You can't see them...can't let them see you." He looks at me, puzzled, suspicious. "They're like I am," I say.

"They'll see you. Really see you. For what you are. They'll know."

He's glaring at me again. That feeling is coming back that he might...snap, change. "They won't be here forever," I tell him. "Probably not long at all." Then it'll be just us again, I don't say.

Maybe he read my mind, maybe I said too much. He reaches out and takes my hand, squeezes it, lightly, gently. "Find out what you can," he says, "but be careful."

I want to shrug off that look he's giving me, the way he's holding my hand. Most of the time before when he's not mad he's always looked at the floor or his feet. Now he's staring right at me. I'm stupid enough to let hope see the light of day. "Yeah, okay," is all I can manage. "Okay." I pull my hand back. I try to smile, do a piss-poor job of it, turn around, and leave him, my feet crunching on the glass and then on the gravel outside. I never should have stopped, that little voice in my head is telling me. Yeah, well, maybe. But I did.

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The walls are closing in on me. God, I can't take this today. I've only been at work for two hours, but the office feels like a prison. I'm trying to keep all the weirdness within me. I can't. It seeps through my skin. With every breath, it fills the cramped space I share with Frances, expands to include Floyd's office. Frances must be able to tell. I'm filing stuff in the wrong places: personnel files in the safety-standards cabinet, reclamation-tonnage estimates in the vehicle-safety drawer. She probably thinks I'm on drugs. I wish it were that simple.

I can take a break, go outside, grab a smoke, whenever I want—but I'm not sure what I'll find

out there. I'm not sure what will find me. Five nights. It was five nights ago that Rindle brought me here after dark and showed me what he calls Wyrm-taint. He took me by the hand and with one step took me to a different world—a world that exists beneath and around mine, a world that I've known for a while was there, but that I wanted to ignore, to forget. I can still smell the thick bubbling mess, or maybe I just imagine that I do. I didn't understand before when he wrinkled his nose at me, told me that I stank when I came home from work. Now I understand. It's a sickening smell, like burning rubber but worse, and it clings, coats my mouth and nose. I taste it. How many times have I gone in the bathroom and closed the door so I could spit? Hasn't helped yet.

One thing is for sure: Even if I were inclined to give up on Black Rindle, to let him go, *make* him go, I couldn't go on like everything else was normal. I guess I'm screwed that way. Maybe I could quit this job, stay away from the incinerator, but I have an ugly feeling that I'd run into the same thing wherever I go now. Corruption. Wyrm-taint. Black pus leaking from the earth itself. Is that why he showed me? So I wouldn't have a choice? It's like with the dead people, the unnatural beings: Get away from the city, hide out, but you can't hide out forever. They found me. Rindle found me too. And he wants me to believe that he's trying to fight a noble war, right some cosmic wrong. I don't know what to think. I don't see how anybody could smell that stuff and think that it was good or right or natural. So who the hell is he fighting? What I keep coming back to, though, is the fact that he cares what I think. It's important to Rindle that I see it the way he does.

Not just so he can be right—that's more like Clarence—but because the battle he's fighting is important to him. And I'm important to him.

Damn the lump that's in my throat again. I stare at the form in my hands—papers stapled together, typed letters, hand-written scrawl—and I can't for the life of me make any sense of it. The letters don't fit together, don't make words. The black print oozes out of the paper, spreads into sticky bubbling patches. The red ink streaks like blood splattered across my face. Cabinets and shelves are spirit trees, their roots drinking in black corruption. Frances at her desk is a wolf crouched behind a rock.

"Kaitlin...? Kaitlin, dear, are you all right?"

What if Rindle isn't here when *this* wolf tries to kill me? What if there's no Quilt Wolf this time, or next time, or the time after that? Does Rindle really care what I think, or is he just dead-sore-tired of being alone? He won't be alone anymore. He's the head monster now, the biggest and baddest wolf. Why would he still need me? Why would he want me?

"Kaitlin." Frances' hand on my shoulder. "Why don't you sit down, dear."

I do sit. Frances is like my mother, comforting, wanting everything to be all right. But ain't never everything gonna be all right. I breathe in her perfume. It's not a scent I like, but it masks the corruption a little, maybe enough. I close my eyes and hope that the world—both worlds—will just go away and leave me alone.

"Are you all right?" Frances asks. "Is it cramps?"

I almost laugh. I must have a horrible expression on my face. She's so much in the dark, where I would like to be. It sinks in. I could tell

her everything, and she'd never see, never understand, never believe. Does not telling her keep her safe, or just ignorant of what kills her in the end? I nod. Yeah, cramps. Nothing a heating pad and a couple of Pamprin won't take care of. Better yet, a big, fat, mile-long reefer.

"Try to breathe deeply, and it'll pass," Frances says.

I breathe deeply, I try to let go of everything, let the big picture recede into the back of my mind or else I can't function in the here and now. I listen to the hum of the heat system, and the bathroom fan.

"Can I give you a ride home, dear?"

I shake my head. "I think the fresh air will help." I sit for few more minutes. Frances is burbling conversationally—if men knew what we had to go through there'd be no such thing as babies, and that kind of thing. I smile a little when she looks at me, and nod once in a while. I get up, finally. Stick my head into Floyd's office. He's at his desk, writing away, oblivious, as clueless as Frances as to what the world is really like.

"I'm not feeling real well," I say. "I'm gonna..." I gesture with my head, so he knows I'm leaving. "I'm...I'm sorry."

His smile fades, replaced by concern. He's more worried about me than any filing that doesn't get done. How could I have thought such horrible things about him? He's not like all those other things that went wrong in my life. He's just another dash of color in this messed-up picture that's my vision of the world. He deserves better from me. I can't face my own cruelty right now, and so I can't face his kindness either, because it makes me such a bitch by comparison. I give him a weak smile.

Do I need a ride? he wants to know. No, I tell him, just like I told Frances. The fresh air will do me good. Can't hurt. He laughs. Nervously. I make him nervous.

I'm about to turn and go, but the guilt I feel about Floyd shifts, and now it's the guilt I feel about Rindle—these men care for me, and I treat them like crap.

"Floyd, about the lab," I say before I even realize that I've decided to tell him. "There's...there's something..." He's watching me, and now he's worried *and* puzzled. My hesitating only makes it worse. He's trying to figure out what I'm going to say. *I'm* trying to figure out what I'm going to say. "I've been talking to some folks...." He's *more* puzzled now, wondering what folks? what the hell is this wreck of a girl talking about? "They say there's a pipe back behind the lab...and something's leaking out of it. Something that shouldn't be. Leaking."

"Really?" His face is full of questions, but that's all he asks. I'm surprised to see that he takes me seriously, doesn't brush me off like the fruitcake he has every right to think I am. Maybe he'd be right to do that. I don't know. But I told Rindle that I'd try. It means so much to him. "The lab has all sorts of safety procedures," he assures me, not dismissively, but not understanding how what I say could be possible either. "Inspections...and the EPA They come in regularly...well, semi-regularly...to make sure that everything is being done by the book. AgriTech is very committed to protecting the environment, you know."

I find myself nodding, allowing myself to be placated. It's not what I want, but I'm too unsettled to press Rindle's point. Standing here talking to

Floyd, all the rest of that seems so impossible. The worlds don't mix well. When you're stuck in one, the other seems so hazy and far away. It's so easy to let myself believe I was imagining the rest—that's what I'd like to believe, after all. But I told Rindle I'd try to help, damn it. Just a few minutes ago, caught up in my own head, I felt his conviction just as strongly as he does. Can that get washed away so easily?

"I know," I say to Floyd. "I know they do all those tests and stuff, but..." But what? But this werewolf I know says otherwise? Stop. I won't let myself look at it that way. Rindle is real. He's willing to die for this. I've seen the Wurm-taint. I've smelled it. For some reason, I don't think the EPA with all their tests would have the first idea of what I'm talking about. This isn't arsenic in the water. It's not chemical—the earth itself is sick, is being *made* sick. And then it comes to me.

"I don't know, but...it might have something to do with me feeling sick like this." Partially true, in a roundabout way. Floyd, if not understanding, seems willing to give me the benefit of a very large doubt. I don't think he's just humoring me, because he still looks worried. He's still trying to figure out what the hell I'm talking about.

"I'll see what I can do," he says, and I believe him.

It's that natural sincerity of his. It runs as deep as—maybe deeper than—his natural goofiness, his natural *harmlessness*. Just like I can feel the coiled rage within Rindle, never more than a step or two away from exploding, I can feel Floyd's desire to help, to make everything right. I nod again to him. I don't know what to say. Maybe this is what Anne sees in him. Maybe it's why she wanted to have

his children, in hopes that his decency would be passed along. Maybe she thought there should be more people like Floyd in the world.

I turn and stumble out of his office. I mumble something to Frances about seeing her tomorrow. She hopes I'll feel better, she's sure that I will. I'm not so sure. Maybe the fresh air does me good after all. I don't know. But I do know that after so long of being alone—I've lived by myself for two years, but I've been alone for so much longer—after all that time, I'm overwhelmed by two people—two *men*, for God's sake—who see me as a person. It's not easy to break through the numbness, the thick layers of scar tissue that have built up and built up. But it is still possible to strike a nerve, and maybe that's not always bad.

CHAPTER 9

By mid-afternoon, Sands finally had slept enough. He hadn't felt rested in weeks, not since his normal life had been interrupted. The last few days, in particular, had been a *mélange* of stress, danger, violent death, and flight from the city that had been his home for the past twenty-odd years. Perhaps his nerves had needed rest as much as his body. They'd gotten it. He felt that he could look at the world objectively now, something he hadn't been able to do when they'd arrived last night. The distant memory of the dark, gnarled forest encroaching ominously upon the house tickled his mind like a fading dream. His brief encounter with Clarence and the girl that morning was equally foggy. Sands had stayed awake long enough to find the bathroom upstairs, take a leak, and then crawl back into his sleeping bag. Now, with the sun past its peak and the day's light just beginning to wane, he crammed his sleeping bag back into its stuff sack and gathered together the few items he had taken from the motel: pillow, washcloth, small bar of soap. He packed with a certain sense of disquiet—because of the fading light, perhaps; the solidity of day was about to plunge him again into the ephemeral shadows of night. Or maybe the stiffness and stench of his clothes was what unnerved him; he didn't have a change, and had had no opportunity to do laundry since crawling around in the sewers of Iron Rapids. Disgusted by his situation and at his own anxiety over the approaching darkness, he left his clothes in a heap and tromped down the hallway in his underwear. He remembered as he went that morning's encounter with Clarence, and made a point to suck in his stomach.

Hetger and Julia were sitting in the adjacent room talking quietly. They paused in their conversation when Sands entered.

"You're probably wanting a bath and some clean clothes," John said.

"Uh...yeah," Sands managed, caught a bit off guard by the complete transparency of his thoughts. Then again, he'd been wading through the sewers; *everyone* would likely appreciate him taking a bath and washing his clothes.

Hetger gestured toward a small stack of folded clothes on the floor. "I don't know how well they'll fit, but they're clean."

Sands hesitated a moment, then took the clothes. As he left to go upstairs, he thought to stop and turn back: "How are you feeling, Julia?"

She shrugged. "Better mostly. Thanks for asking." Both her expression and voice were neutral. Sands wasn't sure if she meant what she said, or if that was some kind of dig at him for seeing to his own needs before thinking to inquire about her well-being. Who was she tonight: Julia the angel of mercy, or Julia the shrew?

I don't need this, he thought, as he continued up the stairs, his face pulled tight into a scowl. He still needed to have her heal the gash on his face, but he'd be damned if he was going to give her something else to fuel her damn air of superiority. *Why can't she get off my case?* There was the matter of the flask, he realized...but he didn't think she knew that he had taken it and used it for Scotch before returning it. Maybe she'd figured it out. *Hell, I don't care if she did*, he thought. *How was I supposed to know that it was full of holy water that she needed to kill a vampire? Like anybody would have guessed that.* And she'd survived, after all. That was better

luck than Jason had had. Sands thought back to those chaotic few minutes in the sewer; more than the stink of sludge, he thought he could still smell the lurker. *A vampire, for God's sake.* The reality didn't grow any more believable; it continued to slap him across the face every single time he thought about it. Nor did Jason's death seem completely real yet—his violent grisly death, that monster raking its claws through his flesh, tearing into his chest and snapping off a rib. If only there *had* been holy water in the flask....

No, Sands thought. He wouldn't take that blame upon himself. Jason was dead before Julia had tried to pour what she thought was holy water on the creature. The lurker's claws had already made a God-awful mess of the boy's chest. Douglas could see the shock and pain on what had been left of Jason's face. *He was already dead,* Sands told himself. *Already dead.*

The bath was a welcome relief, as were the clean clothes. The pants were a bit tight in the waist, but that was okay, he decided, because it forced him to suck in his gut. Back downstairs, Sands stuffed his dirty things into a garbage bag with everyone else's.

"There's no washing machine in the house," Hetger told him. "We'll see if we can find a laundromat somewhere."

Something about the statement brought Sands up short. The incongruity must have reflected in his expression, because Hetger gave him an odd look. "I don't know how you do it, John," Sands said.

"Do? Do what?"

"I don't know," Sands said, not having the thought completely pinned down. "You know, this." He indicated the garbage bag.

"Laundry?" Julia asked. "No wonder you had a rocky marriage."

"No, not *laundry*, smart ass," Douglas snapped. "All of this, laundry, logistics, details, *normal* details, like *anything* is normal anymore."

"Douglas, those things *are* normal," Hetger said. "Still. As far as I know, they always will be."

"Sure they are, but...but..." Sands sputtered for a moment. "But nothing else is."

Hetger nodded. "I do know what you mean. But the world is the same as it has been. It's our perspective of it that's changed. We're aware of more than we were before—aware of things we might rather not be. But no matter how we approach that change—that horrifying, infuriating, confusing change—no matter how we approach it, we still need food and shelter. We have to sleep, we use the bathroom, we wash clothes. Death might be walking the street, but that doesn't mean that civilization comes to an end. Life doesn't come to an end."

Sands nodded. He wanted to believe that. He wanted life to go on. The vampire was dead, destroyed, gone. He latched on desperately to the idea that he could go back to his old life—though he knew that wasn't what John meant.

"It's tough to remember sometimes," Hetger continued, "that the day-to-day necessities of life still have to be taken care of. We've all been through that period of adjustment. Maybe none of us ever really finish adjusting. And talking about this reminds me, Douglas, that you need to check in with your work. You've been gone almost a

week, no explanation, no nothing. You and Albert have both been gone a week.”

Albert. The mere sound of his name caused Julia pain, or maybe her convalescence was not so miraculously far along as they thought. She grimaced, readjusted her position where she sat leaning against the wall. *You may be able to fix the cuts and broken bones*, Sands thought, *but you've got as many scars as the rest of us.*

“Yeah,” Douglas said to Hetger. “That might seem strange.”

“Especially,” Julia pointed out, “since you were staying with him, *and* after your little stunt back before Christmas.”

“What are you talking about?” Sands wanted to know.

“Your little swan dive out of Melanie Vinn’s window?” she reminded him. Julia seemed to draw strength from busting his balls. “Sound familiar?”

“I know what you mean about *that*,” Sands snapped, “but what does it have to do with anything?”

Julia rolled her eyes. “The police are still looking for whoever killed that rot that was working with you and Albert at Iron Rapids Manufacturing.”

“Gerry Stafford.”

“Right. So if the police have an open murder investigation, and one of the people they questioned disappears with *another* of his co-workers and then shows up again, but the co-worker never does...”

“But I didn’t kill Albert!”

“What are you going to tell the police when they want to talk to you again?” Julia asked. “That

a seventy-year-old man possessed by his dead alcoholic wife killed him?"

"Maybe I *will* tell them that," Sands said defiantly. "And why the hell not?"

"For one thing," Hetger cut in, "they'll lock you away *somewhere*, whether they think you killed Albert or not. Look, Julia overstates the case a bit, but the truth is that some of what we do—okay, a lot of what we do—is beyond the parameters of the law. Society doesn't see the creatures we see, it doesn't know they exist, it's not equipped to deal with them. It's not equipped to deal with us either. So we have to make sure that it doesn't see us, doesn't know that we exist. We have to save civilization without it ever knowing we're here."

"Good God," Douglas said, his legs suddenly feeling rubbery. He eased himself to a seat on the floor and leaned against the wall across from Julia.

"You sure as hell don't want to go public," she said. "If you're lucky and you *don't* get locked away, the best you can hope for is to end up on Jerry Springer or Ripley's: people who already know what you know will believe it, everybody else, not. And some of those people who *will* believe you, they're the monsters. They'll hunt you down, and they'll kill you, or worse."

"So if I tell anyone," Sands counted off the options on his fingers, "it's either jail, the mental institution, or I become the hunted instead of the hunter."

Hetger nodded. "Right. You're either predator or prey; the distinction isn't clear a lot of the time."

The more Sands learned about this life, the more the distinction *did* seem to be a clear one—and he didn't much care for the side he came down on, no matter who was out to get him, human police

or inhuman monster. "Okay, so assuming that the police want to talk to me at some point—"

"And they will," Julia said.

"I'll need to lie about Albert."

"Yes," said John. "The most important thing to remember is that you don't know he's dead. You don't even know he's missing. You just needed a vacation...get away from the stress of marital problems, that kind of thing. Skipping out on work is harder to explain...."

"Maybe I left a message, because normally I would, of course," Sands suggested. "Voice mail can get erased...." Julia looked skeptical. "Or...no, I know. I left a note...a note for Caroline instead of voice mail, and it must have gotten thrown out by the cleaning lady."

"That might work," Hetger agreed. "But it's better to keep it simple, as close to the truth as possible. Maybe you did just take off. We'll need to work out the details of the rest of your alibi—where you've been all week, something that can be confirmed, or at least not disproved. After that, you'll have some tough choices about your job, your living situation, family. But the important thing is to make sufficient arrangements, to plan ahead, so that there's less need to cover your tracks after the fact. Preparation is the—"

"Hold on just a second," Sands said. "Let's not get carried away. Once I get this squared away, I'm all done with this mess. I mean, thanks and everything, but that vampire is dead. I'm done." Julia and Hetger fell silent. She glowered, while John, in his subdued way, was crestfallen. "Look, I'm not ungrateful for your help. I had a certain amount of responsibility for putting Faye in danger, and now she and Melanie are both safe. There's

no reason for me to carry this any further. I deal with the police, and I'm free and clear."

"How in the world could you just walk away?" Julia wanted to know. "How?"

"There's nothing for me to walk away *from*," Sands insisted. "I'm *done*."

She shook her head in disbelief. "That is the most selfish—"

"Don't give me that," Sands cut her off. "You're trying to find your little boy. I'm sorry to bring it up, but that's the truth. That's what keeps you going. And you, John, you're suspicious about your friend's death. You both have a personal stake. And something happened with Jason's sister, right? He wasn't interested in monsters out of the goodness of his heart. Well, my personal interest is taken care of, and I'm not going to throw away the rest of my life. All this stuff that we see, things that shouldn't be happening, shouldn't be there—it's like a disease. But I'm done with it now. I'm going to get better. I'm over it." The words streamed out once Douglas started. He didn't know how much of what he was saying was true, but he *wanted* it to be true. He wanted that as desperately as he'd wanted anything in his life. Maybe he'd go back to Faye, maybe they could work things out. He wasn't necessarily excited or even hopeful about that prospect, but it was worth a try. It was better than *this*: skulking around at night, making impossible demands of himself, all in the name of saving lives while, around him, people died.

"It's your decision, of course," Hetger said.

"My decision, but if I choose wrong, then I'm an ungrateful, self-serving, egotistical bastard, right?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Julia said.

"Would I be disappointed?" Hetger asked. "Yes. Would you have chosen differently than I think I would in your position? I think so, yes. Does that mean that I'd be right, and you'd be wrong?" He shrugged. "I can't say that for sure."

"I can," Julia said. "Because you *are* an ungrateful, self-serving, egotistical bastard, and let me tell you why. So that one vampire is destroyed. Do you think it was the only one out there? Where do you think it came from? Jason had encountered at least one other creature similar to it. Are they the only two in the world, and they both happen to hang out in our little patch of Michigan? How convenient."

"But you don't understand," Sands said. "I led that thing to Faye. She wouldn't have been danger otherwise. I've made amends. I've done my part."

"She wouldn't have been in danger otherwise?" Julia threw his words back at him. "How the hell do you know that? Why was that beast stalking your friend Melanie? Chance? Dumb luck? How can you be sure that no more are going to run across your path, or your wife's?"

"I'll be ready next time," Sands said. "If there is a next time. And I'll know what's going on instead of—"

"And you'll take it on by yourself?" Julia asked. "Good luck. While we're at it, what if it's not a vampire next time? Do you know enough to handle whatever you run up against? Because they're not going to all just go away because you're playing ostrich with your head in the sand. Your buddy Stafford—there's lots more where he came from, and whether he was harmless or not, a lot of them aren't."

Sands listened with mounting frustration. He couldn't refute everything that Julia was saying—he couldn't even refute *most* of it. But he wasn't in a mood to be reasoned with. She could be one hundred percent right about everything, but that wouldn't change the fact that he might walk away from this madness and never see another unnatural creature. He'd spent over forty years *not* seeing them. Why was it so hard to believe that he'd never see another? And probably that voice he'd heard, and the hallucination of Adam—those were results of stress, of his mind trying to cope with insanity. They weren't like the lurker; they weren't flesh and blood. They were figments of his tired mind. Just like Mrs. Kilby. Mr. Kilby was real enough, but not his wife. Never mind that Albert had seen the same figment....

"And another thing," Julia was saying. "Not everybody is out for themselves. Yes, John and I have personal reasons that we became involved in this. It doesn't mean we're going to cut and run when we solve our own problems. And what about Albert, and Nathan, and Clarence? They're not trying to find loved ones, they're not in it for personal reasons."

"*Of course they are!*" Sands erupted. "Even if it's pure altruism, which I tend to doubt, then that just means that they get their jollies by thinking that they're helping people. It's a power trip. And don't hold up Clarence as a paragon of virtue. He's a sociopath, a psychopath, for God's sake, and probably a dozen other something-opaths to boot!"

By the way both Hetger's and Julia's gazes shifted to the doorway, Sands knew with near certainty that Clarence had just stepped into the room and had, of course, heard everything that Douglas had said. Sands turned to face him.

Clarence was leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, biceps and forearms bulging, chest naturally puffed out. His gray sweatshirt was dark in patches with sweat, and his combat boots glistened with melting snow. The wind outside seemed louder than it had before; swaying branches brushed and scraped against the side of the house.

"Don't worry, Sands," Clarence said. "There's lots of folks who ain't comfortable unless their nigger is in a little white suit sayin' Yessa, Nossa."

"Oh, good God." Sands climbed to his feet. "Don't give me that crap. Don't try to paint me as racist. This doesn't have anything to do with you being black. Because I find it disturbing that you enjoy *killing people* does not make me racist."

"I don't kill people," Clarence said coolly. "I kill *things*—things that ought to be dead already, only it didn't take the first time."

"Gerry Stafford was a person who was in pain and needed help," Sands said. "He wasn't a monster. He wasn't a thing. You had no right to kill him."

"He had 'no right,'" Clarence mimicked, "to come back from the dead. Ain't my fault if hell is brimming over. Good people don't come back. They stay dead when they supposed to."

"And you're the one who's supposed to decide that?" Sands asked.

"We each make our own decisions, my man," Clarence said, "and if you don't like mine, then stay the hell out of my way."

"Douglas," said Hetger, stepping between the other two men. "Think back for a moment to when we were in the sewer: Jason was hurt, probably dead already; Julia was hurt; Clarence and I just arrived. Do you remember what happened after that?"

The change of topic, as well as Hetger's calm, reasonable tone after Clarence's rant, gave Sands pause. Reluctantly, he did as John asked him, thought back to two nights past. "Clarence shot it...the lurker...the vampire. He blew its head off with his shotgun."

Hetger nodded. "Before that. Tell me what happened right before that. The creature stabbed Julia. It was trying to kill her, and you."

Sands was back there again. He didn't want to be, but the house began to lose its substance. The echoing screams were all around him, as was the darkness, broken only by bobbing flashlights, and the putrid stench of sewage and death. His stomach squeezed itself into a fist. "You made it stay where it was," he said, barely able to speak the words. "You...you just told it to stay where it was...and it did. It didn't have any choice. It couldn't move."

"That's right," Hetger said. "That's one of my edges, one of the powers I have over them—sometimes. And what happened after that, Douglas? Before Clarence shot it?"

Almost without realizing he did so, Sands reached out a hand and steadied himself against the wall. Clarence had blasted the lurker into thousands of pieces—but the shotgun had been so devastating because the lurker had already been burning, its dead flesh crisping and falling away. "I..." Sands didn't know how to put it into words; he remembered what had happened, but he didn't understand it. "I...did something...."

"There was a red cloud of some sort," Hetger said. "I don't know how, but it came from you—and whatever it was, it tore the hell out of that beast, burned it, like all the stories say that sunlight should do to a vampire."

The fist in Sands' stomach twisted in upon itself, tightening, tightening. He leaned more heavily against the wall, almost cried out. He had vomited forth that reddish cloud; it had come from within him and burned what remained of life from the lurker. The thing had tossed away Jason's body, flailed about like a lunatic, and then, when Clarence's shots had hit the rapidly deteriorating body, it had ceased to exist.

"That was an edge, Douglas," Hetger explained calmly, as if the world somehow really made sense, as if impossible things weren't happening, as if Sands and all of them had not seen and done those impossible things. "That was a powerful edge, something that none of us can do. I've heard of that sort of thing before, but never seen it. We each have our place in this struggle."

"Not me," said Sands, wishing he had something to drink. "I'm done. I'm through with it." He pushed away from the wall, shook his head. When he could see straight again, he brushed past Clarence without looking at John, without looking at Julia. He couldn't face them now, not right this instant. Instead, Sands stumbled into the kitchen and, as the last of the light was fading outside, turned on the faucet and thrust his face under the cold water. He let it run over his face, opening his mouth, drinking what he could. A glass of Scotch would have been much more satisfying, but this was all he had at the moment. He refused to think about the future, when he might have something better to drink; he couldn't let himself think about the past, about anything that had ever happened to him before right now. There was only the cold water running over his face, only the right now, no decisions.

CHAPTER 10

Enough waiting, EveSong decided. If he's not done meditating, then...well, he'll just have to be done. In the past, EveSong would not have thought, would not have dared, to force his will upon his alpha, but as far as Murphy could tell, Evert Cloudkill was lacking will of his own at this point. Besides, the forest was damned cold. EveSong was no stranger to the wilds, but he didn't see the harm of sleeping indoors. The Route 42 Motor Lodge was not too far away. It was an establishment of that age when air conditioning and color TV were considered luxuries instead of givens, and the motel's sign proudly advertised those amenities. The place was a dump, really, little better than a hunting cabin in the backwoods, but it had heat and electricity and running water, more or less. At the very least, EveSong figured, even if Evert refused a human facility, they could build a fire.

The day's last light was fading as EveSong made his way back toward the spot by the stream where he'd left Cloudkill. The forest winterscape looked and felt more bleak than ever it had before. EveSong couldn't manage to imagine the stark trees ever again producing new growth; dead leaves crackling beneath ice and snow were the only sound that reached his ears. And when he reached the stream, Cloudkill was gone.

EveSong glanced around for a moment, puzzled, then suspicious. He shifted to wolf-form, better to smell, listen, track. Had he mistakenly come to a different portion of the stream? No. There was the impression in the snow where Evert had been sitting cross-legged, unable or unwilling to move, practically all day. Or had it been all day? EveSong hadn't checked back very recently.

Wherever Cloudkill had gone, he might have gotten a significant head start. But why? EveSong discarded the question for the time being; for now, *where* was more important than *why*.

A few quick sniffs told him that Evert had not, in fact, left long ago—maybe within the last hour or two. The tracks were not difficult to find. Cloudkill apparently hadn't been concerned with hiding his passage. That, at least, was reassuring. Probably he had emerged from his day-long meditative trance and been disoriented; possibly he didn't realize where he was or why, and he'd wandered away. If that were the case, EveSong would catch up with him quickly.

The trail led along the course of the stream. EveSong followed easily with merely a cursory sniff every so often. As he went, his mind shifted back to the secondary question he'd deferred before. Why would Cloudkill run off without him? Why had the alpha done anything that he had done over the past weeks and months, his mind addled by grief, his spirit weighed down by despair? There was no telling, EveSong decided. No telling, until he found Evert, and maybe not then.

Noticing the sound of the stream growing more faint, faint to the extent of being muffled, EveSong was surprised to look up and find that he had not turned from the bank. Instead, he saw, the surface water was frozen, a sheen of black ice in the moonlight. Beneath the ice, the stream, perhaps a foot deep here, still flowed, but its sound was like the scream of someone smothered by a pillow. Something within EveSong told him to pick up his pace. He loped forward with more urgency, with each step a sense of dread growing in his lupine breast. Within a few strides, he was hurtling forward at nearly a dead run, as fast as he could

move and keep an eye on the trail at the same time. Still, the chilling intuition grew more intense. The fur raised on his hackles, his ears pricked up, hypersensitive, trying to catch any suggestion of danger. Through this instinctive agitation, his rational mind asserted itself. EveSong laughed unconvincingly at his anxiety. He was Garou. There was little enough in the forest for him to dread. Even so, a hunter knows enough to pay heed to his instincts; EveSong forced himself to slow, to scan more thoroughly the foreground as he advanced. And then he found Cloudkill.

The trail, which had followed the stream devotedly for the past mile or so, veered suddenly to the right, into the water—what would have been the water were it not frozen. EveSong paused at the edge of the black ice, gazing to the other bank in search of the trail. Not until several seconds had passed did he notice with a jolt Cloudkill staring up at him from beneath the ice, Crinos snout pressed against the glassy undersurface, claws embedded, holding him motionless.

EveSong's heart skipped a beat—but that was the entirety of his hesitation. Within a second, he was airborne, his lupine features shifting in motion to those of his rage-form. He crashed into the ice with the force of his entire and considerable bulk: eight and a half feet of stone-hard muscle and fury. The ice was not thick; it gave way beneath him, shattering so that the stream could take him in—and thus Ryan EveSong Murphy came to realize that the ice itself was not black, but the water that ran beneath it. If water it could be called.

The syrupy liquid that greeted EveSong was thick as blood, cold as the north wind, and dark as the blackest night when Luna's face was turned

away. In the stream that should not have been deep, he plunged completely under. Submerged, he made the mistake of opening his eyes, and the liquid blackness burned. EveSong thrashed, trying to find the streambed with his feet so he could launch himself back to the surface, but there was no bottom to be found. He sealed his mouth against the viscous water lest he suck in a mouthful of the stuff, but the blackness pried at his lips, snaked its way into his nose and sinuses. The unmistakable stink of Wyrms-taint enveloped EveSong, fought to eradicate from the face of Gaia his own scent. He flailed against the darkness, his lungs beginning to burn from exertion and lack of oxygen.

Evert, he reminded himself through rising panic. *Find Evert. Get him out.*

But which way was his alpha? All the world was starless, smothering night. EveSong felt fibrous bands forming around his arms, taking hold of his ankles, holding him, confining him, pulling him down. *Down!* He latched onto that hint of direction. With a slice of his claws he slashed through the tentacles, freed himself from their grasp, and then kicked and flailed with all his might in the other direction. Still the darkness pawed at him. Through the heart-pounding in his ears, he thought he heard nickering laughter somewhere far away. As his air finally gave out and he resisted the need to gulp in blackness, thought gave way to rage. Hatred of that which consumed him gave him strength. He slashed with the might of all that is holy, rending the dark, his fury burning it away from his body. With a snort he expelled the taste of corruption from his mouth and nose. For a moment, the blackness was again water, and EveSong propelled himself through it, upward, upward, until with a triumphant gasp he

broke the surface in a violent spray, a morsel disgorged by corruption.

He sucked in air, and his sense of triumph lasted only as long as that first breath. The forest was gone, as was the night sky, replaced by murky subterranean darkness. Walls of earth and stone lay at some indeterminate distance, but the impression of containment was undeniable. EveSong, confused, wary, searched the gloom for a sign of solid ground. Seeing anything amidst the mono-hued blackness was nearly impossible; he was practically upon the outcropping of rock before he realized it was there.

"At least this will make one hell of a story," he muttered to himself.

"It will, at that."

EveSong turned toward the sound of the voice—at least he thought he did. Direction was difficult to determine with any surety. Now that his heart was not pounding quite so fiercely, he noticed the reverberating plops of phantom droplets of water falling unseen in the distance. The voice, too, echoed, shifted, like a ventriloquist's words cast here and there and nowhere. Nonetheless, the voice itself was familiar.

"Evert," said EveSong, "I have found you."

"Yes. Yes you have," said Cloudkill's voice, but muffled, as if a hundred mouths whispered the words not quite in unison.

As EveSong started to claw his way up the boulder protruding from the brackish water, he began as well to make out the shape of his alpha perched atop the rock.

"Come to me," whispered the hundred mouths.

EveSong hesitated, his instincts again raising his hackles.

"Come," crooned Cloudkill.

Without the upward momentum of climbing, EveSong clung desperately to the stone, lest he plummet back into the pool. Having discovered the object of his search, he no longer was sure that he wanted to have found Cloudkill. The alpha's voice was...wrong. And something about his eyes...through the darkness, EveSong now could see that they glowed a fiery red.

"Come to me, whelp!" Cloudkill suddenly thundered. The stone and water, the hundred mouths cloaked in darkness, echoed his command.

EveSong felt himself climbing again, his hands and feet searching for new holds despite the fact that he wished them to do otherwise. His claws dug into the boulder, and his muscles pulled him upward, closer to the red eyes. Above, Cloudkill waited gleefully, fangs gleaming white. His fur was matted and sticky, his hide visibly crawled, pulsating as with a life of its own. EveSong's mind recoiled before this abomination that was but was not his alpha. His instincts pressed him for fight or flight, but his body would not obey. Spittle dripped from Cloudkill's slack mouth, scalding the rock where it landed, burning away in a hiss of fizzling and steam.

Near the top now, EveSong roared in defiance, but his howl did not echo throughout the chamber—instead, it was swallowed by the darkness. Cloudkill greeted him with rapturous laughter, a sound not suited to the musculature of his Crinos face. Again EveSong roared. This time Cloudkill spat. His putrid venom found its mark, burning EveSong's mouth, forcing its way down his throat, searing tender flesh every inch of the way.

At last EveSong's rage broke through the will of the whispering, cackling beast. He drew back a paw to strike in Gaia's name, but his hold was precarious. He slipped and scabbled but could not cling to the rock. Backward and down into the darkness he fell, and the black fibrous tendrils rose to greet him. They snaked around him as he struck the viscous water and pulled him down into the depths. His howls were no more than a geyser of bubbles fighting their way to the surface. Then that too ceased, and all was darkness.

CHAPTER 11

Sands sat at the card table in the kitchen. He didn't turn on the light; getting up was beyond him. He concentrated on breathing, tried to ignore the knot in his stomach, and stared out the window as night stole definition from the trees outside: They went from individual trunks and branches and twigs to swaying silhouettes to indeterminate swaths of motion. From the other room, voices carried to him.

"He might not stay with us in the end," Hetger said.

"Good," Clarence snorted.

"That doesn't mean we should drive him away," Hetger said, frustration obvious in his tone.

