

Those Who Walk With Giants

Part of the World of Archaea

Matthew Lane

Chapters 1-3.

For Davide and Uldis, Daniel, Arthur and Debalina.

Thank you for bringing the icy wilderness to life.

Chapter I

WE THREE HAGS

My parents were not lovers. At least, I don't think they were. Nor were they sisters, though they often referred to each other as such, or even family, not that ordinary folk would recognise. Sometimes, they were barely friends, and even now I still don't really understand them: their motivations, decisions, their wild tempers and wicked humour. But I am certain, somehow, that each of them loved me.

Can a hag love?

Conventional wisdom would say no, that they were incapable of love. That the feeling would have been as alien to their hearts as death is to a God. But I know they loved me, and I know that Gods can die. Besides, I have always baulked the chains of convention, and ignored the words of the wise, most often at my own peril. And I would stake what divinity I have left to bet that they did. Though as a child, it rarely felt that way.

Constance was in charge, though I always called her Grandmother. The other sisters seemed to like that, and would call her Grandmother from time to time themselves, as much to mock her as out of respect. She was the least beautiful of the three, with blue skin that wrinkled like a leaf and thin white hair forever coming undone from beneath her scarf. Her fingers were long, always wrapped around a wooden greystaff of old knotted timber with bird skulls dangling from one end. When I ran away I would discover that she could sit on it, perched on a twist in the branch, and it would lift her up into the sky so she could fly like a bird. I was perhaps the most afraid of Grandmother Constance.

Denna was the biggest, in that she was both the tallest and the broadest. Her skin was pale, and her hair was dark and cut short, about the length of grass that never grows longer than your thumb. One of her shoulders sat higher than the other so that she leaned slightly to one side when she walked. It irked her and she tried to hide it but could never seem to stand straight, and the others reminded her of this often. Denna could pull a tree up from the ground, roots and all, and her fingers were often bloody.

Matilda was the most beautiful. She was also the smallest and the least vicious, which is not to say that she was kind. She had pink skin like I did, and long smooth hair that shone in the sun like a beetle. When she swam to catch fish I would sit and watch, waiting sometimes for hours for her to return to the surface, heavy dark eyelashes batting away errant droplets from her yellow eyes. It was almost impossible to look away. She knew that I watched, and it pleased her. Matilda spoke to me the most.

The four of us together lived in a clearing surrounded by a ring of nettles, and it snowed often. Our house had three rooms with a tree growing through the middle from which Constance strung up all kinds of plants and mushrooms to dry. Our cooking pot was hung from a single stray branch at just the right height over the fire. I knew the importance of never letting the fire go out, and it was one of my jobs to ferry wood from the supply where Denna left the logs by the river up to the clearing.

This was the first room: the room with the cooking pot and the tree. It was the biggest room in the house, with windows that could be covered by rolls of leather nailed in at the top and weighted down with rocks on the sill. Constance carved her spoons here, and the shavings were always useful if the fire burned low, though this rarely happened. If it did then I would be covered in bruises. The floor was concealed by leaves that made a shushing sound when you walked through them, and the walls were draped with furs of grey and brown that Denna brought back from hunting. The furs were also to keep us warm, as was the fire, though I was the only one who ever seemed to get cold. This was also the room where I slept, curled up by the fire to keep warm. There was no pelt that was mine, and I knew better than to move anything, so the nights were often cold. This was one of the reasons why I was afraid of the winter.

There are many such reasons.

The second room was a room for things of all different kinds. It was where I brought the wood, it was where meat that had been smoked was hung, it was where spare leather and fur and stone was kept, and where Matilda stored her spare thread and yarn. It had a stone floor that had always been there, and a wooden pole as wide as two hands was jammed into the stone and firmly attached to the roof with rope and tree glue.

The third and final room was their room, into which I did not venture.

“Don’t stumble,” whispered Matilda, striding ahead through the nettles effortlessly. For her, the tallest stem barely reached her chest and their needles couldn’t pierce her flesh, whereas I was having to push through them with one gloved hand while the other was ready to guard my face, empty satchel for wood slung over my shoulder. If it wasn’t for the trail that she left me, the rashes would have been much worse. “They are still watching, hurry up.”

I could hear the impatience in her voice and struggled closer, risking a glance back. True enough, Denna was standing in the doorway, having to lean slightly to fit her bulk beneath the transom beneath the window hole above it. Constance was sat beside her, wicker chair rocking back and forth as wood shavings flickered off a partially finished spoon. My attention broken, I was greeted by a palm-sized leaf to the face as I turned back, dragging across my cheek and brow all the way to my ear. Gasping, I pushed it away. Matilda chuckled.

“Don’t forget to bring back more wood, boy!” shouted Denna, her voice rough and angry. “I don’t cut down those trees for fun, you know.”

I did know.

It wasn’t far to the river. The light of the spring sun dappled the forest floor in a mosaic of moss and snow strewn fern, unmarked by game trail or path. There was a fallen

tree that we used to cross the brook about an hour away from our clearing, though it was more for me than for Matilda. Gently, she stepped down to the water's edge, bare feet crunching on the snow still melting away, and dipped her hand into the stream. For a breath, the colours of the forest deepened, with orange being pulled out of the brown twiggy detritus and lines of pale gold tracing nearby leaf edges. Then the moment passed and the birds started to sing again.

Once at the river proper, I set the satchel down by Denna's wood pile, tucked the leather gloves behind my belt and started packing in as many of the log pieces as I could, but Matilda stopped me, her cool and glistening fingertips coming to rest on the back of my hand.

"Later."

She led me down to the edge of the river where the water was shallow and clear, grey pebbles clothed in moss just below the surface.

"Look here." She pointed to a cluster of orange flowers sprouting from a ditch, before reaching down and gently pulling up one of the smaller plants from the roots. The flowers had three petals, two like downward leaning lobes and one cupped above them that extended backwards in a cone. I had seen them there before.

"What are they?"

She smiled as she handed the flowers to me, breaking the stems of a second one. "Jewelweed," she said, wiping the white sap juices onto her fingertip. "For when the nettles sting." And she wiped the sap across my cheek, going back to the broken stems and repeating the process three more times. It was cool, and the tingling subsided. She stepped back to admire her work. I reached up to touch my skin, but she shook her head. "It will dry, and then we will wash it. You can take one back with you and we will plant it." I nodded.

"Why is it called jewelweed?" I asked.

Matilda smiled a beautiful smile then, revealing perfect white teeth that ended in delicate points, and lights danced in her yellow eyes. "Come and see, my bright-eyed boy." And she took me by the hand and led me into the shallows. This was the name that she had for me, her bright-eyed boy. She bent down, holding the leaves of the jewelweed beneath the water. As soon as she did, the toothed edges turned vibrant silver, light sparkling off them through the ripples up across her face. Mine was the same, reflected on the shimmering surface, wavy brown hair and smooth white skin covered in dirt, wide eyes with irises that changed from bright teal to burnished copper around the pupil. She lifted them out, cupping one so the droplets pooled at its centre. Everywhere else, the leaves returned to their normal colour, water running off in circular droplets, but where a pool collected the leaf was silver. I laughed, and she laughed with me, handing me the plant.

"That is why it is called jewelweed."

"Shouldn't it be called silverweed?"

Matilda's face darkened, and she thrust the flowers at my chest, nearly toppling me over backwards with a splash.

"They are called jewelweed," she said darkly. "Take them back to plant if you like, or don't, I care not. It makes little difference to me." I did not question her again. Not long after she vanished beneath the froth at the centre of the river, a shadow swimming rapidly against the flow towards the foothills of the mountain where the river had its source.

Early-dusk had descended by the time she returned, bursting forth in a rushing arc of sparkling spray, two huge salmon clamped beneath one arm, yellow eyes flashing. She shook out her hair and strode through the river towards the bank, throwing down the fish as though they were nothing, each weighing at least a hundred and twenty pounds. I scrambled up towards them, pulling a flint knife from my belt and jamming it up through the gill flaps of the first before it could start flopping back towards the water. As the smell of fish blood filled my nose, I threw my body onto the second but wasn't fast enough. It bucked along its spine once, powerful tail knocking me to the side. I lunged a second time, hoping to plunge in the knife, but Matilda got there first, jamming a hand through the scales and raking once along its tummy. Neither fish continued to struggle for long after that.

"Come here," said Matilda, her voice quiet and deep as her lungs were still half-full of river water. Her shift clung to her body, and the droplets shone against her skin like gemstones. I scrambled to obey beneath her yellow gaze. "Look towards the mountains. What do you see?"

Afraid of some kind of trap, I dragged my attention away from her and surveyed the path of the river, starting somewhere up in the mountains but only becoming visible in the foothills. The trees were tall and grew on either side, a deep shade of evergreen still coated in winter snows, and the mountainside was totally obscured by white. The sky was clear, and three eagles wheeled over the forest. They were small compared to their giant cousins that made their roost higher up.

"I see the river that marks the edge of our home," I said, "the forest that provides for us, and the mountains that mark the edge of the horizon." Matilda nodded, which I took as approval.

"And beyond that?" Even subdued, I could sense the edge in her question, and avoided meeting her eyes. Not knowing the answer, I stayed silent. "Beyond that you see the wilderness," she murmured. "You had better pray it never sees you back, bright-eyed boy, lest it send a blizzard to steal away your warmth so that the birds might eat your flesh, soft and unprotected, all too easy to raid." And then she spat up the lungful of river water she had been holding in.

Matilda did not pray to the Frostmaiden as far as I knew; none of the sisters did, nor to any of the Gods, though I had still learned their names in passing and foolishly believed them to be all there was. But I took her suggestion seriously and prayed to the Frostmaiden when the snows fell thick. They were innocent prayers, whispered in the night through cracked lips or spoken silently when an errant beast came close. But the Gods love innocent prayers the most, and the gaze of the Lady of Winter is indiscriminate.

Later, I found a ditch behind the back of the house at the edge of the nettle ring, shaded beneath the overhanging branches of a tree but always damp from run off water from the house, and planted the jewelweed. It took root well, and soon there were seedlings with the same toothed leaves and cupped orange flowers growing in a rag-tag line, seedpods bursting in the breeze. As each spring came, so did the jewelweed, brighter and bigger than the spring before until I had to start cutting them back, their white sap collected into a wooden dish and sealed with wax. The nettles weren't so bad after that.

For a time, Matilda grew bored of my company so helped Denna instead. She would reach down, left side drooping ever so slightly, and grunt as she clawed beneath the roots of her chosen tree. If she caught me staring, a fist would fly up blinding fast, scattering dirt and dried pine needles. I soon grew accustomed to this, standing lightly while I waited, always ready to step back. I was not often fast enough though, and frequently returned with a new load of logs and a fresh bruise of green and brown blooming across my face. Constance saw it, and said nothing, and Matilda only laughed. But even the bruises and bloody scrapes were worth it, for there was something primal about the way Denna ripped trees from the ground, tearing up the bones of the earth and casting down eons of slow growth in an instant. The way the soil shook and her shoulders bulged, the scraping of her hands as they clawed beneath the dirt. No nest or bird or beast was spared, not even the massive pine-needle ant hills that sat beneath some of the trees, and any who crossed our path made their way into Constance's stewing pot. And so for all the time I was with her, our fire burned extra hot, which was why Denna wanted to clear away the ashes.

"It is a mess," she insisted, gesturing at the fire. It was burning low, but not low enough that it mattered. "Look how far it goes, all grey and creeping." Constance was hunched atop a misshapen hill, a chair buried beneath countless layers of hide and fur until every edge had been rounded and the seat itself was trenchlike. Wood shavings flew from her current spoon, the click-clacking of her knife a constant companion as it flew back and forth. Getting no response, Denna turned to Matilda. "Don't you agree, sister?"

"The fire must burn," replied Matilda, shrugging nonchalantly as she plucked the scales from her most recent fish and dropped them into a bowl. "Constance says so."

"Do you always do as she says?" snapped Denna. "Whatever Grandmother wants, is that right? It's messy, and we should clean it."

I surveyed the rest of the house, the carpet of leaves and collection of mosses and fungus hanging from the central tree. The ash formed a ring beneath the cast iron pot, a circular ridge of powdered grey and blackened chunks. The fire was my responsibility, and I was afraid I was about to be punished.

"The boy pushes the pieces back in to burn," said Constance. "That is enough."

"But what about the ash?" Denna whined. "What is he to do with that? It will just keep building up until one day not all of us can fit inside. No, we must clean it up, take some of it outside." Matilda's scales kept dropping into the bowl, rattling slightly. Nobody moved. Or rather, Constance kept on shaving her spoon while Matilda saw to her fish. But nobody moved towards the fire where I sat, and Denna simply stood there, hunched slightly to one side. Perhaps sensing that she was losing, but unsure exactly over what or why, Denna did the only thing that was in her nature to do. She continued to fight.

The shadows in the room darkened, and not because the fire was burning low.

"The ashes offend me," she proclaimed. "I am going to move them."

"No, you're not." Constance continued with her spoon, leaf-dry blue hand darting back and forth, her lank white hair partially obscuring her face.

The colours deepened, and Denna grew taller as the world tilted to fit her into perspective. She had to stoop to avoid the ceiling.

“I am done with them being there,” she growled. “Even the humans sweep away their ashes.” The whites of her eyes had turned red and she leant down towards the fire, her colossal bulk bent impossibly far. I could feel the bestial heat of her breath against my face, hotter than the low flames, as she swept one hand through the charcoal. Cinders spiralled into the air.

“Leave the fire to the boy.” Constance had stopped carving her spoon. She was so small in comparison to Denna. “It is his responsibility.” Denna glared at me, the hatred and fear of a trapped animal burning in her red eyes. Matilda dropped a scale into the bowl.

“Then he will clear away the ashes.” Denna straightened as much as she could, and the shadows grew with her. I could feel her pressing down on me and could hardly breathe. Hastily, I moved to sweep up the ashes.

“He will do no such thing.” Though the words were not directed at me, I felt my chest tighten. Constance did not give instructions, nor did she give warning. She simply stated how the world should be, and it was that way, and if it wasn’t, then she cut it back until it was. The world, to Constance, was an unfinished spoon.

The blow was blinding, and I reeled in shock at the pain. Blinking back burning tears, I struggled to right myself as the room span, central tree swerving from side to side. Denna retracted her fist.

“The ash,” she said. “Now.”

With shaking hands, I scooped the ash into a pile, streaming tears marking it with black rivulets where they fell.

“No.” This time, Constance did direct herself at me, one single grey eye visible from beneath her hair. As the word left her lips, the lines of pain were immediate and instantaneous as the skin across my hands split to reveal the bright red underneath, droplets of blood welling up to drip down and mingle with the ash pile. “He will do no such thing.”

Denna recognised the lines of blood, and through watery eyes I saw her standing at her ordinary height, the only shadows cast by the flickering of the fire light. The air hummed as Constance pursed her lips, pulled tight into a white line. Then she returned to carving her spoon. Denna let out a breath.

“Then you had better fetch more wood.”

A scale dropped into Matilda’s bowl. She hadn’t even stopped working on her fish, tip of her tongue caught between her teeth and head tilted to one side as she concentrated. She smiled happily at me as I left.

After that, Matilda started taking me to the river with her again. It had been a weak summer and the snow never melted off the foothills, promising an even tougher winter. The thought chilled me, but such concerns would not have crossed Matilda’s mind as she strode through the forest. Everything was made beautiful by her passage, every shade enriched with colour and the dripping of water a small chorus. A woodpecker was making work somewhere nearby and Matilda stopped to listen, her pale face lit up as though by a moonbeam when she smiled.

“Svellnottr is alive today,” she said, flashing her full radiance in my direction to share in her enjoyment. Involuntarily, I grinned. Svellnottr. The name of the mountains and the snow and the forests. The name of the land on which we walked and the land beyond in the

Wilderness, of bitter cold and icy winds, of winding mountain ridges bisecting the world into pieces. Rivers interspersed the trees, and the trees interspersed the mountains, and everywhere the beasts of the wild roamed: packs of winter wolves, from paw to shoulder as tall as a man with blue eyes that left a trail of frost through the air; perytons that scarred the sky with their red wings and antlered heads like a stag, casting the shadow of a man until they killed one and earned a shadow of their own; trolls that lurked at the base of the mountains and flame-bearded dwarves that delved beneath them. Svellnottr was a land of winter, of monsters, of those who walk with giants.

“Can you feel the breath of winter on your skin?” she asked. “It is surely coming. Can you feel the chill creeping into your bones?” I could, and in spite of myself, the frightful precursor of the Winter to come became wonderful to me. That was Matilda’s way, making the terrible beautiful. “The Lady Frostmaiden is padding through the forests today, a blur of pelt and teeth, of pointed ears and cat’s whiskers. She is on the prowl and waiting for the season to turn. But prowl as she might, the full wrath of her winter will never find us.” We crossed the brook, fallen tree bridging the frigid waters.

“Why will she never find us?” I asked. Matilda laughed, a sound like tinkling crystal and running water over smooth stones.

“Because Constance weaves her magics, and even the eyes of the giant Gods are turned away by them. Our clearing is a paradise, and it is ours and ours alone.”

“But why hide from the Gods in the first place? We mean them no ill.” She looked at me with pity.

“When you see a bear,” she whispered, “do you stop to wonder at its motives, or do you instead worry at the size of its teeth? Do you hope it will pass on by, or do you weave a muzzle from vine and hemp? You do neither, of course. Instead, you ready your blade to defend yourself before the bear has even attacked. Because if the bear has teeth like that, it must surely attack. That is what bears with teeth do. That is what teeth are for.” And she grinned wickedly at me, revealing her own row of perfect white canines.