"If he don't get his act together, he ain't no use to us noways," Clarence said matter of factly. "And you know what happens to the folks who try to walk away. It's his funeral."

"No use to us, Clarence?" Hetger was hot now. "That thing in the sewers was a vampire. You've read the same hunter-net posts that I have. You think your shotgun would've done the trick if he hadn't softened the thing up? You want to try your luck putting a stake through its heart?"

"You know what Clarence means, John," said Julia. "With his attitude, he's as likely to get all of us killed as he is to help."

He. Just he. No names. Of course, Sands knew they were talking about him. They weren't hiding anything, weren't pulling any punches. Their disembodied voices drifted into the kitchen much as did the scraping of the branches against the outside of the house.

"Maybe," Hetger said. "But he could turn out to be a huge asset. He saved you in the sewer, Julia."

"Got Albert killed," Clarence grunted.

"We don't know that," said John.

"We got lucky in the sewer," Julia said. "Jason's luck ran out. Albert's ran out."

"Albert didn't take enough precautions," John countered.

"Ain't none of us gonna live forever," Clarence said. "Me for one, I'd like to hang on as long as I can, take as many of them as I can with me. All four of us that made it out of those sewers were damn lucky. We weren't ready to go up against that thing, and Pete Sampras in there wasn't ready to go out with us. I know we got to bring in fresh blood—you know what I mean, new people—but we got to bring them along slow. None of this here's the nod and secret handshake and now you can come kill monsters with us."

The three hunters fell silent, and then: "You're right," Hetger said. "We have to do a better job of minimizing risks where we can, and we have to do a better job of teaching newcomers and easing them in." He sighed. "It's just that things feel so...urgent sometimes. All of the time."

"Yeah," said Clarence, "well, if we stumble in somewhere and get our asses handed to us, ain't nothin' gonna be urgent, and ain't nobody gonna be around to do anything about it."

Listening to them, Sands found it harder and harder to remember the normal life that he had always led until recently, much less to imagine returning to any semblance of it. What would he do the next time he saw a person walking down the street who he *knew* was dead? Even assuming that he could get back with Faye, could they live

in a fortress? How could he ever let her out of his sight again, knowing what was out there? But she was out of his sight now, wasn't she? And there was a haunted wind that blew around the back corner of their house, a voice that called for its daddy, a boy who was dead but wasn't dead. That was different, though. That was Adam, his own son.

The voices in the other room grew indistinct. Sands' mind lost the ability to sort words into sentences, to assign meaning to sound. His thoughts were consumed by one horrifying utterance that he should not have heard in the darkness of his own home: *Dad-dy*. Panicked, he looked to the window, with relief remembered himself, where he was. The boundary between memory and experience grew firm once again.

An uncertain number of minutes later, the click of the switch and the flash of light suddenly illuminating the kitchen startled him.

"Sorry," Julia said, seeming to mean it. As she shuffled to the refrigerator, she looked very tired. Not a stickler for posture at the best of times, her shoulders sagged, mirroring the dark bags under her eyes.

Sands tried to speak, had to clear his throat first. "It's good to see you up and about again."

"Thanks." She rummaged around in the refrigerator and pulled out a package of hotdogs. She wrinkled her nose at them, but put them in a pot of water on the stove, nonetheless. "Look," she said eventually, leaning on the counter and not facing him, "I get...angry sometimes. There's so much going on that I can't control, that I'd like to change." She turned and met his eyes. "I've given you a hard time.... Maybe some of it you

didn't deserve. I can't expect you to know everything if you haven't had a chance to learn. So from now on, I'll try to answer your questions if I can. You just make sure to ask them."

Sands nodded. "I appreciate—"

"Hold on. I'm not done. If things get hairy, though, if something starts happening, if things get serious, you've got to do what I tell you. Or what John tells you, or even Clarence, because he knows a lot, even if you don't like him or always agree with him. None of the arguing and bitching and moaning. We say what to do. You do it. Deal?" She paused, waiting expectantly.

Sands nodded again. "All right." He surprised himself by thinking that Julia was almost likeable during these moments when she was too tired to be a bitch. Maybe some of the fault had been his too.

"Even if you don't stay with us," she added. "I'm not trying to convince you of anything. You make your own choices. But who knows what might happen when?" She looked at him differently now, narrowing her eyes and frowning. She came over to him and slowly raised her hand to his face, to the gash that the lurker had left in their final encounter. "Hold still."

Carefully, she peeled away the bandage, which was not long enough to cover the entire wound, then she placed her fingers gently against his skin. Sands wished he had a mirror; he wanted to see what was going on, like when she had healed herself in the motel room. He couldn't see, but he could feel it. He could feel the warmth in Julia's fingertips, the unnatural, soothing warmth that spread into his face and eased the throbbing ache of his cut. He felt tiny pinpricks, so light that they almost

tickled. He felt swelling recede and skin grow tight. And then it was over. The warmth remained for a few seconds as Julia stepped back. Sands put his hand to his face and felt for the wound that was no longer there.

Julia regarded him and frowned. "There's a bit of scar," obviously dissatisfied with her handiwork, "but I guess that's what happens after a day or two, especially when you should've had stitches and didn't."

Sands shrugged, adopting Hetger's habitual gesture. "It'll go with the scar over my eye. From the ice falling in the Kilby's house. You didn't get to me until a full day later that time too."

"A scar a week," Julia said. "You've got to learn to take better care of yourself."

"I'll drink to that." Sands raised a non-existent glass. "At least I'd like to drink to that."

"There's a dive bar just down the road," said Clarence, coming into the room. Hetger was with him. "Didn't look open, though. Might be later."

"You out scouting the countryside?" Sands asked.

"PT."

"Physical training. Ah." Sands nodded. "Finished your mile run and hundred sit-ups just in time for dinner."

"Five miles, five hundred crunches," Clarence said humorlessly. "Five hundred push-ups too. You ought to look into it, Pete Sampras."

Sands didn't feel like another argument, so he let Clarence's sarcasm slide. Besides, Douglas couldn't help be a bit awed by someone who ran five miles in combat boots, not to mention the crunches and push-ups. *I bet he's lying*, Sands

thought. Then he gave another look at Clarence's physique. *Hell, maybe not.*

Clarence and Hetger were, in fact, scrounging for food. There was plenty around. The cabinets were stocked, though with a strange and largely incongruous assortment of items: plenty of hotdogs, no buns or condiments; lots of pasta, hardly any sauce; macaroni and cheese, but not butter; and so on. Clarence's cousin, Kaitlin, evidently bought in bulk, but otherwise she was fairly haphazard about her shopping. Still, after the last few days they had all had, any meal was welcome, and Sands even felt that the earlier blow-up had cleared the air a bit. He felt better for having let the others know, in no uncertain terms, that he wasn't planning on continuing as part of their little operation. Maybe they appreciated his honesty or hoped he would change his mind; maybe they didn't care. But they shared the meal amicably enough.

"How long you figure we stay here?" Clarence asked Hetger as they ate.

John shrugged. "We'll check in with Nathan, see how things look in Iron Rapids." No one disagreed with that. "How long has your cousin lived here?" Hetger asked Clarence a few minutes later.

"Couple years. She was in a bad way for a while. Thought it'd be better to get out of the city. Hadn't looked back."

Sands didn't know what Clarence meant by a *bad way*. He didn't think he wanted to know. This place, however, this house, was a dump. Sands wasn't sure which was worse: the way Melanie lived in that hellhole of an apartment complex surrounded by miscreants, or this girl living in a

rickety old house that probably ought to be condemned, out in the middle of nowhere.

"I was thinking," Hetger said, "that maybe there was something we could do for Kaitlin, you know, as a thank you for staying here. We're eating her food. We can replace that. Maybe some repairs, or there seems to be a lot of junk to haul away. She doesn't have a car?"

"Nope," Clarence said. "Too much upkeep, too much trouble. She's not one for financial commitments, or work. I'm not sure how long she's had this job she's got now, but it won't last. She'd be better off going back with us."

"I thought you just said that she'd gotten away from the city?" Sands asked.

"That was then," Clarence said. "She's got her head on straight now, maybe. No reason for her to be cooped up out here wasting her life."

"Maybe she *likes* being cooped up out here," Sands pointed out, not that he could see how anyone would.

"Maybe it ain't none of your business," Clarence said curtly.

Sands started to reply, then thought better of it. He took another bite of his plain hotdog on white bread, and replied anyway: "You're right. I'm not related to her. She's your family—and it's obviously such an oh-so-well-adjusted family."

Clarence glared but said nothing. Julia started to make a comment, but the creak of the front door opening forestalled her. Padding into the room a few seconds later, so slight that her footsteps barely made a sound, was Kaitlin.

She glanced around, shy, even though this was her house, not making the first move to take off her heavy coat. "Hi."

"Kaitlin, hi," said John. "We can't thank you enough for letting us stay here awhile. Sorry about the early arrival this morning." It was Hetger who spoke for the group and tried to put her at ease. Strange, Sands thought, with Clarence being her cousin. Then again, Clarence might have gone his entire life without putting anyone at ease, as far as Sands could tell.

"Clarence says you've lived here for a couple of years," Hetger said.

The girl nodded. She looked miserable: tired, uncomfortable with a house full of strangers, and like she would rather have been anywhere else in the world than in that kitchen just then. One hand was wrapped around the small, tight ball of the other; her feet were glued to the floor; she wouldn't meet anyone's eyes, least of all her cousin. Sands guessed that she was about Melanie's age, a little shorter, and without the presence and confidence that made Melanie so attractive, without the fire.

"Pretty quiet around here," Hetger said conversationally, "at least when you don't have all us extra folks around."

She nodded again. "Yeah. Pretty quiet."

Hetger wasn't giving up. Sands was impressed; John was obviously trying to draw the girl out, to engage her, but he sounded sincere. He sounded...interested. "We thought we'd pick up some groceries tomorrow, at least make up for what we eat." He smiled casually. "Let us know if there's something in particular we can pick up. You're probably hungry. Let us get out of your way." Julia, who had been sitting in the only chair, got up to make room.

"No, that's okay," Kaitlin said hurriedly, actually looking up at John and trying an

unconvincing smile that was little more than a flicker. "I'm not hungry." She started to shuffle out of the room. "Long day," she said in way of explanation. And then she was gone—around the corner and up the stairs—leaving no more trace of her passing than had she never been there. No trace other than the perplexed expressions on Sands', Julia's, and Hetger's faces. Clarence was leaning against the corner, arms crossed, grim.

"Nice girl," Sands muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Shut the hell up," Julia snapped at him, her conciliatory manner of the past half hour noticeably absent.

"We're the guests here," John reminded him in a quiet voice not meant to carry beyond the kitchen. "She doesn't have to conform to our expectations. From what Clarence has told me, she's had a rough time of it."

Sands held his tongue. No point causing a fuss over this burnt-out waif of a girl. He'd seen crazy people on the street before, homeless, addicts, runaways, criminals. She probably fell into several, if not all, of those categories. Not his problem. He was here for a few days, and then back to his old life.

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I can't breathe until I'm near the top of the stairs. My chest hurts, it's all tight, maybe like somebody shot me. I try to miss the creaky spots on the steps, but I can still feel those people listening to me. Man, I thought I was gonna die in there. Too many people sucking up my air, pretending they're interested in anything I have to say. Maybe they are interested. Maybe they need to know what they can get out of me, how long they can stay, what I might be good for. Just

because I think I can take Floyd at his word doesn't mean everybody is like that. Maybe it's just wishful thinking about Floyd.

I shut the bathroom door to take a pee. Didn't have to shut the door before, nobody around. Not until Rindle. Now these folks. I might as well put up a damn Motel 6 sign and charge by the night.

In my room, I leave my clothes in a pile. I'm cold and my skin is all goose bumps, but I'm no colder than I was before, all the way home. Maybe I should have let Frances drive me home. I took a long time walking. A long time. I had my coat on, but I was cold from the inside out, bone cold. After seeing Rindle, I can't get warm, can't breathe right. Those people being around just make it worse. I *am* hungry. But I'm not going to eat in front of them. Standing here naked, I can feel my body temperature dropping. The surface warmth seeps away, drawn out like steam on top of pavement when the ground is a lot warmer than the rain. I'm shivering. I clench my jaw so my teeth don't chatter. As cold as I feel inside, my outside *should* be cold too. It just makes sense. If I stood here all night, would I freeze solid? Freeze to death? Or would I have to go outside and lie down in the woods to freeze? I could lie down in Rindle's stream. That would do the trick. Or in a pond, or a lake. They're all over the place around here. Would that even out my insides and my outsides, if I were stiff, gray-black skin, dark purple lips and fingernails?

At this time of year in the forest, all of the trees look dead, all the hardwoods. Some of them are, they just don't know it yet. They'll sprout a few leaves this year, maybe next. But they're dead on the inside, rotten. First big storm...done for. Maybe I'm just dead on the inside. Maybe this

wanting to get back into the real world was me just not knowing it yet. A few leaves after it's too late to do any good. I wrap my arms around myself, but it doesn't do any good.

Clarence is a real bastard. I'm ungrateful, I know. I've been called worse. I've been worse. He's made sure I've gotten my money. He's sent me pot—helps take the edge off. I'm not saying what's happened to me is his fault, but when he's around, I see myself how he sees me. Not pretty. I thought maybe I was ready to ease back in to the world. Now I see that I'm just as much a welfare case as I ever was. Who am I kidding? Just myself. Not Clarence. Not his friends. It would serve him right, all of them, if I stood here all night and froze to death, and they found me in the morning. White men think they can buy you some food and it's okay that they come barging into your home. Floyd did. That chatty guy downstairs, too. Maybe the woman belongs to him. Maybe he thinks I'm here to be sweet-talked. And that other guy—I could feel him staring at me, looking down at me, sizing me up. I can see why he and Clarence don't get along—not that Clarence is Mr. Congeniality or anything. Hell with them. All of them.

As cold as I am, as dead as I feel, I'm too pissed off to freeze to death just now. This is my place, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna leave it to a bunch of high-and-mighty hunter types from the city. I make my legs and hands work. I crawl into bed under the quilt—what's left of it. I should be mad at Rindle for tearing everything to hell, but once I figure out which springs poking through to avoid and settle in, the rest of the stuff, strips of cloth and stuffing from the pillows and mattress, is like insulation. In a strange way, I feel safer, warmer, than I ever did before. My outsides, at least, begin

to warm up a bit. I hear the wind outside. I know the house is full of drafts, but they can't touch me here. I'm not shivering quite as much. Every few seconds, my muscles tense up and a spasm rattles my body, but that's happening less now. I think about all the stuff piled around and on top of me. I snuggle down like a baby bird in a nest. I forget about all the people in the world, all the bastards, all the people in my house. I forget about everything outside of this room. I forget about the room.

I'm not sure when exactly I fell asleep or for how long. I'm not sure of what woke me up, not until I hear the sound again. It's not one of those people coming upstairs to use the only bathroom in the house that works. It's not a person noise at all, but a forest noise. Scrabbling, like the trees brushing against the house. Except the light scrabbling is at the window now, opening it. The window is old, it sticks, but he's strong. He's like a boy just grown into a man's body, all strength and anger, more of either one than he knows what to do with. The draft picks up. I feel it even in my nest. I pull the quilt close, rearrange so the slits don't uncover my skin. Then the window is closed.

I think I knew he'd come tonight. I wanted him to. I was afraid he would. I was afraid he wouldn't. I'm buried in my nest, but in my mind I see him changing, becoming more man than wolf. I see his ratty clothes, and the curve of his back that he's so self-conscious about, that he's so angry about. I remember wishing for a time that I were white; life would have been so much easier.

He doesn't curl up on the blanket on the floor. He eases under the quilt, all awkward strength. If he were gonna kill me, he'd know exactly what to do. His clothes are just like I imagined, except cold

against me too. I start shivering again. But his skin is warm to the touch. We pull away the cloth, hurriedly, before we think, before one of us changes our mind, before the moon falls or the world comes to an end. Our fingers get tangled working at a button. We disentangle them, hurry on. No cute or nervous laughter, only hunger, desperation. I feel the stubble of his beard rough against my face, my neck, chest, belly. His skin is warm against me, his kisses. Two years. Has it only been that long since I've been with a man? Seems like lifetimes. We're manic in our affection, can't hold him tightly enough, can't rub and kiss him all over at the same time. Warmth returning to my body. Skin is the easy part. His hands bring blood to the surface. Maybe my heart can thaw too. Maybe it's not too late. Maybe the real world that I was looking for was the wrong one. Maybe I've found where I need to be. I feel him reaching out, too alone to be fearful anymore. I reach out for him as well. Dear God, it's been so long since I've felt another person's heartbeat. I'm alive. I'm alive.

Part Two: Pursuit

CHAPTER 12

"How are things on your end, Nathan?" Hetger asked.

Sands tried to stand close enough to listen in on the phone conversation without attracting the attention of passersby—not that there were a plethora of them. Downtown Winimac was not an exciting prospect: a few squat houses, a couple of churches, a hardware store that evidently doubled as post office, and a very few small businesses, including this grocery store that he and John were standing outside of since it had the only payphone in town.

"Not as bad as they could be," Nathan answered. "Everyone kind of assumed at first that a gas main had blown up, or something like that. After the fire crews pulled Jason's body out, the powers that be got a little suspicious. Iron Rapid's finest scoured the sewers. Yesterday afternoon, they announced that they'd found fragments of an explosive device."

"Great," Hetger sighed.

"Hold on. It gets better," Nathan said. "They've called in the FBI. There's a lot of talk going around about Oklahoma City, that kind of thing. People are pretty spooked."

"Any other information released?" Hetger asked.

"Not really. No word on anyone being questioned beyond routine. No manhunt or anything like that. No word yet publicly if they've identified the body or not."

"Okay," Hetger said, pausing to weigh Nathan's news. "We'll probably spend a few more days before we head back."

"Understood," Nathan said. "Oh, and John, I've come across a few interesting things online having to do with our very own Iron Rapids. A couple of promising contacts, too."

"You can fill us in when we get back. Meet with the prospects if you think they're worth it, just don't do anything irreversible before we get back. Okay?"

"Understood. You people take care of yourselves."

"Will do. You do the same," Hetger said, and then hung up.

"The FBI?" Sands said, not too loudly. "I don't like the sound of that. I feel like...like a criminal."

Hetger nonchalantly scanned the street. "Well, we did blow up part of the Iron Rapids municipal sewer system, and there was a dead body when we were through. If we're lucky, they'll identify Jason but not find any ties to the rest of us. With his background—rough background, a few minor scrapes with the authorities—they'll figure him for a minor-league terrorist who got his wires crossed and paid the price for it."

"So much for honoring his memory," Sands said.

"It's not pretty," Hetger said solemnly, "and the prospects aren't that much brighter for any of us. There aren't any medals, Douglas."

"I know, I know. But...I mean, it was for their own good...everybody's good...that that thing be destroyed."

"And probably no one will ever know," Hetger said, "and if they do know, they won't understand."

"I know," Sands sighed. "Saving civilization but not letting them know we exist, and all that."

Well, that's fine for you, because when we get home, I'm done."

Hetger regarded Sands seriously but said nothing, didn't argue, didn't try to change his mind, didn't get angry with him like Julia would have, or insult him like Clarence would have. "I'm heading inside," Hetger said at last, indicating the grocery store. "Restock. You coming?"

"No thanks. I'll leave you to your fun. I'll wait out here." Sands had looked in the store briefly; he'd seen the two women sitting near the cash register, both of them smoking like chimneys. He didn't feel like suffocating in the cramped little grocery, and now that he thought about it, he understood why the food packaging in Kaitlin's house all smelled faintly of stale cigarette smoke. Besides, the afternoon was nice enough: clouds not a thick as they usually were, not much wind, the temperature might even have climbed up into the fifties. Better yet, unstimulating as Winimac was, it wasn't the inside of a dilapidated house, or a car, or a motel room. The fresh air was a breath of freedom for Sands as he wandered down the street. The business district—one intersection—wasn't so large that he would miss Hetger when he was done in the store. Then they had to go in search of a laundromat. Winimac didn't have one.

Sands considered the bag of foul-smelling clothes in the trunk of John's car. He wasn't convinced that his overcoat would ever again smell like anything other than sewage, not without heavy-duty and repeated dry cleaning. His eye fell upon the Salvation Army store at the other end of the block, and he decided that a heavier sweatshirt, something warmer than what Hetger had loaned him and less dressy than his own coat, might be a worthwhile investment, if they were

going to be around this place for a few days. Heading toward the storefront, he caught himself watching the few locals on the street, regarding them the way he would someone in Iron Rapids, as if he might recognize anyone. He laughed at himself—and then he did see someone he recognized. Not from Iron Rapids, of course, but Clarence's cousin, Kaitlin. She was with a man, was arguing with him, not in an overly animated way, more muttered comments and subdued gestures of aggravation, like an old married couple. They went into the Salvation Army store without seeing Sands. He stopped there on the sidewalk and thought about turning around and going back to the store. For whatever reason, he felt that the less he saw of this girl the better. Maybe she knew about Clarence and, by extension, the rest of them, or maybe she was just screwed up and didn't look kindly upon company. Then he shrugged and continued on. What did he care if she got her panties in a wad? It was a free country, and after a few more days, he'd never have to see her again in his life.



I tell Rindle we're going in the store. He doesn't need to go in, he says. He's not buying anything. I know he's not buying anything, but I am. Fine, he says, you go in. I'll wait here. You can't wait here. I have to make sure it fits you. Fits me? What the hell...? I grab his arm and drag him inside. He doesn't fight me too much. He's learning that I'm stubborn, and he picks his battles.

We got up early this morning, way before anybody else in the house. I thought it might be awkward, the morning, but it wasn't. Back in the bad days, the heroin days when I was turning tricks, the johns were uncomfortable afterward

sometimes, a lot of the time. Didn't make no never mind to me. I had my fifty dollars. But this wasn't like that no more. Last night wasn't a business transaction. One of us might have thought better of it after the fact, but it's not like that either. We snuck out of the house: opened the window like he'd come in, climbed across the porch roof, and shimmied down the post. Once we were away from the house, just walking along the road, that's when stuff could've gotten weird, but it didn't. I think we were both relieved in a way. Maybe we both knew it would happen eventually, both figured it would. I'm just guessing, as much about what I think, what I feel, as about what he does. Maybe it's a big mistake, but what else in my life hasn't been?

Inside the Salvation Army store, I make a beeline for the coats. Something about this place makes me nostalgic for home, my old home, and the city. I guess it's the memories of the Santas with their buckets and bells, even in the skanky part of the city. Say what you will about these militant Christians, but they put their money where their mouth is.

"Try this on," I tell Rindle, grabbing a coat off the rack.

"I don't need a coat."

"You do. That flannel shirt is falling apart, and it makes me cold looking at you with no more than that on." I don't mention the fact that the shirt has bloodstains on it. Better not to bring that to the attention of the clerk, who's busying herself sorting clothes out of a box so she won't have to help the crazy drunk and the crazy black girl.

While I'm sifting through the table of mittens and stocking caps, Rindle pretends not to be

looking in the mirror, checking out the coat. I grabbed the biggest one I saw, so it would have room for his back without being too tight. I think he likes it. Maybe he just likes having somebody take care of him—God knows he makes it hard enough.

He balks when I try to hand him mittens, same with a hat. He shakes his head, aggravated. "They get in the way," he says. Doesn't mention in the way of what, but I think of him changing, the claws that would rip through the sturdiest pair of mittens. I don't press him. I pick my battles too.

Out of habit, I look toward the door when the little chime rings. I glance at the man coming in and do a double take when I realize I know him. One of Clarence's buddies, Sands, the one who thinks he's too good to be in my company even though he's happy enough to stay in my house. He nods at the clerk, who's relieved to have what she thinks is a non-crazy customer in the store. Mr. High-and-Mighty nods at me—awfully white of him to acknowledge my presence, in public no less. Then he looks at Rindle. I see it coming, but there's nothing I can do. Sands' eyes get really big, and the color drains from his face.

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The grungy man with Kaitlin returned Sands' stare—except Sands no longer saw a man. He saw a hulking, furry beast over eight feet tall, hunched forward from a sizeable protuberance on its back. Bloody spittle dripped down its chest from ominous fangs. The wolfish eyes glared murder. In its claws, the monster gripped...a heavy winter coat. Sands blinked, and again, unable to absorb the incongruity. He smelled blood, he smelled death.

“Good morning,” said the store clerk cheerfully. The gray-haired woman seemed relieved to see Sands. Why? he wondered. So the werewolf in her boutique could eat him instead of her? Sands stared at her, uncomprehending, and her expression of relief froze, cracked, fell away. She returned to her box of donated clothes, studiously sorting, sorting, pretending she was all alone in this strange strange world.

Sands belatedly tried to conceal the fear that was coursing through him, causing him to break out in a cold sweat. Who knew what might provoke this beast? But when he looked again, the beast was gone. The man stood in its place, unshaven, darkly complected, still hunched over, but human. He *looked* human. Sands knew better, and he cursed God or whomever had seen fit to curse him that he should know. He didn't *want* to know.

He forced his feet to carry him into the shop, though he would rather have turned and run the other way. But that might clue in the beast that something was wrong, that might set it off. Sands could all too easily picture it slashing Kaitlin in half, tearing out the clerk's throat, coming after him....

It might come after me, and they could get away, he thought briefly, but there were no guarantees with that—except for him ending up dead. So Sands tried to act casual; he began to examine clothes on the nearest rack...until he realized they were dresses and moved on to a rack of men's clothes. He worked up his nerve to glance surreptitiously at the monster—it wasn't watching him, wasn't stalking him, wasn't about to pounce and disembowel him. Instead, the man-beast was doing much as Sands was, much as the clerk was, and showing entirely too much interest in the bins

of discarded clothing and household goods. Everyone in the store, it seemed, was busy not noticing one another. Everyone except Kaitlin; she was watching Sands.

Once he realized that she was looking his way, Sands decided he had to warn her, get her out of the store. *What about the clerk?* He wasn't sure what to do; he'd never had to come up with a life-and-death plan on the fly before. He wasn't completely confident in the result, but he didn't dare delay any longer.

Catching Kaitlin's eye, and moving only his own head and eyes, he motioned toward the door, something he hoped she would interpret as: *Get the hell out of here*, or the rough equivalent. Maybe she did, maybe she didn't, but her only response was to glare more coldly—something Sands read as, more or less: *Drop dead, you asshole*.

This wasn't going to work, he realized. She didn't understand, *couldn't* understand. Just like Faye and Melanie had no idea of all the hell he had gone through for their sakes, this drug-addled street urchin probably thought that he was coming on to her, or that he had a peculiar twitch in his neck. Sands wanted to dash across the room and grab her by the shoulder, shake her, slap her, yell at her and tell her how much danger she was in. Women could be so thick-headed!

Trying to improvise without giving himself away, he edged toward a table of odds and ends: an egg timer, serving spoons, kitchen crockery, calendars, a bare bulletin board, a medium-sized chalk board. He reached for the stubby piece of chalk in the tray, and while he was still trying to decide what he could do, his hand was at work. Feeling as if he were watching someone else make

the marks, he drew a simple figure, a rectangle. To the corners he added small circles, and another in the center. Not understanding, he could see the meaning of the symbol; his mind read it, though he had no idea from what quarter the sudden comprehension sprang. *Danger*. It meant *danger*, pure and simple. Sands turned and found himself facing the werewolf—what else could he be?—but the creature's image was flickering back and forth: man...beast...man...beast. It stared at Sands, and at the chalk board, but there was no recognition in those changing eyes.

Kaitlin looked more surly than ever. She was trying to suppress her anger, but doing no better a job than Sands was at keeping in check his rising panic. Any second the hunchback would understand what Sands had written. The beast would fly into a murderous rage.

Sands almost sighed audibly when Kaitlin finally said, "Let's get out of here." An instant later, he realized that she wasn't talking to him—she was talking to the monster.

Good God, I've got to save her! No matter how much she resisted his efforts, no matter how uncooperative she was. If only she knew. If only she could see what he saw!

"How much for the coat?" Kaitlin was asking the clerk. "Seven dollars?" She reached into her pocket and left a crumpled wad of ones on the counter. "Here." Then she was heading for the door—the creature following her.

I've got to let her know somehow, Sands thought. Thinking on his feet was not what the corporate world had prepared him for. He'd made a mess of this so far and was growing desperate. He'd have

to follow them, get Kaitlin alone when he had the chance, warn her. As the chime sounded and the door closed, Sands moved toward the door himself. He opened it—*bing-bong*—only to hear Kaitlin say to her demonic companion: “Hold on a second, I forgot something.”

She stepped into the doorway just as Sands was stepping out, but she was less surprised than he. With two stiff fingers, she shoved him in the center of his chest. He stumbled back into the store with her right in front of him.

“Don’t you *dare* follow me, you son of a bitch,” she said in a harsh whisper. Then she turned and was gone, leaving Sands slack-jawed as the door again closed. *Bing-bong*.

He looked to the clerk, who had nothing to offer except an expression of shock and mortification at the inexplicable series of events. Stunned and confused, he shuffled back to the chalkboard and rubbed it clean with the cuff of his sleeve.

CHAPTER 13

As the black waters parted, he rose into darkness, tasting air as if for the first time. Primordial sludge drained from his eyes, ears, mouth, splattering back into the stagnant pool from which he was reborn. Matted and singed fur lay slick against his body. A queer sensation from his sides, gills, that he might never lack for breath, marked him as a creature of the water. Blood-thirsty fangs and obsidian claws gave him the desires of a hunter.

As he breathed in the foul atmosphere of the grotto, the sulfurous steam rising from jagged pus-filled chasms in the earth, the distant memory of a name tickled the back of his throat. He tried to speak the name: *Eeeve...Eeeve-sss...* But his mouth would not curl around the sounds. He choked and spat bloody-black phlegm. There was a story in the name. He was a teller of tales, or had been once, long ago. That particular story, however, was no longer his to tell.

Another name awaited him, a name of his homeland, a name older than the land itself, older than the ancient Fomoiré, who had feasted upon the bones of the First Men. He, too, was a hunter of man, sweating hatred and spite, picking his teeth with vengeance. *Fir Bolg*. The sound of it was sweet and terrible, like the music of plucked sinews of mangled flesh.

A story still remained for *Fir Bolg*, a story like his spirit, as old as blood-wetted dirt, as old as mud-caked skulls and screams upon the wind. *Hunch* was the name of the story, and it was to be a story of rending and of savoring. *Hunch*. The sound brought a twisted grin to *Fir Bolg*'s snout. *Hunch!* He could not say the name, could not think it,

without quivering, without scraping his claws along the flesh of his scalp. With a quick, savage bite, he severed his own forked tongue so that he might feel and taste the blood. He would save the name. He would not speak it again until his tongue grew back in his mouth, until the glee of orgiastic frenzy was at hand.

The end of the story was near, so close. So close. The girl. He would find it with the girl. Beginning. Ending. Life and death, everlasting. He laughed, spewing forth the blood that ran down the back of his throat. He quivered with anticipation, and the waters of the pool, like a bounteous lover, lapped with the motion of his body.

CHAPTER 14

Five wolves stood around the low wall of stacked stones, the former shrine now lifeless, obedient Water Snake gone away after the death of its spirit master's charge. Naught but a pile of stones remained at the heart of the Sept of the Wailing Glade. The wolves mewed despondently, grieving for their guardian departed and acknowledging the largesse of the spirit world, for they knew that to embrace the future, first they must resolve the past. Their cries of distress rose dissonantly toward Luna who, open-faced, full in her magnificent countenance, looked down upon them, imparting hope that they, like she, could pass through a time of darkness and re-emerge again to serve Gaia.

Of the five, Black Rindle's song was that which the others followed. He was unused to such a position of prominence, unused to being included so whole-heartedly in the life of the sept. Always before he had been an object of scorn, ridicule, resentment or, at best, strained tolerance. His howl was perhaps tentative, as he feared making a mistake—also, because he was distracted. Whereas before he had been unwelcome in the worlds of both Garou and human, now he found himself torn between the two. As he saw to the duties of his caern, he fought distracting thoughts of humanity: of Kaitlin, whom he had claimed and who, in turn, had claimed him; of the stranger they had encountered that afternoon, one of the people staying at the house, one of the people who Kaitlin had warned him would be able to see him for what he was, Garou. Was it safe for Kaitlin to continue associating with these humans who were somehow more than human? Might they come to pose a threat to the caern? No time existed at present to

ponder such questions. The dirge required Rindle's undivided attention; the pack demanded his energy, his strength, his essence.

As the howl of regret drew toward its close, another voice, stronger, more practiced, took on added prominence. Of the five Garou, only Shreds Birch, the Talon, was natural lupus. As such, her mastery of the wolf-form song was unparalleled and better suited to subtle inflection.

A challenge? Black Rindle wondered, jealous of his newly won prerogatives as leader. The howl falling silent, he punctuated it with a throaty growl. All eyes drew toward him. Shreds Birch recognized the cast of his hostility. Without hesitation, she rolled onto her back, exposing her belly to Rindle. There was no challenge in her song, he realized. None except that which he imagined. *He who flaunts dominance when there is no true need is no true leader*, he thought, standing in embarrassed silence.

Still on her back, Shreds Birch howled again, softly this time, not a song meant for resplendent Luna far away, but for the Garou gathered around the low wall. "We rededicate this caern tonight," she said through yips and barks. "We rededicate this sept, this remaining pack. It is fitting that we submit to you, pack alpha, grand elder of the sept. My life is Gaia's, the caern's, yours."

Black Rindle stood stunned. There was nothing of false modesty, of ingratiation or artifice in Shreds Birch's acquiesce—only respect of the proper order, that which to a lupus is right and natural. She might, before, have regarded him with disdain, as did the others, but now he was her alpha. Her duty was to follow. The Red Talons, less human than all other Garou, held inviolate

the old ways, the traditions of the Litany. Unless she should ever feel need to challenge forthrightly, as long as Rindle served the sept, Shreds Birch was offering her unquestioned loyalty.

How could I have doubted her? Black Rindle wondered. But he'd had a lifetime of reason to doubt all others, and one did not unlearn such hard lessons in but a few nights. *I will strive to earn her loyalty, he thought, to deserve it.*

Just as he was hoping that Shreds Birch would get up so that the rite might continue, Claudia Stands Firm joined her septmate on the ground, belly exposed. The warder had long been the closest to accepting Rindle, and lived only to protect the caern. Cynthia Slack Ear was more reluctant in her acquiescence, but she followed the example of her Red Talon confidante. Barks-at-Shadows was last to go down. Even a disowned Silver Fang was a proud beast, and he seemed to submit more from a desire to conform than from any great reverence for Black Rindle as alpha.

Never in his harried life had Rindle anticipated such a moment as this. His most outlandish flights of fancy had seen him accepted, no longer derided by those of his own kind. Countless bottles had, on occasion, provided him with brief respite from reality, but had provided no alternatives. Now, surrounded by the four supine wolves and overcome by the honor of his pack, Black Rindle raised his chin and howled true and strong. He howled to Sister Luna, keeper of the night, watcher of spirits. His song was twisting woven strands, strains of gratitude and requited fealty to his packmates, and of petition to the ephemeral and mystical that existed around and within all things mundane.