“Is it what we do?” I asked, confused. Matilda looked up towards the mountains, a new emotion in the crease of her brow, and she batted away her hair in a gesture so careless and precise that a shiver ran down the base of my spine.

“You have never seen the sea,” was all she would say until we reached the river proper, and then: “My bright-eyed boy. Today, you will catch a fish.”

I will not bore you with the details of what followed, suffice it to say that Matilda dragged me up the river by my wrist because she did not realise that I could not breathe underwater and I nearly drowned. She was disappointed that I was so ugly when I swam, while I was simply pleased to survive the journey. At a still pool in the foothills she handed me a spear of polished wood engraved with a pattern of spiny leaves. It had a leather grip, decorated above and below by silver scales that had been painstakingly placed one on top of the other. At the far end was a weighty shard of dark flint, sharpened to two points, one large and blade-like and a second that curved beneath to a narrow point, reminiscent of a jewelweed flower. Towards the other end was a loop of thick rope, and the wood ended in a rounded nodule. Over the course of many such trips, I learned how to stand so still that the water did not shift at my presence and the salmon would swim by my ankles, and when I did

lunge forward for the first time, flint blades flashing down through the water like black lightning to impale a salmon completely unawares, Matilda let out a warbling cry of unbridled joy, grabbing me from behind and lifting me up in a spiral of laughter. I lost the fish and Matilda had to dive down to reclaim the spear, but neither of us cared. I have remembered that moment ever since, her lantern eyes glowing with pride as she spun me around, beautiful and, in that singular moment, anything but deadly. I have thought back to it often, and wondered whether, if she was still alive, would she think back to it fondly also? Or would she hate me forever, regretting the moment she handed me that spear?

I do not want to ever know.

Chapter II

A SISTER NAME

The snows fell thick and fast later that year. It was not so much that the winter was sudden. Rather it was as though it had been brooding all year, prowling through the forest like Matilda had said, just waiting for the moment to strike. It started with the pine needles, carpeting the forest floor earlier than was normal. Denna was the first to remark on this, coming back from a day of root tearing and tree hauling, dry brown needles caught in her hair.

“The ants are growing their nests,” she said, bending slightly to fit beneath the door frame. “Plenty of needles for them as the trees empty their branches.”

“Isn’t it early for that?” asked Matilda, crystal voice calling from their room where she had been resting. “The birds have yet to go quiet.”

“Early or not, the needles have fallen, and fallen fast and fallen heavy.” Denna ruffled her dark mop of hair, sending a cascade of the tiny slithers to join the leaves on our floor. “The trunks are bare. If we are to tap any trees for sap, we should do it now before they freeze up.”

“Take the boy,” said Constance from her chair. She had barely moved from it in what felt like eons, grey eyes fixated on spoon after rounded spoon as she whittled away. “Ack!” She spat in anger and rested her wrinkled brow atop the steeple of her long fingers, taking and holding a whistling breath. When she opened her eyes again, they were locked onto mine, dull grey and bloodshot. “Burn it,” she said as she tossed me the spoon. There were only eight that she had ever kept, standing handle to bowl on the shelf behind her.

“Another dead spoon?” enquired Matilda as she strode in, shawl tossed dramatically over one shoulder. Constance nodded.

“Useless piece of wood, not a murmur of life to it. Good only for the fire.”

So I added it to the fire, and went out with Denna, carrying our five sap buckets and spigots. A week later we carried them back, brimming with sweet watery sap that would boil down to a small keg of syrup.

Next it was the brook. While wide enough that I needed the fallen tree to ford it, in other places the brook ran small and thin, little more than a series of elongated puddles and pools that all bled one into the other.

“Brook is crispy,” Matilda chirped one evening. “White spider cracks and crunching bits around the edges.”

“It won’t be long before the river freezes then,” I said, disappointed. It had already grown so cold that I knew we couldn’t keep on fishing for much longer, and Constance’s eyes had begun to follow me narrowly every time I came back from the pool, dripping and a little too pleased with myself.

The wind howled outside then, and we all turned to look as the leather window covers bulged and blew inwards. The stones pinning them in place held firm, but there was no doubt that a gale was blowing through the clearing.

“There will be carnage come the morning,” said Constance as we turned back towards the fire. I nudged the end of a log, replacing burnt out charcoal with fresh wood.

“More wood though,” said Denna. “Might need it.”

Everyone nodded.

The final sign was the padded stillness. A white fog descended on the clearing from the mountain, becoming one with the sky in a heavy sheet of clouded pearl. It brought with it a stillness and a thickness to the air, a waxen pallor to every colour and a creeping cold that didn’t bite but lingered all the same. No one left the house for the passage of three days, and then Constance sniffed, her thin nose pinching and flaring, pinching and flaring. With a creaking sound like twisting rope she rose stiffly from the chair, a grinding skeleton of slate and ice, white hair hanging heavy with grease across her wrinkled blue face. No one said anything when she picked up her graystaff, bird skulls clattering with each slow step. Nor did we say anything when she pushed open the door and vanished into the white. Whatever purpose she had, it was hers.

She returned while I was fetching wood from the supply room, so I did not see the three of them try to fit the corpse through the door. How they managed it I don’t know, but when I came through with wood clutched to my chest I stopped and stood still, mouth ajar. The winter wolf was huge. Being dead and loose limbed, it was difficult to tell what height it would have stood to, but it must have been nearly as tall as Denna, Denna who tore trees whole from the ground. Its fangs were each as long as my hand, its claws black and serrated, and its crystal blue eyes though lifeless shone with cold malevolence. But it was its fur that seemed to light up the room, amplifying and purifying the yellow fire light so that it shone with its own lunar radiance, and not a single trace of red.

“The curtain, boy,” grunted Constance, as the three of them hefted the body towards their room. Dropping the logs I darted past to pull it aside and Constance vanished into the shadows with the wolf, banishing even Denna back to the fireside.

Then the snow finally came.

It fell like unyielding silence, constant and thick, and didn’t stop until a small drift spilled out between the leather window covers and the sill. To make it clear how deep this was, if I stood to my full height, I still had to stretch to reach the weight stones. And I am taller than most men. I would not be leaving the house until someone carved a path for me. My breath billowed in small clouds. Only Constance’s did not. And while everyone was cold, I was truly frozen. Days went by and I kept the fire burning hotter than usual, but that only did so much. Matilda went to embrace me one evening as I shivered, resting a cool damp hand on my neck, but thought the better of it and backed away.

I started coughing, and Denna went to tell Constance who had barely left their room since returning with the wolf. She came back with instructions to blend eyelid shaped leaves with syrup over the fire and boil them with cracked pepper, ginger and cloves, a brew I knew to be restorative. Denna looked worried. My lungs filled with fluid that rattled when I breathed, and the cold settled into my bones so that I shook beside the flames, soaked in my own sweat. Matilda watched me with the same expression as when I'd nearly drowned, an innocent mixture of impatience and confusion. Denna looked worried and tried beating my chest. She said it was to knock out a ghost, just in case, but no wight or wisp burst forth. From the pain that followed I think she probably broke a rib.

I dreamt of wolves and a taste like metal and a fish that swam through fire.

Denna and Matilda slept, but Constance did not. She stood in the doorway to their room, blue skin and orange shadows, a soft moonlight emanating from the pelt she carried. She came over, treading silently across the still dry leaves, until she stood over me. The pelt fell across my body and she tucked in the edges before straightening to stoke the fire with her greystaff, the black sockets of the bird skulls watching all the while.

"No," she rasped, a cutting word, though not aimed at me. The she bent all the way down and wiped a drop of honey across my lips, fingers rough with paper sweetness that smelled of ripe flowers. "You will not die." When I awoke, my fever had broken and the mucus on my lungs had turned clear. We never spoke of the pelt, and neither Matilda nor Denna eyed it with jealousy. They knew it was not for them. It was mine, and as long as I had it I would never come close to death by the cold again. I did not become a fool however, and continued to offer back-of-the-mind prayers to the Frostmaiden when the snows fell.

The winter lasted for two full rotations of the earth about the sun. We sweetened everything with syrup for the sugar, and Denna carved a path through the ever-replenished snow each day so that I could carry back wood when she tore down the trees. We had prepared well, having carried up most of what had been left down by the river, but it was not enough to last two years. Eventually the winter passed, and the white melted away to reveal the brown and green of earth and tree until the spring came and we had eggs to eat. Time passed, and one day I noticed that Matilda was only a head taller than me. It seemed I had grown over the winter.

Then everything changed.