With a single flash of blinding light, the Garou found themselves upon a great plain stretching in every direction. The world was small beneath their paws, the broad curve of Gaia's belly plain to sight with the naked eye, and there, just beyond the horizon, almost close enough to touch, was Sister Luna, beckoning. The final notes of his song barely away from his lips, Black Rindle was in motion, streaking across the plain toward the deceptive horizon. His pack streamed after him, nose to tail to nose to tail. Above, spread wide as if to swallow them, was the dark, endless sky, pierced by countless bright specks, changing faces of the dancing constellations.

Black Rindle thought at first that three long strides would take him to Sister Luna, that he would then leap and land upon her beautiful, pock-marked face. Yet his first three strides brought him no closer to her, nor the next three, nor the three after that. Three leagues of three strides he ran and drew no closer. Still he ran. Three leagues tenfold and tenfold again, with the earth rolling beneath his paws, and his brethren keeping his measure, panting behind him. As the plain stretched ever onward, distance crept in between them, and soon the Garou, who had been a tightly linked chain, were now a stitchwork pattern, a seam upon Gaia's broad face, reaching from horizon to horizon. Black Rindle felt them receding farther and farther behind him, but he could not stop. The fore horizon was merely a leap out of reach—always one leap, one and a half, one again, no matter how fast he ran, no matter the burning in his lungs and muscles.

Barks-at-Shadows was the first to fall away into the past, his legs faltering, fighting to maintain the pace, until he missed a step, stumbled, and was

gone. Rindle spared only a quick glance over his shoulder upon hearing the Fang's yelp of dismay, but the alpha could not stop, the pack could not stop. The four ran onward.

Ahead, Sister Luna was drawing away beyond the horizon, falling lower and lower in the sky. With a burst of speed that surprised even himself, Black Rindle shot forward. He crested a ridge which suddenly became the horizon behind him instead of ahead, and came full upon a wide chasm severing the plain. Feeling his rage pricked by the sight of Luna beyond now far-distant mountains, he leapt. His nails sent a trickle of dust over the edge of the chasm, a tiny cloud dissipating in the depths of oblivion, but Rindle flew upward, ears laid back, body flattened against the wind. His arc crested dangerously shy of the chasm's center, and then he was falling, momentum and gravity playing a lethal tug-o-war, with him as the prize.

He landed in stride, kicking forward as the lip of earth beneath his hind paws crumbled away into the depths. Shooting ahead, he saw that Luna was all but gone now behind the distant mountains, but on the intervening plain ran a gray wolf. *So be it, thought Rindle. Luna has brought me to this hunt. I will not turn away.*

Glancing back, he saw too as Cynthia Slack Ear, who was next behind him, crested the ridge and skittered to a halt at the edge of the chasm. Her hesitation cost her any chance to jump successfully, but she barked a warning, and as Shreds Birch topped the ridge, she was ready. With a strong leap full of grace, she surged through the air and cleared the gorge by several lengths of her own body. Such was also the case for Claudia Stands Firm, who moments later traversed the tear in the divided plain.

I did not warn Cynthia, Rindle derided himself as he returned his attention to the gray wolf running ahead. But there had been no time, he realized. Had he hesitated, he never would have crossed, and none of them might have seen the wolf. *I will make amends by catching it*, he decided, and surged forward unheeding of the ravenous exhaustion that nipped at his heels.

The gray wolf ran on fresh legs, as if Luna herself had deposited him on the plain that instant as her proxy. As Rindle labored to keep up, the other wolf gradually pulled ahead, the distance between growing slowly but unmistakably. Black Rindle pushed himself harder—harder than ever he had—and the gap became constant, then, painfully, slowly, began to lessen. From behind, Shreds Birch's howl sounded, and Claudia Stands Firm's in response—howls of encouragement. They too could see that Rindle was closing on their prey, and they urged him onward. From their faith and pride in him, he drew strength. His strides grew longer, more powerful, and the earth fell away more rapidly behind him. Still the gray wolf ran strong and true, but Rindle continued to gain ground.

Now the plain, however, which had been incredibly vast, was at an end. Forested foothills lay directly ahead, and craggy mountains loomed behind them. The gray wolf slipped into the woods and was gone from sight. Black Rindle, though, with his senses free of instinct-numbing alcohol, was a hunter without peer. The trail was not difficult to follow. The gray wolf was fleeing headlong, not pausing to obscure his path. So Rindle wove his way among the trees, racing up small hillocks and down the far side, one after another after another. Before long, a mighty hunger took hold of him. His stomach ached as if

he had not eaten in many days, and as he pressed deeper into the forest, the hunger grew more severe, until his fast seemed to have lasted years instead of days. His legs, rubbery and weak, weighed tons. Each step became a struggle, a feat of will, but still he persisted.

When the gray wolf's trail crossed a swiftly flowing stream, Rindle shifted to his larger rage-form and leapt. Without breaking stride, he reached into the water and snatched up a silver-scaled fish and raised it toward his fangs.

"Hold there a moment," said the fish, a glistening salmon. Rindle stayed his hand but kept running. His belly burned for food, just as his lungs burned for air. "Spare me," said the fish, "and I will tell you how to gain what it is you seek."

Rindle hesitated, unsure whether he possessed the strength to deny his hunger. Emptiness gnawed at him from within, and the rage of his Crinos body strained for the satisfaction of fangs rending flesh and snapping bone. But he thought: *This is the spirit world, and nothing happens here without a reason.* It could be that this fish wished to trick him, but Rindle's Theurge mother, Galia Rainchild, had told him that a salmon was a creature of mystical wisdom, and the Sept of the Wailing Glade had suffered enough from lack of wisdom.

"Be quick about it," Rindle growled, coming to a stop.

"Take me back to my stream," said the salmon.

"It is the wrong way." Now Rindle did suspect a trick. He snarled and raised the salmon closer to his mouth.

"Take me back to my stream," said the salmon, "and I will tell you. Eat me, and you will assuage your hunger for the moment, but you will run the

plains and hills and mountains without ever finding what it is you seek."

Rindle hesitated a moment longer—the gray wolf's trail was growing colder with each passing second, but what if this salmon spoke the truth?—then turned and forced his weary legs to sprint back to the stream. "There," he said when he stood beside the running water. "Now tell me."

"Very well," said the salmon. "Look there." It lifted a fin and pointed.

Black Rindle looked, and through a break in the trees he saw the mountains on the far side of the wood, and barely discernible upon a path climbing a pass a tiny speck moving, the gray wolf, hopelessly far ahead.

"You have cost me the hunt!" Rindle snarled. His every muscle aching from exhaustion, he knew there was no way he could catch up to the gray wolf again. In his rage, Rindle squeezed the salmon,

"Not so hasty!" the alarmed fish cried, its eyes bulging. "The hunt is not always to the swift, but to the wise."

"Speak quickly," Rindle said with a snap of his teeth, "or I will have the wisest belly in all the Tellurian."

The salmon took him at his word. "The gray wolf's path to the west over the mountains winds up and around this way and that way and then finally down. You must go that way," the fish pointed with his other fin, "to the south. There is a way through the mountains. Hurry and the race will be yours. One other thing—" But Rindle had already tossed the salmon into the air, back toward the stream, where the spirit fish landed without the least splash.

Black Rindle raced westward. Shreds Birch and Claudia should almost have caught up with him by now, he suspected. *They should follow the wolf through the pass, he thought, so that he doesn't turn and escape by the way he came.* But there would be two paths to follow: the gray wolf's to the west, and Rindle's to the south. *How will they know?*

"Why don't you tell them?" said a voice, descending upon Rindle along with a rush of wings. Owl swooped by Rindle's shoulder as the spirit bird flew past. "Have you forgotten everything that once I taught you?" Owl asked. "Or have you spent so much time sulking about what you cannot change that you've forgotten how to do something about what you can?"

Owl's sudden appearance surprised Rindle, but the rebuke focused his attention. He knew readily enough to which spirit gift Owl referred—a gift that Rindle had not utilized in many years, because more often than not he had been wanting to avoid his fellow Garou, not communicate with them. *Shreds Birch, Stands Firm, he cast his thoughts to his packmates. Have you reached the stream in the woods yet?*

Coming on it now, responded Shreds Birch.

I'm just behind her, added Claudia.

Good, Black Rindle thought. Cross over, head west for the pass over the mountains. Do not let the gray wolf escape back that way. The two agreed, and Rindle's thoughts were once again his own.

As Rindle pressed on, Owl was before him again, above him, perched upon a branch beneath which Rindle ran. "The spirits impart gifts for a reason, Black Rindle. Ignore them at your own peril."

Gifts and wisdom, Black Rindle thought. The first his to use, the second his to seek.

A few strides beyond Owl's tree, the forest ended. Simply ceased to be. Nor did the wide plain resume, but instead Rindle faced a sheer wall of rock. The mountains shot skyward like an impregnable fortress. Rindle's legs and lungs were relieved as he stopped and anxiously surveyed the topography: There was no break in the stone wall, no path, no pass, hardly even a foothold were he to try to climb. *That would take forever*, he thought, even if the mountain were favorable for climbing.

"The blasted salmon has played me for a fool," he muttered, as he toyed with the idea of returning to the stream and exacting revenge upon the spirit. *But what did the fish say?* Rindle tried to remember exactly. Not a road or steps or a path. *There is a way through the mountains*, Rindle thought. *Through.* And then he felt again the sting of Owl's admonition: *The spirits impart gifts for a reason, Black Rindle. Ignore them at your own peril.*

Feeling the urgency of a hunter whose prey is slipping away, Rindle rushed to the wall of stone and began scraping at it. His claws shone with the power of the spirit world, and as temperamental Badger had taught him long ago, Rindle began to dig. Sparks flew as he tore into the mountain. He worked at a furious speed, quickly leaving behind forest and stream, Owl and Salmon. He leaned low, ever forward, and flung dirt and rock between his wide-spread legs. His hands and claws grew warm, they glowed in the darkness beneath the mountain. Somewhere behind him, Shreds Birch and Stands Firm had crossed the stream, dashed through the forest and were now likely climbing the mountain pass. Ahead of them, perhaps above Rindle, the

gray wolf was racing to escape the mountains and break free to whatever lay beyond.

Black Rindle continued his work in the darkness, arms and shoulders now as punished and fatigued as before his legs had been. One moment, he was breathing in the gritty dust of his burrowing, the next his subterranean night exploded into what seemed a brilliant light—the evening sky, and Luna's bright, wide face far to the west. Rindle stumbled into the open, onto the edge of another endless plain stretching out toward retreating Luna. His emergence from darkness and heat stunned him. The night seemed unusually cool. Steam rose from his claws and his sweat-matted fur. Barely had he taken his first breath of fresh air when the gray wolf came charging down the nearest hillside, outlet of the path he had followed from the other side.

The gray wolf, Rindle now realized, was much larger than it had appeared from a distance. The creature stood as tall at the shoulders as did Rindle as Crinos. Yet Rindle had committed himself and his pack to this hunt, and beyond him lay the vastness of the open plain. He was not about to be daunted now. As he leapt, he caught from the wolf a flash of eyes that were vaguely familiar, one brown and one green, but Rindle was in flight—

A great clawed hand caught Rindle about the throat. The headlong momentum of his charge, stopped so suddenly, nearly broke his neck. He coughed and sputtered as his prey, one-handed, lifted him from the ground.

"You have chased me until I caught you," said the spirit wolf, which in the blink of an eye had matched Rindle's rage-form and towered above him.

Rindle coughed as the hand tightened around his throat. He lashed out, but the other lifted him from the ground and there was no leverage to be had. Lights danced before Rindle's eyes. Growling reached his ears—not from his captor, but familiar voices, Shreds Birch and Stands Firm charging down the hillside, following the same path that had brought the other over the mountain.

"You would save this one?" called the gray wolf, hidden behind the dancing lights. "*This* one? This deformed creature, this hunchback?"

"He is our packmate," Shreds Birch growled menacingly.

"Our alpha," Stands Firm snarled in the Garou tongue.

"And you would die for his sake?" asked the wolf.

"You would be the one to die," said Shreds Birch, her words thick with spittle.

"We do what we must," said Stands Firm. "He is our alpha."

The pressure was suddenly absent from Black Rindle's throat. He found himself dropped to the ground, and was back on his feet in an instant, shaking his head to clear the last of the lights, sucking in air to his lungs which were already so overwhelmingly taxed.

"Then I have finally found a pack worthy of my attention," said the wolf, and Rindle, as if his eyes were just then opened, recognized this wolf that he had chased until it caught him. "You have taken heed of my warning," said Meneghwo. He was no longer Crinos, but giant Lupus, and his fur no longer solid gray, but the familiar patchwork of browns and grays and blacks and reds that Rindle

had seen before. "You look to the future," spoke the wolf, "but there are still amends that you must make."

Shreds Birch and Stands Firm, still poised to strike, hesitated to do so. Perhaps they remembered the way this patchwork wolf had ended that fight beneath the human girl's house that might have claimed Rindle's life. They measured the words of the mysterious stranger and looked to Rindle. Hearing the truth in what Meneghwo said, Rindle dropped to the ground. He rolled to his back, exposing his belly to the spirit wolf. A moment later, Shreds Birch and Stands Firm followed his example.

The giant wolf stood above them and, as much as a wolf is able, he smiled. "Now I will tell you what must come next."

CHAPTER 15

Not even Clarence had something insulting to say. In fact, Clarence in particular seemed to have *nothing* to say.

"Tell us again," Julia asked of Sands. She was concerned—not the shrew, not Florence Nightingale.

Douglas took a deep breath and sighed. "Again." He must have recounted every detail at least a dozen times for Hetger in the car and as they were doing laundry in the nearby town of East Morey, and then half that many times again back here at the house for Julia and Clarence. Sands was tired, irritable; the adrenaline rush of what he'd seen had worn off hours ago. But in one way, he didn't mind. Hetger and Julia weren't reacting with shocked incredulity, as a sane, normal person would. They were pressing for details, trying to get everything straight and learn as much as they could. For Sands, who as the last weeks had passed had been unable to believe what his own eyes had seen, the belief of his acquaintances was a palpable relief. Only Clarence didn't have any questions. He sat staring at a fixed spot on the floor.

"While John was in the grocery store, I walked over to the Salvation Army shop," Sands began. "But like I said, I see Kaitlin and this guy about to go in."

"You said they were arguing," Julia said. "Are you sure she wasn't trying to get away from him?"

"I told you, they weren't *arguing* arguing, just..." Sands had elaborated before. Hell, he thought, *Julia's been through a failed marriage. She should understand.* "They were just, you know, kind of sniping. That's what it looked like anyway. That was the impression I had. But I'm fairly positive

that she wasn't trying to get away. She was the one that grabbed his sleeve and pulled him inside." Sands glanced at Clarence, who was still unresponsive.

"Okay," said Julia. "So they were bickering, she pulls him inside the store...."

"Right. I follow them in." Douglas had not mentioned and was not about to mention that he'd thought about avoiding the girl altogether. All that would do would be to annoy Clarence.

"How long between them going in and you going in?" Julia wanted to know.

"I don't know...a minute or two." Sands tried to remember himself walking down the block and was amazed by how imprecise was his recollection of time's passage. "Three or four, tops. What the hell difference does it make?"

"Maybe none," Julia said sternly. She didn't like being challenged. "Maybe all the difference in the world."

"Douglas," Hetger stepped in, "the specific questions may or may not turn up anything relevant, but they may remind you of something that you forgot, something you didn't realize, something that could end up being significant."

Sands took another deep breath. "Okay. So I go inside, and they are looking at clothes, just like anybody else who went in might have been doing."

"What clothes?" Julia prompted.

"He was holding a coat," Sands remembered. He remembered that very clearly. "A winter coat. Except he wasn't just some guy anymore."

"What did he look like before?" Julia asked. "When he was just a normal guy?"

"Grimy. Longish hair, dark. Pretty scruffy. Hadn't shaved in a while."

"Look in the mirror recently?" Julia said caustically.

Sands sneered but kept going. "He was kind of hunched over too. He stood sort of awkwardly."

"And after you went inside?" Hetger said.

A brief, violent shiver made Sands flinch. For an instant he relived the panic of standing face to face with a monstrous beast from a child's nightmare. Though this wolf-thing lacked the sheer oozing malevolence of the lurker, it more than made up for it with seething fury, a tightly wound violence held back so precariously that to look upon the creature, even to think back now, made Sands' legs weak.

"Claws," he said. "And teeth. Its mouth was bloody, dripping...."

"How big?" Hetger asked.

"At least a couple of feet taller than me, and that was hunched over. The hump was more pronounced. Fur all over. A werewolf," Sands muttered, completely sure of what he'd seen, but still trying to remind himself that in this new world he'd stumbled into, such things were possible. "An honest-to-God werewolf."

"But it wasn't really like that," said Julia. Sands shot her a withering glare. "I mean, it didn't appear that way to the others. They didn't see it for what it was...like you did."

"They couldn't have," Sands said, seeing her point. "They didn't react to it. They would've...I mean, its eyes...its eyes were...I felt like a sheep. Its eyes were so...so predatory. They couldn't have known. The woman behind the counter...Kaitlin—"

"She knew," said Clarence, breaking his silence. "She damn well knew."

"What?" Sands asked.

Clarence hadn't shifted his cold gaze from the spot on the floor. For a second, Sands wondered if he'd imagined the comment, but then Clarence said it again. "She knew."

Sands looked at John and Julia. They both seemed to understand. "What do you mean she knew? What are you talking about?"

"She's like us," Hetger said.

"Like us."

"Chosen. Imbued."

"She's a hunter?" Sands couldn't begin to imagine how she was with that thing—bought it a coat, for God's sake!—if she knew.

"Not all of the chosen are hunters," Julia said. "You, of all people, should understand that."

"I should...?" Sands felt the sting of her words. The barbs, as they were meant to, took hold. He began pacing around the room. "Could you be any *more* condescending, Julia? I guess all that about not giving me such a hard time was just a load of crap, huh?"

"It's a fact," Julia said defensively. "Some people don't care what these powers are for or why they have them. Some people walk away. You're living proof. Kaitlin is living proof."

"Good God! Don't you compare me to her," Sands snapped. "Maybe I do want to go back to my own life, my normal life, but my eyes are open now. I may not be part of your little crusade, but I'll protect my family if I need to. That vampire is dead, destroyed, gone. I didn't shirk anything. I didn't invite him over for tea. I'm not hanging out

with a werewolf, for God's sake. So don't you compare me to her. I tried to warn her. I tried to help."

"Always you," Clarence said, suddenly up on his feet, his face contorted into a scowl. "It always has to be about you, doesn't it? Well get this through your white, rich-ass, country-club head: it ain't about you. You told us plain that you don't care what we do, don't care what happens to us. Well, that can go two ways, mister. So keep your damn whining to yourself. This ain't about you."

"Then who is it about?" came the voice from the doorway, Kaitlin's voice, the words spoken softly but with an edge.

None of them had heard her come into the house. Their arguing had drowned out all else, and she was a quiet waif of a girl; a strong breeze could have concealed the sound of her coming and going. Sands' first response was embarrassment that she might have heard him talking about her, but that reaction angered him, and he decided he didn't care. *I tried to help her, damn it all. I could have pissed off that monster and gotten killed, for all she cared.*

"Who's your boyfriend?" Clarence asked, icy cold.

Kaitlin hesitated. She wasn't shying away from meeting their eyes tonight as she had last night. Her face was devoid of any discernible expression, but from beneath that practiced blank look seeped anger and resentment. Whatever familial bond existed between she and Clarence was obviously strained and frayed, if not completely destroyed.

"You're welcome to stay here for a little while," she said with forced calm. "That's it."

"Who's your boyfriend?" Clarence asked again, as if she hadn't spoken.

"Shut up, Clarence." Kaitlin wasn't backing down. She wasn't withering before the demands of her surly cousin.

"Who's your boyfriend?" Clarence said again, as if his fury could pry the answer from her.

What's your boyfriend is more like it, Sands thought, but he already knew the answer to that. A werewolf. *God help us.*

"I do what I want," Kaitlin said.

"Do *who* you want, is that it?" Clarence said contemptuously. Kaitlin bit her lip, said nothing. The cousins locked gazes. Finally Clarence shook his head. "How'd you get so damn messed up? You always been messed up."

"I didn't ask your permission for anything," Kaitlin said.

"Good thing."

There was another pause. Sands, Julia, and Hetger might as well not have been in the room.

"I didn't ask why you need to stay here, either," Kaitlin said at last. "Don't know, don't want to know. I'm not telling you how to run your life."

"He's the enemy," Clarence said flatly.

"The enemy?" she mocked him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? The enemy? Why? Because you say so?"

"You know why."

"Oh, I do?"

"You always hung out with freaks and losers, girl. Addicts, pimps, whores—but this guy—"

"You *don't* know what you're talkin' about!" she burst out. "You never know what you're talkin' about, but you're always so sure you do. You're always right, aren't you, Clarence?"

She's right about that, Sands thought. He glanced at Julia and Hetger. They looked as uncomfortable as he felt, being party to this family squabble—but it was more than that. It did affect them all, because no matter what Kaitlin thought about this guy, he wasn't *human*. But nobody was saying it. They were all afraid to say it. The hunters had discussed it among themselves, but talking about it in front of a stranger would somehow make it real. Sands recognized the hesitancy. He had felt the same thing about the lurker. The pressure would just keep building and building and building....

"He's a werewolf," Sands said. "You know that, don't you, Kaitlin? You see it. He's a werewolf." With Sands entry into the conversation, the tension in the room, instead of dissipating, crystallized. Kaitlin and Clarence both turned their seething fury toward Douglas, as if he had no right to interfere. "I know what I saw," he said. "I may be crazy, but I'm not blind, and I'm not stupid." He looked to Julia and Hetger, but they were spectating; they weren't the girl's family, and they hadn't seen what Sands had seen. They couldn't speak with authority, so they kept quiet.

"I ain't stupid," Kaitlin said coldly, defiantly.

"Stupid enough to think that something we oughta be killing is your friend," Clarence said.

She glared back and forth now, between Clarence and Sands, her eyes blazing, nostrils flaring. "You stay however long you need," she said, "but no longer. Soon as you can, I want you out of my house...*my house*," she said again, and then stomped out of the room and up the stairs.

CHAPTER 16

The north wind intruded where it should not have been allowed. Within the hollow of the Ash Tree, all those Garou who had gone before rustled, swirled in tiny eddies. Three handfuls for each, chips of bone, fine-grained ash scooped from the spent funeral biers—they knew no peace since the spirits had fled from the lightning-marked tree that was only a shell, the Ash that was truly an oak, the final resting place that offered no respite.

Black Rindle felt the wind, and his hackles rose—not from chill, but from shame and anger. His wolf ears pricked up at the keening of the spirit wind, the death wind. He raised his snout and offered his own voice to the night, that his howl might drown out the wind that should not be in that place. Four other voices followed him, joined him, strengthened his call. Still, the wind tugged at his fur, played among the ashes.

We seek peace for our dead, Rindle's song intoned, and strength for the living.

The others echoed him, the strains of their howls twining like threads upon the Weaver's grand loom:

Peace for our dead.

Strength for the living.

Mother Gaia, hear our call, Rindle entreated. We are born of you, and in the end return to you.

Born of you, return to you, sang the pack.

Mother Gaia, hear our call.

Sister Luna, Rindle sang, hear our call. One night past your full radiance, I am born of the Warrior Moon waning. I speak for my people.

He is alpha.

Sister Luna, hear our call.

Spirit wolf, Meneghwo, hear our call. We have chased you until you caught us. We look to the future to right the wrongs of the past.

Look to the future.

Right the wrongs of the past.

Meneghwo, hear our call.

We seek peace for our dead, and strength for the living.

Peace for our dead.

Strength for the living.

Peace for our dead.

Strength for the living.

Again the Garou of the Sept of the Wailing Glade raised their howl to the heavens: to Gaia, to Luna, to Meneghwo spirit wolf. As one, they sought to wash away their past failings, to wash away the blindness that had kept them from seeing, to wash away the stains upon their honor.

Peace for our dead.

Strength for the living.

Their breath rose steaming to the heavens, rising upon the cold air—ascending unmolested, buffeted by no wind, north, south, east, or west. The ashes of the dead settled to their quiet contemplation, while the song of the pack transformed into joyous yips and barks. Five wolves, bathed in moonlight, circled the dead tree, leaping and spinning tight circles as they went. They nipped at each other's tails, growled and snarled in the glory of Gaia. Then among them Rindle dragged a threadbare blanket, a woven cloth to which clung, among other scents, his own.

A gift to Gaia, to the spirits, to the pack, he sang.

To Gaia.

To the spirits.

To the pack.

And then the wolves fell upon the blanket, tearing and rending, and in a very few seconds, no blanket remained—only fraying threads and patches of cloth tossed into the air with joyous, snarling abandon. The world of the Garou was set aright. Beneath Luna's broad face, they ran and danced.

From the cloudless sky, a spirit rain began to fall, the drops freezing into snowflakes that fell upon the wolves and coated them white and pure. When the last shred of blanket lay damp and covered with snow, the Garou could no longer contain their rising vigor. Like a dam bursting, they shot from the Ash Tree and into the deep woods and, their howls echoing among the trees, they hunted.

CHAPTER 17

Damn them all, every last one of them. Especially Clarence. I should expect it from strangers, white folks. I guess I should expect it from Clarence too. Something about being family makes people think they can say whatever they want. For the first time in my life it's him coming around needing help from me, but never mind that. He's gonna straighten me out anyways. Wish I'd thought to say that downstairs. Lots of things I wished I'd thought to say. It always happens like that. I get mad and shake all over and want to scream, and then later, when I'm somewhere else, I think of what I should have said. Hell with it. Hell with them.

The chatty fellow didn't have much to say tonight. The woman neither. He's the kind of person wants everybody to like him, wants to be calm and reasonable, so he don't have nothing to say when people are yelling. Hell with him. Life ain't calm and reasonable. Just don't work that way. Hell with him. Her too. She's just thinking how glad she is that she ain't me. Thinking about all the things that I've done wrong, things that she never would have done, reasons that she never would have ended up like I have. Except she don't know nothing about it. Don't know a damn thing. Don't know what I've been through. Just because they can see ghosts and things the same as I can, they think they know everything about me, think they know what I think about everything, think we're all the same, just that I've made all the wrong choices, and they've made all the right ones.

Clarence *knows* he's made all the right choices. Everything he does is right. That's why he did time. That's why he lost his job. Yeah, right. He ain't

never made no mistakes. Bastard. Screw him. Hell with him. At least I know that everything I say and do ain't perfect. Don't know nobody like that. Last time I checked, Jesus Christ had finished his time on this hellhole. Hell, Clarence saw Jesus walking down the street he'd want to blow his freaking head off. "Dead people supposed to stay dead." Right. You got all the answers, cuz.

That other fellow is worse though, I think. Another white man wanting to tell me what I should be doing. He thinks he was helping me in town. Hell, I was the one helping *him*. God knows what Rindle would have done if he'd realized that was one of the guys who was staying with me, one of the guys who could see him for what he was. I was waiting for the asshole to started pointing an yelling. I think Rindle would've torn that store apart. Killed mister got-all-the-answers white man, probably killed the bitch behind the counter. Hell, I don't know what Rindle would do if he got worked up like that. I seen what his kind *can* do. Seen it through the window at the bar—through my fingers through the window. Like a fly on the wall. That's as close as I want to get. Don't want to see Rindle flip out. I can feel it sometimes. Feels like it's so close to the surface that one little push, one wrong word, could set him off. Damn. Don't want to think about that. But that dumb-ass downstairs, he don't know how close he came to giving his last advice. Hell with him. Hell with all of them.

I should have gotten something to eat. Haven't had anything all day except crackers out of the damn vending machine at work. Rindle didn't want me to go back, but I told him, don't make me choose. Don't make me choose. Besides, I'm trying to get Floyd to help. Help with whatever

that crap is that's leaking out of the lab. Wyrmtaint, Rindle calls it. Course, that wouldn't mean anything to Floyd. Said he'd check it out, just hadn't had time yet. Right. Check it out, damn you! Don't make me wrong in what I'm thinking about you. He wants to help. I can see it in his face, his eyes. He just doesn't understand, and I can't explain it to him, probably wouldn't help even if I understood everything. Rindle couldn't explain it to me, couldn't convince me, had to show me. Just go look, damn you, Floyd. Go look. See for yourself.

I'm sitting on the edge of my bed with my fists squeezed up into little hard rocks. Too much crap to be angry about. All this time by myself, and now the whole world has landed on my doorstep at the same time with nothing better to do than piss me off. With the light off in my room, I can see outside okay. It's snowing again. Small flakes, but thick. The kind of snow that can keep going for hours and hours, maybe days. Covers up the world. Too bad you can't just start over, but the snow melts sooner or later—later around here. Snow melts, and you're stuck with the same ugly world, same ugly people. I think maybe that I can hear wolves howling in the distance. Probably just my mind screwing with me. Got wolves on the brain. After we left town, Rindle was real tight-lipped about having to get back to his pack. Pack, he calls it. Just like wolves or dogs. Pack. I know he's not like me, not like most people, but sometimes things he says make it stand out how different he is. Him and his kind. Funny that it's what he says, though. Seeing them fight and tear chunks out of each other and kill people is scary, but it ain't *different*. Hell, I've known lots of folks who were scary, mean just to be mean, liked

hurting people, got off on it. That ain't different. Rindle ain't mean. He's just angry. I've known lots of folks like that too. Clarence is like that.

My stomach's growling. Too bad. I ain't going back downstairs. Not with those people. Not with Clarence. I already spent all evening after work walking around so I wouldn't have to come home and face them. That ain't right. I shouldn't have to feel that way about my own home. Damn them. Hell with them. You too Clarence. Especially you.

So I'll just be hungry. Won't be the first time. Maybe I'll take the edge off. I crawl under the bed and pull out my cigar box. Roll myself a little joint. I feel guilty, like I should be hiding it. What if they smell it downstairs? What the hell if they do? My house. They don't like it, they can get the hell out. What they gonna do, call the police? Like I don't know the police is exactly who they *don't* want to see. Why the else they come here? Assholes.

I breathe in. Hold it.... Out slowly. In again. Close my eyes. Open them only to watch the plumes of smoke I exhale billow toward the ceiling. I continue this way for a while. A long while. Letting the tension drain out of my body and seep through the slits in my tattered mattress. Nothing can make the world and everything in it go away, but I can try to forget it once in a while, ignore it, pretend it doesn't exist. What's another hour or two added on to two years? I keep going until I'm about to burn my fingers. You'd think that of my few worldly possessions I'd have a roach clip, but no dice. I suck in one final drag, one too many, and I do burn my fingers. I drop the glowing ember of pot, slap it off the bed, watch it glimmer for a few seconds on the hardwood floor before going dark.

No noise from downstairs now. No creaking floorboards, no arguing. I let myself believe that they're gone. I won't even think about who *they* are. Why waste a perfectly good high. They don't matter. Nothing out there matters. I lie back on my bed, slide over so that an exposed bed spring isn't digging in my back. I stare at the water stains on the ceiling and laugh. I used to have a friend named Maleva. She was Hungarian or Albanian or Polish or something like that. She had a thing for dropping acid. Man, but those water stains would look freaky then. Maleva's pimp broke her jaw with a baseball bat. She would have lived if the bastard hadn't left her unconscious to drown in her own blood.

I crawl under the covers. It feels good to have something over me. Feels safer that way. I'm warm now, still a little lightheaded too, but I don't sleep. The water stains aren't trippy, but it seems like I can see Maleva's face in them. I know they don't look anything like her face. I've stared at those stains in the dark for hundreds of nights. That's the trouble with pot. Sometimes getting away from the conscious world just means that the unconscious—subconscious, whatever the hell you want to call it—is waiting there to kick your ass. Toking up don't keep the spirits away. Often as not, it signals them. I've never been able to convince myself that they're all bad. Spirits are mostly dead people, right? And not all people are bad, so why should all spirits be? Why the hell should Clarence want to kill all of them?

Sorry. Not going to think about him. Don't even know who he is right now.

Rindle ain't human. Not all human. Not *just* human. But, hell, considering all the humans I've known who didn't deserve the air they was

breathing, there's something to be said for not being human. I don't know that I'm completely human anymore. Maybe you-know-who who I'm not thinking about would like to kill me too. But then he'd have to kill himself, and all his friends too. I giggle. More a snort than a giggle. He'd have to kill them first, of course, before he killed himself. Unless he killed himself and then came back as a ghost to finish them off, but then he'd have to kill himself all over again. That should keep him happy. Plenty of killing.

Rambling. Not making a lot of sense. But what the hell do I care? Phase out a bit. Think about...nothing. Just breathe. My chest rises. How long can I hold that breath? Too much of a bother to find out. Who cares? My chest rises again. Falls. Breathing. Heartbeat slowing down. Nice and easy. This is more like it. Nobody here but me and my slow-motion lungs. Heart's just along for the ride. Counting the beats, but I lose track after...what, twenty, thirty? Oh well. Whatever.

My brain must be tired. I don't hear the scrabbling at the window until the draft catches my attention. He's already climbing through. Maybe he figured out how to open the window more quietly. Maybe my heartbeat was just too freaking fascinating. He shakes the snow off himself. I laugh—not a snort, just a kind of chuckle. I hate the way I snort when I laugh. Haven't had much reason to for a long time, but the way he shakes—it's like a dog might. I think about that for a second. Maybe it's not so funny after all. Too close to the truth.

He moves toward the bed. No blanket on the floor for him anymore. It's not there, I notice. The blanket. Wonder where it went. Must have gotten slid under the bed. He takes off the coat I bought

him today. He was wearing it. That makes me smile. Even with the overcast sky, the fresh snow, falling snow, seems to cast a pale light through the tall, rippled windows into the room. I watch him undressing. The way his back makes him hunch over makes him look like a caveman. I never have gone for the big, strong, dumb type. Still don't. He's not stupid. It's just that there's something...primal about him. He looks like a hunter—not a sit in the duck blind and drink beer with his buddies hunter, but a chase down prey and tear out its throat with his teeth hunter. I know that's what he is. Hunter. Strange. That's what Clarence and his friends call themselves. They don't know what the word means. Sure, maybe they track down some poor zombified son of a bitch and bust his skull. The fellow in the store who thought I needed him to come to my rescue—I should have introduced him to Rindle, should have let him see what a real hunter could do. Hell, Rindle's got ten times as much survival instinct as they have self-righteousness, and that's saying a hell of a lot.

What I need is a survivor, someone who can take a shit-kicking and get up again. Hard to admit even to myself that I need anything, much less to someone else. Rindle knows. He's here, isn't he? Funny thing is that he needs the same thing. We're both like that for each other. It's so much harder to be strong for yourself.

He's with me now, beneath what's left of the quilt, rubbing against me, pulling at my clothes. I can feel how anxious he is to have me, how hungry he is. I kiss him hard because I can't stand not to. This is when the rest of the world truly doesn't matter, when there's only us. His mouth is warm. He tastes and smells of...of blood. God help me. I

don't stop kissing him. I'm drawn into his world, his soul. My eyes are closed, but everything is spinning. I don't want the Sight, not now, but it don't listen to me. I wanted a hunter. I'm seeing through his eyes. Racing through the forest, winding between trees, leaping bushes, the wind in my face, I'm moving so quickly, so powerfully, that the snowflakes can't touch me, they swirl around me. A deer, I smell its fear, running, leaping, but I'm faster. Howling so my brothers can follow, so they'll know, I'll be the one to take it down. Nothing has ever been this right, this natural, so as it should be. I'm gaining, drawing closer, snap at a hind leg, a shake of my head and the bone breaks, splinters. The deer goes down. I can feel the pain, the hunter always knows, but it's brief, fangs to the throat are merciful, and then it's over. I hear my brothers approaching, but my snout is buried in its belly, first share of the kill for the greatest in station, steaming entrails, gulping, steam rising from its innards like a prayer to Luna.

He tries to pull away. Rindle. We're separate again. Two people. I'm chewing on his lip. He's bleeding. I loosen the grip of my jaw, and he pulls his skin from between my teeth. He's grinning, his eyes still hungry though I've tasted the blood from his mouth. He buries his face against my neck, gathers my skin between his teeth until I cry out. Tonight desperation takes a back seat to urgency and hunger. When I open my eyes, my God, the Sight won't leave me alone. I see a man-wolf bearing down on me, so I close my eyes. I know him by touch, digging my claws—my fingers, just fingers and fingernails—into his flesh. He's at my throat again, licking, taking my own blood like I took his and that of his kill. I feel him pressed against my leg. I latch onto his hair, force his head

down to my chest, arch my back in response to his wet tastings—

—*An explosion of glass.* The window. Shattered. Fragments everywhere, jagged and thirsty. I scream, shock, as my lover is torn from me. Claws black as night rip into him, cast him aside.

“*Hunch!*” the steaming nightmare screeches. Madness and death burn in its eyes. Venom drips and sprays from between its wagging black tongue and yellow fangs.

I scream again, pure terror this time. I lunge to the side, have to get out of the bed, the room, the house, anywhere, away—but then I freeze. No. Not me—it, everything else. My Sight tickles reality, maybe just my perception of it, I don't know, but the world stops. Now it's going again, but I watch myself, watch my own body, naked, fling itself from the bed onto the floor, trying to run but not being able to get my feet beneath me, scabbling, crawling and rolling for the door. I watch, too, as the nightmare leaps from the bed, pounces on me. Its coat is patches of burned, smoldering fur. Wisps of pungent smoke rise from its matted hair, mingle with the pot smoke, make the air too thick to breathe. I watch as I try to scream, but the thing has a fistful of my hair. It pulls my head back, too far, something in my neck pops. Its other hand is raking at my throat, obsidian claws tearing every stringy fiber that I might need to make sound, to breathe, to live. My blood sprays the floor where once a stranger curled up on a blanket. Satisfied, the monster lets go. My head snaps forward, cracking sharply against the hardwood. I'm already dead, my twitching corpse left face down in my own blood, ass to the wind.

Satisfied, the vision lets go. I'm half-covered by my quilt, facing the beast perched on my bed. I resist the urge to flee, to act like prey. It grins at me, a toothy, insane smile, savoring the moment. I can't run, want to, but know what'll happen. So I lash out at it, let my fear and anger take the lead, try to scratch this bastard's eyes out. One snap of its jaws, like a person might swat a mosquito, and it laughs. I don't feel anything. I don't believe. I just stare at where my hand used to be, while the devil laughs, cackles, licks my blood from its mouth.

My hand...dear God...halfway to my elbow...I clutch what's left of my arm against my body. Dear God. The monster's laughter is thick with my blood, peppering my face, my chest. Spurting from my arm. I manage to roll, fall from the bed, land hard on the floor on my shoulder. The devil is about to pounce, smiling bloody spittle—when Rindle is on him. Snarling, flashing claws and fangs, biting and slashing with blinding speed and incredible power, any single blow which should kill a person. A human.

I drag myself across the floor, through the doorway. Moving so slowly, like a snail. Leaving a trail too. I laugh. A bloody trail smeared by my own body as I crawl on my elbows, away from there. My home. Shouldn't be happening in my own home. Shouldn't have to be afraid here. Shouldn't have to die here.

CHAPTER 18

The crash of shattering glass woke Sands as gently as splinters jabbed beneath fingernails. He sat bolt upright, roused from troubling dreams to an equally troubling reality, his pulse racing. He was alone in the room that he had claimed for his own, bathed in the pale light of the lazily falling snow outside. Though he felt the noise had been from farther away, he glanced around, panicked. The piercing scream a moment later drew his attention upstairs. He heard movement in the next room: Clarence, Julia, Hetger. Sands jumped from his sleeping bag, getting tangled in his hurry, then flailed about for his shoes, found only one in the darkness, threw it down in disgust. He made it into the hallway to see Clarence bounding up the stairs.

"What's going on?" Sands yelled after him, but Clarence was already disappearing above.

Another scream. Female. Kaitlin. Sands stood stunned as Julia and Hetger rushed past him and up the stairs as well. Hetger was carrying a pistol. Douglas tried to say something to them, but his mouth was suddenly too dry to speak. So he followed, flicking on the light above the stairs. He reached the top just as an explosion seemed to shake the entire house. He cringed, instinctively put his hands to his ears. Grenades? No, the shotgun, he realized. Clarence must have had it, though Sands hadn't had time to notice. Another blast. Sands flinched again. He could see the flash of the shot from Kaitlin's bedroom, and the brief illumination in the upstairs hall revealed a gruesome scene.

Between Sands at the top of the stairs and the door to Kaitlin's room at the far end of the hall, three figures were crouched low—that is two were

crouched. Hetger, with his gun raised, looking toward the shotgun blast, and Julia, her attention focused on the third figure—Kaitlin. The girl was glassy eyed, staring up from where she lay on the floor, covered with blood, laughing and crying at the same time.

Good God.

The light from the stairs didn't penetrate far into the hallway, and the muzzle flash from the other end of the hall was gone almost as quickly as it happened, leaving the hall darker than if there had been no light in the first place. Only belatedly, as the ringing in his ears from the gunshots began to fade, did Sands notice the other sounds coming from the far bedroom—inhuman sounds, demonic, throaty howls cut short by violent crashes and enraged howls of pain, the din of wild dogs tearing one another apart.

Sands dropped to a crouch like the others. He'd been halfheartedly searching for another light switch, but now suddenly he didn't want more light. He didn't want to see what was making that hellish clamor, he didn't want to *be seen*. In the darkness, he couldn't shake the image of Kaitlin covered in blood. She must be dying. So much blood. Like Jason, with his chest torn open, rib snapped off, internal organs all a churned bloody mess. That had been the lurker's doing. Sands had thought he could face anything after that night in the sewers, but the sounds of fury and bloodlust emanating from the other room made the lurker seem like a boy scout.

"J-John..." Sands managed to whisper. His throat felt so tight that it might snap. "Julia..." But they couldn't hear him. He could barely hear himself, and his pathetic calls were drowned out

by Kaitlin's hysterical sobbing, by the sound of deadly, primal conflict in her room. "H-Have to help C-Clarence," Sands stuttered. The only way he could force his mind to complete a thought, to unfreeze it from the terror gripping him, was to speak. "Clarence?" As he took an awkward step forward, his question was answered.

Clarence—intimidatingly large and powerful Clarence—came flying through Kaitlin's doorway—*thrown* through the doorway. Fully airborne, he slammed into the opposite wall, his head and shoulder punching through the plaster. He thudded to the floor—dead, unconscious, stunned, God only knew—his shotgun clattering beside him. Sands' heart tried to jump out of his throat.

The creature was in the hallway before anyone had a chance to move to Clarence's side. It was black: black as pitch, black as coal, black as pestilence. Sands' eyes were drawn to it, yet he couldn't make it out clearly. It seemed to absorb what little light the snow-covered trees beyond the window allowed. Two red eyes shone clearly, though. Red and gleaming and full of death for death's sake. They took in Clarence's still form. The creature moved toward him.

"Hold it right there!" Hetger called.

The blackness halted. The red eyes shifted and their palpable gaze swept over the rest of the hallway, took in the other humans. Sands had to make a concerted effort not to pee himself. He wanted to turn and run down the stairs. He wanted to run away into the night and never stop. But he didn't. Clarence was down but maybe still alive. Kaitlin, the same. Julia and Hetger needed help.

Douglas looked around for a weapon, anything; there was nothing.

But John had a weapon, and the creature was not moving. It was snarling and making god-awful barking sounds, and where its saliva splattered onto the floor and walls, they hissed and burned. A thin film of choking, eye-stinging smoke began to fill the hallway. But the creature didn't move. It held its place—as John had commanded it, just as he had commanded the lurker. He raised his pistol, squeezed off several quick shots. One shattered the window behind the beast, some of the others hit true, at least one crashing through the skull between the two gleaming eyes. The beast recoiled, cried out in anger and pain, but when it removed its hands from its face, the flesh and bone that had just been blown apart seemed as whole as ever they had been. The beast smiled, a hungry, malevolent smile. And then it was gone. Disappeared. Vanished.

“What the...?” John moved his pistol back and forth to cover the width of the hallway, but there was nothing to aim at. No black beast, no monstrosity vile in the sight of nature and man, nothing. As if the thing had blinked out of existence.

Yet Sands felt that it was still there, still with them, stalking them. *This can't be happening, he thought frantically. This can't be happening. This can't be real. Things like this don't exist. I've flipped this time. My brain has gone around the bend. I'm lying in a hospital somewhere in a coma, dying, and my brain has gotten bored.* He wished that were true. He wished that he were somewhere else, that he wasn't about to die at the hands of some creature that shouldn't even exist, that until a few weeks ago hadn't existed, as far as he knew! *It's not fair,*

he thought. *We killed the lurker. I did my part. This can't be happening.*

But it was happening, and he was shocked into action when, as suddenly as before it had vanished, the beast reappeared. Now directly behind Hetger.

"John!" Sands felt strength coursing through his body. He wouldn't watch his friend die, wouldn't let it happen. In one motion, Douglas ripped an upright post from the banister by the stairs and charged, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Hetger heard him and whirled. The grinning fiend slapped the pistol from his hand and spat. John's hands flew to his face and he fell backward, screaming, his flesh hissing and popping, burning like the plaster and floorboards had done. He landed in a heap, all tangled with Kaitlin, who was silent now, looking up with wide eyes to meet her death.

"No!" Julia shouted, still crouched beside them on the floor. A magnificent golden flash, like a lightning strike in the hallway, exploded, sending sparks in all directions.

The black beast staggered, its wolfish ears laid back against its head. At almost the same instant, Sands crashed the banister post down right between its ears. The wood snapped, splintered, the sharp crack accompanied by the satisfying crunch of bone. As Douglas felt the first tinges of pain in his back, he thrust the jagged end of the post between the monstrosity's shoulder blades, plunging a foot of wooden stake into the creature.

With impossible speed, the creature spun, still on its feet. The red eyes latched onto Sands as the pain in his own back spiked and his knees buckled. *It should be dead*, he thought angrily. *This isn't fair.*

I'm going to die for nothing. He dropped to the floor, unable to resist the cramping muscles in his back. If only he could keep fighting...but something about swinging the post, something about ripping apart the banister with strength he shouldn't have been able to summon, had taken a toll on his body.

The werewolf, with its mangy fur and steaming flesh, didn't care. The thrill in its eyes suggested that it would have enjoyed chasing down Sands, facing a challenge instead of swatting this pathetic excuse for a human. Julia was behind the beast, on her hands and knees, searching for Hetger's gun, for whatever good that would do. With a long, gangly arm, the monster reached over its own shoulder, yanked out the fragment of post from its back, grimacing, then sighing and cocking its head as if to say, *There, that's better.* Then it leaned down to make Douglas eat the bloody post.

The next instant, Sands was knocked to flat against the floor, and the monster bowled over top of him in a flash of fur and snapping fangs. The murderous black beast wasn't alone. Another creature—all claws and blood and death—was part of the writhing, snarling heap as well.

Great. How many times can they kill us? Sands wondered, but then, through a haze of pain and terror, he realized that the second beast had *saved* him. *What the bloody hell for?* Creatures like that lived on human flesh. He could see it in their eyes, in the way they were built strong and fast and more deadly than a body had a right to be. But they were fighting each other. *Must want to see who gets to eat us,* he decided.

Whatever the cause, the two were going at it with a ferocity that compelled Sands to fight the disabling pain of his back and drag himself farther

away. The two beasts lunged and snapped and slashed with such speed and lethal intent that he couldn't follow the motion of their strikes. The newcomer was black as well. It was panting and bloody, fearsome chunks torn from its hide in more than one spot, but its fur didn't steam like the sulfur pits of hell, as did the other.

The first, fiendish wolf-thing snarled something that sounded close to human speech: "Hunch!" Or something to that effect. The two separated for a brief moment—Sands saw that the second monster stood awkwardly, a hideous crook in its back, and then he recognized it as the creature he'd seen that afternoon—then they crashed together again, blood and fur flying. The black demons savaged each other, teeth and claws sinking deep into flesh, strike and counterstrike, bite, raking slash. From the midst of the melee erupted a snarl of pain. Jaw clamped tight, furious shake of head, and an arm landed on the floor beside Sands. A black arm—but from which beast?

Ichorous brown blood flowed from the arm, and maggots bore through the flesh as if it were already dead. The steaming hellfire demon squealed and clasped its remaining hand over the stump of its right shoulder. The second wolf-thing drew closer for the kill.

Sands couldn't take his eyes from the severed arm. He felt a grim satisfaction at the fiend's agony, but little relief. All that had changed, he was sure, was the identity of the beast that would kill him. Gripping him most fiercely, as the pasty, squirming maggots fled the arm, was revulsion. Deep within him it grew, far more than disgust at the foulness and blood and parasitic corruption laid before him. He could no longer look upon these things, these offenses against nature, and try to imagine them

separate from that which was his world. They *were* his world. There was only one, and it was teeming with abominations that would prey on him, his family, his friends. In the center of his gut, something snapped, gave way, and his revulsion took on substance, swirling, churning. Faced with irrefutable reality and impending death, he retched, spewing forth an acrid, burning cloud. And as if the cloud were the very essence of his soul, he was left empty, little more than a mass of cramping muscles, writhing on the floor in his own bile, which ran freely from his mouth and nose. Still he convulsed and retched, unable to expel in full the revulsion that had taken hold of him.

Only vaguely did he hear the wild howls of agony, or smell the burning flesh and fur. A shadow passed over him—no, a shade darker, more malevolent than the blackest shadow—and then the shattering of glass. Wasn't that how this nightmare began? He opened his eyes briefly to see the second wolf-thing leap over him, land at the far end of the hall, and spring through the already broken window. Sands let his head thud against the floor. The pooling vomit and blood were little cushion. His eyes closed again. He tried to spit, as if he could ever be rid of the burning in his mouth and throat. The beasts were gone, and he was alive, for whatever little good it did him. He wanted nothing more than to wake up and have all of this gone: the hallway, the blood, the bodies, the house, his pain, this cruel inescapable world.... But hands were on his shoulders, shaking him. Someone was speaking to him, almost yelling.

"Douglas, get up! I need your help!" Julia. She wouldn't let him rest. She wouldn't allow him peace for even a moment. "Come on, get up." She was dragging him, forcing him upright, propping

him against a wall, prying his eyelids open. She kept shaking him.

Let me go, Sands tried to say, but he didn't think the thought made it into words. She wouldn't stop shaking him. He could see what was coming. *Let me go. Don't you dare slap me, damn it. If you slap me, so help me God—*

She slapped him. Sands' eyes popped open, and a stream of curses and spittle rained from his lips.

"Right. Whatever you say. Just get up," she was saying. Then she was gone.

But Sands was too furious now to drift away. In the darkness, he saw Julia scurrying to Clarence's side, checking for breathing, for a pulse. She was back sooner than Sands would have liked, pulling at his arm, helping him to his feet. Kaitlin still lay on the floor, eyes staring wide. A strip of cloth was tied around her arm—where her arm ended, rather, a few inches below her elbow. Hetger was on the floor too, rocking back and forth on his side, hands over his face.

"Help me get him into the bathroom," Julia said. "Into the tub. Come on." She shook Sands again, and somehow he lurched into action. His back tried to pull him back to the floor, tried to force him into a quivering ball, but he pressed on, helped Julia lift Hetger, drag him into the bathroom, hold him under the faucet in the large, claw-footed tub. The water ran cold and hard, and John seemed to take some comfort from it. When finally they lowered him onto the floor leaning against the sink, Sands' strength was gone. He slumped to his knees.

"I think Clarence is okay," Julia said. She didn't seem to care that Douglas was barely

listening, or that Hetger gave no indication of hearing. She was talking to hear herself talk, to prove to herself that she was alive. "If he has a neck injury, or spinal...I don't know. I don't know."

Sands, leaning precariously, was trying not to fall over on John. Their faces were very close. Sands' vision began to swim, and when it righted, he was close enough to see the craters of charred flesh on Hetger's cheeks and nose. Only slowly did Sands' eyes focus enough for him to notice the two larger pits, the curled, blackened skin. Droplets of water ran down Hetger's face like tears beneath what used to be eyes. Sands lurched backward, stumbled against the tub as he clumsily climbed to his feet. He staggered into the hall and almost fell over Kaitlin. She was sitting up, holding her hand—her *hand*. Attached. Where before there had been nothing but a ragged stump of bone and torn flesh. She stared blankly at Sands. He stared back for a moment, not comprehending, and then everything went black.

CHAPTER 19

Black Rindle could not draw enough fresh, cold air into his lungs. It was as if his hunched back kept his chest from being able to expand properly. He breathed as deeply as he could, yet still he was almost suffocating, smothering under the weight of whatever foul substance the human had disgorged. *Not human*, Rindle reminded himself. *More than human, more dangerous than human*. His skin burned as well. When he had slapped and scratched at the burning patches, his fur had come out in clumps and his hide had cracked and fallen away, crumpling like dried leaves. This on top of the burns from EveSong's saliva. *Not really EveSong*, Rindle told himself, also. There had been the smallest spark of recognition in those psychotic eyes, but very little remaining of what had been EveSong. *There'll be nothing left when I'm done with him*, Rindle thought. But first he had to catch the thing that EveSong had become, and Rindle could barely breathe, much less track and hunt. Rolling in the snow had eased the burning slightly, but still Rindle coughed and hacked and spat blood.

I need to get the others, he thought, *my pack*. There was some small comfort in that fact: that he *had* a pack to call to his aid. In the past, that had never been true. Though he had been a member of the Sept of the Wailing Glade all of his life, never had he been accepted into a pack. How times changed, that tonight would find him alpha of the sept's sole remaining pack. He turned toward the caern, hurrying so that he might return with the others before the trail grew too cold. As he started that way, though, he hesitated. His thoughts, full of vengeance and blood until that

instant, were drawn reluctantly back to the house, to Kaitlin. She was hurt, bleeding heavily, surrounded by dangerous humans. *Not dangerous to her*, Rindle thought. *They're not trying to kill her. They'll help her.* He hoped that was true. He shied from thoughts of what would happen if it were not. *They will help her. I must get my pack.* He had important matters to attend to—matters that might well determine the survival of his people, the health of the land. He had sworn himself to the faithful service of Gaia, had made a compact with the spirits. No mere human could stand in the way of all that. Not even Kaitlin.

Yet still he hesitated, looking back toward the house, as if he could see what was happening, as if he could hear her cries of pain, her pleas for him to comfort her as she had comforted him.

But he could not forget the human who had hurt him so grievously, who had belched forth a cloud of burning, searing pain. *She chooses her own company*, Rindle thought angrily. *She must live or die by that decision.* So with forced determination, he started back to the caern.

When he arrived there, the other Garou quickly gathered around, alarmed by his obvious injuries. The air was full of growls, deep throaty rumbles, as they sniffed at the burns and gashes—lingering smells of Wyrms-beast...and something else they did not recognize. Their agitation grew as he told them what happened. "EveSong is lost to the Wyrms. He attacked me at the girl's house."

"EveSong would not go over," Shreds Birch growled.

"The Wyrms has many ways to seduce our people," Claudia Stands Firm said. "Remember EveSong's own stories of the White Howlers?" The

other Garou cursed, snarled, and spat at the mention of the name. "Were they not a tribe devout in their hatred of the Wyrms? Yet they were seduced."

"There is no question," Rindle said tersely. "This is no moot. We track him now. And any who does not believe me when you see him," he said, glaring menacingly at Shreds Birch, "you will take my place as alpha."

"He did all this to you?" Barks-at-Shadows asked, still sniffing at Rindle's wounds. "There is the smell of Wyrms-taint, but there is also the scent of...something else."

"At the house, there were also humans...humans other than the girl. Dangerous humans capable of...things I have not seen before," Rindle said. He recognized the others' grim response to this news of a new threat to their caern so recently recovering from neglect—their glares of suspicion, hostility. "We will deal with them later," he said. "The girl is not one of them," he added, mostly believing what he said. "We must seek EveSong now. He is the greatest threat to the caern. Come."

Five sleek, powerful shadows slipped away through the forest, leaving barely a trace of their passing upon the freshly falling snow. Morning was not far away, but they moved like the night: silent, unseen.

CHAPTER 20

No one had died, but the house was silent as the grave. They had all managed, with varying degrees of help, to make it downstairs to the room John, Clarence, and Julia had been staying in. Sands lay stretched out on a sleeping bag, trying to find some comfortable position, but every few minutes his back would spasm, muscles seizing up, cramping, extracting their payment for the unwelcome, *unnatural*, burden he had placed upon them. It had happened before: when he'd thrown himself through Melanie's window, both times he'd fought the lurker. This time, though, there was no other reason for his pain. He hadn't been struck or thrown. He *had* acted with a strength that was not his, could not be his—and now he was paying the price. He grimaced as a different muscle in his back contracted, like an invisible hand was reaching into his body, grabbing whatever it could find, and making a fist. This was the cost for the impossible feats he was finding himself capable of: strength to dismantle a banister bare-handed and wield the pieces as a deadly weapon, debilitating back spasms; puke some vaporous cloud that burns vampires and werewolves, relentless nausea, vertigo, and blackouts; see the damned monsters in the first place, destruction of his entire way of life. *What a bargain*, he thought. All because he was, as the others put it, chosen, imbued, a hunter.

No wonder it was so easy for them to be so self-righteous. *They* didn't seem to go through this action-reaction torture every time some supernatural bogeyman pranced through the room. They just did their little thing—zip, boom, bam, thank you ma'am—and went on their merry way. That wasn't completely true, Sands knew, but at

least their injuries came from the monsters rather than being self-inflicted. Every time that Douglas tried to help, he ended up in pain, miserable, impotent. How could they expect him to live like this? How could they think, even for a second, that it was worth it? Of course, this time they hadn't come out much better than he had, if at all.

Clarence was sitting, propped up against the wall, an ice pack wrapped around his head. He could move his head, with difficulty, and he and Julia didn't *think* there was permanent damage. Time would tell. Sands had seen Julia heal wounds miraculously. He'd been on the receiving end of her talent several times. He'd felt the vital warmth of her magic fingers. He smiled at that image: Drop a quarter in the slot and Julia does her thing. Could she take care of a cracked vertebrae if that was what Clarence had suffered? Maybe. But at the moment she looked beat, and understandably so. She'd been tending to everyone since the fight had ended—since *before* the fight had ended—and she still didn't seem to have recovered her full strength from the injuries she'd suffered against the lurker. Even so, she'd helped Clarence and Sands get as comfortable as possible. Kaitlin too, though the girl seemed not to have noticed. She was in a world of her own. Maybe all this had been too much for her. Sands could understand how that could happen. He'd been sorely tempted to drift off into la-la land and forget everything he had seen. It would be so much easier than continuing this way. If it weren't for his sense of responsibility for Faye's safety, he might have let himself go, might not have been able to do otherwise. He might be a lousy husband, but he could keep his wife alive...he hoped. What did Kaitlin have that was worth her fighting to keep her marbles? This

ramshackle, piece-of-crap house? Cousin Clarence, who treated her so well, and whom she seemed to love so much?

"Hmpf."

Julia looked over at him wearily. "You all right, Douglas?"

"Yeah, fine. Never been better." He closed his eyes again. Let Kaitlin drift away and find whatever peace she could—it wasn't like she was a contributing member of society.

Hetger elicited a bit more sympathy from Sands. Perhaps with the exception of Nathan, whom Douglas hadn't spent much time around, Hetger was the one hunter who at no time had been a total asshole. That had to be worth something. Like Clarence, he was sitting up against the wall, his eyes covered with the last gauze pads and bandages from the hunters' first aid kit. *Thank God for the bandages*, Sands thought. He'd seen enough of the burned, empty eye sockets. The water, along with a great deal of Julia's time and energy, seemed to have eased John's discomfort somewhat. Her laying on of hands had quenched the burning more effectively than the water, but still Hetger was left with no eyes. At least with the hollow, blackened craters covered, he seemed to be sleeping, or perhaps thinking. The expression on the lower half of his face didn't seem particularly pained. Looking at him, Sands could almost pretend that nothing significant had changed...almost.

Among all the pain and discomfort, Sands' glance kept wandering back to one thing: Kaitlin's hand. There was, he knew, upstairs on the floor, an arm that had belonged to the snarling, ravenous beast. Was there the hand of a petite black woman

as well? Sands had seen the bloody stump, the tourniquet that Julia had applied—but now Kaitlin had two hands again. Her left hand was back...but different. The color was slightly off, not egregiously, but enough to draw attention. More disturbing was the texture: smooth and unblemished, perfect. If Sands hadn't seen the fingers move, he might have thought the hand was artificial, rigid, some sort of not quite life-like rubber substance. But it was real, living flesh and blood. Had Julia done that? That had been his first thought, but Douglas didn't think so. She'd been helping Hetger when "the hand" had appeared. There was no point in asking Kaitlin what had happened, he suspected. Not with that glassy, faraway look in her eyes. He didn't want to think about the damn hand anyway, or the arm upstairs, or the freakish killing machine that it had belonged to.

It's not that monster that's freakish, he thought. It does what it was born to do. It kills. We're the freakish ones, messing around with things that we weren't meant to see, not really.

"You know," Sands muttered, "home is starting to look pretty good right about now."

Julia chuckled wearily as she checked on the dressing on Hetger's face. "The grass is always greener over the septic tank," she said.

"I'd rather take my chances there," Sands said. He started thinking about all the headaches that were waiting for him back in Iron Rapids—a floundering marriage, potential unemployment, relentless wind that called to him, a small boy who had died but whose memory lingered in too real a way—and decided that maybe home in the abstract

was a lot more attractive than in actuality. Still, it would be somewhere other than here.

"I guess this proves my point," Sands said.

Julia shifted a pillow, trying to make Hetger more comfortable, then looked skeptically at Sands. "What point would that be?"

"That we're not cut out for this."

Her mouth fell open. She didn't speak until a moment later: "What?"

"Look at all this." Sands waved a hand dismissively, implying the whole room, all of them. "With or without our little powers, we're not equipped to handle this kind of thing."

Julia was overcome by incredulity and quickly flamed anger. "Not equipped...?"

"Those things could have killed us all! Almost *did*. Seems like that's getting to be a regular happening. Tell me," he challenged her, "Albert wasn't the first was he? Before Albert and Jason, there were others who got killed, or disappeared. Weren't there?"

"But they *didn't* kill us, did they?" Julia insisted. "We survived."

"This time. I just hope to God there's not a next time. We might not be so lucky."

"*Lucky?*" Julia demanded. She stood up so that she wouldn't be shouting directly in John's ear. "You call this lucky?"

"Compared to what could have happened? Yes. Hell, look around you, Julia. You're the one who's trying to put everybody back together. If just a few things had gone differently upstairs, there wouldn't be anyone *left* to put back together!"

"Maybe, Douglas. But we *were* there. I was there. You were there. And all of us together, we

made a difference. If one or two of us hadn't been there, it probably would have been much worse."

"You didn't answer my question," Sands said. "How many before Albert? How many have died in these little games?"

"They're *not* games."

"Whatever."

"Two," Julia said unapologetically. "Albert was the third. We haven't been at this very long."

"Doesn't seem like anybody lives long enough to have been at this very long."

"For some of us," Julia said, "walking away isn't an option. You've made it clear enough that for you it is. Fine. If you can turn your back on us, on humanity—"

"Oh, go ahead." Sands tossed his hands in the air. "Lay all of humanity at my feet. A bit grandiose, but go right ahead. World War II? My fault. Three Mile Island, Newt Gingrich? All my fault."

"Now who's being the drama queen?"

"It's called sarcasm."

"I hadn't noticed." Julia shook her head, disgusted, disappointed. "Is there sacrifice involved? Yes. Of course. But I forgot. You don't believe in sacrifice. Usually marriage for a husband implies forswearing other women. But that would have been too much of a sacrifice, wouldn't it?"

Sands rolled his eyes. "Is that what this is all about? Is that what everything comes back to for you? Let me guess: Your husband slept around on you, right? So you're going to take it out on me, no matter what."

"That's a fairly minor sacrifice compared to what we go through," Julia continued, ignoring

him. "Injury and, yes, maybe death. You apparently don't know anyone or anything who's worth that kind of sacrifice. And no. To answer your question, David did not sleep around. We might not have been compatible, but he wasn't that big of an asshole. And I think whatever killed him also has my son, so I'm not going to walk away. Once I find Timothy, maybe I'll see things your way, but I don't think so. I hope not."

"I hope not too," Sands sneered. "I'd hate for your self-righteous little worldview to—"

"Hey."

Sands and Julia fell silent and both looked to Clarence, who was unwrapping the icepack from his head. "How 'bout you two shut the hell up? I swear, I'd rather fight those monsters again than listen to all this crap." He dropped the icepack and Ace bandage to the floor and supported himself on the wall as he climbed to his feet, but he didn't look completely steady. "You're wasting your breath, Julia. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, and Pete Sampras here's gotta get back to the country club. But I'll tell you what, Mr. Douglas Sands. Can you stand up?"

Sands didn't like the sound of that. He'd often had the vague impression that Clarence was going to lash out and punch him in the jaw, and standing up just so he could be knocked back down wasn't very appealing, even if Clarence was wobbly on his feet. On the other hand, Clarence was waiting expectantly, and Sands would be damned if he was going to be intimidated. He shifted his weight and started to get up. Almost immediately, his back seized up. He groaned and let his body collapse back onto the sleeping bag.

"Huh," was all Clarence said.

"Not yet," Sands told him. "Give me a little time." A few moments later, when the pain had receded for the most part, Sands' curiosity got the better of him. "What do you want, anyway?"

Clarence smiled. Sands didn't like the look of that smile. "When you're up to it," Clarence said, "when you can stand up, we're gonna go out back, and I'm gonna teach you how to shoot."

To Douglas, that sounded fairly ominous. This was a man who had repeatedly expressed his dislike—his *contempt*—for Sands, and who had thought nothing of bashing in poor Gerry Stafford's skull, nor of setting off grenades in the Iron Rapids sewers...and now he wanted to go out in the woods, where werewolves were on the loose, and fire guns. Sands pondered a myriad of responses, but managed only, "Um..."

"What?" Clarence demanded. "You already know how to shoot?"

Sands couldn't overcome his pride enough to call Clarence on the question: *You want to shoot me, don't you?* So he tried a more elliptical, yet equally confrontational, tack: "Didn't look like bullets did much good? Or did you miss?"

And then a strange thing happened. Instead of flying into a sanctimonious rage or growing sullenly silent, Clarence smiled. A big, toothy grin. And then he laughed. This made Sands more uncomfortable than if Clarence had flown off the handle. Douglas glanced around, curious about the exact whereabouts of the shotgun. *He might not bother to take me out back,* Sands thought. *He might just shoot me right here.* Had Clarence finally had too much? Was it the blow to the head that was making him laugh, or thought of giving in to his natural bent toward sadism?

"No, I didn't miss," said Clarence, after which his laughter quickly died away. "Didn't do a damn bit of good, did it? You're right. This time. Might next time. Worked okay against that vampire, didn't it."

Because Hetger was holding the lurker in place, Sands thought, but kept to himself. And because I did...whatever it was I did.

"A gun ain't always the answer," Clarence admitted, "but it's good to have to fall back on."

Sands still didn't see. "But why do you want—?"

"Douglas," Julia interrupted. "He's offering to show you something that might someday be useful. Just shut up and say okay." Sands started to reply, but she didn't give him a chance. She turned to Clarence: "He says okay. Let me rub down his back, and then he'll be happy to go with you."

She wants him to shoot me, too, Sands thought. He was about to protest, but apparently both Julia and Clarence considered the matter settled.

"Stretch out and take off your shirt," she told Sands. "Let me get John something to drink, and then I'll..." She stopped as she was walking out of the room, turned back suddenly and kneeled beside Kaitlin, who seemed oblivious to all the bickering. "Kaitlin," Julia said with restrained urgency, "Kaitlin...what you did with your hand...can you do that for John's eyes?" The young black girl stared blankly into the distance. "Kaitlin, I know you can hear me. I know you've been through a lot...we've all been through a lot. *Kaitlin.*"

Not until Julia grabbed the girl's shoulders did Kaitlin's eyes focus on Julia. Julia took hold of Kaitlin's left hand—the perfectly formed hand, the *too* perfectly formed hand—and raised it between them. "This, Kaitlin. You did this, right?" The girl

stared, expression unchanging. "Can you do this for John's eyes? Can you fix his eyes?"

Julia jumped when the girl finally did respond. Kaitlin jerked her hand away from Julia; the frozen expression shifted to one of displeasure, deeply furrowed brow, glaring eyes. Kaitlin looked around for the first time, seeing what was there for the first time since the fight upstairs. She glared at Sands, then at Clarence, then at Julia again. Then she stood up.

Julia stood with her. "Kaitlin, can you help John? Can you fix his eyes?"

Kaitlin turned and marched out of the room, yanking her hand away again when Julia tried to grab hold.

"Let her go," Clarence said. "She'll be back. Where else has she got to go? Back to her dog-boy?"

Kaitlin straightened the clothes that Julia had helped her into, laced her boots, picked up her parka from the floor, and stomped out of the house, slamming the door behind her. Through all of this, John Hetger sat propped against a wall, his head tilted back, face half-covered with bandages. Perhaps he was listening, or maybe he was just sleeping.

CHAPTER 21

It's not my hand. But there it is on the end of my arm. Just like that building back there looks like my home, but it's not anymore. Not really. It's not me, it's not the safe place that I thought it was. Anybody that wants to can knock on the door, bust through the window. I was stupid to think any different.

Snow's still falling. Sun's not up yet, but morning don't come till late around here.

Where is he? Where's Rindle, and how bad is he hurt? That devil wolf got him pretty good, claws, and spitting something, some kind of acid. Burned everything. Slobbered some of it on me too. Still burning. I almost forgot all that, though, once it... My hand. I wiggle the fingers. I can feel them. They do what I tell them. It hurts when I pinch one. People ain't supposed to grow back hands that get bit off. Ain't supposed to see dead people walking or monsters like that that bite off hands, neither.

Rindle. How bad is he hurt?

Clarence is lucky he isn't dead. I know he was shooting at anything he could hit. He ran right past me. Left me lying in my own blood. More worried about shooting Rindle and that thing than he was helping me, his own blood. Lucky Rindle didn't rip his head off. Lucky that thing didn't spit acid all over him, melt his face off, like it did that other guy. Can I fix his eyes? How the hell do I know? Get the hell out of my face, bitch. Can I...?

Rindle. Where the hell else *do* I have to go? Dog-boy. Maybe Rindle *should've* ripped Clarence's head off. Probably would have if that thing hadn't jumped on him. I heard the gunshots, and Clarence don't miss, but nobody looked the worse for wear

that I could tell. Nobody but Clarence. But, hell, it was dark, smoke everywhere, and my hand...