The man was called Jannis, though at first I did not know he was a man. I had seen people before; Denna regularly brought back the body of a woman or child for Constance's cooking pot, and their bones were used to decorate the surrounding trees with hollow sounding wind chimes, dangling alongside the feathers and teeth of other animals. You may think that I was a monster, but I didn't know any different. In many ways though, you would be right, I was a monster. But no one can choose their parents, me least of all.

They carried him through the nettles unconscious. His clothes spared him the worst of the stinging, but I discovered that to a mortal the poison did more than simply bring out a rash. Where the leaves brushed against his skin, he came out in vivid burns and shiny red welts that wept blood through hundreds of tiny puncture wounds. They brought him into the storage room and tied his hands to the wooden pole, knotting his feet together with rope as well. This had the effect of leaving him half dangling, half slumped amid our log piles and

hanging smoked meat, stripped of the straps buckles that held his clothes together. Purple bruises blossomed across his chest and a trickle of scarlet dripped from the corner of his mouth. Denna hissed when they removed a plate of iron from his shoulder, sucking on her teeth as she fumbled at the clasps, and in the end I had to help her. Iron in particular they hated above all other metals. Matilda went through his clothes while Denna made sure that the rope was tied tightly and that the tree glue that joined the pole to the ceiling wasn't old and crumbling. Constance prodded him with her greystaff, muttering incantations under her breath and clucking her tongue in displeasure from time to time. She turned to me standing in the doorway.

"Your jewelweed sap," she rasped. "Where is it?"

"In my cloak." I had sewn in many pockets on the inside.

"Bring it to me." I got it for her, and she proceeded to use all the sap powder that I had accumulated, spitting on the man's sores to return it to a paste-like consistency. Once his poison-burns had been covered with chalky white, she pressed a bunch of leaves to a gash in his arm and then tied them there with twine. "He will survive," she said, "and then we will learn all he knows. It has been a long time since we have questioned the world of man, sisters."

"And then we will eat him!" said Matilda, clapping happily. She threw me a smile.

He didn't stir for a count of days, though Constance checked on him often. Other than to fetch more wood for the fire, I was not allowed into the store room. This was not a spoken thing, but I could feel the eyes of Constance on the back of my head every time I went in there, her lips pulled tight into a white line. But when I was in there and alone, I studied him. He was probably a little shorter than me, though it was difficult to tell with him being strung up. His skin was like mine, except covered in scars and a roughness which I lacked, and there was a blue painting across his shoulder of a snake. His hair was dark and thick, tied behind his head, and one of his eyes was swollen shut. But there were other things about him as he lay there unconscious that caught my eye: the hair on his chest and groin, the width of his shoulders and muscular chest, that to my eye seemed strangely flat. This was the first time I ever saw a man. I frowned, and looked down at myself.

"The fire burns low, boy!" came Denna's cry, and I carried through the wood.

The next time I saw him he had grown long hair on his face, a band of straggly brown across his cheeks across his chin. I rubbed my own smooth skin subconsciously, wondering at where the hair had come from and how it had suddenly got there. He was also awake. Constance had been talking to him.

"What is your name?" he croaked, looking at me. His voice was deep and rough, and many of his words had heavy breathing sounds that seemed to come from the back of his throat.

"I-" I started, confused. "I'm... They call be Brighteyes." He nodded.

"I can see that." He tried to turn towards me in the doorway as best he could, wincing with his hands above his head. We took a moment to study each other, which made him shift awkwardly.

"My name is Jannis." He said it with a yuh, like Yanniss.

"Jannis..." It tasted strange, the thing he was called.

“That’s right.” I must have been staring, because he turned his body away. “Listen, Brighteyes, you don’t seem like the others.” I started as spoke my own thoughts back to me. I narrowed my eyes and stared at him harder, to make sure that there wasn’t some kind of trick, that he wasn’t making arcane gestures behind his back to read my mind. It was a silly thing to think, for I didn’t even know that such things were possible. Satisfied that he was not placing a charm on me, I went back to studying his body, a strange and uncomfortable revelation taking root. “You seem like a reasonable person. We have to stick together out here. Whatever it is that’s happened...” He shook his wrists. “Why not let me go?”

I tilted my head to one side. “You’d never get past the nettles,” I said.

“You could help me. No one would have to know.”

There was a moment of silence while he watched my face hopefully.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because they’re going to eat me!” I had to step back as he lunged forward and pulled at the pole, spittle flying from his blood-crusting lips. “I have a family, I have a wife and two children. The village looks to me, they need me! You can’t let them keep me here, they’re monsters. Please, let me go. Are you hearing what I’m saying? They are going to eat me!”

“Well, what else would we do?”

He froze, fear and revulsion on his face, a mix of horror and hatred settling as he looked at me. He slumped.

“Get away from me, hag,” he muttered. “Take your tricks and visions elsewhere. Whatever sick pleasure you get from tempting me with hope, I want none of it. Which one are you? The crone, the hulk or the sea witch? A curse on you and your house. A curse on your coven! May Kolghrim curse you and send beasts to tear apart your limbs, and goliaths from the mountains to stamp on your bodies, and a winter to bury your remains. Curse you. I have a family. I have a family...” And then he started to cry.

I left.

I had never minded before that we ate people, and I didn’t mind then either. Animals were animals whatever colour their skin and fur, whether they spoke in words or growls, it made no difference. My parents were stronger than they were, more fierce and more hungry. It was in their nature to hunt, and they did so out of necessity. The pleasure of hurting was a thoughtless thing, and in some strange way they never meant any harm by it. Like Matilda had said, why does a bear have teeth if not to use them? My family had the biggest, sharpest teeth, and I had my cloak of snow and spear. So it didn’t seem strange to me that we would eat Jannis. No, there were other things about Jannis that seemed strange.

“He says that they are coming further north, though,” said Matilda. The three of them were sitting close to the fire. Even Constance had scraped her chair over so they could gather there, a finished spoon cradled in her spindly fingers. “Perhaps we should move the clearing, go even further north where they won’t bother us?”

“You want us to run, sister?” scorned Denna, tearing splinters from a log and dropping them into the flames. “They are beetles, insects! We do not run from them, they

cannot hurt us. They cannot even find us! We should go like a storm into their village and raze it to the ground with tar and nightmares. What say you, Grandmother?"

Constance turned the spoon over in her hands, staring into the flickering orange of the fire, her wrinkled face unearthly in the shifting shadows. "Everything you have just said is wrong." Denna's head whipped round and she glared at Constance before huffing, mighty arms crossed in a sulk. Hunched as she was, Constance was a full head shorter than even Denna's shoulders. "They can hurt us, and they can find us, they have found us before. Just because you say something, doesn't make it true." The reprimand stung. "But that is not why we cannot go north. To go north is to tempt fate. I cannot turn away the eyes of the Frostmaiden forever. And if we go much further then the true winter will bleed over into this paradise." She grinned wickedly, a smile of jumbled yellow shards in grey and black gums. "I would not complain, but it is colder further north..."

"None of us want that, Grandmother," acknowledged Matilda quickly. "Do we, sister?"

"The boy couldn't take it," Denna grumbled.

"No," Constance agreed. "There is also that. We cannot go further north, and their endless ranging will certainly stumble this way more often if what the man says is true, and he cannot lie, not to me."

"So we destroy their villages and towns, and remind them that we were here with the giants!" Denna thumped the fire, sending up a flurry of sparks as wood cracked and popped, the promise of bloodshed invigorating her.

"You do not listen, Witch of Bone-Breaking, Tree Rending, Neck Twisting sister! Destroy the village, then who is left to remember us? No one! No." And all the logs in the fire split suddenly. "The man speaks for them. They will think themselves saviours and come looking for him, prideful fools. And when they come, we will each do as we do, and as long as one of them lives to tell the tale then they shall avoid this place. That is what we shall do."

They returned to their individual brooding for a while, me a spectre hanging in the background. Constance had rubbed some oil into the bowl of the spoon to bring out the grain and was studying it intensely, Denna had gone back to splintering logs, and Matilda was watching the fire with distaste, sitting a little further away than the other two. After sufficient time had passed in silence, I judged it time to speak.

"The man is called Jannis." Denna and Matilda looked over, but it was Constance I was more interested in. She would either give me what I wanted or put me in my place. She didn't move, hunched away from me over the spoon.

"How would you know that?"

"He told me."

"Did he now. And what of it?"

I took a breath. "He isn't like the others," I said. "He isn't like you. He's like me. I'm a, I mean, he's..." I faltered.

"You are nothing like him," said Matilda, aghast. "He is a man!"

"And so am I!" I raised my voice, though I couldn't tell you why. "I'm a man!"

"A man?" scoffed Denna. "What do you know about men? You are nothing but a boy, a mongrel, a--"

“That’s enough.” Constance still hadn’t looked up from her spoon. “So you think he is like you, eh? So you think you’re a man? And what? Because he has a beard and a deep voice, that you are more like him than us? You are a fool, an idiot. Take your sex with its surface importance and mind your tongue.” She spat out the last word, and I tasted blood.