Don't know if I could find Rindle if I tried. I only been to that place of his once. At night. And he took me...hell, I don't know where he took me. Through another world, the spirit world. No way I could go back the same way. But we followed the creek from the lab. Ran into another stream, followed that all the way to his...his shrine, he called it. God, I hope he's okay. Okay as he can be. Hell, he's gonna blame me for all this. Never should've let those bastards in my house. But Clarence is family. He's a bastard, but he's family. That other bitch can stay out of my face, though. And the other guy, not so chatty now. I *don't know* if I can help him. Why the hell should I? They gonna try to kill Rindle. They were shooting at him. And that last one...heaving, looking like he's gonna puke his guts out, and then this haze, this smoke...right out of his mouth...and all I can hear is Rindle screaming, howling. Him and the devil wolf. Both of them. That stuff could've killed him. That's all they want is to kill Rindle. Stay in my house and kill Rindle. Why the hell should I help anybody that wants to kill Rindle? Even if I could?

Keep walking. That's all I gotta do. Keep walking. Get away from that house, away from those people. The hand comes with me, though. Guess it's mine, like it or not. I was the one lying there on the floor, wanting my hand back, and there it is. Only it ain't mine. Not really.

God, don't let Rindle blame me for this. I never wanted them to go after him. He was saving me from that thing. Couldn't they see that? All they could talk about was killing those monsters. Rindle was saving me. Would have saved me and killed that thing if they hadn't gotten in the way. Now,

who knows? Where he is, how bad he's hurt, what he thinks.

I'm breathing too hard. My throat hurts, and my lungs. I stop walking so fast, stop altogether. Sit down. I'm still in the road. Sitting. This is crazy. No, not crazy. Stupid. Some redneck in a pickup is gonna run my ass over. Snow's just gonna give him a convenient excuse. "No, I didn't see the stupid nigger girl sitting in the road, and then when I hit the brakes, I skidded. By the time I stopped, she was one flat tar baby." Let them run me over. See if I care.

Hell, I won't give them the satisfaction. I crawl to the shoulder. I put the new hand into the snow. It's cold. After a few minutes, the fingers start going numb. My fingers. My hand. Hell. I pull my mittens out of my coat pocket and put them on. Better not to look at it. I pull the tail of my coat under my butt as much as I can, because my pants are getting wet.

What now? Sit here and freeze? If that's it, I better crawl farther into the woods, or some dumb-ass Samaritan will find me before I'm good and dead. No need to think like that. Ain't nobody gonna die, least of all me. I'll find Rindle sooner or later. Or he'll find me. If he thinks I had something to do with them trying to kill him, well, I'll just have to set him straight. And, hell, what the hell was that thing busting through the window and trying to kill *me*? That wasn't one of my houseguests, damn it all. That was somebody that came because *he* was there. So don't you get all high and mighty with me, Rindle. I don't even want to hear your crap. Maybe my friends did try to kill you—even though they ain't my friends—but that's twice now your friends tried to kill me. So you just get over it.

Jesus God, what the hell am I thinking?

Hell, now I'm crying again. I am *not* gonna cry. Not gonna keep on. Stop it. Right now. Stop. Too cold to cry. All my snot will freeze and I'll suffocate. Hell. Okay, enough of that.

What now? No sense in trying to find Rindle. He's probably tracking that thing down. If he can. If he ain't hurt too bad. He's gotta be okay. He's too stubborn to die. He's hunting that thing down so he can tear it a new asshole. I'll meet up with him soon enough.

Sun will be up before too long. Not going back to my house. Not with them there, after they tried to kill Rindle. Wonder if Floyd's at the office yet? Somebody will be there. Maybe Frances. Somebody normal. Not the ones at the lab, the ones that had guns. I need to get on Floyd's case anyway. Not that he understands anything about Wyrn-taint, but he can find out what's going on at the lab. Said he would. He better keep his word. Wyrn-taint. I don't understand either, but that's what that thing tonight was. Wyrn-taint. One way or another. Had the same smell. Same kind of smell. Something rotten, dead, worse than that. Things die all the time. Part of living. This thing was outside all that. It was just...wrong.

I get my ass off the cold, wet ground. Snow keeps falling. Gets harder. I have to squint my eyes while I walk. Not that I could get lost on the road. All I got to do is make sure I don't get run over. They say snowflakes are all different, each and every one. Don't know about that, but I try real hard to see through my eyelashes while I walk. Better than thinking about Rindle, about Clarence, about everybody that's trying to kill somebody else, about the hand that's in my pocket.

Before too long, I get a cramp in my side. Reminds me that I haven't eaten in...how long? A couple days? Too long. Now that I remember, my stomach starts growling. Shut the hell up. You think I got dinner in my pocket? Walk seems longer today. Maybe my steps are smaller, not getting me as far, taking twice as many to get anywhere. I hear wolves howling, off in the woods. I stop. I should know if it's Rindle, but I don't. I should be able to recognize his call, right? But they all sound the same. I laugh. They sure as hell don't all look alike. The sound dies away. Maybe I was imagining it. No, I don't believe that. I spent too many nights trying to tell myself that I was imagining whatever I was seeing. That's just my brain looking for an easy out. Nothing to listen to now. If he's out there—he's got to be out there somewhere—he'll find me when the time is right. Keep walking. Keep walking.

By the time the fence of the incinerator complex comes into view, I've almost forgotten where the hell it is I'm going. Gates are open. Somebody must be there. I never have been on a regular schedule. Come in and file whenever you want, Floyd and Frances tell me. I haven't been here this early before. Sun just starting to come up. But there's lots of folks here already. Guy in a bulldozer taking a load of junk to the pit. Another guy with a clipboard, trying to keep whatever form he's got dry, out of the snow. Never knew people liked to keep track of garbage so much. Government's got a hand in it, Frances tells me. Environmental regulations, that kind of thing, so lots of paperwork. Else I'd be out of a job, I guess, so it's not all bad.

Jesus. Both Floyd's and Frances' cars are by the office. They can't get paid enough to show up this

early in the morning. Sure, Floyd's house was nice, but it wasn't *that* nice.

I slip inside, keep my hand—"my" hand—in my pocket. Frances is fixing coffee.

"Goodness gracious, Kaitlin. What in the world are you doing here this early in the morning?"

I know every word she's gonna say before she says it. Nothing to do with my Sight, or ESP, or anything like that. She's just always gonna say whatever's the nicest thing she can say. I could crap on the floor, and she'd say thank goodness nobody stepped in it. Do I want some coffee? Sure, thanks. It'll be a few minutes. No problem. The warmth in her starts to get to me, makes me a little light headed. Maybe because I haven't eaten. What was that?

"You don't look like you're completely awake yet."

No, I guess not. No, I don't want to take my coat off yet. That's all I say. What am I gonna tell her. I've got this new hand.... A coat pocket is a lot easier to keep it stuffed in than my jeans pocket. But sooner or later... That Floyd's car out front? I think that made sense, what I said to her. A little dizzy.

"He's gone to talk to Dr. Evans," Frances says. "He tried to catch him last evening, but the lab assistants said he wouldn't be available until first thing this morning. Some type of experiment he was keeping an eye on, I suppose."

I hear all the words. Somewhere in the back of my mind they tie together. Dr. Evans. Floyd's gone to the lab. About what I asked him? Frances says, yes. Hell, I didn't mean to ask her that. What?

No, that neither. Never mind. No, I'm fine. Maybe I should lie down for a few minutes. Yes, that's a good idea. Floyd has a couch in his office, not long enough to stretch out on, but good enough. I shut the door behind me. Lie down, pull my coat over me like a blanket, keep my hand underneath. Floyd's gone to the lab. Thank you, Floyd. Knew you'd keep your word. Never doubted you for a minute. Wonder how long until the coffee is ready. Just close my eyes for few minutes....

CHAPTER 22

"Okay, first of all, don't ever, *ever*, point this at me, or I kick your ass," Clarence said. He seemed immune to the cold. The falling snow landed on his bald head, some melting, some perching until he nodded or wiped the thin, crystalline layer away.

After the oppressive, claustrophobic night, with the smoke-filled, bloody combat upstairs and the bitter recriminations of the hospital ward downstairs, the breaking morning felt surreal, white and pristine. The clouds crowded close to the house, as did the surrounding forest, as if man and all his pernicious contrivances didn't exist beyond this tiny place. But if it was the first morning of the world and all sins were yet to be committed, why, Sands wondered, did he feel so exhausted, so beaten down? Adding to his discomfort was the pistol that Clarence was thrusting at him.

"Pay attention," Clarence said. He laid the sleek, black gun flat on his palm. "Glock 9 mm. Switch right here, that's the safety. This way, won't fire. This way, you're ready to go." He flicked the safety back on and reached into his pocket. "Seventeen-shot clip, slides into the magazine right here." He snapped it in through the bottom of the grip. "Safety off. Bam. When you're done, pull this back, make sure the chamber's clear. Press this, clip slides out."

Sands waited for more, but Clarence merely watched him expectantly, the Glock flat on his palm again, waiting. "That it?" Sands asked hesitantly.

"One other thing," Clarence said. "Did I mention, you don't ever, *ever*, point this at me—"

"Or you kick my ass. Yeah. You did. You mentioned that."

Clarence winked. "Good."

Sands took the pistol. He tried to grip it confidently, as if the thing didn't intimidate the hell out of him—at the same time making sure not to point the barrel anywhere near Clarence.

"Okay," Clarence said, "check your safety."

"It's on."

"Damn straight it's on. You think I hand a gun to you with the safety off, especially when I know you're nervous, standing there not knowing what to do any more than if you got your dick in your hand?"

"But it's not loaded."

"Sounds like a personal problem to me. Gun ain't loaded neither. Don't matter. Safety on. Always know if your safety's on or off. Only bad stuff happens if you don't. Either you shoot yourself or your friends, or you point that thing at some zombie head and nothing happens."

That made sense to Sands. He nodded. "Clip goes in here like this.... Okay, then...safety off?"

"Go ahead," Clarence said. "And you're good to go."

While Julia had been rubbing Sands' back, putting her magic fingers to work and easing the cramping and soreness of his muscles, Clarence had scavenged through the junk room by the kitchen and brought up a cardboard box and half a dozen cans and bottles that he'd set up on the box. Sands aimed, pulled the trigger. The recoil didn't throw him as much as the report, sharp and piercing despite the muffling effect of the snow. Many yards behind the bottles and cans, snow exploded from a branch.

"You know those little, raised metal pieces on the front and the back are sights?" Clarence asked. "Try again. Try a few shots in a row."

Sands took a deep breath, aimed again. He fired four shots, waiting just a few seconds between each and the next. The second shot hit the cardboard box, and one of the bottles fell over.

"We'll call that a moral victory," Clarence said. "Maybe your next zombie will be standing on a box, and you can—"

"Look, I haven't done this before," Sands said sharply. "Do you mind?"

"Me? I don't mind. Knock yourself out."

Sands returned his attention to the targets. Methodically, he fired the remaining dozen rounds, in the course of which he shattered one bottle and winged a can, sending it flying off the box. When he was done, he turned the safety back on, made sure the chamber was empty like Clarence had shown him, and removed the clip.

Clarence watched him closely all the while, then took the gun back. He stared at it, then at the remaining targets. "Don't worry. It takes some practice.... Five years...ten...you'll be in good shape."

"Go to hell."

"You know," Clarence went on, "I figured, Hetger ain't seeing much no more. Old Pete Sampras might be a better bet with the Glock." He looked at Douglas, shrugged. "I guess I give it back to John."

"I don't need this," Sands said turning and walking away.

Clarence grabbed his coat, pulled him back. "Come back here. Oh, did I hurt your feelings?" He smoothed down the wrinkles in Sands' coat,

taking exaggerated care. "Look, I couldn't hit nothing when I started shooting, neither."

Sands was surprised by the uncharacteristic moment of candor and humility. "Really?"

"No, not really. But that's what you want to hear, right? That make you feel better? Now stay right there." Clarence returned the Glock to the gym bag beside him on the ground.

"Why do you care anyway?" Sands asked, his patience fraying and sensibilities rubbed raw by Clarence's sarcasm. "Why do you care if I know which end of a gun to point, or if I can shoot straight?"

Clarence zipped the gym bag closed to protect the contents from the snow, and stood up holding his sawed-off shotgun. "Called self-preservation," he said. "You might not stick with us after we're gone from here. Maybe I think that makes you a pussy, but that's your call. Fact is, the last two scrapes we been in, you threw down some powerful stuff. You may not know what the hell you're doing, but you're doing stuff that I can't do, Julia can't do. I figure, no matter how big a stick you got shoved up your ass, as long as you're walking around, that's bad for the bad guys. And anything that's bad for them is good for me. Sometimes knowing how to handle a gun comes in useful. I figure you got a better chance of surviving, and in some small way, I figure I got a better chance."

Sands waited for the punch line, waited for the twist of the knife, but this time there was none.

Instead, Clarence held out the shotgun on display. "This is a Winchester, pump action. I've cut off the stock and the barrel. It's easier to hide—in the gym bag, under a coat, under a car seat—but you lose some range. But, hell, it's a shotgun.

You point, you shoot. You're still in good shape up to about twenty yards."

"How far are those?" Sands asked, gesturing toward the bottles and cans.

"About fifteen. Look. Got your safety. Load here on the breech, one shell at a time. Holds six. These are twelve-gauge. You don't want to go no smaller. Larger if you want, but these are the easiest to find. Bigger number means smaller shot. Twenty-gauge is smaller than twelve. Got it?"

Sands hesitated. He wasn't sure that he had it all, but he nodded.

Clarence loaded, then unloaded, showing him how to clear the chamber. "Now you try. And remember—"

"Never ever point it at you. I know, I know." Sands took the shotgun, loaded the six rounds, let off the safety.

When he raised the gun to aim as he had the Glock, Clarence put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't need to aim with this. You're gonna be close. Point, shoot."

Sands nodded. "Point, shoot." He did, and the explosion made him take a step back. His surprise must have shown.

"Without the stock, you can't cradle it against your shoulder," Clarence told him. "Your arms got to absorb the recoil. So grip tight, but keep your elbows bent, so you got a little give in your arms, a little spring. And by the way...nice shot."

Sands took a moment to realize what he was talking about, but then saw that the cardboard box was full of holes, the last bottle shattered, the cans knocked off. "Hey, I got it."

"Yeah, shotguns and breathing. You're a natural. Now put the safety on," Clarence told him.

Sands did so, after which Clarence set more bottles on the box. "Okay, now, like I said, you're gonna be close, whatever it is you're shooting at. As you so observantly pointed out, a single shot don't always do you no good. Getting a lot of rounds of in a hurry can save your ass, though. So what you're gonna do this time, you're gonna pump to get the next round in the chamber. That right there's called the forearm. That's what you pump. Do it. Good. Now, when you shoot, you're gonna hold down the trigger and keep pumping. Every pump's gonna fire another shot. Got it?"

Sands nodded and, when Clarence gave him the all clear, fired. He was ready for the kick this time, and the noise. Instead of squeezing and letting go, he held the trigger and pumped the forearm. The second blast came on the heels of the first, and then the third and then the fourth. He was concentrating so intently on what his hands were doing that he barely registered that the box and everything on it were blown to pieces. After the fifth shot, he pumped twice more, but nothing happened.

"Easy does it, Rambo," Clarence said. "That's all your shells. Six, remember."

Sands nodded. His eyes were glued to what was left of the targets. Smoke wafted from the truncated barrel.

"Kind of fun when you actually hit something, ain't it?" Clarence asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. It is, kind of."

"Well, let me tell you this," Clarence said, taking the gun back. "Shooting a box and some bottles might be fun. Ain't nothing fun about shooting at a person. Even a dead person, or one of those things we saw last night. 'Cause the only

reason you're doing it is that if you don't, that thing, person, whatever, it's gonna do its damndest to kill you, or your wife, or other people that don't even know it exists. So you have your fun shooting at bottles, and you get good enough that you can hit what you need to, 'cause when it comes down time to shoot for real, you don't have time to think about it. You don't have time to screw around with your safety. You just do it. Got it?"

Sands nodded again. He noticed now that his ears were ringing—from the shotgun blasts, and with the words of Clarence's sermon.

"Pick up that trash before you come in," Clarence said. He put the shotgun back inside the gym bag and went inside.

CHAPTER 23

"When *will* he be available?" Floyd asked, beginning to grow a little irritated, but not wanting to sound too pushy.

"I do not know," said the tall assistant standing in the doorway of the lab building and barring Floyd's way. The name tag on the man's white jacket read *Gunderson*. Floyd remembered the name; he'd seen it in his paperwork. This fellow was one of the new assistants who come to the facility after the other five had suddenly been transferred away. "Perhaps it would be best if Dr. Evans came to your office when he is so disposed," suggested Gunderson, oh so helpfully.

"Last night they said he would be available early this morning," Floyd said. He was trying to look past the assistant's shoulder and into the building, trying to catch sight of Lawrence Evans or someone else, someone who might prove helpful. But Gunderson's bulk took up most of the doorway, and Floyd was having little luck. *Get out of my way, you big, dumb Swede*, he thought.

"I apologize, Mr. Robesin," said Gunderson, sounding not at all sorry. "The doctor's schedule sometimes depends upon rather volatile experiments. He is not currently available to see you."

"Yes, yes, you said that." Floyd stood up on his tip toes but still couldn't see over Gunderson. "Is there anyone I could...? You know, I am the Facility Manager here."

"Yes, Mr. Robesin, I am aware of that." That was it. That was all he said. He just stared back at Floyd.

Floyd could have screamed. Never before had he run headlong into the quirky corporate structure

that allowed the R&D arm of AgriTech such free reign. He had thought it peculiar, but he had always assumed that if the need ever arose to ask, among reasonable adults, for interdepartmental cooperation that his request would be treated expeditiously, not derailed by some overgrown office boy. "Look," Floyd said, "I've had some complaints...well, not complaints exactly, but concerns. Concerns have been voiced to me by...concerned parties...um...concerns about substances draining from the lab facility, around back. Behind this building. I wanted to discuss the matter with—"

"There is a drainage field behind the building, Mr. Robesin," Gunderson said. "So there are substances draining there, but I can assure you that none of those substances are harmful to the environment or to any of your concerned parties. If you would like to give me their names and addresses, we could send them some of the literature regarding safety practices and environmental regulations. Our facility has passed all of its required regulatory inspections."

"Yes, yes, I'm aware of that and...um...no, uh...no, I wouldn't like to give you...I mean, I don't think we need to send the literature...." Growing flustered, Floyd propped his hands on his hips. "Look here, I'd really just like to speak with Larry. It would take a few minutes and we could take care of all this. I'd really just like him to take a look with me, and I'm sure it would all be fine."

"As I have explained," Gunderson said in his infuriatingly even manner, "Dr. Evans is not available at present. I would be happy to take a look at the drainage field out back if that might be helpful?"

Floyd cocked his head. "Oh. You would? Well...why, yes, I suppose...that would be helpful. Thank you. Thank you very much."

"One moment please." Gunderson stepped outside and methodically locked the door behind him.

Floyd followed Gunderson out of the fenced area that encompassed the front and sides of the lab building, and the two men continued around to the back. The snow was falling hard enough that Floyd wished he'd worn his hat, but he had assumed that he would have a brief conversation with Larry and that the matter would be settled. Not until the obstreperous Swede had refused to let him in had he decided to demand that someone physically inspect the drainage field. Well, perhaps *demand* was a bit strong, but he'd held his ground, and the matter was being taken care of, and that was the important thing. He had promised Kaitlin that he would look into the matter, and he was looking into the matter. Poor girl, she had so much weighing on her, it seemed. If doing this could ease her mind, then Floyd was happy to do it.

"So you're new to this area," Floyd said to Gunderson as they walked. The large man made Floyd slightly nervous for some reason, and when Floyd was nervous, he talked. "How are you liking it so far?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Very well. Well, good. Good. Where did you move from? I saw your paper work, but it all just came through from the central office. Not much personal information, if you know what I mean. Mostly that string of degrees and training, scientific jargon, all Greek to me."

"I have worked at various labs," Gunderson said.

"Oh. Have you, now? So they keep you moving around a lot, do they? Makes things tough on a family. Do you have a wife, any kids?"

"I find that my work precludes the free time that is required to maintain such relationships," Gunderson said.

"Oh, I see. Sounds lonely, but to each his own." They walked a few steps in silence. "You must work out a lot," Floyd said shortly. "You're a big fellow. I mean...I guess you don't have to work out to be big, really. I'm big in my own way," he said, patting his belly cheerfully. "But you look like you're in good shape. Not many gyms out in this part of the state either."

They were rounding the back corner of the building, and Gunderson directed Floyd's attention to the sizeable ravine—perhaps twenty feet deep with a relatively steep slope on either side—that abutted the rear of the building.

"Do you see that metal plate?" Gunderson asked, pointing to the earthen wall directly beneath the brick wall.

"The thing that looks like a manhole cover at the end of that big pipe? Yes."

"That is a drainage plate," Gunderson explained. "You will see a small hole in the plate, through which liquid is draining. The liquid is predominately water, along with trace amounts of a few chemicals, all well within the applicable regulatory limits, I assure you. We keep close track of the liquid emissions. If you would like to see the charts—"

"Could we go down closer?" Floyd asked.

Gunderson pursed his lips. "I believe that the charts would make abundantly clear that—"

"Oh, I'm sure that they would...if I knew what all of that technical mumbo jumbo meant. *That's* why I wanted to talk with Dr. Evans in the first place." Floyd tried to restrain his sense of guilty satisfaction. *Make life difficult for me, will you? Maybe next time you'll be more accommodating to a simple request.* It wasn't often that he felt peevish about such a slight, and he felt shameful about taking pleasure at Gunderson's difficulty, but there it was. "But while we're back here, I'd like to get a closer look, so I'll know better what I'm talking about when I do *finally* get to speak with Larry."

"The bank is slick, Mr. Robesin," said Gunderson. "I would not want you to slip and hurt yourself."

"I think I can manage," Floyd said. He began edging down the slope sideways. "Don't you worry about me," he called back over his shoulder.

"Very well," said Gunderson. "I am right behind you."



They lay in the tall grass, silent and still. On the other side of the gully, the two humans began picking their way down the slope, oblivious to the presence of five Garou, watching, waiting. *Their senses are so dulled,* Rindle thought. How could such pathetic creatures as humans have played so major a role in the despoiling of Gaia? Witless pawns, but they spread with such tenacity that they threatened to help Weaver and Wyrms all but destroy the Wyld. *Not in this place. Our caern will survive.*

The place reeked of Wyrms-taint, just as Rindle remembered it, just as he had told the others that

it would. EveSong's trail, once they had picked it up again, had led here. Not surprising. Corruption had taken root here, had festered and spread its tendrils through the land, through the very stream that ran through the caern itself. *We should have seen so long ago.* But they had not. While Black Rindle had wallowed in self-pity and hatred, and his father Cloudkill in madness, the corruption had burrowed deeper, extending its reach and power. Now EveSong had gone over. He had left in defiance with Cloudkill when Rindle had taken charge of the sept, and now the Wyrms had claimed the tale-teller. *Does that mean Cloudkill is here too?* Rindle wondered. Had his father given in so completely to the madness?

No tenderness or mercy stirred in Rindle's heart when he thought of his father. Cloudkill had harangued and beaten that from him years ago. *He was the weak one,* Rindle thought. *Not me. All of the shortcomings he saw in me were reflections of himself, and now he is the one who is fallen. Same for EveSong. Hardly a day passed he didn't name me as Wyrms-tainted, yet who has gone over?*

Falling snow coated the motionless Garou. Where the flakes touched Rindle's fresh burns, they melted at once, sizzling, and sent jolts of pain coursing through his flesh. He burned inside as well, seeking vindication for all he had suffered. To each side, the members of his pack lay awaiting his signal. Before them, the humans worked their way down into the gully. The human in the lead was heavy-set, soft. Rindle smelled the sweat of his exertion. The man talked incessantly. The second, larger man wore the white jacket of a lab technician. Of the two, he at least worked within the building that was somehow connected to the Wyrms-taint. He was, in part, responsible for the

corruption that afflicted the land. Then again, no human was innocent. Rindle gave the signal, a short bark, and the Garou sprang into action.

Barks-at-Shadows was the first to move. He sprang over the gully, landing and sprinting around the corner of the building before the two humans were completely aware of the shadow passing above them. An instant later, however, four more shadows darkened the sky, as the other Garou jumped into the gully.



Floyd had just reached the bottom of the gully. The hill was slick, especially with the new-fallen snow, but hardly to an insurmountable degree as Gunderson had implied. Floyd was considering commenting on that fact when a sudden chill seized him, a violent shudder, piercingly painful, as if he'd bitten down on metal. He glanced up, thinking that he'd seen something move—a bird flying overhead? Whatever it was, Gunderson had noticed too, so they were both looking up when four more figures leapt down into the gully.

For a single heartbeat, Floyd saw them: wolves, but standing upright like men; towering over him, blotting out the sky; fur-covered from head to foot, a dusting of snow on top; ears laid back; snouts wrinkled in snarls; saliva dripping from between bared fangs longer than his fingers; claws glimmering; and eyes...eyes that took him in, that disregarded him, that considered him less than nothing.

The heartbeat froze, as did time for that instant. Floyd was stone, muscles immovable, eyes and mouth open wide. For a moment, he saw Anne as he had earlier that morning before he had left for work: in her worn, blue bathrobe, pillow

imprints still fresh upon the otherwise smooth skin of her cheek. She hadn't been fully awake yet, hadn't woken up the girls for school. The girls—he should have looked in on them before he'd left: Jenna, a beautiful young woman, so much like her mother; Mel, still very much a child, and a constant source of laughter and joy. He should have looked in on them. But he hadn't. He'd merely spoken to Anne. *I love you, darling. I love you too.* The words rang in his ears, echoed as memory drained away. Then time unfroze, and Floyd descended into madness.



The taller man turned to run. He tried to scabble up the hillside, but the fresh snow worked against him. For every two feet he managed to climb, he slid back down one. He was fearful, but not beyond reason as was usually the case. Black Rindle remembered the humans in Kaitlin's house who had seen him for what he was, who hadn't fallen prey to the Delirium. Shreds Birch and Slack Ear didn't know about that, but they had seen Frederick Night Terror die, had seen him gunned down by humans who did not run, who stood and fought with powerful guns. They remembered, and they had not forgiven. They pounced on the tall, blond man, Shreds Birch hamstringing him while Cynthia ripped out his throat.

The other human was staring and blathering, uncomprehending of the blood splattering his face and clothes as the Garou tore his companion to shreds. Rindle snarled. The incomprehensible speech spewing from the human's mouth annoyed him, not because of a great need for secrecy—for sounds of Barks-at-Shadows' attack carried around the brick walls already—but because the gully stank of Wyrn-taint, of corruption, and here was

a human, part of the problem. With a single swipe of his great clawed hand, Rindle nearly severed the head of the panic-stricken human. The body crumpled to the ground, and more streams of fresh blood pumped out, melting red canyons into the snow.

For a moment, the gully was strangely silent.

Then: "This?" Claudia Stands Firm asked, tapping the metal plate that capped the large pipe protruding from the hillside. Water dribbled weakly from a small hole in the plate.

Rindle nodded. Claudia dug her claws into the metal and ripped the plate away. The brackish water leaking from the pipe could not explain the Garou's revulsion. The intense stench that assaulted them was not from the water alone, but was from what was beneath the water, around the water, within it but not part of it. The light of morning reflecting from the contaminated liquid made the step across a simple matter.

There was silence again in the gully—silence, and two still bodies, their lifeblood swallowed by the snow.



An alarm sounded when Barks-at-Shadows crashed through the glass door on the front of the laboratory building. The blaring electronic pulse hammered at the Garou's sensitive hearing but served only to lash him more deeply into frenzy. All that he saw and heard was filtered through a haze of rage. Barks-at-Shadows attacked quickly, mercilessly. A white-jacketed, barrel-chested man rushed to the foyer to investigate the cause of the alarm. Barks-at-Shadows disemboweled him with the flick of a wrist. A secretary sat slack-jawed with fear behind her desk. Barks-at-Shadows jumped

onto the desk, laid open her throat, and continued on in one fluid motion.

More humans were drawn by the commotion, and then the screaming began. Men and women ran for their lives, while others dropped to the floor, curled into balls capable of no more than quivering and whimpering. *No mercy.* Barks-at-Shadows repeated Black Rindle's instructions over and over to himself. *No mercy.* The words set a cadence to the carnage he wrought. *No mercy.* This was a place of the Wyrms from whence corruption had spread and seeped into the life of their own sept. *No mercy.* The humans were, at best, tools of the enemy, at worst, willing agents of the Wyrms. *No mercy.*

Barks-at-Shadows had torn apart several more of the humans, slaughtering them where they lay or chasing them down as they ran, when one individual in particular caught his eye. The man wore the white jacket, same as the rest, but his movements were different: purposeful, not tinged by the insanity of seeing that which he could not comprehend. Barks-at-Shadows ignored a bespectacled human crouched in a corner trying to claw his way through a wall, and instead followed the more peculiar human—around a corner, down a long corridor and around another corner. Primed by the thrill of the chase, the Garou's mouth watered. He growled and let his drool flow freely onto the floor as he loped down the hallway. The white jacket glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes grew wide. He quickened his pace. Shouting a word of warning to an unseen compatriot, the human dove through a doorway. An instant later, the co-conspirator stepped from the same doorway, he too in full possession of his

faculties—as well as a large rifle leveled at Barks-at-Shadows.

Barks-at-Shadows dove to the floor, and the hallway exploded behind him. Broken ceiling tiles and fragments of cinder block rained down upon him. He rolled and kept moving, never pausing in his pursuit. Before the human could fire a second blast, Barks-at-Shadows grabbed the barrel, wrenched the weapon from this new white jacket's hands, and crushed his skull with the butt. One step into the room revealed the first human slamming a clip into an identical weapon. He never had a chance to fire. Barks-at-Shadows clubbed him with the captured gun, then forced him eight inches of the barrel. Still not satisfied, the Garou pulled the trigger, but he must have damaged the rifle, because it refused to fire. Regardless, after a few more seconds of gurgling, the human was silent.

Barks-at-Shadows paused for a moment, panting from his exertion, his blood running hot, claws and fangs trailing strings of gore. Throughout the building, alarms blared and panicked humans ran this way and that. Only now that his immediate prey was taken care of did he notice the contents of the room he'd chased them into: a wide, shallow locker, open, containing a rack of guns like that which had destroyed the hallway. Other lockers lined the walls. One by one, Barks-at-Shadows ripped them open. The locks deterred him no more than did the moans of twisting, torn metal, as he rent the doors from their hinges. Each locker contained the hollow shell of a human—body armor, and a helmet with reflective face plate. Five sets, all told. EveSong had told them several times the story of Frederick Night Terror's death,

of the soldiers, of their armor and their rifles with exploding charges. Barks-at-Shadows' rage was kindled anew. Whatever intellect and sensibilities his Silver Fang tribemates claimed he lacked, he was able to piece *this* together. He raked and spat on the two bodies at his feet, then turned his fury on the equipment, breaking the rifles over his knee, tearing apart the armor piece by piece, until it was beyond recognition. His rage was not sated.

No mercy. That was his alpha's command—even if that alpha was Black Rindle. From somewhere else in the building, a woman screamed. Immediately Barks-at-Shadows was off, headlong through smoke and debris and what was left of the corridor. His ears and nose told him of more humans scurrying about, hiding. These humans had killed Night Terror. They had corrupted the land. *No mercy.*

CHAPTER 24

The stench of Wyrmtaint was so powerful that Black Rindle gnashed his teeth until his fangs dug into his gums and blood dripped from his mouth. *The sickness of the land is a sickness of spirit*, Meneghwo had told them on the plain at the foot of the mountain, and so they had stepped into the spirit world. Here in the Umbra there was no pipe to crawl into, no hill, no brick laboratory building—only a gaping hole from which liquid tarmac bubbled and belched, corruption and decay given form. The other Garou cursed the foulness and asked Gaia for strength. Rindle cast his silent petition at Meneghwo, the pack's spirit totem, a spirit of war. *Help us destroy what we find here, spirit wolf. For Gaia's sake, we must prevail.*

He led them down into the viscous dark, holding his breath as he swam down slowly through the sludge, as air and light and all that is holy receded into the past. He didn't dare open his eyes lest the burning that now assaulted his entire body boil the orbs in their sockets. The tunnel walls were slick and slimy to his touch, yet he followed them down like some deaf and blind babe retracing its path, crawling back along a birth canal of weeping obscenity.

Stay with me, he told his packmates, and was relieved to sense them all still there. All save one. Barks-at-Shadows had balked at first when Rindle had ordered him to deal with the mundane threat while the rest of them confronted the corrupted spirit world. *If you knew what you were missing, Rindle thought, you'd be thanking me.* That time was yet to come, the aftermath, the telling of tales. First, they must survive.

The going was slow through that festering hole. Rindle clawed his way along. Soon his lungs, like his flesh, began to burn, but he'd suffered worse before. On the endless plain chasing a spirit wolf, his lungs had burned until he'd thought they would burst. There was a dream, too, that he remembered in which he'd breathed in foulness like that which surrounded him now. He remembered the taste of death, even as now it seeped in through his nose and sinuses. *Is this the right way?* he wondered for the first time, *Or have I led my pack to destruction?* He fought to squelch the doubts before the others sensed his mood. What else had Meneghwo said upon the plain? *When the time is at hand, you will know the path to follow.* This had seemed the proper route, Rindle decided. He must trust his instincts. He would not doubt himself.

No sooner had he reached that conclusion than the tunnel twisted sharply, turning to the side—and up. The Garou broke the surface, one after another, each with a gasp. They crawled from the sludge onto a rocky shore, the stuffy dank air of this underground cavern now seeming as fresh as the first gardenia of spring. Rindle double checked that they were all still together amidst the darkness.

“So nice of you to join me, *Hunch*,” came a hissing voice from nowhere, but then EveSong stepped forward. He was unnervingly close, eyes gleaming black, and his singed, matted fur giving him the look of a snarling rat-creature. His right arm was out of proportion to the rest of his body. The limb was trying to grow back, but the wounds suffered at the tooth or claw of a fellow Garou were slow to heal. Thus far, all he had accomplished was a hairless, spindly arm, little more than a thin sheath of muscle over newly formed bone.

To his back, Rindle heard sharp intakes of breath. The others had not seen EveSong, had not seen what he had become.

"You spoke truth," Shreds Birch growled.

"This abomination must not be suffered to live," Claudia Stands Firm agreed, drawing her klaive. It shone amidst the gloom like a silver sun in the darkest heaven. "I wouldn't have thought this possible of you, EveSong," she said.

"No EveSong!" the creature shrieked, its words echoing from unseen heights. "Fir Bolg now. Fir Bolg." It worked its jaws open and shut, teeth clattering together, and the thing's partially formed right hand mirrored the motion, as if trying to form a fist of bony fingers but not quite able.

"Whatever you say, Fur Ball," Cynthia Slack Ear muttered. "It's your ass." And she was in the air. Claws slashing, fangs bared.

She landed where, a moment before, Fir Bolg had stood, but he had vanished into the shadows as if of them. Manic, warbling laughter filled the darkness, surrounded the Garou, pressed down upon them. The sound shifted slightly, grew deeper, drew farther away then closer, and then it seemed to take form, churning the stale air.

"Wings," said Claudia.