“He has a name,” I said thickly. “He has a name. Jannis.”

“So you should have a name then, is that it?” She let out a cackle and looked up from her spoon, grey eyes shimmering orange in the light of the fire. “What do you say, sisters? Shall we give our boy a name?”

“He can borrow mine!” said Matilda excitedly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” replied Denna. “Then what would we call you?”

“No.” Constance looked straight at me through the matted curtain of her hair. “We shall give him his own name. Not a man’s name, only to turn to dust and be forgotten. But a sister name.” Matilda and Denna nodded, Matilda with enthusiasm.

“Mildred!” she exclaimed.

“After the Neckmuncher?” snorted Denna. “But he doesn’t have iron teeth, and there’s nothing green about him.”

“Katarine then.”

“Her skin was the colour of night, Matilda. Is his skin the colour of night?”

“I don’t hear you coming up with anything!”

“That’s because I’m thinking!” And Denna grew a head taller as she shouted.

Constance eyes still hadn’t left mine, a warren of burst blood vessels surrounding flint-hard irises, the orange light still flickering in contrast. The spoon lay in her lap, four lines of shining wood-grain clearly visible on the bowl before one of them overtook the others in a mess of interlocking spirals.

“Layla,” she declared, quietly, and the room fell silent. “Leyla Brighteyes. Yes,” and she hissed, “you will be Layla Brighteyes, child of copper and water, iron and flint, moon and winter, giant and fey and man. Child of we three second, son of none first. We give you this name until the end of time, that all will know who raised you. That is enough said. Get wood for the fire.”

That is how I got my name.

Later that evening I heard them talking. They were in their room and Denna had come to check that I was sleeping by the fire, wrapped up in my winter wolf’s fur. Denna did not normally check that I was asleep, and it was this strangeness that prompted me to use the lessons of stillness that Matilda had taught me to quieten my heart and breathing enough that I would seem asleep.

“The boy, Layla, is asleep,” she said.

“Then out with it,” replied Constance. “I can see it on your face, no amount of illusion could hide it. What are you so worried about?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have named him.”

“Oh, but it’s nice that he has a name,” said Matilda. “I’d never have thought about it before, but we really should have given him one earlier. That’s what people do, isn’t it, they name their children?”

“We are not people,” hissed Constance. “And he is no child.” I could see Matilda shrinking back in my mind, the inside of their room a mosaic of dry brown leaves and indistinct shadows. “Now speak your mind Denna. Layla’s name. What of it?” There was a long pause, and the faint sound of shuffling.

“We were never told anything about a name.”

“What of it?” she said again.

“What if Matilda is partly right? His mother should have named him.”

“So you worry that she is watching, and will fall on us in wrath?” Constance laughed a mocking laugh.

“You should not joke about such things.” It was the first time that I had heard Denna repudiate Constance so openly. Her voice was flat and quiet, there was no competition in it or petty vengeance. And she had used the word should, instructing Grandmother with an imperative, something none of us did. Constance stopped laughing, but her next words surprised me. There was no anger or harsh punishment. She responded in the same dull tones as Denna, and I had to strain to hear.

“How long has he been with us? How many lives of men, how many winters? And where has she been? If she had wanted to name him, sister, it would have been easy for her to do so. But she has left him to we three crones and forgotten him and us.”

“She won’t have forgotten,” replied Denna, “you know she doesn’t forget. She’ll know what we’ve done.”

“Of course, she will,” Constance snapped. “You think me a fool? Her eyes pierce my veil as surely as the eagle spies the rabbit. I know she sees.” The fire popped and hissed, and I missed what was said next. “But she isn’t here, is she? She knows we have given him a name, and she doesn’t care. You worry overmuch, sister. It is not like you.”

“But perhaps you draw her attention by naming him.” It was Matilda this time. “What now if she comes?”

“After all this time, and over a name? No. Our paradise is deep in the Wilderness, tied down to nowhere and of no importance. She has given him to us to ensure that he has the same fate. She has no interest in him. She will not come.” And then she repeated herself: “She will not come.”

“It is not so bad for you, Grandmother, for you or Katarine the Black.” Constance hissed, but Denna continued. “For you Witches. But we are only hags. If she comes, what will she do to us?”

“Enough! This is foolishness. We have done what she asked. Nothing has changed. While he is here, he is barely even her blood. As long as the fire burns and the veil is maintained, the boy is right. He is little more than a man.”

“Layla,” said Matilda. “Layla Brighteyes.”

“Alright,” said Denna. “You know best, Constance. But times are changing, just as the man told you.”

“They are always changing. But here things will endure forever.”

Given how long she spent staring into the bowls of her spoons, it is remarkable just how wrong she was. When I remember that conversation, I can never recall exactly how she said those words. Sometimes I think she sounded bitter, like maybe she knew what was about

to happen. Other times she sounds the same as always, confident in her power over the small sliver of the world that was hers.

Having learned everything that she wanted from Jannis, Constance decided it was time to visit his village. They had been coming out to look for him, reported Matilda, starting out as small groups in twos and threes, but then the numbers grew. He had been their leader, and they would keep coming, that was what Constance said. And because of this, all but a few of them would have to die, their terror at the three sisters enough to keep them away for generations. They left me alone with him for three days while they terrorised beyond the protection of our home. In that time I kept the fire burning, practiced catching fish with my spear in the rain, and looked after the man. He had grown accustomed to my presence as I had been given the job of cleaning out his bucket and ensuring that he was kept alive between Constance's questions. I guessed that he had realised that he had nothing to gain by resisting and gave her the information she wanted, because he just seemed tired. I talked to him about the weather and the wildlife and asked him questions, and occasionally he would answer.

"Are the humans and goliaths still at war?" I asked as dusk deepened the shadows. There was the smell of rain on the air, and a breeze ran through the storage room. He shivered, and I felt a flicker of sorrow for this man who did not have a fur. He frowned, not meeting my eye, and chewed over something before responding.

"The Founding Wars have been over for more than a generation," he said. I must have seemed surprised. "The witch didn't believe me at first either. You must have some goliath blood in you? Or something, at any rate."

"What makes you say that?"

"You're pretty tall for someone your age. You look like you must've seen twenty winters give or take, but you're a good head taller than my oldest son. About the right size for one of the younger grey-skins." Normally he would have stopped then, the mention of his family driving him back into the silence of despair. "Maybe not a goliath, then something else. Your skin's more the colour of ours, and they'd say you're too skinny to be one of them."

"So the clans talk to your villages now?"

"Aye."

"And there's really no fighting?"

"There's always fighting, but no war. It's not worth it when the snows can drown the lowlands in a week, or them dire beasts come charging through. Neither of us could keep it up, the war, so we stopped."

"That sounds too easy," I said, not that I knew anything about these things. Jannis shrugged.

"I wasn't there, Layla." I had told him my name. He found it strange, I could tell, but used it all the same, and I was beginning to relax when I heard it, like hard leather wearing in properly around the heel. "My father was, but he crossed the ridge years ago. The war didn't stop by accident, I know that much. It's hard to keep the bloodshed to a minimum, but we managed then and we manage now."

"So you're in charge of where you're from?" He didn't answer. I pressed on. "We don't often see goliaths here."

“Consider yourself lucky, not they they’d be any trouble for your hags.” He spat, hatred creasing his eyes and dragging down the corners of his mouths like weight-stones. “I’ve seen them do monstrous things, rip off a man’s head or carry a fallen tree. Maybe it’s true what they say.”

“What’s that?”

“That they’re giant-kin. I didn’t used to put much stock in such things, but now...” He glanced around at the tall doorways pointedly.

“Hags aren’t giants.” I tried to sound confident, but that my family were hags was a revelation to me. That my skin was like his though, that felt a dangerous thing to realize. It all seems so obvious now: giants, hags, goliaths, humans, fey, spirits, an entire mess of intermingling bloodlines. But back then I didn’t know how to think.

“No, but if hags exist then giants might.”

I knew giants existed, of course. I knew it in my bones. It was a truth, a self-evident fact of lore that occupied my mind without ever having been taught. But they had been long gone, a race from a distant age when giants and dragons fought for dominion over a young world. The giants had won and crafted their hierarchies long ago, but it was the dragons who survived in the distant reaches of the wilderness. Barely even a whisper of giants remained, and here was this man who doubted even their existence.

“They existed,” I said. “You know the Gods, they were giants once. The last of the giants.”

“So the elders say. But who can really know.”

“What do the goliaths say?” He frowned thoughtfully.

“Something similar.” Then: “You’re really not a hag?” It was an honest question half asked. He looked me full in the face, his eyes boring into mine. We had both grown strangely accustomed to his entrapment. Some people would have fought to escape, not caring that it was ultimately futile. Others collapse in on themselves and vanish until all that is left is a husk. Still others weep in rage and sadness with wildness in their eyes, but not Jannis. I have seen broken people do all these things, but only rarely have I seen the calm that Jannis carried with him in captivity. I would remember him from the chains beneath the mountain, and realise then that he was intelligent beyond his means. He gave me something to follow, someone to emulate, and by accepting the inescapability of fate we both maintained our sanity.

I wish he had not died. I wish I had been there to keep him alive.

I shook my head. “I am not a hag.” He was asking whether I was an illusion sent to trick him, but I was answering a different question.

“You could pass for a man. Maybe.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” He continued to hold my gaze with weary eyes sunken back into his face. His beard was longer than before, and thinner too. And there was a bald patch on the left side of his head.

“Just that, if I didn’t know better and you were trying to seem normal, you could pass for just a man, maybe a goliath mongrel. You’d have to stop moving like a wild animal though, and not be so... different. And you’d have to cover your eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“You look at me like I’m interesting but not really alive, like you’re a wolf who isn’t hungry. Plus they’re not normal, like copper metal gone to rust. And the way you sniff the air and- yes, just like that! The way you tilt your head. I can’t help but...” I frowned, catching myself just as I was about to tilt my head.

“You can’t help but what?”

“But be afraid.”

We watched each other for a long while. And then I left.

Chapter III

BLOOD LIKE HONEY

When the sisters came back, I was sitting out by the front of the house waiting for them. They had been gone longer than I had come to expect from hunts like this one, but I wasn't nervous. I caught snatches of their approach on the breeze, though this in itself was unusual, for they travelled silently.

"Matilda, wait!" came Denna's muffled panting from somewhere beyond the ring of nettles. "Your face... Layla..." The sound of their laboured staggering grew closer, and I caught a glimmer of movement. Matilda grunted something in response, there was a breeze, and then they appeared, wading through the tall green stems, the body of Constance carried between them. Slowly, not quite understanding what I saw, I stood up from the wooden step, mouth open and eyes wide at the impossible sight before me. Constance's grey-blue arms hung spindly and thin like dry branches from a broken tree, her grey robe torn and eyes closed as Matilda and Denna stumbled forward carrying her, her greystaff clutched under Matilda's other arm. But it was her blood that caught my breath, and she was covered in it, a slick layer of transparent nectar, the cloying aroma of paper-sugar and flowers blowing over me as they approached.

"Fetch water," commanded Matilda as they pushed past. I ran to our cistern, ever full from the last of the melted snow, and filled a pale. They had already laid Constance out beside the fire as I hauled it in, red and brown leaves sticking to her seeping wounds.

"What should I do?" I asked, my voice rising in pitch and volume. Matilda looked mostly untouched except for a smattering of soot and the bitter smell of tar drifting from a black mark that ran along her sleeve, and while Denna was covered in gore, it was the velveteen scarlet and iron tang of a humanoid rather than the petal fragrance of their honey blood. Denna ripped the pale from me and emptied most of it into the iron pot that hung above the fire, splashes hissing as they scattered into the flames. I pushed more logs into the heat hastily as Matilda reached over me for leaves and herbs from across the tree trunk and dropped them into the water.

"Bring cloth and twine," she muttered as she ground fresh flowers into a paste before scraping them into the bowl. I did as I was bid, and between us we managed to wash away most of the blood and dirt and bind the wounds with a layer of healing poultice beneath wrappings that had been soaked in the antiseptic brew bubbling in the pot. Jannis watched me with wary eyes as I went back and forth from the storage room. From the tension across his shoulders that he knew something was wrong, but he barely moved. His wrists had long

since chaffed against the rough rope and the blood that had dried there had turned a flaky black.

Denna brought out a bone needle and some suture thread and started sewing up some of the smaller cuts that didn't need treating to remove any trace of metal from axe and spear, her eyes smouldering while she worked. Matilda just paced back and forth, having run out of practical things to do.

"Will she be okay? She must be okay, she must be."

"There's no must about it," grunted Denna. "We've none of us been hurt this badly before, and she's the strongest of us, the best healer. We'll see what happens." She pulled the thread tight and snapped it with her teeth. "But there's no must. Let's just hope this is enough."

"But what if she..." Matilda trailed off into a looming silence.

"Don't be such a prim, Matilda. If Constance dies, then she dies, and we'll pull the mountains up by their roots to cast down on that wretched town, and heap salt and ash over whatever's left." The bone needle snapped in her fingers, and she had to fetch another one.

"But if she dies, then who will keep the illusions going?" asked Matilda, eyes flashing wildly. "Who will maintain the border to the forest? Who will turn aside the wandering spirits or gaze of the Gods? Who will keep out the divine, or the devils or the worst of the storms? And the fire! What about the fire? We don't know the incantations... And what about the--"

"No one, dammit!" shouted Denna, the red in her eyes flashing. "We'll move on, but not before the earth is drowning in blood and tears, and the skies are heavy with smoke and screaming."

They went on in this way for some time, Matilda worrying about what would happen and how we would survive, only really interested in herself, while Denna plotted ever darker revenge against the mortals who dared raise themselves from the lowlands. Neither of them paid me any heed other than to bark instructions or use me as an extra pair of hands, but Matilda's words still rang in my head. Who will maintain the border to the forest? What about the fire?

What about the fire?

While they bickered and worried over Constance, I watched the flickering flames. I knew Constance would survive. I was certain of it, as though with a kind of religious fervour. But if I wasn't a hag, and I knew now that I wasn't, then I was surely a man? But not quite a man. What other lies had I been living, captive beneath the unbreaking grey eyes of Constance? The fire quivered yellow and orange, the meaty smell of old dry wood accompanying the sweet blood aroma. The wood cracked and popped, pieces of white edged with luminescence glowing from the underside as points of lights trailed upwards before blinking out. An ordinary fire, beneath a pot, in a house.

I would have to let the fire die. The thought came unbidden to the very back of my mind, and I fought to hide its echoes in case someone else heard them. It scared me, the very idea, certain of the beating I would surely earn. I glanced over at Constance, and felt the blood drain from my face as her weathered eyes stared back, one swollen almost to the point of closing but the other was just as beady and piercing as it had ever been. She would know

what I was planning before I even gave any thought to it, so I gave up. It was foolishness anyway.

“Water,” she croaked, pushing herself up onto her elbows with a grimace. There was none left in the pale, so I dashed out to get some more, Matilda hovering anxiously at my shoulder. Constance drank the water in sips, drops of blood glistening on the surface like oil and sticking to the wooden cup in a layer of varnish. She hissed in discomfort, glaring down at the bandages around her arms and waist and sniffing at the air.

“Bring me the man.”

“Yes,” jeered Denna, hurrying into the storage room. Constance grabbed her staff from where it was lying, cradling the knotted grey wood with a face like overhead thunder. With one long finger she stroked the three bird skulls, making a wheezing croon sound. Denna returned dragging the man along behind her, his hands still tied by rope while his feet were free. He staggered to one knee before being pulled back up, taking in the scene in three swift seconds.

“Sit.” The word rang with tight power, and Jannis let out a cry as blood ran hot from behind his knees, the tendons slashed in a small spray of red. “Stand.” The air hummed as he struggled to obey without even thinking, animal fear on his face as his legs refused to work. With a strangled cry he managed to half stand for only a moment, hands clutching at the rope before he gave way again, crumbling like a ruin into the leaves, useless. “Stand. Up.” There was no way he would manage it, but he fought onto his knees, feet lying lifeless and limp by his side, before wresting control of his body back.

“No, witch,” he spat, voice hoarse. He looked back at his legs, crying out as he turned, blood coating his fingers. “We both bleed then,” he said, eyeing her. “Not so different.”

“Hold him up.” Constance nodded at Denna, who lifted the rope so that he dangled. With slow purpose, Constance tilted her head towards the fire. Jannis’ eyes widened even before Denna drew the cord towards the heat, forcing him to try to hold his weight away from the flames. Still, his feet hung loose, streaked with red, unable to pull away.

“Stop!”

I looked around in surprise, wondering who had shouted. The realization that it had been me came slowly, like melting ice down your back. Constance’s eyes were cold from across the fire, leaning against the trunk of the tree.

“His people did this,” she said, still stroking the skulls. “There are monsters in the wilderness, and they must be made to remember that, must be made to regret the day they dug black-iron from the frozen earth and fashioned it into weapons.” She spat. “Curse’ed metal, warped and twisted, like silver to a vampire. You have never known the pain.” She heaved herself forward. “But I could show you, Layla. Oh yes, boy, I could show you.” And she drew a sliver of black metal from within her tattered cloak. Matilda and Denna both recoiled, dragging Jannis away from the fire for a moment, Matilda’s hands darting in some kind of symbol that left a brief trail of yellow in the air.

“You brought it here?” Matilda asked, voice breaking in fear. Constance’ face contorted as her fingers twisted around the dull shard, sizzling as they made contact and filling the room with yet another sick aroma, this time of burnt sugar and vinegar. She held it out to me, bones cracking and creaking.