Something brushed against Black Rindle's leg, something else against his shoulder. He lashed out, but the thing avoided his claws. And then suddenly the wings were everywhere, buffeting like canvas sacks. Fir Bolg's laughter rang out clearly again, this time taken up by thousands of chittering mouths—mouths full of hunger and teeth. Even as he crouched and swiped at the attacking Wyrthings, Rindle could not see them clearly. They were a black wind in the darkness, swooping down

from all sides to claim chunks of flesh as prizes. He tried to peer through the gloom, his eyes glowing with a cat spirit's gift of sight, yet all was blackness, what light wasn't devoured in this Wyrms-place being hidden by a wall of bat-like wings.

From frustrated growls and grunts, Rindle guessed the others were fairing much as he was. Spinning and slashing to keep the bat teeth from his back, he worked his way toward the sounds of Stands Firm fighting. Drawing closer, he saw that there was light amidst the darkness: the flash of her klaive slicing silver through the air, lightning in the otherwise impenetrable storm.

I'll take your back, Rindle told her, waiting until she acknowledged his thought before moving closer. He had no desire to end up on the wrong side of her klaive. Back to back, they made out a bit better, concentrating their attacks, each to his or her fore. He hoped Shreds Birch and Slack Ear were doing likewise; he thought that probably they were, considering how, often, the Talon and Fury seemed to move and think as one.

The buffeting wings had grown so thick now that Rindle was making contact with every slash of his claws. He couldn't *help* but do so, and with every swing he drew back his hand trailing tattered wings, streaming sinew, and ichorous blood. Shrieks of pain mixed with the Wyrms-beasts' cries of hunger. *We might tear them all apart*, he thought, *but it will take a hundred years*. The Garou might as easily move a mountain or an ocean with their bare hands, but if such was the war that the Wyrms waged, then Rindle was prepared to fight until his strength gave out.

Suddenly, as Rindle plunged his claws into another of the myriad winged beasts, a deafening scream tore through the darkness, shrill and lingering, dying away to a piteous wail—and before it ended the incessantly flapping wings were gone. Rindle and Claudia still crouched back to back. The darkness remained but not so impenetrable now that the endless waves of Wyrms had disappeared as unexpectedly and suddenly as they'd appeared. Silence was not absolute. Pained whimpering drifted through the chamber. Rindle and Claudia followed the sound, coming shortly upon Shreds Birch and Slack Ear—and Eve-Song-turned-Fir-Bolg.

"Gaia preserve us," Stands Firm whispered.

Cynthia Slack Ear lay staring blankly from the cavern floor, her blood pooling with the rivulets of black corruption that ran across the stone beneath her. Her throat, chest, and abdomen were laid open, her insides shredded. Rindle recognized the handiwork of raking claws. He pictured Fir Bolg charging forth from the darkness, obscured by the cover of countless wings, latching his fangs and perhaps his one good hand onto Cynthia's throat while his feet, all his weight behind them, tore through flesh and muscle and organs and bone. As the Garou watched, helpless, the last of Cynthia's life spilled out onto the floor.

Small consolation was to be found in the vengeance Shreds Birch had taken on Fir Bolg. He was finished—that much was certain—but at such a cost. He still worked his jaws, open and closed, and stared off into the darkness, whimpering, coughing, spitting blood, at times making a sound that might have been weak, hysterical laughter. His belly was as wrecked as Cynthia's, his feeble arm torn away again, his good

arm sliced full open, all but one finger ripped off. Where his blood fell to the stone, smoke rose hissing from freshly burned craters.

Shreds Birch kneeled not far away, Claudia at her side. As Rindle approached, he could see that the Talon's hands were bare and showing bone, all fur and much flesh burned away by Fir Bolg's corrosive blood. Rindle stepped around the two women and came up short, sickened almost to the point of retching. Shreds Birch's face was all but gone. Her snout, where she had rooted into Fir Bolg's gut, was nothing more than a partial cage of scorched bone—no hide, no nose, no tongue; all that burned away. The flesh of her throat and chest was peeled away. Each labored breath produced a soft wheezing sound. One eye was shriveled; the other stared straight ahead, blinked every few seconds.

"She's still alive," Black Rindle whispered. Garou were capable of absorbing incredible amounts of physical damage, but not like this, not at the hands of a fellow Garou, not this pestilent blood that coursed through the body that once had been EveSong. Rindle felt the sting of the burns he had suffered from Fir Bolg—painful, but none nearly so destructive as those afflicted upon Shreds Birch.

"She won't last long," Claudia said quietly, easing Shreds Birch to the ground.

"Your klaive," Rindle said.

Claudia looked at him for a moment, then handed him the silver weapon, hilt first. Rindle turned back to Fir Bolg. The beast smiled, his tongue darting in and out like a snake's. His legs twitched every so often, as if he were dreaming of the hunt.

"EveSong never would have hidden in the dark like a frightened cub," Rindle said.

"No EveSong," said the beast, panting. "Fir Bolg, now. Fir Bolg." It seemed to take pleasure at hearing its name. The evil grin stretched wide, even as Fir Bolg's own blood gurgled in its throat and ran down its chin. "Fir Bolg's story."

"Fir Bolg's story," Rindle said, nodding. "Over." And with several jabs of the klaive into the creature's brain, it was. Rindle took no pleasure in the deed. What blood he couldn't avoid sizzled away small patches of flesh, while the acid upon the klaive fizzed and popped until gone, and the silver blade shone clean again. He returned the weapon to Claudia.

"EveSong was never good to me," Rindle said. "Never kind or patient or even civil. But he didn't deserve this." Shreds Birch was still now, her body having shifted to the form of a reddish-coated wolf. Rindle shook his head in dismay. "That a member of our sept should do this..."

"Not a member of our sept," Claudia Stands Firm said, still kneeling by Shreds Birch's side. "He left when you became grand elder of the sept, alpha of the pack. He was no longer one of us, and he was no longer EveSong."

It was true, Rindle knew, but he still felt the profound sorrow of failure, the emptiness of his kin struck down. *If only he had come after me*, Rindle thought, *then this might have ended differently.* Undoubtedly, Fir Bolg had surmised similarly. Once already he had measured himself against Rindle, and to face the metis alpha again, plus three of his packmates, had not proven inviting. *He wasn't EveSong, but he had EveSong's knowledge. He knew that of us all, he would be most likely to*

penetrate Cynthia's guard, and he knew that Shreds Birch would have retribution without hesitation, without mercy, no matter what. The implications of that slowly sunk in. It was suicide. How better to strike at me than to take two members of my pack—and at the same time, whatever was left of EveSong found release. Rindle stared at the rapidly decaying black body, already stiff in death, what matted fur remained, falling away. He thought that perhaps he should feel an ounce of relief for EveSong's sake, but Rindle could summon no compassion.

"We must press on," he said grimly. Claudia rose from Shreds Birch's side and cast one last lingering glance at the two dead Garou. "Let them stay here together," Rindle said. "We'll get them on the way out."

Stands Firm nodded, but said nothing. Her hand gripped tightly the hilt of her sheathed klaive. Side by side, Rindle and Claudia Stands Firm moved away into the darkness.

CHAPTER 25

I sit up so fast that everything goes white for a few seconds. Head rush. I'm awake. Free of murky images of a red-eyed beast crouching over me, drooling, ready to tear my heart out. But where the hell am I? Floyd's office, scrunched up on his little couch, at work. The monster—it wasn't just a dream. Dear God, I wish it could be. I wish I could have my house back, before all these invasions. I wish I could have my *life* back—no more monsters, no more dreams and visions.

The dream. It wasn't the dream that woke me up. A noise, something loud, outside. My heart starts racing again, like there's a hummingbird buzzing around in my chest. Probably all I heard was one of those big trucks rumbling past. I stumble out of Floyd's office, to Frances.

"Did you hear...?" I start to ask her, but I can see by her expression that she did hear something, that it startled her, that she doesn't know what to do. "Wait here," I tell her. I'm not sure why. Maybe because she looks so lost. Usually she's the one helping me, reminding me that the blue forms go in that drawer, the invoices bunched together by week in that folder. Maybe I can repay some small part of her kindness and patience this way. Just stay where you are, Frances. I don't know why I think you should. Don't ask. My intuition scares me. Nothing good ever comes of it.

She's staring at me—at *my hand*. Hell. I tuck it inside my coat. Embarrassed, she pretends she wasn't staring, but we both know. I leave her there, step outside into the snow. My heart flutters. The air feels colder than it did before. I pull my coat tight and put my hand over my stomach. It's unsettled. No wonder, after what I've seen today.

I head toward the lab. That's where Floyd was going. I see people running around, hear some of them yelling, but the sights and sounds seem far away, like the snow has separated each and every one of us into our own little world. I feel like I'm watching myself in one of my dreams, one of my visions, but I don't remember this one. Maybe this is a dream, and I'll just wake myself up when I get tired of it. But I *am* tired of it, so tired of it all. My hand, my new hand, stays clutched to my belly, like that's where it belongs.

My heart skips a beat again when I see the lab. The front gate, chain link with barbed wire on top, is open like it often is during the day. The door of the building itself...well, the metal frame is still there, but the glass is broken, almost gone altogether. A few jagged fragments cling to the corners.

This is what I heard, I know. Glass shattering from a distance. I'm not the only one who heard. The lab building is like an ant hill that somebody jabbed a stick into. The men in hardhats, running and yelling—this is where they're running to or from, this is what they're yelling about. A few are venturing inside. Others are high-tailing it away. None of them seem to notice me, a little black girl walking through the snow. Nobody knows what's going on. I think I do.

Closer. I move inside the fence. An abandoned clipboard and blue hard hat lie on the steps to the building. Beyond the broken doors I see a body on the floor. A man is kneeling next to the body, checking for signs of life. Good luck. There's blood on the walls, splattered so far that I can imagine the impossible force of the blow, the fury that was behind it.

Was it the red-eyed nightmare that did this?
Was it Rindle? Does it matter?

It's like my house all over again, except this time it's not my blood on the floor. I make it as far as the stairs. I sit there, not by choice really. My legs, they just won't keep going. My knees bend, and I'm sitting. That's all. A man runs past me. Head spinning again. Think I might puke, but fight it down. I feel a hand over my mouth. My hand. Part of me but not part of me.

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No mercy. Barks-at-Shadows hunted up and down every corridor. He smashed his way into each locked room. The sound of shattering glass was electric to his ears, like the morning after an ice storm, when the trees shed their crystal sheaths. *Be careful of the chemicals*, Black Rindle had told him. Barks-at-Shadows had tried, but his enthusiasm got the best of him at times. Only once did a cabinet he destroyed result in noticeably painful fumes—choking him, burning his eyes—so he'd left that room, moved on to the next.

Evert Cloudkill had always warned the Garou away from human places, but Hunch had changed that. Barks-at-Shadows was pleased. This building was like a treasure trove. Every corner he turned brought the thrill of the hunt without a long, drawn-out chase. The humans themselves were a bit tiresome after a while—they ran, they screamed, they died—but the exploding glass, splintered wood, metal cabinets ripped from walls and crumpled into balls, these provided a feast for the senses. Barks-at-Shadows gave himself to his rage, left no room untouched. The mishap with the chemicals cautioned him, but after a short while even that seemed but a trifling inconvenience.

Not until he reached the final lab, the largest of those he'd come across, did he find another human who defied him. This one, too, was large for a human, strong, like those in the armory. But this man held only a puny gun, barely larger than his hand, not one of the rifles that could cause such an explosion. The man was waiting when Barks-at-Shadows broke down the door. Another human cowered against the back wall, but it was the man with the gun who stared directly at Barks-at-Shadows, lucid, unafraid.

"Go ahead," Barks-at-Shadows growled in the Garou tongue. "I'm ready." He stretched his fingers, extending his claws.

The human fired. The blast struck Barks-at-Shadows square in the chest.

He gritted his teeth and smiled, the pain whetting his appetite. In a few seconds, the bullet wound was healed over, as if the shot had never hit him. Now the first hint of fear crept into the human's eyes. That was enough. The second gunshot missed, because Barks-at-Shadows was in the air. He bowled the human over, back claws ripping into the man's chest, front claws latched into his face, fangs clamped down on either temple. The weight of their fall drove the Garou's strikes even deeper. The human screamed.

"Is this what you want to see?" Barks-at-Shadows growled, his jaws spread over much of the man's face. "Is this why you don't run like a human should?"

He bit deeper, heard skull begin to crack. With his tongue, he pried loose an eyeball. He bit with more force, the skull gave way, the screaming ceased. Barks-at-Shadows pulled free his claws. Still holding the human by the head, he shook

until the entire body raised off the floor. Other bones snapped in the neck.

The fight was over so quickly—too quickly. Barks-at-Shadows raked at the human, but to no good effect.

Then he heard the whimpering from the back of the room, and jumped to the top of a counter, scattering racks and test tubes. Three loping strides, scattering scientific equipment in his wake, and Barks-at-Shadows crouched above the remaining, scrawny human, an older man with glasses, huddled on the floor, eyes squeezed shut, his white jacket held tight as if it might protect him more successfully than the other humans' armor had.

"We hunt you," he muttered over and over again. "We hunt you. We hunt you...not...not this. Not this."

Barks-at-Shadows cocked his head. Humans hunt Garou? He chuckled at the absurdity of the idea. And then he ripped the old man's throat out. *All of these humans, Barks-at-Shadows thought, and all of this equipment, so that they can hunt us.* He shook his head. *They did kill Night Terror,* he reminded himself. *But look what it got them.*

There was little left to do in the building. Barks-at-Shadows had destroyed practically everything there was to destroy. On his way out, he came across a few more humans and dutifully dispatched them. These weren't the white jackets though. These were blue hats. He thought he might have gotten all of the white jackets, and those were the ones that Hunch had been most concerned with. At the front door, another blue hat fled screaming, away from the body of Barks-at-Shadow's first kill that night, out of the building, past a young woman sitting on the steps.

She looked up at Barks-at-Shadows as he stepped toward her—*looked at him*, he realized. Like the few armed humans had looked at him. She didn't run or scream as he moved closer, as he raised a clawed hand.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Thank God it wasn't Rindle that came out of the building. I don't think I could have taken that. All this blood, all these people. But God help me, I think I recognize this one—from when Rindle took me to their place, the wall by the stream. He doesn't know me. I'm just another human. We all look alike. He's gonna kill me just the same. He's bloody all over. What's a little more? I hold my breath, but I don't scream. Maybe it's time. Maybe you've lived too long if you can tell one werewolf from another. He draws back his claws.

"You're one of Rindle's people, aren't you?" I say. He hesitates, cocks his head. Maybe he recognizes me now. Maybe.

The hand comes down. Slowly, not tearing my head off like I know it could have, like he was going to do. I try to think of something else to say. *You hurt me and Rindle's gonna kick your ass*. But, hell, I'd probably just piss him off enough to kill me anyway. And, besides, I'm so tired. Don't know if I could get the words out if I wanted to.

He growls, shows me his teeth, as if to prove that he don't really care what I say, that he ain't afraid of Rindle. But he doesn't kill me. Instead, he's gone. Just like that. Not disappearing like a ghost, but leaping from the steps. Seems like he barely touches the ground. They're so damned fast, so strong. Like gods. Like devils. Gone.

I sit for a while, staring at nothing. The cold seeps through my coat, my boots. Ain't the first

time I've felt this way, cold and numb on the outside to match the numb and cold on the inside. I need to get up, move, get away from here. Don't want to go inside. I can imagine...but I try not to. Sooner or later, somebody's gonna come to his senses and call the cops. I don't want to be here for that. I feel like an accomplice. I brought Rindle to this place, he brought his people. *People*. That's what he calls them. Don't know if I'd go that far. I stand up, don't look at the lab building, at the bodies in the lobby. Walk away. Just walk away. My feet know this part. I been walking in a haze all morning. Why not a little more? I walk away, still seeing the way *this* werewolf looked at me. Not quite as crazed as the red-eyed burning monster, but just as hot for my blood. They kill so casually, like I might change my clothes or take a crap. I've known people like that—*real* people, humans. Some of them have reasons for hurting people, some of them just like it. How can they be like that? I've known for a long time that they exist, but never understood. Still don't.

What about Rindle? He like that too? The way this last one looked at me, like he'd rather kill me than talk to me, that's the way Rindle looks whenever he says *Wyrms-taint*. He wrinkles his nose and curls his lip. He does that, and it's like I can see him as a monster, that wolf head flashing before my eyes, teeth bared. He doesn't direct that look at me, but I recognize it. This was the place that caused the *Wyrms-taint* he said. He showed me, as much as he could. I could be afraid of it, I could feel that it was *wrong*, but I don't think I ever hated it like he does. Never had a reason to. So why am I surprised that he comes here with his people to clean this place out? Maybe he didn't. Maybe he's

home licking his wounds, and this guy came on his own. I can hope.

I move beyond the fence, away from the building. A few of the workers are still wandering toward it, warily, all of them freaked out. One or two of them stare at me blankly. Maybe they went inside before and made it back out without having their own heads ripped off. Maybe they wish they hadn't seen what they saw. I only saw one or two bodies that were in the lobby. I can damn well bet there are more. Does it have to be this way? Is this any better than Wyrms-taint?

My feet carry me around the building. I'm ready to leave this place, forever, but I go this way. With each step, I expect the world to change, go away, for me not to be here where I am. If not with this step, then with the next, or the next.... But nothing changes. It's like I'm reliving that dream that I can't quite remember. I know what I'm going to find. I know that I don't want to find it. But I keep taking each step, and the next, hoping that it won't happen the same way that I know it's going to. The Sight is like that, like cheating, but I have to take each step anyway. By the time I reach the back of the window, I'm crying. Bawling, full out. I don't care. Don't care about trying to suck in air. Don't care about the tears and snot running down my face. From the top of the gully, I see the bodies. I know. But I have to keep going, have to see this through.

For the second time, I climb down the slope. The snow is slick. I fall on my ass. Don't care about that either. Slide the rest of the way on my butt. Skirt the worst of the blood. A few more steps and I know—know what I knew from the moment I woke up, but couldn't let myself acknowledge until now. I've proven my intuition right, even though

I wanted it to be wrong, maybe as much as I ever wanted anything in my life. The vague dread that I didn't want to come into focus is clear now. Floyd. The snow around him melted, refroze in a thin sheen of red ice. The falling snow isn't hard enough to have covered it yet. A white dusting has covered his coat, his pants, his boots. Not his face. He's not cold enough yet. Won't be long. The red ice crunches underfoot as I step closer. There's another body, but I hardly look at it. Maybe this is *his* fault. Maybe *he* deserved this enough for both of them. I can't think about *deserve*. Floyd didn't deserve this. God, dear God, his head is barely...

I look at his face, just his face. He's crying melted snowflakes. He's crying for Anne, and Jenna, and Mel. I'm crying for them too. And for Floyd. I'm on my knees now. Damn the blood. I see his face, only his face. The snowflakes are beginning to stick. He's cold, becoming cold, fading. I close his eyes. The gentle pressure of my fingers makes his head loll to the side. Not much holding it on. I turn away, throw up. My hand instinctively clutches my belly. Does it have to be this way? Could Wurm-taint be that much worse? Could anything be that much worse? I cry more, until my throat is raw and my chest aches. Then I cry some more.

CHAPTER 26

When the time is at hand, you will know the path to follow. Black Rindle could only hope that Meneghwo was right. Rindle paused only briefly at the three-way split in the tunnel, Claudia Stands Firm behind him, and then chose the left branch. There the ceiling drew the lowest, and putrid muck covered the floor. The Garou waded ahead, even Rindle with his hunch having to stoop farther down. *If there is an easier path, he thought to himself and to Claudia, then it is not meant for our feet to travel.* Stands Firm rewarded his grim humor with a caustic growl.

Rindle had come to grow fond of this Owl-gift, the knowledge of speaking without speech. Never before had he felt such a bond—the totem bond of a pack, acceptance among his own kind. Still the loss of Shreds Birch and Cynthia Slack Ear pained him, the ache of a phantom limb torn asunder, the unsteadiness of a body no longer whole, but if all went well in the mundane world, Barks-at-Shadows would be waiting at the caern to greet the survivors: Rindle himself, should he prove equal to this task the spirits had laid before him, and Stands Firm, she who even in the darkest of days had not abused him.

Forgive the past. Look to the future. Those, too, were the words of Meneghwo, spirit wolf. Rindle was trying. He thought he could forgive Claudia for whatever failings he had seen in her; she might not have directly challenged Cloudkill's habitual pattern of cruelty toward Rindle when Evert stood as alpha, but she had often sheltered Rindle from the worst abuses and dissuaded others from perpetually tormenting him. Her responsibility, after all, had been to see to the safety of the caern,

not to protect a self-pitying metis, an Ahroun who by all rights should have been able to look out for himself. *The fault was more mine than hers*, Rindle thought, careful to keep these thoughts his own. *I should have had thicker skin against the insults and demanded to take my place as hunter and warrior—instead of slinking away like a wounded cub.*

Rindle spat into the sludge that had risen from his ankles to his knees. Forgive the past? He could forgive Claudia more readily than the others, and them more readily than himself.

The future, though, he could begin to see, even in the enveloping darkness of these Gaia-forsaken tunnels. *We will purify the land and rebuild the caern. Garou will come to join us when they hear. Our people will thrive again. And Kaitlin...* He chose his steps carefully among the slippery muck. Kaitlin. Surely there must be a place for her in this future.

A hand on Rindle's shoulder drew his attention. Claudia. She motioned for him to halt, to listen.... *Something is moving*, she said to him, silently. *Beneath the surface.* The light of her klaive shone against the black stream but did not penetrate it.

But Rindle felt movement beneath the surface as well. With the speed and strength of a diving hawk, his claws shot down into the sludge, struck, and drew forth part of a slithering tentacle as thick as his arm. Now discovered, or perhaps because of the five claws now piercing its girth, the tentacle went berserk. Rindle held on despite the wild thrashing and coiling. The spasmodic convulsions drew his claws farther along the tentacle, slicing membrane and tissue, spilling meaty gore and watery bile into the sludge below.

Silver flashed before Rindle's eyes. One slash of Claudia's klaive severed the tentacle completely. The remaining end ripped itself free of Rindle's claws and dropped back into the stream. Silence.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Claudia said.
—And the sludge erupted.

The cramped tunnel was at once filled with snaking tentacles, lashing, crowding, wrapping, constricting. Rindle bashed his head against slimy, lichen-covered stone as he struggled to defend himself in a space where a Crinos Garou could not begin to stand upright. His claws tore through stringy flesh, ripped limb after limb to shreds, but always there were more, pawing at him, pummeling him. Stands Firm sold her freedom dearly as they closed in on her, klaive blazing through the darkness, fetid strips of flesh dangling from her fangs. For a while, they held their own, but a single misstep among the treacherous footing of the black stream and Claudia was pulled under. And without her support behind him, Rindle quickly found himself overwhelmed, his desperate blows truncated by lack of space, his arms and legs and all his body wrapped in a rubbery sheath of tentacles. And finally he was pulled beneath the surface.

Though his eyes were blinded by sludge, dream images flashed through his mind: an endless cavern filled with writhing, eel-like appendages dragging him toward a ravenous maw, concentric rings of flesh-rending fangs each longer than his arm. Rindle instantly repented of any request he'd ever made of the spirits for the gift of prophecy when, finally, he fought his way above the sloshing muck and found the images of his dreams realized before him. He'd have given most anything at that

moment for his dream to have been wrong, for the size or monstrosity of the gaping maw to have been exaggerated, or better yet, to now awake amidst the remains of Kaitlin's mangled bed. But the cavern and its horrors were all too real.

Rindle began to itch and burn where the tentacles held him, as the secretions of corruption seeped through his hide and began to eat away at his flesh.

"Look what you have brought us to," spoke the maw, deep rumbling tones with perfect inflections of the Garou tongue.

"You defile our language by your very speech," Rindle snarled.

"Is that so?" asked the maw, perhaps smiling, though the profusion of fangs rendered any expression practically inscrutable. Slowly, from the scramble of tentacles, a new appendage rose, this one a thick, veined stump, and atop it was the Crinos head of a Garou, not impaled upon the appendage but rather part of it. Whatever passed for blood within this abomination pulsed through bulbous arteries, visible beneath the oozing hide. The Garou's eyes shone bright and green, as ever they had in all the years that Rindle could remember. "Is this more to your liking, my dear child?" spoke the head of Evert Cloudkill.

The strength drained from Rindle. He ceased struggling.

"I see you brought your loyal warder, too," Cloudkill said. "So loyal that she turned her back on me."

"I was loyal to the caern!" Claudia snarled, straining against the tentacles that bound her. "My crime was trusting you too long, allowing myself to be blind to your weakness!"

"Was I *weak*?" Cloudkill hissed. "Is that what happened? Or did I simply recognize the rise and fall of history? A caern grows powerful and strong, and then it decays and dies. The same is true for us. If a Garou is not lucky enough to fall in battle, she grows old, sick. She dies. What was I to have done?"

Rindle, still not fully believing his eyes, was further mystified by what seemed a hint of uncertainty in his father's words, even regret.

"You gave up on Galia," Stands Firm said. "You never fought the corruption that coursed through the land. It struck her down first because she was the purest, she alone would have recognized it and stopped it. You were too weak—too weak for Galia, too weak for the caern. And now you are nothing more than a Wyrms plaything, mouthpiece of a Bane."

Cloudkill's moment of uncertainty faded, his green eyes glaring and face contorting with hatred and spite—emotions more familiar on that face to Rindle. Though subsumed by a malevolent Bane, something of Cloudkill remained within the monstrosity. Whatever good that might do.

As Cloudkill writhed and spat and howled, the tentacles grew tighter around Rindle—around Claudia, as well. She cried out in rage and pain as the pressure increased. She gritted her teeth and glared hatefully at Cloudkill. The constrictors lifted her into the air, squeezing, stretching, until joints popped and bones snapped. Her fingers gripped her *klaive*, waiting for a chance to strike—then a wet tearing sound filled the cavern, and her arm, still wrapped by writhing tentacles, was impossibly far from her body. A glaze of shock washed over her face as the tentacles undulated

more spastically, increasingly agitated, excited, and ripped a leg from her body.

"I have heard enough from the faithless warder, I think," Cloudkill said.

Rindle resumed his struggle for freedom as the tentacles dragged the unresponsive Claudia closer to the maw, the thing now working open and closed and salivating gray-green spittle. Rindle was held too tightly to escape. Helpless, thrashing for all he was worth but barely able to move, he lost himself to his rage. Trying to kick and snap and claw, he couldn't budge the tentacles gripping him, which made him more furious. Forgotten was all pain as he strained his muscles to and beyond endurance. Ignored was the burning of the corrosive juices that worked their way ever more deeply into his hide. None of that mattered. All he could see was Cloudkill's gloating face—and Claudia dragged closer and closer to her doom.

"You deserved each other," Cloudkill taunted him. "You were both curses to me, but you were the worst. I shouldn't have listened to her, shouldn't have trusted Galia. If I'd snuffed out your first breath, then none of this would have happened. She'd still be with me, and the caern...the caern would be whole.... If not for...not for..." Cloudkill's words trailed off into incomprehensible snarling, sounds of pure bitterness and hate, as vitriolic as the blood of any Wyrmspawn, spewing, filling the cavern but beyond reason.

Or perhaps it was Rindle who could not hear, who was beyond reason. A great din of screams and hissing and demonic laughter filled his ears. Blood vessels began to burst as he strove without result to free himself. His eyes rolled up into his head, but he couldn't block the horrific images that

flashed over and over through his mind: Claudia dragged into the maw, the countless teeth pouncing on her, tearing into her, rippling jaws, one set working against another, twisting, churning her body into unrecognizable strips of meaty pulp. She did not cry out or howl at the end, but Rindle howled for her, a cry of total anguish and hatred, of fury and loss.

Never before had his rage been stoked to such a pitch, so great that he thought he might explode, so intense that his body and soul could not contain it. Yet he was helpless before the raw power of the Wyrms, impotent in the face of the condemnation of his despoiled father. As he thrust outward with all of his rage, the world imploded inward—

And there was silence, peace.

Rindle saw as if his eyes were open for the first time. He saw the fierce corruption of the hideous Bane, but he did not fear it. He saw the bitterness, the hubris, the unbearable arrogance and denial of failure that still contaminated what tiny germ remained of his father. He saw Cloudkill for what he had become—an extension of what he had been, twisted, defiled, fulfilling a fearsome potential that had always existed—but Rindle did not hate him. The time for fear and hatred and loathing was past.

Rindle felt himself changing, shifting, more quickly and fluidly than ever before he had, taking on man-form, slipping free of the countless tentacles that grasped him. In almost the same instant, he was shifting again, landing as sure-footed lupus, bounding away as soon as his paws had touched the solid floor of Wyrms appendages that rose from the primordial black sludge. They lashed after him, but he had slipped beyond the limitations of the spirit world. His form shifted as

quickly as thought. Airborne, he was Crinos, rage-form, but even his rage was a clanging cymbal many miles away. He landed beside the arm of Claudia Stands Firm, hand still clutching her warder's klaive. Rindle snatched up the silver blade.

He heard the furious bellow of his father. Rindle looked at the wolf's head, somewhere within it the last vestiges of a once-noble Garou, though Rindle had never seen evidence of nobility, compassion, wisdom. He looked at the klaive in his hand, as the tentacles slowly reacted to his escape, rushing toward him, converging.

Rindle hurled the klaive—not at Cloudkill, as vengeance urged him, but into the gaping maw, into the deepest of the concentric rings of teeth, into the gullet of the Wyrms that had devoured Claudia, devoured Cloudkill, devoured the sept and threatened to consume all of the land. A blinding flash of silver, the Garou blade disappeared into the darkest heart of the Bane.

Cloudkill's mouth opened in a silent scream of anguish, as surely as if Rindle had embedded the klaive in the turned Garou's heart. The roar of the beast, the ravenous gaping maw, was anything but silent. The blast knocked Rindle from his feet. He splashed into the muck, now visible again between tentacles that were flailing, lashing the air, exploding in violent sprays of gore. The world trembled, while Rindle fought to keep his head above the foul pool. What remained of the tentacles threatened to entangle him as they collapsed, lifeless, devoid of sentience and malevolence. He looked for Cloudkill, for his father, but the stalk that had housed the Garou's head was gone, either exploded like the others or sunk into the sludge, gone forever.

CHAPTER 27

I hold Floyd's head in my lap, brush the snow from his face. My tears mix with the melting flakes. Keeping him at this angle, I can almost pretend he's asleep. I can almost pretend there's not a horrible gash that has nearly taken his head off. I'm sitting in blood. Cold now, like the snow. Not the warm stuff that keeps us alive, takes oxygen from heart to brain and everything else, not anymore. I stare at Floyd's face—his stupid, kind, aggravating face. If he were still alive, if he weren't a victim of all this chaos, he'd be nervous, he'd be chattering away, talking just to be talking. Maybe he'd be more nervous than when I was in his car—hard to imagine.

None of my daydreams are gonna bring him back, though. I'm not doing him any good, just making myself feel a little better, maybe. Just putting off the inevitable, hoping that everything will change back, that I'll wake on the little couch in his office, and he'll be sitting there behind his desk.

Damn! Why the hell did he ever have to run into me? Why'd he have to help me at the grocery store, offer me a job. Damn him. He'd still be alive. Still be his goofy damn self. I'm the one who brought Rindle here. Rindle and *his people*. Hell. *People* don't do this kind of thing, human, werewolf, who the hell ever. Monsters do this. Damn them.

Don't know how much time has passed. This bloody gully is a world to itself. Just me and Floyd, and that other unlucky bastard. Maybe he has a wife and kids at home too. Maybe Rindle didn't think to—

My brain shuts off. For a second, everything flickers, like maybe a bad trip starting up, but no. I'm back. And there he is. Rindle. Standing in front of the open pipe, water trickling out at his feet. Same water that started all this, as far as I can tell. He has two bodies over his shoulder: one wolf, one human, a woman. He had a body over his shoulder the first time I laid eyes on him. Should have known it wouldn't be the last. I don't look too close. I've seen enough folks ripped apart today. I don't want to see what happened to them. I look only at Rindle's face. I can tell that those bodies were his people.

People. I want to laugh. I want to spit at him. I clamp my hand over my mouth 'cause I don't know what I might say. He's not a man like this, not human. Sometimes I have to remind myself that—no chance of forgetting it right now. The wildness is in his eyes, the anger that says everything wrong with the world is somebody else's fault.

He looks like crap, covered with scars, bare patches where his fur has been burned away, deeper wounds. God, these things get the hell torn out of them, and they bounce right back. Is that it? Do they think humans are the same way? Just playing too rough? I do laugh this time. In the sound, I hear my heart ripped open.

Rindle's looking at my hand, the hand covering my mouth, the hand he hasn't seen before. He left me lying in a pool of blood so that he could come over here and kill Floyd. I hold up my hand so he can get a better look.

"You like it?" I ask him. He looks confused, just standing there like a stupid animal with two bodies over his shoulders. "This is my friend," I say, making sure that Rindle is looking at Floyd.

"I hope you took care of whatever it was you wanted done, 'cause he *was* gonna help us. Don't 'spect so anymore."

He growls—no, more like he's trying to say something but the words don't work real good from that wolf mouth. It's only good for killing.

"Those are your friends." I nod toward the ones he's carrying. "Your *people*." He nods slowly. "Good," I say. "I'm glad they're dead."

His eyes flash, and he bares his fangs. He's three steps toward me before I even know that he's moved. One of the bodies shifts, he has to lean quick to one side to prop it up with his hump. Probably that distraction breaks his momentum, saves my life.

"You're just an animal," I tell him. I don't care. I don't have any luck to push. "A wild animal. A deformed freak." He stands there now, glaring, breathing hard, deep and slow. "Go on!" I yell. "What are you waiting for? Either kill me or go the hell away!"

He flinches, starts at me, stops, doesn't know what to do. I can see the struggle in his eyes, but I don't care. "Go on!" Somewhere deep down inside I wonder if he could do it. *Could* he hurt me? Bodies strewn all over the ground, and I'm stupid enough to wonder.

He might be wondering the same thing. He hesitates, fights down his anger, wishes me silent, wishes me obedient. It'd be easier that way, wouldn't it?

"Go to hell!"

Maybe he does, because he's gone. Vanished, like he did before, taking me by the hand into a world of spirits. Gone. This time I'm left behind. I think I can still feel him there, a ghost, watching me.

"Go to hell, you freak." I barely hear my own words. I watch their mist, my breath. I feel like it must, drifting, breaking apart, becoming nothing.

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Not sure how long I've been sitting here. Long enough for snow to cover Floyd's face. Makes it a little easier to leave. I get up. God, my legs hurt, stiff and cold. Something crunches under my boot—Floyd's glasses. I curse, but what for? I set them on his eerily still chest, not rising and falling, like he might need them wherever he's going.

The climb out of the gully takes forever, slick, and my toes and fingers are numb. Couldn't have taken that long, though. None of this could have taken the years it seemed like. Cops aren't even here yet. Big county and a few sheriff's deputies, I guess. I start walking, keep walking. Not everybody's dead, thank God. The folks that are still around are sitting or shuffling about, dazed. They look like I feel. I keep away from the front of the lab. Not like I think another werewolf is gonna come running out all of a sudden, not really, but I keep my distance, just the same. From what I can see, the other buildings look okay. I don't see bodies lying around them. Aside from Floyd and the other fellow around back, the damage and killing seems like it all happened at the lab. I guess that was the bad spot, the Wyrms-taint place.