“Take it.”

It was no command, but I did it anyway, a morbid fascination with the strange black metal that could so wound my Grandmother. I almost dropped it, expecting pain, but there was none; it was nothing but a rent piece of charcoal-dark iron, cool the touch and about the length of my hand. Then Constance lifted her greystaff, bone skulls knocking, and the fire wavered and dimmed, casting shadows about the room. Immediately, my hand burned, a searing pain across my palm in a line of white fire, its edges seeming to tear my flesh as though they were hungry for it. Blood ran down my arm, the iron-red of Jannis rather than the honey-gold of Constance, and I bit my tongue in surprise.

“You see,” she wheezed. “You see what would happen to you if it were not for us? They would come in their hoards, low born humanity grovelling in the dirt, they would come for you with star iron all black and broken just because they can, and no amount of fey blood will keep you safe. It will turn your power against you.” Slowly, she lowered the staff and the flames burned higher once more, the pain vanishing. “The man will die because he has to, because it is him or us. Such is the cruel logic of the coven, is it not sisters?” Denna and Matilda both nodded. I unclenched my fist, the broken lines of my skin weeping down my arm, but the burning pain had gone. The metal was just that, returned to an innocent piece of iron.

“Keep it,” said Constance, some kind of challenge. I nodded dumbly, pocketing it, then she turned to Jannis. “Your people are strong, too strong.” He stared back at her proudly, dangling broken from the rope where Denna held him. “You led them well, and this will be their downfall. We cannot permit them to live. I will recover quickly,” and she heaved herself up once, twice with her greystaff, until she stood opposite him across the fire, “and then their retribution will come, before we send you to join them. Take him away.” She turned to me. “Now come here.” And she proceeded to stitch my torn hand with the bone needle and thread, dabbing it with one of the honey sweet cloths from the stewing pot. The wound had gone by the following morning, and I had resolved to leave as well.

I didn’t have long. It would have to be before Constance had healed. She spent the next day in their room, and I spent it making sure I knew where my spear and fur was, getting together a small collection of things in the corner of the storage room. Jannis was there, bound again to the pole, but his spirit had left him. His eyes were glassy, whether from pain or despair I didn’t know, and he had shrunk, the tattooed skin of a blue serpent hanging loose in wrinkles across his chest and shoulder. We didn’t speak. I should have said something, but I didn’t. I choose not to remember him like he was then. But we don’t really get to choose, do we?

I waited until the following dawn. The sky was still dark and no sound stirred the stillness, but even so I waited for many hours just to be sure. And then I stepped out into the night. I pulled my white winter wolf pelt around me as I pushed through the nettles, spear and gloves holding them back from my face and the very last of the dried jewelweed sap in its wooden tin. A pouch of medicinal herbs, two daggers, rope, tinder and flint, the closest to a bedroll that I could cobble together and a water skin constituted all of the things that had found their way into my backpack as I trudged through the damp mosses and tough grass beyond the house. The sun rose, and Denna had not come rushing through the trees to get

me. I reached the river by the afternoon and Matilda did not rise up from the waters. Night fell and I slept beneath the stars in the cold since I didn't feel safe enough yet to light a fire. I walked without stopping the following day, travelling away from the foothills of the mountain and the river, away from the ring of nettles and the house. It rained in the evening, and on the third day I woke to the sound of birds singing as heavy droplets fell from the canopy above. The air was fresh and damp, and still no one had come to drag me back. The hours went by as each step took me further from home, towards what I didn't know. And then I noticed a shimmer in the air ahead, hovering between the trees. I stopped dead in my tracks, breathing lightly through my nose. It was always better to keep breathing when trying to hide. Nothing happened.

The shimmer was about sixty feet ahead out of the corner of my eye. As I gradually turned my head, it moved, but I concluded that nothing was really moving; it was only visible on the periphery. With halting steps I continue on, stopping at each tree to listen, but the only sound was the dripping. The birds had stopped.

Then I heard it, a faint whistling behind me. I looked to the shimmering wall, vanishing but definitely there, and started to run, but it was too late. It only took seconds for Constance to become visible, sat astride her greystaff as it hurtled through the air, the whistling rising to a warbling whine, white hair flying back in an unholy halo.

“No!”

Like a thunderclap, her voice rang out through the forest, a wave of force visible only by the water vapour that burst outwards and twigs that rattled in the trees, but the blunt impact of it sent me tumbling. A cascade of water splashed down across my face as I glared up at her.

“I won't come back!” I shouted, looking back at the shimmering veil that appeared to separate me from what lay beyond. “You're monsters, you're all monsters!” She cackled.

“Of course we are! We are a coven of hags, what else would we be? Once you have lived to see mountains weather away, then you can tell me who the monsters are. Then you can look into those bright witch's eyes of yours and call yourself a monster! Aha!” And she laughed again, waving a spoon at me in mockery, but I saw her tiny black eyes darting back and forth between me and the veil.

She hovered there, some forty feet above the ground, a whirring nightmare of gaunt and hollowed flesh, skin taught and blue over sharp bones, some of the bandages still in place. Her eyes blazed only with the force of her will, which was enough that I quailed beneath her, wind tearing through the pine needles sending dirt and moss up into a twisting frenzy. A horrifying visage, ancient and unyielding to time and the elements. I was terrified as I had never been before and gripped by the sudden certainty that I was nothing like her, neither in form nor nature. But before I had a chance to do anything, whether beg or scream or vainly attempt to flee, she pursed her lips in a tense line and sucked in a breath.

“Sleep.”

I felt the impact, and after that all was darkness.

I awoke beside the fire with Matilda watching me. She looked sad, confused and betrayed, the look of a child. But she didn't say anything. Denna and Constance were not there, no sign of the greystaff, and I could tell from Matilda's awkwardness that the others had gone to finish what they had started. This time they would be prepared. This time there would be no holding back. And Matilda had been left to guard me. It took a little while for the fog to clear from my mind enough to get up, but I was in no rush. I felt like something had shattered, whether in me or beyond me I wasn't sure, but I was certain that things could never go back to the way they had been before.

"Are you here to stop me?" I asked. Matilda's brows creased and her shoulders dipped a little. It was a small, sad gesture.

"Yes."

"Will you?"

"Will you run again?" I didn't answer her. "Why?"

Why did I run? Was it the beatings and contempt? Having been left to freeze to death? Being forced to kill and eat my own kind until it numbed me? Living in fear of Denna's rage and Constance's malice? Being trapped, never allowed out by myself? The blatant lies, or the lies of admission?

"You never once stopped them," I said, getting my wolf pelt from where it was draped over a spindly chair. My spear was leaning next to the door. "When they beat me, or cursed me or—" My voice caught, and I had to swallow. "You never stopped them. You didn't even say anything, not even to me, after." Her pale skin glistened, dark hair damp. She looked innocent, incorruptible somehow. It had held some power over me all my life, her eyes and body, and I could feel it pushing into my mind. *You are safe*, it said, *you have nothing to fear*. *Shush now*. I shook my head to clear it. "Get out of my head." The pressure withdrew, and I saw surprise register on face, and briefly felt satisfied.

"I taught you to fish." She said as though it was some kind of offering to make everything right.

"And you think that's enough?" I rounded on her, shouting in anger, my spear suddenly in hand. "How long have I been here? How long? How many years did you lead me out to river to watch you? Don't pretend it wasn't just for you." She didn't flinch; nor did she withdraw from my anger. She was still taller than me, still stronger. She only looked puzzled. "Will you stop me if I run?" I asked for the second time.

"Would you rather Constance stopped you? Or Denna?"

"That isn't what I asked." When no answer was forthcoming, I stormed into the store room. Jannis was tied to the wooden pole in a pool of blood, dead, the first among many whom I would be unable to save. He looked so old. Matilda came up behind me.

"Who killed him?"

"Grandmother said you'd ask that."

"Who?" It was barely a whisper.

"She said to say it was you." Because I had run away.

My shoulders sagged and I had to lean against the door frame. The wood, worn smooth by time, was a small comfort, familiar and untouched by the evils of that cottage. In the right light there was something beautiful and quaint about the clearing, and the central

tree, and the squat structure. But the beauty was not even skin deep, it was an illusion. Wickedness had marked that place, had corrupted the very earth into which its foundations had been placed.

“It’s alright, Layla,” murmured Matilda. “Constance won’t be angry forever.”

My heart hardened, and my vision turned white for a moment. Of course it had been Constance, Grandmother, jailor and executioner. If Matilda thought that I still wanted to please her, then she was mistaken. She would try to stop me running, and we both knew it. We also both knew that she would be able to carry me back, that there was nothing I could do to stop her. Which meant that I had to make it impossible for her to find me. But that wasn’t something I could do either. Each of the sisters possessed sight beyond my own, able to spy an eagle in the far distant sky before it was even a speck to me, and Matilda had the best eyesight of the three of them. So I wouldn’t be able to hide from her, which meant that I had to keep her here. There might be a way, but it was risky, and I had no idea what would happen or if it would even work.

She placed a cool hand on my shoulder, and in spite of myself the light touch of her fingers was calming.

“Layla, my bright-eyed boy, do not be angry. Everything happens according to its nature. None of us have any choice, not really, and you are one of us. Come, let me get you something to eat.”

I let her lead me back to the fire and sat down among the furs that carpeted the floor. She busied herself cleaning out the cooking pot before throwing in a collection of mushroom and nutty roots for a stew. The pile of honey-soaked rags from Constance’s wounds were left outside, having still not been disposed of. They were very precious about their blood, using it for different rites and rituals in observance with the seasons. Every year at the full moon Denna would walk through the nettles having bitten her own hand, clenching it ahead of her so that the drips would fall between the stems. I made a mental note of where she left the rags and waited for the stew to ready. When it was, I ate in silence. Matilda seemed to take my reticence for defeat, and took to rambling happily about unimportant details, having already moved on as though nothing had changed. After a while I joined in awkwardly, as though I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to talk to her. She was so busy trying to draw me in that she never once noticed that I had let the fire burn low, or that I hadn’t restocked the wood supply in the storage room since days before I had tried to run away.

I got up and went into the store room. It was for show; the last thing I wanted to see was the corpse of Jannis, limp and held aloft from his wrists. When I returned, I did not need to fake the appearance of being shaken.

“Matilda,” I stammered.

“Mmm? What is it, Layla sweet?”

“We’re out of wood.” She looked at the fire then, its diminishing light brushing her face with low orange. “We need more.” I watched her carefully, fighting to keep my breath steady.

“Then we shall have to go and get more. Constance will be furious.”

“What if it goes out while we are gone?”

“It mustn’t.”

“I think it might.” I had been the one who always looked after it. I would know best. And I had received so many beatings, I wouldn’t dare lie about it, wouldn’t dare let it die. And some of that was true. The panicked desire to find more wood, to fan the flames and keep it burning was rising in my chest, pushing into my lungs. Every instinct fought to keep that fire burning, out of my own self-preservation rather than any misplaced sense of loyalty. I took a breath, and then said it: “If you go and get the wood from the pile down by the river, I can keep it burning here, make sure the embers don’t go out. I would only slow you down. This way you’ll be back sooner.”

The seconds were long as she watched my face.

“Okay,” she said, and she just walked out.

I was left stranded, surprised that it had been so easy. Slowly, I walked over to Constance’s mountain of a chair and collected together the eight wooden spoons that she had kept, throwing seven of them onto the fire and gently stoking the flames until the well-oiled wood caught. It should have been harder, unless Matilda knew something I didn’t. Unless I was wrong and the fire didn’t matter, didn’t mean anything, had never been more than a tool of control. Minutes went by and I hadn’t moved, frozen, staring into the low flames. I hadn’t been lying; she would be faster without me. There wouldn’t be much time. In a final wrenching second of violent decision making, I turned and left the cottage, filling the wooden pail with frigid water, and in an instant I was back in front of the fire. More time passed, and my arms started to ache with the weight of the water, watching the well-worn spoons blacken and deteriorate. Then suddenly my hands slipped and the bucket tumbled sending crystal water cascading downwards in shimmering wave. I tried to stop the bucket, but it was too late, and the water baptised the embers in a surge of white steam, and the fire went out.

Nothing changed. There were no screams from out in the forest, no howling of wolves of tearing down of trees. Everything was the same, except for a dull prickle at the top of my left thigh. In something of a daze, I reached in to my side pouch only to hiss in pain, fingers waving in the air as they trailed a thin line of smoke, the burning at once familiar. I sucked them, tasting blood, but that only made the beating pain worse. It was the black-iron, the star iron that Constance had brought back from the attack and shown me what it could do. But once she had made her point, the metal had returned to just that, ordinary metal, devoid of flesh rending pain. After that I had no trouble holding it. Now it seemed to have taken on its strange properties again, and I could feel it gnawing through the fabric of my trouser.

The iron had changed, and that spurred me in action, even it was only a small thing. I gathered together my things, packed the same backpack as before and wrapped the black-iron in a fold of cloth to tuck gingerly between my bedroll. Grabbing a small grey bottle, I squeezed the honey blood from the rags on the doorstep and stoppered it, picking up my spear and pelt. With Constance’s final spoon the last thing to be packed, I was ready, took a breath, and walked out of the door for the last time.

The nettles passed by in a blur. I only stopped to strip one of the thick ribbed stems of all its palm size leaves and dangling green flower bundles with my flint dagger. They could be useful. This time I didn’t walk into the forest, but I ran, still paying careful heed to the twisting mess of roots that surrounded each tree. I was sent tumbling on multiple occasions which was strange, since I had long since learned how to spring nimbly up on my toes,

leaping over the burrowing masses with ease. Perhaps the drum beat of my heart or the burning adrenaline through my veins had made me reckless in haste, or perhaps it was something else entirely.

In spite of the trips, I covered well over a day's distance in only a couple of hours, garnering a collection of small cuts and bruises and twigs in my hair. I didn't stop to question the distance, or the enlarged force with which I smashed into the ground every time I fell; the fear of Constance's certain retribution was too great. It made it difficult to judge when exactly I crossed what would have been the shimmering veil, but I never saw it. I stopped at a small clear pool to drink for only a second before the sense of being watched became too great. Backing away from the water, cool beads dripping down my chin, the sudden silence signalled that I had given myself away.

You run again, came the quiet pressing against my mind. *You lied to me. Come back and be safe. Come back, my bright-eyed boy.*

"No!" I hadn't meant to shout, brandishing my jewelweed spear at the pool. Matilda's yellow eyes flashed before me but not really there. The pressure of her gaze did not diminish.

You let the fire die. Why not come back and help me light it? Come back and run with me, swim with me, fight with me. We are beautiful, you and I. You do not want to leave.

I turned and ran away.

Constance will be back soon. But as I kept on running from the pool, her presence receded, and the birdsong returned.

About an hour passed in drumming footfalls before I heard the scream, a wrenching sound that rolled in wailing echoes across the lowlands, impossibly loud to travel so far. It was a dry keening, filled with horror and malice. Constance had returned to find the fire out, to find her spoons burned. To find me gone. I ran harder and faster, paying little heed to my surroundings, making no attempt to travel quietly or without a trace. None of it mattered now, all that mattered was escape, and I had no idea how far away that was.

The air rushed by, growing colder as though a whole season had passed, and by nightfall the dampness of spring had become a bitter chill, my breath billowing in worn out clouds. There were other signs of change. The forest thinned, the trees grew sparse and the moss cover lessened. The land itself rose and fell in sharp ridges and uneven slopes, but there was no whine of Constance's greystaff blasting through the air. Eventually, when I could keep up the wild running no longer, I slowed, chest heaving and throat raw. I did not stop that night, but staggered on through the darkness, brighter-than-normal stars hanging in the sky. The moon had become a silver lantern to guide my path, creating a world of half-shadows lit by the unnatural luminosity of the sky. But the hags never emerged and dawn came, shedding a little warmth across the hills. I had made it out of the forest, further than I had ever been before. I had escaped.

I did not trust that hope for many days, and barely stopped except when exhaustion took me. The hills rolled by, with snow tipped mountains a band across my vision, and the trees thinned. I could see birds wheeling in the distant sky, some hundreds of miles away. I felt stronger, covered distance more quickly, and the cold which had certainly deepened suddenly and without warning, did not seem to bother me so much. Still, my only desire was to get further and further away from everything that I had known, so I pressed on towards the

foothills of the mountains. After a count of days I lit a fire and stopped for a full night, using my tinderbox for the first time in the wild. There was plenty of thick dry yellow grass in the foothills, so I collected that. A heavy croaking betrayed the nearby presence of a set of ptarmigan nests, so I caught the birds and ate them and their eggs. It was strange; they did not seem afraid of me, not even when I picked them up. Before the small fire went out, I propped up my travelling pan and boiled the nettle leaves until the liquid that was left turned green and started to thicken. Careful not to touch it myself, I filled another of my small collection of stoppered bottles.

My final sense of panic came at a stream, when Matilda brushed up weakly against the back of my mind again as I stopped to drink. I turned to look back across the largely empty plain, broken only by creases in the land, the forest now little more than a blemish. But there was no sign of movement, nothing except a group of seven elk lead by a proudly antlered male and a snow fox further off, scampering through the brush. I closed off my mind. She offered no resistance and retreated. I pushed on again, but that was the last of it. After that, I was beyond their reach, and turned my attention to my new life. I could find somewhere to rest properly each night now, no longer having to carry on through the darkness. Eventually I would find somewhere permanent to make my home.