Wyrms-taint. A few days ago, I thought I almost knew what that meant. I'd seen it and smelled it, felt it in my bones. Rindle made it real for me. Now, I'm not so sure. It's farther away, blurry, indistinct. It's like...trying to explain a dream to somebody. What was real and important to me sounds stupid, doesn't make sense anymore. The reality drains away. All I smell is blood. All I feel is cold.

Walking. Walking. Forcing a little life back into my legs. At the office, Frances is standing on the front step, leaning against the wall. She's staring at me, but doesn't seem to recognize who I am. I want to go to her. The person I was a few years ago, maybe even a few days ago, would hug her, but there's a gulf of understanding between us. She hasn't seen what I have, and I can't go back to where she is. So I keep walking. Away from the buildings, along the road. My instincts work well enough on autopilot that I get out of the way when a cop car goes by. I try not to think about what he's gonna find in a few minutes, but of course that's all I am thinking about. He's gonna want to talk to me, him or somebody like him, in the next few days. A survivor. I laugh. The noise of it sounds sick to me. I shouldn't be making any sound. I should be lying back there with snow covering my face.

I let go of everything except the next step, and the next and the next. *Rindle*. I say his name over and over to myself, until it doesn't sound right anymore. The sounds don't fit together, not in my mind, not on my numb lips when I whisper. He's receded from reality, covered by snow. I can't see Floyd's face anymore either, or Frances'. I can picture the front step of the office, but there's no one there. No one inside. No desks or cabinets or stacks of files. The real world turns out to be just as slippery as the other, as a dream that gets my hopes up and then sneaks away leaving me to stare at the ceiling and try to remember. I was gonna go back to the real world. I was gonna ease my way back. So much time alone, and I was ready. Guess it was the real world that wasn't ready, not for me, anyway. Back to solitude, I guess. If the real world doesn't want me, it shouldn't be that hard to keep

away from it. Spirits, well, they seem to be more ornery, but I've dodged them before. I can do it again.

Walking. One step after another. I can feel my legs again. It ain't so great. They're tired, aching, ready to give out. Don't think about it. Don't think about any of it. I wiggle the fingers on the hand I can't get used to. It's only been a few hours. It's like a transplant. That's how I need to look at it. Like a kidney, or a liver, or a heart. At least you can't see those. They can't make you carry around your liver and look at it all day. Keep walking. Everything deep inside of me, that's what matters. Nothing out there is real, always changing, always shifting. Like Rindle. That name again. Like a disembodied voice, doesn't match up with anything anymore. Keep walking. I'll be back soon enough. Back to what used to be my home, my refuge. Let all the rest go.

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They seem surprised to see me when I come through the door. Never mind that it's my house. They're jumpy. Clarence got his bag, his security blanket, like I don't know what's inside. You expecting somebody else, cous'? *Something* else? You afraid of something?

"Where'd you go?" he wants to know. He sees something in my face, but he don't know what. Seems strange to me that he doesn't know, that none of them know. All that blood, the whole world should know, should've heard by now. But these folks had their own blood.

I push past Clarence. He follows me, wants to know where I was. The others are where I left them, in the front room. I think the blind one was sleeping. He sits up. Julia's still playing nurse. I've

been there, done that. Taking care of somebody helps the time pass, keeps you from thinking about stuff that hurts more than whatever problem they got. The other guy's there too, the one who saw me in town. Maybe he was right after all. Maybe I did need rescuing. Why he wants to put his ass on the line for somebody he don't know, somebody he don't even like and who don't like him, I don't know. But it's his ass.

"There's a pack of them," I say before I take time to reconsider. Clarence shuts up. "Seven or eight of them, maybe not that many now. They have a place in the woods. And a shrine, a stone wall. I think it's what gives them their strength. From the incinerator where I work...where I worked...there's a drainage ditch, big gully, turns into a stream and runs into another. Take a left at that one and you get to the place."

They're all staring at me. Even the one with his face all wrapped up. I can feel him, just like he's watching me. They don't know what to make of this. Lots of questions, but they don't know where to start. I don't give them the chance. I push past Clarence again, head up the stairs. Hell with the spirit world, hell with the real world, too. If these people can set things right, fine. If not, I don't care. Sooner they're gone, sooner I can get back to myself again. Hell with them. Hell with them all.

Part Three: Return

CHAPTER 28

"Nineteen...twenty..." Sands paused before his next sit-up, took an extra breath. Inwardly, he cursed himself for all the years he'd let his body go. Sure, he'd been fairly athletic ten or twenty years ago, but memories of the good old days weren't going to do him any good now. "Twenty-one..." He sucked in air on his way up, pushed himself.

"You're going to hurt your back doing sit-ups," Julia said from the doorway. Sands had taken to doing sit-ups and push-ups in the room where he used to sleep. He slept with the others now. Less chance of being caught off guard in the middle of the night that way, less chance of being singled out by one of the things that lurked in the forest around here. "You should do crunches instead," Julia added.

Sands let his escaping breath flap his lips as he collapsed onto his back. "And when was the last time you worked out?" he asked sharply.

Julia regarded him coolly but didn't rise to the bait. "I think your exercising is admirable, Douglas," she said instead. "It can't hurt to be in shape, and probably better, it's a good way to release stress."

"Right. Healthy is as healthy does, three out of four doctors, and all that," he said.

"It might help with the hunt," Julia conceded, "just like learning how to fire a gun."

To Sands' surprise, over the past week, Julia had joined in the target-practice sessions that he and Clarence had been having. She seemed uncomfortable still with the shotgun, but she'd proven a better shot than Douglas with the Glock, much to his chagrin.

"Don't get cocky, though," Julia said. "I think the hunt is more spiritual than physical."

Sands looked up at her. "Do you? Well, the next time we see one of those monsters, you can pray. I'll take the shotgun."

"Shotgun did a lot of good last time, didn't it."

"Do you want something, or did you just feel a need to interrupt me?" It was bad enough for her to watch him working out, but for her to offer him pointers and then belittle his efforts to get in shape simply struck a raw nerve. Sands already felt touchy about following Clarence's advice, the guy was such a jerk. But sometimes even a jerk had a point. Being stronger and faster and having more endurance might just give Sands an extra boost if he found himself in a life-and-death situation again. And strengthening his back and abdominal muscles might save him some misery the next time—if there was a next time—that he called on his edges in the face of the supernatural. If he was going to be able to protect Faye from whatever was out there, first he needed to survive. So he was doing reps of sit-ups and push-ups three times a day. There was little enough else to do to while away the time. And no privacy, even in what seemed a large, empty house. That increased the tension for everyone, made everything more difficult. But Sands wasn't about to go hike in the woods alone, considering what was out there, no way. Even if it meant living in what felt like a fishbowl.

"What do you think?" Julia asked him.

"What do I think about what?"

"You know what. What we've been talking about all week."

"Good God." Sands rolled his eyes. "How many times have we...? Why do you keep asking me? I'm not going to change my mind. I'm ready to head back home, and then you folks are on your own, as far as I'm concerned."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to change your mind?"

"No, for God's sake."

"Good," Julia said. "I agree with you."

"I don't care what you..." Sands paused, blinked, twice. "You agree with me."

"I do. Let's tell John and Clarence."

She turned on her heels and left the room. Sands was left to scramble up from the floor, his sore abdominals making the task more difficult than it might have been, and hurry after her.

"Okay, fellows," Julia said, marching into the front room that doubled as dormitory and hospital. "Douglas and I have made up our minds on this. We think it's time to head back to Iron Rapids. If you want to stick around and hunt for werewolves..." she looked at Clarence pointedly, then moved closer to John, leaned down closer to his bandaged face so there would be no doubt that she was addressing him too, "then you're crazy."

"What about Kaitlin?" Clarence asked.

"Take her with us."

"What?" said Sands from behind Julia.

"What?" Clarence said, sitting cross-legged across the room. "What if she don't want to go."

"Why wouldn't she want to go?" Julia asked.

"Do you think she wants to stay here by herself, seeing what she's seen?"

"Maybe she's seen worse somewhere else," Clarence said.

"Um...Julia," Sands said. "I think you're getting a bit ahead of yourself. I mean...and no offense, Clarence..." Sands tapped an index finger against his head, "but the girl has lost it."

"She's been through a lot," Julia said.

"We've all been through a lot," Sands shot back. "Has she spoken to you in the past week? Has she spoken to *anybody*?" His question was met by silence. "She did her little interview with the cops about...about *whatever the hell* happened at the incinerator. Before that she tells us this fairy tale about werewolf shrines. But she hasn't said a damn word since! It's pretty obvious she doesn't want anything to do with us, doesn't want us here. And, hell, I don't want to be here either. That doesn't mean I want to take her back to Iron Rapids."

"You'd leave her to those things?" Julia asked.

"Doesn't matter what we want or don't want," Clarence said. "She ain't gonna come with us. She's crawled into her little shell. She ain't coming out till she wants to. Nothing we can do. She ain't ever been the most together chick. I don't think uprooting her is gonna do any good, but I ain't leaving her to the kind of things we saw, neither."

"Look," Sands said, "we've been waiting because you guys wanted to wait. If we've been waiting to see if the werewolves were gonna come back, personally I'm just as glad that they haven't. You saw the newspaper, what happened to those people at the incinerator. If we've been waiting for Clarence's cousin to come out of her funk, then it's a bust. Either way, it doesn't leave us any good choices. We take her back with us, which is

probably a bad idea, or we leave her here. Equally bad idea."

"I absolutely agree with you, Douglas," Hetger said. All eyes turned toward him.

"You do?" Sands had grown habitually suspicious when the others agreed with him. First Julia, and now Hetger. *If Clarence agrees with something I say, I know I'm in trouble*, he thought. "You agree. Okay. So what do we do?"

Hetger shrugged. Since losing his eyes, the gesture seemed to have taken on a world of hinted but evasive meaning. "No good choices. We either make a bad one, or we try to be patient, see how things shake out. Maybe a good choice presents itself. Or at least a better one."

Sands shook his head vigorously, then remembered that wouldn't mean anything to Hetger. "Oh no," Douglas said. "I've been as patient as I'm going to be. If we're not going back, then I'm hitchhiking to the nearest bus station and catching a Greyhound."

"That don't sound much like consensus to me," Clarence said sarcastically. "Julia wants to save my cousin. Pete Sampras wants to save his own ass."

"My wife is in Iron Rapids," Sands said heatedly. "God only knows what kind of...that vampire might not have been alone...and did you think about that with your werewolf? Kaitlin said there were seven or eight of them, maybe. You going to kill them all? And what if you do? You were the ones who told me that the monster I was seeing wasn't one of a kind. You going to go kill all of the werewolves now? How long do you think you'd live trying that, considering what one or two of them did to us?"

"Douglas," Hetger said calmly, "I think we remember what happened."

The laconic comment seemed to suck all of the air out of the room. Sands thought he was going to suffocate. Breathing was suddenly an effort. He swallowed, choked off anything else he might have had to say.

"Of course we remember, John," Julia said, her voice earnest, pleading. "But that is why we should go back. We're out of our league on this one. We need to pick our battles. We need to help who we can, and we don't help anyone if we're all dead."

"So your boy is more important than my cousin," Clarence said. "That's what you're saying."

Julia shook her head, exasperated. "No, of course not."

"Good God, Clarence." Sands tossed up his hands. "And you accuse *me* of playing the victim."

Clarence began to say something in return, but he fell silent. All four of them held perfectly still for a moment, aware of the sound of an automobile—not zooming past on the hardtop, but slowing, pulling onto the gravel driveway. A new tension took hold in the room. Sands watched as Julia moved to the tall window that lacked curtains or shades. She stood to the side, trying not to expose herself to scrutiny from outside. Ideally, the hunters would have preferred that no one other than Kaitlin know they were staying there, but the ideal so seldom survived for any length of time.

"Red minivan," Julia said. The sound of tires on gravel and snow ceased. A car door opening and closing. "Black woman, mid-thirties maybe." Julia shook her head, not recognizing the visitor. "Clarence, you want to take care of this?"

Clarence nodded. He moved toward the front door as the others took up unobtrusive positions, not hiding exactly, but not in the line of sight from the front door, either.

"Don't shoot her or anything, okay?" Sands said.

Clarence ignored him. His boot steps marked his progress to the door. He didn't wait for a knock to open it. The woman was just stepping onto the porch.

"Can I help you?" Clarence asked, not sounding at all helpful.

The woman hesitated. She sounded unsure of herself. "Is this...does Kaitlin Stinnet live here?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, good." Her relief was short-lived, evaporating over the course of an uncomfortable pause. "Is she...home? Is she here? Can I talk with her?" From around the corner, Sands could imagine Clarence crossing his arms, the displeased scowl he was giving the woman. "It's very important," she said, her voice quivering with a tremulous note. She took a moment to regain her composure. "My husband...Kaitlin worked with my husband, and..." She stopped again, couldn't go on. Sands was glad the he wasn't the one out front talking to her. Even inside the house, he felt uncomfortable as hell. Clarence was the right one for this job, cold, uncaring bastard that he was.

"Let her in," said Kaitlin from the steps, halfway between upstairs and down. Her voice was quiet, pitched low and emotionless, but her words had a similar effect on Sands as had the crack of the Glock the first time he'd fired it. He started.

Where the hell did she come from? He'd been concentrating so intently on the conversation out

front, that he hadn't heard her moving in the hall upstairs, coming down the steps. Not that that was too surprising, once he thought about it. She always moved about the house like a ghost, silently, never giving herself away, never leaving any trace that she'd been there. Sands had almost forgotten what her voice sounded like, she'd proven so incommunicative over the past week. That she spoke at all was as startling as her presence on the stairs.

"Clarence, let her in," she said again.

Kaitlin made no move to come the rest of the way down the steps. She looked haggard, defeated. Wild ringlets of hair stuck out in various directions. Sands stared at her as she stood there, unselfconsciously, in her threadbare long underwear. Her gauntness made her hips appear fuller than they were. The lay of the knit shirt against her breasts reminded him a little of Melanie—except Kaitlin lacked any fire, ambition. Douglas felt cold when he looked into her eyes. Before, at least, she'd been hostile. Now, nothing. Dead. Her hand—her reconstructed or magic or whatever the hell it was hand—was tucked under the front of her shirt, resting against her stomach.

Maybe the other woman saw the same thing as she stepped into the front hall. "Kaitlin, are you all right?"

Kaitlin didn't say anything, didn't respond. *God, I'd hate to be that woman*, Sands thought—caught between Kaitlin's flat stare and Clarence's looming presence.

"The girls wanted to come too," the woman said. "Especially Mel. But I told them I didn't think it was a good idea. Not yet."

Kaitlin was taking in what the woman said. The girl's eyes weren't completely blank. She obviously recognized the visitor, understood what was being said, but she didn't respond. Sands heard a few hesitant footsteps. The woman was moving closer, edging slowly to the foot of the stairs. Sands pressed back against the wall when he saw her hand on the banister post. He felt like a voyeur, surreptitiously listening to this painful, one-sided conversation.

"I've talked to some of the people from the plant...to the police," the woman said. "I don't know...they said that...they said you were the one who found Floyd." She paused, waiting for some type of confirmation, of acknowledgement, from Kaitlin, but received none. "I don't know why I came, but...No, that's not true. I...I was wondering...I need to know..." Her voice cracked. The woman cleared her throat. Her hand left the post. Sands leaned the slightest bit and saw her wiping her face. When her hand returned to the post, her fingers gripped the stained wood as if the support it offered was all that was keeping her on her feet. "I need to know...when you found him...was he...was he still alive? Did he...did he say anything to you?"

The silence grew heavy, oppressive. The woman stood perfectly still. Maybe she was holding her breath. Sands heard Clarence shifting his weight from one foot to the other, in the doorway or just inside the hall. Kaitlin's eyes still were flat, as if she didn't want to see what was going on here, but she couldn't quite help it. Her forehead was wrinkled, her brow set hard. She responded the slightest bit to the question, gnawing her lip, pressing her teeth down until the skin was taut and white.

"Can you tell me anything?" the woman asked at last. "Anything?" The words were torn from her heart, pure anguish, pleading.

Kaitlin shook her head, in response to the question or in denial of what was going on and what had happened, Sands didn't know. "Go away, Anne," Kaitlin said, her stark words like nails driven into a coffin. "Go away. Don't come back. Don't bring the girls back. Not ever."

The woman, Anne, drew in a sharp breath. She let go of the wooden post, then grabbed it again quickly. Sands thought she might pass out. He almost rushed to her aid, but then remembered that he wasn't supposed to be there, wasn't supposed to be hearing this. He pressed back against the wall again. He didn't want to see anything, hear anything.

After a few moments, Anne breathed again. Sands heard her gasp; he recognized the sound of a woman fighting back tears. Anne turned away. She paused, maybe about to say something else, but she couldn't manage the words. Her footsteps traced her hasty retreat out of the house. No one inside moved or spoke until the car engine had started and the minivan had pulled erratically out of the driveway and was gone.

"Good God," Sands whispered.

Clarence closed the door, and only then did Kaitlin seem free to turn and slowly climb the stairs and return to her solitude.

CHAPTER 29

Water stains on the ceiling. It's like watching grass grow or paint dry, but I lie and stare at them. Never could get the hang of just gritting my teeth and putting up with the here and now. Always had to be something bigger, always had to mean something. Couldn't just be a handful of bastards using me to get their rocks off, had to be all humanity going down the crapper. Nothing to do but run away. Keep running. Except nowhere is far enough away, so I try again. I guess the real world has chewed me up and spit me out again. No point in pretending everything is okay, that life will get back to normal, that there even is a normal.

So that leaves me one option, if any. Maybe none.

A few hours after dark, Clarence brings me some food. Maybe I'll eat some of it later, when nobody's around. Sometimes the woman brings food up, but most of the time it's Clarence. Maybe he thinks he's supposed to because he's family. He should've learned by now that *supposed to* don't mean nothing no more. I think he likes to be in the same room as me so he can look down at me, feel better than me.

They brought me some clothes the other day, bought them in town I guess, left a heap in the corner. I haven't touched them. Not going to. I didn't ask for nothing. They're the ones hiding out in my house. I could've told them to get out but...I'm afraid to. If I tell them and they say no, then it really ain't my house no more, and I've lost the last thing I have that means anything to me. So I lie here and pretend they don't exist, pretend they ain't here under my roof. I watch the

water stains. I don't know nothing about the world outside these walls, don't want to. Don't want to know what the police have or haven't figured out. Don't sound like they have a clue. Nobody remembers. All those different people wandering around at the incinerator, I know some of them had to have seen.... But don't nobody remember a damn thing. I don't *want* to remember, don't want to know what happened. Sure as hell ain't gonna tell the cops. Just another stupid bastard who don't know what happened, so why should they think twice about me? And why should I think twice about them? That world don't got nothing for me no more.

Damn Anne. What the hell was she thinking coming here? Couldn't say nothing to her neither. Couldn't let myself be dragged back in. Ain't gonna think about Floyd, ain't gonna think about their girls. Clarence and his friends leave, I just fade away again. Everything like it was. I don't need Anne crying on me. I got my own problems. If she only knew... Can't give that first inch. If I do, it rips me apart. Don't need her tears. Can't handle them. She's got her girls. They'll get along. What've I got? Something I can't live with. So I stare at the ceiling. Maybe some time later I'll fall asleep. Maybe everything will go away. House, people, world, everything.

My body won't, though. Won't go away. Can't. And there's something wrong with it, something different. Late with my period.

Mind goes blank, like I pulled a blanket over my head. Can't start to think how that could change everything, what that queasiness in my stomach means. Probably just stress, not eating right, too damn thin for my own good, need to rest. That's all. But can I take that chance? I don't

think so. I don't know. Thinking about it, acknowledging it, doesn't make it real. But it does, sort of. Too real to ignore, even if I only suspect.... Stress, exhaustion, hunger. But too real for me just to check out, to let go of everything. What if? The normal world, the human world, it's no good, not for me. What does that leave? Rindle's world? Is that any better? Is that the way? It's the only way I have left—but I still have to be sure. Just in case.

In case...hell. I know. It's too soon, too early for me to know, but I do. Lots of things that I know that I shouldn't, that no person should. It don't make them go away.

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He waits until just before dawn to come. I figure that's when it would be, if he came at all. I couldn't blame him if he didn't, not after what I said. I even told Clarence and them about the shrine. Thought maybe they'd take care of it all for me, so I'd never have to face any of it again. But all they do is bitch at each other. So I'm back where I started—on my own with this.

I'm not asleep. I hear him climbing up to the window, familiar sounds now, though he waited a whole week to come. So he's here. That can mean one of two things.

The window opens. A few quiet footsteps. He moves damn light for somebody as big as he is, somebody with a crooked back and a limp. What's it gonna be, a hand on my shoulder or claws tearing my head off? He's standing by the bed. Just standing. Watching. Deciding? Does it seem like as long to him as it does to me? Forever, and then some.

I don't hear him breathing, I realize. Don't hear the animal sounds that I would if he'd come as a

monster tonight—and almost before I've had time to think that, I feel his touch. The hand on my shoulder. Dear God. It frightens me more than if he'd just killed me. I can't just give up yet. I still have to find my way along. I jump at his touch. He's shushing me, whispering to me that it's all right. I try to look at him in the darkness. He's a man, but I imagine him like I saw him last, all burned and bloody, bodies over his shoulders. I put my hand to his face. Stubble, but no bleeding gashes, no stiff scarred skin. In the night, I can almost forget that the hand I'm touching him with came from somewhere else, can almost forget the changes happening inside me.

I want to cry, manage not to until I feel the tears on his face. "I'm sorry," I tell him, almost choking on the words. "I'm so sorry. About what I said..."

"It's okay," he says. "It's okay. I'm sorry too. Sorry about everything."

There's so much more to it than that. So much still to be worked out, but not right now. So I just nod, and I'm wiping away his tears, and he's wiping away mine, and we're both trying not to sob. I shush him this time. Point to the floor. They're still downstairs.

He nods. "Come with me," he says.

I slip on my clothes, grab my coat. He's changed. He's the monster again, but the blood-rage is somewhere beneath the surface. He doesn't want to scare me. He strokes my hair. I let out my breath, didn't realize I was holding it. He picks me up, cradles me in his arms and steps through the window. A second later, he jumps and we're sailing through darkness of early morning.

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

Sands partially surfaced from sleep, vaguely aware of sounds coming from nearby. Movement, rustling of clothes, something else. He drifted back into sleep.... He sat bolt upright when he heard the voice, familiar but strange...hollow, electronic: *"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. About what I said..."*

Kaitlin's voice. Sands looked around the room. Julia was waking up too. Clarence and Hetger sat close together, Clarence holding something between them...one of the headsets that they had used in the sewers of Iron Rapids.

"It's okay," said another voice, a man's voice. *"It's okay. I'm sorry too. Sorry about everything."*

Sands' mind took a few moments to make the transition from sleep and register properly what he was hearing. The voices were replaced by quiet crying, still electronic, broadcast over the headset. *We're hundreds of miles from Iron Rapids. They can't have that kind of range.* Too far to communicate with Nathan, he realized, but from one headset to another...

"Come with me," said the man's voice.

"You bugged her room," Sands whispered, but Clarence raised a finger to his lips. They heard more rustling sounds, movement, and then, not over the headset, different noises that Sands probably wouldn't have noticed if not for the eavesdropped conversation, but which might have been footsteps on the porch roof. Then silence. "I can't believe you bugged her room," he said, angry, embarrassed, but at the same time trying to match the male voice he'd heard to the man he'd seen with Kaitlin in town, to the monster he'd seen in this very house.

"You sleep around for kicks, and you can't believe what?" Clarence asked. Then he turned to Hetger: "You ready?" Hetger nodded.

Sands looked on, dumbfounded, not believing what he was hearing. Julia was alarmed as well. "You're not going after them."

"Those things are the enemy," Clarence said, "and whether she's crazy or stupid, I don't know, but we can't leave Kaitlin with those things. We take care of them, and we take her back with us. Tonight."

"Take care of them? Kill them?" Sands sputtered. "Crazy or stupid must run in the family! I'm sure as hell not going out there."

"Didn't figure you would," Clarence said. He was checking his shotgun, filling his pockets with shells.

"John, what are you doing?" Sands wanted to know. Hetger, too, was pulling on his coat. "You're blind, for God's sake. You're not going with him."

John turned his bandaged face toward Sands, *directly* toward Sands, not just in the general direction as if guessing his whereabouts by the sound of his voice. "I am," John said.

Sands sat back on his haunches, dismayed.

Julia didn't argue with John and Clarence. She must have known them long enough to see when their minds were made up. Instead, she reached into one of the bags from the car and handed each of them a headset. "I can't see how we'd be any help from here," she said, "but I don't want to be left wondering."

Clarence nodded solemnly, took one headset. Hetger reached out, not waiting for it to be placed in his hand, and took the other. "We'll come back,"

he said. Julia said nothing, but the pain on her face belied her stoicism. John touched his fingers to her cheek for a moment, then he turned and, as if his permanent darkness were no obstacle at all, followed Clarence out of the house.

CHAPTER 30

The trees are bent low, coated on top with new snow like a second bark. The evergreens have the heaviest load. They remind me a little of Rindle, or of exotic white birds. Everything is heavy, close to the ground, even the sky, thick clouds, no break. Time is finally moving again after days and nights of shuffling along with nowhere to go. Rindle and I walk slowly through the woods. Right now everything is okay. We've left my world, haven't gotten to his yet.

I pretend I'm part of him, try to step where he's stepped, but his legs are too long. Even with his limp. I stretch to reach the spots where his footprints break the snow, but it's no good. I make maybe one of every three. Mostly I just lose my balance, not all the way, not falling on my butt and doing snow angels, but almost. Every time I brush against a branch, the snow crashes to the ground in big clumps. I wonder if Rindle didn't have me along would he leave any trail at all? Would he be a wolf running through the forest, hunting, howling, completely apart from the human world? The place he's taking me, when we went before, he walked as a man, not as a monster, not a wolf. Was that for my benefit? What is he when he's by himself? What skin is he at home in?

The place he's taking me is secret, holy, a shrine. He's got this thing about shrines. Claims that the beer I kept in the fridge and didn't drink was a shrine, and he felt real bad since he didn't decide that until after he drank it all. It wasn't meant for him. Just like this place ain't meant for me—me or any human.

But he's taking me.

The last time he did this, his buddies didn't take too kindly to it. They wanted to kill me, wanted to kill him. Would have if it hadn't been for the Quilt Wolf. Look to the future, the wolf said. I know what that means now. I should tell Rindle, but I can't bring myself to it. I have to find out what things might be like here, in his world.

Maybe that's why Rindle is taking me back now—now that most of *the others* are gone. I saw two of them who are gone, saw them draped over Rindle's shoulder outside of the lab. He always called them his people, even when they wanted to kill him. And I said I was glad they were dead. He should hate me for that.

I should hate him for Floyd. I am mad still, even if I can't open that part of me to Anne. I just can't. 'Cause more than just Floyd died. He was my link to that world, my last hope to get back. I can give up on everything—that's what I thought I was gonna do, that's why I told Clarence about the shrine. But once Rindle came back... Is it wrong for me to want to take the one chance I've got, to want to live? Clarence and his friends will be gone soon, and I'll be here. I hope.

Watching Rindle now, as I tromp through the woods trying to keep up with him, I can't get over how well he moves. Hump and all, even limping. He's graceful somehow—now that he's not buried in the bottom of a bottle. Even as a monster, he's graceful. More graceful that way. Full of anger, a killer, but graceful. Eyes and claws and...and I don't want to see him that way. Not now. Not after everything that's happened. Not after Floyd.

I shake my head, try to get rid of those thoughts. I taste blood from the inside of my lip

where I'm biting down. I won't think about any of that right now. I won't think about Floyd. Look to the future. The Quilt Wolf said that to Rindle, but I'm sure as hell part of all this now. People die every day, all over the world. Me slitting my own wrists ain't gonna bring Floyd back, ain't gonna magically produce a new husband for Anne or a daddy for those girls. Look to the future. There's a bigger picture, and if I look hard enough, I might be part of it.

Rindle's wearing the coat that I bought him for seven bucks. He won't use a hat or gloves, doesn't like them, says they get in the way. My hat's pulled all the way down over my ears. I probably look like a retard, but oh well. My wool mittens do a pretty good job keeping my hands warm—and I don't have to look at my hand, don't have to think about it. I'm wearing all my warm clothes, but it's still damn cold out here. Wonder what my ancestors way back would think if they could see me now? Sweating in the jungles or deserts of Africa, they ever get this cold? They ever see snow? I don't know. Don't know where exactly they came from, what they would've known. Don't even know their names. Came to this country in chains, though. That was the only way. It wasn't even this country yet. Maybe they had cold winters on the plantation down south. Couldn't say. My folks, and their parents, sure as hell were cold in Detroit. And Clarence too, growing up. Last family I got, really. Even if he is a bastard. Everything'll be easier after he's gone. Maybe they'll leave soon.

Family. Home—what *used to be* home. Ain't going there. Thinking like that won't do nothing but make me crazy. Can't forget all the crap that happened there too. I got out for a reason. Dead getting uppity. Bad enough not being able to trust

the living. Least dead people could do is stay dead. Corpses shambling down the street or sitting in a restaurant, skin peeling away. Ghost standing on a corner, thinks she waiting to turn a trick. Twisted face peering out from behind somebody else's face—and no one else sees it but me. Hell, no. I ain't getting all nostalgic and teary-eyed about that. Not that here's been a hell of a lot better.

Whoa, hold on there—Rindle's stopped and I almost jump for the footprint that he's still standing in. He bends down, checking out a little dip in front of us. The drifts here are up to my knees. He's digging—with his bare hands, makes me cold just watching—tossing aside the snow.

"What are you doing?" I ask him. My voice sounds funny, muffled, like we're in a cave, a snow cave. I lick my lips. They're cold, dry, cracked.

He doesn't answer, keeps clearing away more snow, and I see what he's found: a narrow strip of ice, gleaming black. There's water under it, a trickle of a stream that's still flowing.

I look around. I been here before, but I wouldn't have recognized the place. Everything out here looks so different depending on the hour or the season. Day, night, summer, winter. The city wasn't like that. A building's a building, daylight or streetlight, heat wave or blizzard. Don't matter.

Rindle stands up and we keep going, keep to the side of the trough, the covered stream. I'm careful not to step too close. I don't know how thick that ice is, and I don't feel like putting my boots' water-proofing to the test. Hell, guess I could grow new feet if these froze off. Not funny.

We keep going for quite a while. When Rindle stops again, I'm ready. I don't run up his ass. But it takes me a few seconds to see *why* he stopped.

There's a man standing near the trough that I know is the stream. He's completely still, as much a part of the forest as the trees. He's beautiful, too. Same way that a deer bounding away through the underbrush is beautiful. His long silver hair has feathers twined in it. He has on furs and buckskin boots. He looks a little confused, not at all happy, and his pale blue eyes ask: *What is she doing here?* He and Black Rindle stare at each other, each man wound as tight as a spring.

Men. I keep telling myself that's what they are, but I know better. It's not the truth. Not the whole truth. I don't look at them. Not *that* way. Still, even without the Sight, I can sense the razor's edge that Rindle walks. His rage is pricked up. It's never far beneath the surface. There's an unspoken challenge between these two, unfinished business. I almost see each whisker upon Rindle's white face trembling from the strain of keeping the violence in check. I wonder, not for the first time, what if that stare was leveled at me? Could he hurt me? Would he? I shiver.

They're frozen like that, staring, waiting. Beyond them, there's a low, curving mound of snow. It's familiar, but different than when I saw it before, like the iced-over stream. I know where I am. This is where the fight started last time. I point at the mound. "That's the shrine," I say just to break the tension between these two. "I didn't recognize it...with all the snow."

Slowly, at the same time, they both turn and look at me. Now they *both* seem to wonder what the hell I'm doing here. Wish I could crawl under a rock. There's a lump in my throat. Finally, they look away, back at each other again, as if I ain't even here. But I am here.

The other one speaks first: "Evert didn't allow humans."

"Do you see Evert anywhere, moon-calf?" Black Rindle asks.

"His name is Moon-calf?" I whisper. If I can just distract Rindle, keep things from getting too freaky...and it seems like they do all have weird names.

"No more than his is Hunch," the stranger says, offended. Okay, maybe I should've kept my mouth shut.

"My name might as well have been Hunch for those many years," Black Rindle says, just as bitter as the other guy. Bad news. I'm wishing there was an emergency exit instead of just miles and miles of trees. "This is Barks-at-Shadows," Rindle says to me.

I laugh. Yeah, right—but nobody else is laughing. He's serious. "Barks-at-Shadows," I mutter. "Go figure." I guess it ain't any stranger than Black Rindle. I keep that to myself. I'm slow, but I do learn.

"This is Kaitlin Stinnet," Black Rindle says for the benefit of Barks-at-Shadows. "She is Kinfolk."

"Kinfolk born?" Barks-at-Shadows asks.

"Kinfolk by word and deed," Black Rindle says, then adds: "I put more stock in the person than in your Fang bloodlines."

What the hell? All I know is that what Rindle's saying ain't doing nothing to relax this other guy, but it seems to me that Rindle's bitterness runs deeper, stronger. Still...

"I'm hungry," I lie, hoping it's not too obvious. They look at me again, like I just appeared out of nowhere. Never mind that they're—I think—arguing about me. I'm just an excuse. "I haven't

had anything to eat today," I tell Rindle. That much is true. "Can you, you know...go catch something. We'll make a fire while you're gone." The thought of meat makes me queasy, but a distraction's a distraction.

He doesn't like that, but after a few seconds, he says okay, like I knew he would—like I *hoped* he would. He's proud of his hunting, and maybe he feels like he owes me something. He growls a little, real quiet, deep in his throat. Maybe he's just grumbling. Maybe it's a warning to me, or to Barks-at-Shadows. I don't know. But he trudges off into the woods. In just a few seconds, he's gone. Like he was never there.

Okay. So it's me and Barks-at-Shadows. Maybe this wasn't the best idea in the world either. Guess I should have thought of that before now, before it was too late. He's watching me. Close. Trees are creaking under the weight of the snow. I don't look at him—not right at him. Eye contact is bad, right? A challenge, or something like that. Doesn't seem like a good idea. I look at the ground, at the snow, start rooting around, clearing a spot on the ground with my boots for the fire. Barks-at-Shadows wanders away. I can breathe easier when he's not watching me like a hawk—like a hawk watching...watching whatever the hell kind of little birds or rabbits or whatever that hawks eat. He comes back a few minutes later with an armful of kindling. He goes away a few more times, brings back more sticks, bigger pieces of wood.

"So," I ask him, "do you guys, like, rub sticks together?" He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a lighter. "Oh." I watch him while he builds the fire. It's second nature to him. No thinking about it, no planning. Every stick goes in place like that's where it always belonged. One flick of the lighter

and it's burning. The whole time, I'm telling myself that Rindle wouldn't have left me here with this guy if I'd be in danger, wouldn't have brought me here at all. Not *again*. I mostly believe it after about the hundredth time of thinking it.

The crackling flames are a good diversion, something to stare at. I don't have to try so hard not to look at Barks-at-Shadows. I don't want him to think I'm challenging him—like I would be *that* stupid—but beside that, I don't trust my second sight to cool it, and I *definitely* do not want to see...well, that, what this guy really looks like. Not right now, not while Rindle is gone. Him I've gotten used to. I can see him as a *person*, not as one of those things, not as a something that *looks* human but is just waiting to reveal its true form. All this stuff is running through my mind, fraying my nerves...but I've got reasons for being here, too. I've got things I need to figure out, and not much time to figure them out in.

"Are the others...?" I can't say it, can't finish the question. I think my tongue is swelling up, frostbit. I remember how close Rindle came to freaking when I said I was glad they were dead. What if I say the wrong thing to this guy. I don't mean nothing to him.

"Gone or dead," Barks-at-Shadows says.

I watch the fire some more. I look around, look at anything except him. I pull a stump closer to the fire, brush off the snow, sit down. I take a deep breath, try again. "You don't like me being here." I glance up at him, just for a second.

He shrugs. "Evert didn't allow humans here. But Black Rindle is alpha now."

Alpha. All right. But of what? Of you and him? Of this lonely hidden place? I feel like I want to

throw up. Rindle has finally gotten his act together, made something of himself. I don't understand it all, but it means a hell of a lot to him—and I've given away his secret. Worse than that, haven't told him my own, one that he of all people deserves to know. I might find my way despite myself. That wouldn't be true if it weren't for him, but I can't tell him yet, not until I'm sure, until I'm sure that this is the right way.

I glance at Barks-at-Shadows again. He still looks sort of confused—almost always seems to look that way, like a not-too-bright kid who just don't get it. Yeah, listen to me. Don't get carried away. He could have the brain of a two-year-old, but he can grow eight feet tall and sprout claws and fangs that can snap steel, rip people's heads off, kill.

A sudden noise, a sharp crack, about scares the piss out of me. I jump. Barks-at-Shadows is snapping a stick, tossing it on the fire. I don't think he realizes that he scared me. If he does, he doesn't laugh, doesn't think it's funny. For some reason, I'm glad of that. "The others...who are gone," I ask him, as I try to let my heart slow down again, "they didn't much like Black Rindle, did they?"

"He's not very likeable."

I chew on that for a second. Not what I expected. He's got to know that Rindle and I are...that we're close. But he's not pulling any punches. Is he being straight with me, or jerking me around? "Then why are you still here?"

"It's my place. My tribe didn't want me."

"Why not?"

"I'm not so smart as I should be. I don't measure up. They were embarrassed by me." More blam-in-your-face bluntness. But not bitter now, like he

accepts his place, doesn't expect any better, doesn't *deserve* better.

"But you were accepted here," I say.

"Black Rindle's mother was kind. She's dead now."

"I know. And what about Black Rindle?"

"What about him?"

"Why did the others hate him so much?" I ask. *Did you hate him too? I almost say, Or did you just try to kill us because they told you to?*

For longer than I like, Barks-at-Shadows looks at me with his pale blue, confused-child eyes. Almost like he feels sorry for me, like I'm the stupid one, and he feels sorry for me because I should need to ask something so obvious. "He's metis," Barks-at-Shadows says. "Accursed in the sight of Gaia."

The words make my blood run cold. The matter-of-fact way he says them, not dripping with hate...but just as bad, indoctrination, what he'd been told over and over again, casual acceptance, as bad as the ranting of a bigot hate-monger. The way he says *metis*, might as well have been *nigger*. In his eyes, Rindle is worthless—not just Rindle, anybody like Rindle—because of how he was born. Pisses me off. Only I don't have the choice to turn into a big bad monster and rip his head off. Dehumanize anybody that's different. Easier to hate them that way. Easier to kill them.

Of course, in this case Rindle *is* something other than human, but so is Barks-at-Shadows, so are all the others like them. He can't see it that way. That's not what he's been taught to see. Bastard. He can't see Rindle like I do, never will. Metis. Nigger. *Human*. I wonder which is the worst to him?

I haven't decided the answer to that by the time Rindle comes back. He would have hunted in a very different form, but there he is, standing as a man, tossing a bloody rabbit onto the ground by the fire. The limp carcass thuds against the melting snow around the fire. Barks-at-Shadows flinches, like Rindle slapped him across the face. Instantly, from almost relaxed he's on edge. One of them's growling, maybe both. Hard to tell. It's such a deep down chest sound.

Rindle's ready to take anything as a challenge, meant that way or not. So damn stubborn. Barks-at-Shadows is just as bad. Why does he hate Rindle so much? Because of what he is, because the others are dead, because things aren't like they used to be in the good old days? This'll never work. These two surly bastards will break before they bend. Nothing I do is gonna change that. Maybe if Rindle knows...if I tell him what I'm afraid to...would that be enough for him to change, to try? Rindle's as much a product of hate as Barks-at-Shadows is. Maybe if we had years—but we don't. I can't wait that long.

"I'm not hungry anymore," I say. "Can you take me home?"

Rindle glares at me, but he doesn't argue. I don't get up from the stump, so he lifts me in his arms. We don't say goodbye to Barks-at-Shadows, we just leave. As Rindle carries me, he changes. His strides grow larger, stronger, as he grows taller. He holds me so easily, like I'm nothing, but not carelessly like he slung around the rabbit. Jets of steam spout from his wolf nose, his ears lay back as he quickens his pace, and the forest, muted white, becomes a blur.

I curl up against his warmth, eyes closed. I don't know which way he's going. He'll get me back home. I put my hand to my belly. Even through my parka, I can feel it stirring. Life. I want to tell him. I'm going to have a baby. I don't know if it'll be like you or me or somewhere in between. But I can't tell him yet. I can't go back to the normal world. I need to figure out if I can make a life with him. I don't know why I hoped for more from his people, not after what I've seen. Guess I thought them not being human might have an up side. Turns out they're more human than I thought.

CHAPTER 31

Sands and Julia didn't hear much from Clarence and Hetger. There wasn't much to report. Every so often Clarence would check in: "*There's some more tracks. Might be them, but we're going to go by what she said before—head toward the incinerator complex, swing wide, see if we can pick up that stream.*"

"I'd stay well wide of that place," Julia cautioned him. "It's probably still crawling with security."

"*You read my mind.*"

"How are you doing, John?"

"*Doing fine.*"

Hetger remained uncharacteristically silent most of the afternoon, much as he had since the attack that had cost him his eyes. Sands, having been through his own traumas, could understand that. What he couldn't understand, was how John, eyes gone, face bandaged, had *looked* right at him. "Julia..."

"I don't understand it either," she said, never taking her attention from the headset she'd just removed and placed in her lap.

"Are you reading my mind now?"

Julia sighed. "You don't understand either why those two idiots are going out there to get themselves killed, or how John can move around like a seeing person."

"His eyes are gone, for God's sake."

"Douglas, normal people have eyes, but they don't see what we do. *We* didn't always see what we do now. Do you really think that the eyes, the actual, physical eyes, are the important part?"

"I...well, I...I would think they might help. I mean, good God, I guess it's only one step weirder than if you'd healed his eyes, or Kaitlin had grown him a new pair."

Julia whipped around to face him. "I think she could have," she said sharply, her tone as harsh as it had ever been for scathing comments directed at Sands.

"You think...Julia, I was kidding...sort of...." He lapsed into silence. *I shouldn't be surprised by anything anymore. I shouldn't expect anything to make sense.* But he was surprised, and he couldn't help expecting things to make sense. "You do think she could have...?"

"And as for why those two idiots are out there right now..." she said, intentionally or otherwise changing the subject, then tossed up her hands with a deeper, defeated sigh.

"Just save it and yell at them when they get back," Sands said.

"They're not coming back."

The soft-spoken words struck a chord in Sands; they caused his stomach to tighten. Here was Julia, who hadn't been able even to say Albert's name after he was killed, who had seemed to want to hide from the fact, yet it was she who was voicing Sands' own fears, which he was attempting to deny. "Not coming back? Of course they're coming back."

"Douglas," she said, "I *have* to go back. I have to find my son. Last week, when those...things attacked us, I knew I was going to die. That's the most terrified I've ever been—not of dying, but of dying while Timothy is still out there." She stopped, cleared her throat, fought back tears. "I *have* to go back."

And you don't think John and Clarence are going to, otherwise you would have gone with them. Hesitantly, Sands put his hand on her shoulder.

"John usually is so pragmatic," Julia said, "weighing potential benefit against risks. But he's been so...so quiet since...the attack. I'm afraid he's given up."

"Or he sees something that we don't," Sands suggested. He was uncomfortable saying it, didn't even know what he meant exactly. Mostly, he hoped to comfort Julia. As much as she angered him at times, he preferred her sniping at him to this kind of teary confessional.

"We're a few hundred yards behind the incinerator complex," Clarence said a few minutes later. "Here's the drainage ditch kind of thing she was talking about. We're following it away from the complex." A few minutes later still: "Okay. It's come to another stream, frozen over, covered with snow, but it's here. She said left, right?"

"Left. Correct," Julia said into the headset. "You fellows keeping warm?" She tried to sound cheerful. There was no response. Her forced good humor quickly faded. "Clarence? John? Are you there?"

"Yeah, we're here," Clarence said. "You broke up for a second. What'd you say?"

Julia sighed with relief. "Nothing important. Nothing."

"What are you doing?" Sands and Julia both whirled to find Kaitlin standing in the doorway. She seemed so small, dwarfed by her parka and hat and mittens. She looked at them suspiciously, more so than usual. "Where's Clarence?"

"Your cousin is back," Julia said into the headset.

"Keep her there."

That was Sands' thought as well. They couldn't afford for her to run off and get in the way. Would she try to warn the werewolves? Was she that stupid, that insane? Sands didn't have to chase after her, though. Hearing Clarence's voice seemed to cause her pain. She grimaced, sank to her knees. "He's gone after them, hasn't he?" She stared ahead, looking at Sands but not really seeing him. "Tell him to come back."

"We're doing this to help you," Douglas said. "Isn't this what you wanted? Isn't this why you told us about the werewolves, about the shrine?"

She stared and shook her head slowly. "He's going back. He'll kill them. He'll kill them."

Sands wasn't sure if *he* was Clarence—though Clarence had never been there before to go back—or one of the monsters. Douglas couldn't understand how she would have gone anywhere willingly with those beasts—but he'd seen her in town, heard her over the headset that morning. It didn't make sense with the fact that she'd been attacked last week, but maybe this wasn't the time to figure it all out, he decided. It was enough that she didn't get in the way, didn't try to rush out of the house and aid those monsters. Instead, she sat on her knees and feet, slouching, almost dazed. She shrugged her coat from her shoulders. Slipped off her hat and mittens, revealing the eerily perfect hand.

Time dragged on. There was nothing for Sands and Julia to do but wait. They'd made their choice, just as Clarence and John had made theirs. Douglas remembered flashes of the fight upstairs in the darkness. His pulse quickened, but no news came over the headset. With each heartbeat, he

expected to hear snarling and gunfire and howls and screams, but there was nothing. Only his and Julia's uncomfortable fidgeting. Kaitlin sat perfectly still.

When Clarence did finally speak again, his electronic voice ratcheted the tension in the room a few turns tighter: *"Something's been digging here by the stream, and we've got some footprints, too. Another path coming to the stream and heading the direction we're going. Looks like two different sets of footprints where they're not combined. One a good bit smaller than the other."*

Sands looked to Kaitlin for any kind of response. She was rocking gently. He saw that her boots and the bottom few inches of her jeans legs were wet from melting snow. "Can you tell us anything else that might help?" he asked her. "Anything at all?"

"I didn't mean for this...I was wrong," she whispered, still rocking. "I was wrong."

"Kaitlin," Sands raised his voice, but didn't get her attention. "Can you tell us *anything*?" He waited, got no response, sighed in disgust. "Of course you can't. You haven't told us anything all week. Why should you start now? Damn you." Cousin or not, Sands couldn't see why Clarence would risk his life for this miserable girl, and John...it made even less sense for him to go. *He can't have given up. He can't. He must see something that we don't. These monsters must be such a threat that he can't bring himself to walk away and leave them roaming about. He can't have given up.* "Tell them to come back," he said to Julia. "Tell them to turn around and come back. Maybe the girl has a good idea for once."

Julia didn't tell them. Not that it would have done any good. The three sat in tense, miserable silence until Clarence spoke again. His voice was barely audible; he must have been whispering: "Okay. We've got something. Maybe a camp. There's a burnt out fire, what's left of it. Still looks warm. Nobody around. Moving closer.... Okay. This looks like the...must be the wall, the shrine she was talking about. We're gonna take care of this and then boogie. John, give me the sack on your left shoulder, with the grenades."

"Grenades," Sands said to himself. "Good God."

They heard rustling sounds over the headset. Sands could all but see Hetger sliding a canvas sack from his shoulder. But then the activity was interrupted by urgent shushing. Everything grew quiet....

Julia was sitting bolt upright. Sands found himself having edged very close to her. He grabbed one of the extra headsets slipped it on. Julia did the same with hers. Douglas felt Kaitlin at his side, straining to listen.

Then Hetger's voice, forceful, loud, so much so after the whispering that they all jumped. "You, hold it right there. Don't move."

Sands had seen it before: Hetger locking a monster in his unwavering glare and commanding it to hold its place. But *without eyes*? "What does he think he's doing?" Sands muttered.

"Holy...!" Clarence this time. They all suddenly heard snarling, growling—sounds all too familiar. Clarence was breathing hard and very quickly, but at least he was breathing. "You got him, John?"

"Yes."

"Good. You keep him there."

"For God's sake, what's going on?" Julia called into the headset frantically.

"This guy," Clarence said, *"he shows up, sees us, and just like that, he's not a man anymore. One of those things. John's got him under control at the moment, but if you'll excuse me..."*

"Get out of there," Sands said. "Do whatever the hell you've got to do and get out."

"Only two grenades," Clarence said. "Watch your ears."

A few seconds later, Sands was grateful for the warning. Static and feedback spiked over the headsets. And then a second time.

"No more shrine...but we do still have a werewolf, and he ain't happy. Ask Kaitlin if this guy should turn back now that the shrine's toast."

Sands looked to Kaitlin and, by the expression of pure horror on her face, knew she wasn't going to provide answers to any question. "No help on this end," he said.

"Yeah, well, we got to split, so I guess we have to handle this the old fashioned way."

Sands heard the now familiar sound of the pump-action shotgun being cocked, then a blast, and another.

"No way." A third blast. *"This bastard...I might as well throw rocks at him. John, keep a hold on him 'til we figure out—John, look out! Jesus!"*

Another shot, two more in rapid succession. Snarling. And then Clarence bellowing at the top of his lungs, defiantly, cursing—then nothing. Static. Then not even that.

Sands sat shocked, his heart racing, sweat running down the small of his back. The afternoon was almost gone, and he felt darkness closing in.

"Go," Kaitlin said quietly next to him. "Go. Both of you. Now."

Sands' and Julia's gazes slowly drew together, met.

"There's nothing you can do for them," Kaitlin said. "Nothing anyone can do."

Sands stared at Julia. He thought of John and Clarence out there in the forest somewhere, tried to guess the odds that they might still be alive. Against that, he weighed what Julia had said about her son. Sands had no desire to meet a grisly death in the wilds, or here, for that matter. But he was hesitant to abandon his friends. He didn't know what to do, but he did know that the pounding of his heart was a countdown and, very soon, not deciding would be a decision in itself. Julia touched his arm. She nodded. And like that, they were decided. They scooped up the closest gear, abandoning sleeping bags and blankets in favor of personal items.

"Come on, then," Sands said to Kaitlin. But she didn't budge, didn't make the first move for the door. "Come on."

"This is my home," she said. "You go."

"Don't be stupid," Sands said to her. "Let's go." But she ignored him, sat staring impassively at the floor.

"Douglas..." Julia called after him. She was ahead of him, waiting at the front door.

Sands remembered how she'd spoken of Kaitlin earlier: *She could have*. And he knew that Julia wasn't going to hang around for this girl's sake, not when an innocent young boy was lost, needed help. Sands nodded. He turned and left Kaitlin and followed Julia to the car.

CHAPTER 32

There was little left of the humans when Black Rindle was done with them, but instead of being assuaged by their mangling, his rage grew hotter. He'd been on his way back to the caern, not far away at all, when he'd heard the explosions. Rushing back, he'd found the old shrine to Water Snake, which would eventually have been rebuilt to Meneghwo, completely destroyed—and he'd found the humans. When he'd pounced on the first man, the one that turned out to have been blind, Barks-at-Shadows had been freed from whatever invisible power had held him.

The black man had fired his gun and found it useless, but then, as Barks-at-Shadows had attacked, the human had used the gun as a club—a fiery, glowing club that split the Garou's skull as might have a klaive. Barks-at-Shadows finished the human, to be sure, but now lay unmoving on the ground.

“The girl,” Barks-at-Shadows had said before his senses fled him for good. “He said the girl told them.”

Black Rindle's fury had lashed him to such a state that the humans were ripped to shreds before he managed another conscious thought. *The girl. Kaitlin.* Barks-at-Shadows, resentful as he was that the others had perished following Rindle, would not lie about that. Black Rindle could feel the truth of the words, and his blood nearly boiled. She had betrayed him again, had betrayed his caern and his people, and now humans who saw the Garou for what they were, humans who wielded powers that could only be granted Wyrmspawn, had attacked, had

destroyed what was left of the shrine his mother had built with her own hands. This could not be.

A red haze clouded Rindle's vision. He howled his rage to the beginning darkness and ran headlong into the night.

CHAPTER 33

I sit. I wait. Clarence is gone. His friends are gone. Rindle will be here soon. One way or another, he will be here. I don't want to know what happened to Clarence, but I do know. It's my fault. If I hadn't been so angry, if I hadn't told them... There was no reason to tell them. It wasn't going to bring Floyd back. I was so stupid. I was giving up on that other world, on the spirit world. But it's the only chance I have, the only choice. That or to live the rest of my life by myself—by myself and with my baby. How could I have thought that would be better? Life with Rindle won't be perfect, but I can't go back where I came from. That world is dead to me. It died with Floyd. For better or worse, whether it was Rindle's fault or not. That's just the way it is. I can't go back. Look to the future.

I have to tell Rindle. When he calms down, I'll tell him. There aren't many of his people left. Only Barks-at-Shadows. Maybe Rindle and I can make a life. Maybe he could leave that, just like I'm leaving my people. We could do it. Just the two of us. The three of us. I put my hand to my belly. I have to tell him. Should have told him before. Should. Shouldn't. Should have told him. Shouldn't have told Clarence. They would've gotten bored, wandered home sooner or later. They're gone now, though. So it's the same difference. It'll be me and Rindle and our baby. We can stay here, or we can build of a place of our own, far enough out in the woods that no one will find us, no one will bother us, my people or his.

I jump when he breaks down the door. I want to call to him, but I can't. I have the lips and tongue of a mummy, dried and useless. He steps into the house. The floorboards creak under him.

He's not a man right now, not human. So large and powerful. Angry. I can feel his rage from here, like heat from a fire. He moves slowly, one heavy step after another. I see him first. He's covered with blood. Again. Can't think about that. Can't think about Clarence or Floyd. My fault. All of it. I have to live with it. I can't change what he is, what my baby might be, but if we live away from everyone...

He sees me now. I'm trembling. He steps into the room, looks around, sees the blankets and stuff they left behind. He snarls, shows his fangs. My foot is twitching against the floor. His chest is heaving, he's trying to breathe, trying to speak. "You..."

He won't hurt me. He can't. Part of my brain is saying that I need to find out, need to know what kind of monster my child might be before I bring it into the world. It's all right. He won't hurt me. He'll calm down. I'll tell him. That'll change everything.

"You...told..." he says, each word a struggle, "...them."

Can't speak. I nod. Yes, I told them. I was stupid. I told them.

He's so hurt. All the scars and gashes and burns, but I've never seen him hurt this deeply. Frothing at the mouth. I barely see him swing his hand—

No water stains in this room. Not like upstairs, my room. Can't feel my hand, not the new one or the old one. Want to touch my baby again. Want to tell him. Not my blood on the floor. Can't be. Rindle. I think I say it. Such a funny name. We'll be happy. He can't hurt me. Nobody...

CHAPTER 34

Sands was behind the wheel. He struggled against the impulse to drive much much faster than he should. He felt that he *should* turn around, go back, do everything he could to help his friends—but that wasn't something he was about to do. They had made their choice. He and Julia had made theirs. *It's too late*, he kept telling himself. *It was too late when they stepped out that door.* No matter what his conscience urged, he was driving south. The only question was how fast. Every few seconds, he glanced in the rearview mirror, each time expecting to see a wolfish creature running incredibly fast, catching up. He pressed the accelerator a little closer to the floor.

Julia was silent beside him.

It wasn't cowardice, he thought. *Not choosing suicide isn't the same thing as cowardice.* He had something to live for. Same as Julia. He couldn't save the whole world in one fell swoop. The best he could do was carve out his turf, watch over his loved ones. He looked over at Julia, waited for her to acknowledge him—she didn't. He looked back to the road ahead. "Julia." No response. "If something should happen to me... would you look after Faye for me."

"Your wife?" she said. Sands nodded. "I'll try."

"That's all I can ask of you."

They rode on, miles passing behind them, each rotation of the odometer a silent accusation. In a way, Sands was relieved to be away from that place. They'd fled the city worried about the police. Police seemed such a minor threat now. In another way, though, a more immediate, disconcerting way, the absence of those left behind weighed on him.

"There was nothing we could've done," he said. "Even if we'd—"

"Don't," Julia said. "Just...don't." She couldn't speak of the dead—first of Albert, now John and Clarence.

But Sands couldn't stand the silence. He couldn't be alone with his thoughts just now. "Tell me about Timothy," he said.

Julia stiffened, but she knew, she had to know, why he asked. So she started talking. Haltingly at first, then with slightly less difficulty, but always at a great cost. She told him about her son, everything she could about him. Sands had never seen Timothy. Julia had never shown him a picture. All the while she talked, he pictured another small boy, a boy he had seen every day many years ago—and more recently as well, though that should never have happened. Julia's voice made the dull hum of pavement bearable, and all the while, the miles passed behind them.

CHAPTER 35

Ashes swirling. Snow drifting through darkness to earth, covering blood, bodies, collecting atop the crook of a hunched beast, white upon black. His only movement, drawing claws along a cracked stone, slowly, again and again and again, gradually worrying furrows into the gritty feldspar. Wistfully Rindle wished for a drink, but in his madness he had ransacked EveSong's old bar, set it afire, left it to its fate as charred rubble. The house, too. Gone by now. In years ahead to be overgrown, hidden, forgotten. As if it had never been. As if she had never been.

Falling snow. Cold. Numb.

He felt the mismatched eyes watching him, turned to see the wolf, ugly, horrific creature that it was, stitched together from the hides of fallen Garou. Rindle growled. The wolf watched silently long into the night, until the tiny drift of snow on its forehead collapsed of its own weight and trickled in a miniature avalanche down the bridge of the spirit wolf's broad nose. He shook his head, transforming the powder into a fine mist that slowly settled to the ground.

"Why?" was all that Meneghwo said.

"The Bane is destroyed," Rindle growled. "Leave me be."

The wolf sat, and the wolf watched. All the while, Rindle's rage smoldered. The snow could not fall heavily enough to blot out the tattered remains of ally and enemy, nor of the destroyed shrine. Even when the white mounds began to take on an indistinct roundness, precise features molting blunt and vague, still Rindle knew. Still he could not forget.

"Why?" Meneghwo asked again, his quilted coat obscured by snow and shadow.

Rindle bared his fangs, worked his jaws as if chewing with difficulty the words he was to speak: "Look to the future, you told me." Rindle scoffed. "I will look to the future. It is all that remains to me."

"There is no future here," Meneghwo said. "Not for you." Rindle whipped his head around to face this, his latest tormentor. "Your future lies in ashes and rubble," said the spirit wolf.

Rindle bristled. He would not say her name, would not think of her. "My future is with the sept."

"There is no sept."

"There is no sept because we did your bidding!" Rindle snarled.

Meneghwo nodded ever so slightly, the gesture tinged with regret. "You and your brothers and sisters served well indeed, but they are gone now, and you...you are too close to the bitterness that in the end claimed your father."

"I am not my father," Rindle said, standing defiantly, clawed fingers flexing at his side as the red haze threatened again to envelope him.

"No," said Meneghwo. "But where he would have taken the life of his own child, you have done so."

Rindle staggered, struck by the weight of words that could not be true. The red haze dissipated, left him weak and unsteady before his accuser. "But it is not...I am metis."

"She would have borne you a child."

"It is not possible," Rindle whispered. "I am metis. I can't father a child."

"Are you a crescent moon and think you know all the mysteries of the spirit world?" Meneghwo asked, an edge upon his voice now, but one that rapidly grew dull, returning to regret. "Did I not tell you that the little one was not the enemy? Did I not touch your breast and wipe the blood from your eyes? The future was your gift, yet you spurned it. You succeed in the test of war, but fall short in the test of wisdom." Slowly, the wolf shook his head. "There is no sept. For you, there is no caern. The spirits will no longer answer you here. You will see the End Times. You will wield claw and tooth in the final battles, but your road until then will be a solitary one."

Strength fled Rindle. "It is not possible," he said, dropping to his knees in the snow. But the spirit wolf was gone, and there was no one to hear. Rindle was alone with the ashes of his brothers and sisters, of his ancestors, of his past.

**Other World of Darkness novels
by Gherbod Fleming**

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Trilogy of the Blood Curse

The Devil's Advocate
The Winnowing
Dark Prophecy

The following is an excerpt from *Predator & Prey: Mage*, the fifth book in this landmark crossover series. Then, look Douglas Sands and his surviving hunter cohorts to return for the series' exciting conclusion in *Predator & Prey: Executioner*.

Adrian Cross tried to wake up at the wheel before he had some sort of accident. He'd slept poorly the night before, so he'd spent the entire day at work today drinking coffee and washing his face in biting cold water. Neither measure had helped for more than a few minutes, though, which left him even more exhausted now that it was time to go home. He'd felt the gray blanket of unconsciousness wrapping itself around him several times already since then, and he'd jerked awake each time just before his '82 Pontiac Phoenix had crossed the line out of its lane. Not long ago, his eyes had snapped open to find the red brake lights of the pickup truck ahead of him looming bright and angry in the center of his windshield. His heart sped up and his eyelids peeled back after each such close miss, but the gray blanket always crept back in.

As Dwight Yokam's version of "Suspicious Minds" played on the radio, Adrian amused himself by trying to look at more than just the cars ahead. His eyes followed the tree line alongside the road that kept rising and falling and rising and falling... but that didn't help. He tried to create words from the letters on the license plates all around him or find the license plate that came from the state that was farthest away, but both games were far too boring to be helpful. He even looked up into the sky as far as he could through the overcast and the streetlight glare over the city. The most interesting thing he saw there was a red star over the city that he'd never noticed before, but taking his eyes away from the road to stargaze didn't seem like the best idea either. Finally, he settled for thinking that the sleepiness was some viscous liquid

that kept trying to fill the void of his consciousness, and that only by avoiding some heinous traffic accident by mere inches was he able to pan that liquid back out of his brain and remain awake. Yet every time he panned it out, it just oozed right back into place leaving him just as relaxed and sleepy as he'd been just a few...

The angry blare of a horn brought Adrian around again, and he realized that his dented, dirty Pontiac had overlapped the dashed line between his lane and the next nearest right lane, which was already occupied by a minivan. Possessed by the sudden irrational fear that the person in the farthest left lane was trying to usurp the space he'd vacated, he swerved back into his lane, forcing the car to his left to weave dangerously close to the highway's concrete dividing wall. The drivers on both sides of him honked and bracketed him with upraised middle fingers as he settled back into the middle of his lane.

"Idiots," he murmured to no one in particular. He hated driving on Highway 38. Inevitably, every car-carrying, fuel-transporting and double-trailer-dragging 18-wheeler from Flint to Lansing to Detroit decided that they all had to bypass Iron Rapids at exactly the same time whether that time occurred in the morning or the evening. On top of that, every monkey who could see in a straight line and miss an orange cone at the DMV usually decided to join in on the lane-changing, horn-honking, air-polluting madness as well. The confluence of traffic choked Highway 38 into a thick, sluggish mess around Iron Rapids' perimeter every single rush hour. Adrian had driven in worse traffic conditions before — such as I-285 around his hometown of Atlanta — but Highway 38 never, ever, let up. Even the holiday and weekend traffic was nightmarish. Adrian had to traverse only one quarter of the length of the small, self-important

highway to get from his apartment to work, but the trip invariably took him more than 45 minutes every day.

The ride soured his mood on the best days, but the traffic this evening was particularly irksome. After a three-hour phone harangue at the hands of his ex-wife the night before, Adrian had stayed up late worrying because he had no idea under what rock he was going to find the money for his next child-support payment. Thanks to a brilliant feat of amateur divorce-lawyering five years ago, Adrian had found himself paying an exorbitant amount of child-support even though his ex's father was rich and willing to support her, and her current boyfriend — who *was* actually supporting her — made a decent living for himself. Adrian was more than happy to donate money toward his son's upbringing at the very least, but he was sure that his ex's lawyer had taken advantage of him and his own inexperienced lawyer. Having been beaten down by losing his house and car, his half of the joint savings and custody of his child, Adrian hadn't had the heart to fight any more.

Now, working at his third new job since the divorce, money was extremely tight. He hadn't let his son down yet, but he'd only kept his head above water by selling most of the expensive items he'd managed to keep in the divorce settlement. All he really had left to sell was this car that he'd bought at an in-city used-vehicle franchise that sucked its hapless customers dry. Besides, the car was going to be in no marketable condition once they pried it out from under the 18-wheeler that was about to flip over in the lane ahead of him.

With the sudden, painful clarity of a man who's sure he's about to die, Adrian came entirely awake to realize what was happening. The slate-gray and blue truck in the left lane against the dividing wall several

cars ahead had just blown all the tires on the passenger side of its cab. Feeling his stomach lurch, Adrian watched the steel belts and rubber fly apart like a basket unraveling as the truck began to weave in queasy slow motion.

The burgundy sedan right next to the 18-wheeler managed to dodge out of the way, and some miracle kept the rig from toppling across the dividing wall into the rush of oncoming traffic. The burgundy sedan swerved into the far right lane, and the yellow Volkswagen Beetle that was already in that lane swerved into Highway 38's rough, corrugated excuse for an emergency lane. Their narrow escape left the road beside the tractor trailer clear, which was good, but the next cars in the line included a gray van with tinted windows in the far left lane, an unwashed red pickup truck in the right lane and Adrian's Phoenix in the middle. Adrian was ahead of the other two cars, and he could tell that none of them would be able to stop in time to avoid the inevitable crash. The driver of the 18-wheeler had already panicked, slammed on the brakes and locked them up.

As soon as Adrian made this realization, the trailer started to shudder, and it skidded to the right on its cab's denuded rims. Smoke billowed from the truck's rear tires, followed by the unreal shriek of rubber tires clinging desperately for purchase on asphalt. The truck was still far enough ahead that it didn't clip anyone in its mad swerve, but even still, Adrian could see what was going to happen. An eerie, preternatural connection told him that his nearest two fellow drivers had realized it as well. He could feel the drivers in the van and the pickup truck stretching out for their brakes as the primitive survival instinct took over. The entire tableau thus far had taken only seconds, and the uncomfortable reality had set in that this was happening right there in real

life, rather than on some movie or television screen. As one, the drivers of the pickup and the van were about to try to skid to a halt before the 18-wheeler and its out-of-control trailer blocked off the entire three lanes of the highway.

Adrian's mind raced ahead of his fear and instinct, telling him what was going to happen instants before it actually did. The trailer was going to slew awry and slam into the dividing wall on its left as the cab kept sliding sideways. Stretched across all three lanes, the rig would topple and grind to a halt in a cascade of sparks and rubber smoke. The four nearest cars in the lanes behind the truck, however, would all slam into its undercarriage before it had come to a complete stop and before their own brakes had had a chance to catch their grip.

Adrian saw time through a fish-eye lens. He worked out the series of causes and effects before the tail of the truck had even hit the wall. He knew that he and the drivers of the other two vehicles weren't going to make it, even if they'd already slammed on the brakes before the blowout.

Time caught up with Adrian again as the trailer clipped the dividing wall and dragged along the concrete for several yards, spraying stone chips across the oncoming lanes of Highway 38. An instant later, the side of the trailer hit the asphalt, and it rang in a disturbingly beautiful alien chorus as it slid. Panicked, Adrian yanked his steering wheel to the right and slammed on his brakes, even though he knew that neither desperate measure was going to help.

As his car shoved the pickup truck aside and aimed for the 18-wheeler's undercarriage, Adrian Cross closed his eyes.



In the long, pregnant pause just after the crash, the First among them crossed his arms and frowned at the scene below him. Four cars had piled into each other on the highway below, as they should have, and their arrangement was as predicted, but something was not right.

Standing on either side of him, the Second and Third did the same at the same time. They had all seen the events that would prepare the way. None of them had missed anything. None of them had allowed for any error. Random elements had been accounted for, and the standard allowable deviation had been calculated. The Fourth, who waited in the car, had assured them that the procedure would proceed in perfect order. And yet...

"Something isn't right," the First said.

"No, it isn't," the Second responded.

"Did it work?" the Third asked.

The three of them looked back at their car where the Fourth sat in the back seat. He did not look at them or even acknowledge them. He held his mobile phone to his ear, doubtless ordering in medical transportation for the victims of the accident below and apprising Agent Sutton of the situation.

"It must have worked," the First said.

"His calculations were infallible," the Second said. "I checked them myself."

"Still..." the Third said. "That didn't feel right at all."

"Let's go," the First said. He led the way back toward the car, and the other two fell into step behind him. "We'll discuss it once civilian authorities arrive."

"Agreed," the Second said.

"Agreed," the Third said.



Matthew Simonson sat in his room in the Lester Hotel in downtown Iron Rapids, hunching over his laptop computer. His source hadn't sent him an email or an instant message in far too long. Simonson tapped his foot rapidly under the desk, wondering what was behind this sudden dearth of communication.

"Come along, Sugardaddy," he said aloud. "Don't say you've lost your nerve now."

Worried and frustrated, he looked up at the wall mirror that faced him from across the table. "Well," he said to his reflection. "Opinions? Where is he?"

In response, the image of himself in the mirror cocked its head as if listening to something then looked away over its shoulder. It appeared to be looking at the clock radio on the nightstand beside the bed. Confused, Simonson looked over his shoulder at the clock radio on his side of the looking glass. He even stood up and took a step in that direction.

"I don't understand," he said. When he looked back at the mirror, though, he saw that his reflection was now standing beside the clock radio and turning it on. Realization dawned, and Simonson did likewise. He crossed to the nightstand and tapped the sleep-timer bar on top of the clock. A local commercial radio station came to life.

"—affic situation on Highway 38 isn't getting any better as the rush hour drags on," the DJ was saying, "but you people who commute daily shouldn't be surprised by that. One new problem to report: We've got a bad wreck on the top end of the perimeter highway that's going to screw up the traffic flow like cheese through your grandma. Four cars and a tractor-trailer decided to go at it right across all three lanes,

and this is a bad one, folks. No injuries reported as of yet — which is a pretty neat trick — but fire and rescue trucks are still on the scene right now. They're trying to get these mangled vehicles out of your roadway, but all lanes are—”

“Shit,” Simonson said. He turned the radio off and looked back at the mirror. He knew better than to hope that the timing of that traffic report had been a coincidence.