

Mind of a Witness

An OthEarth Novella

By Bill Ricardi

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Preface

In the shadow of the explosive event above the Podkamennaya Tunguska River basin some twenty years ago, I find myself faced with a hoax or a madman's puzzle the likes of which I've never seen before.

Under the foundation of a remote cabin, otherwise leveled by the blast, I found what I believed to be a diary. It was perfectly preserved in a thick hide of animal skin. But upon opening the book, I had to assume it was a work of complete fiction. It depicted a 17th century Earth unlike our own, but somehow hauntingly familiar.

They speak of the Judeo religions, but there is no mention of a Christ figure at all, as if another event precipitated the death of old beliefs. It was like the Roman Empire never earned the 'Holy' moniker.

Then they refer to the time of the Black Plague as the 'great dawning' of the demon world. This gave rise to a mutation of humans into other races, and a foundation of magical and divine mysticism.

If the beautifully drawn maps are to be believed: The oceans around Europe rolled back. Landmasses shifted. England became attached to Europe, bridging France to Scandinavia. France became a nation of werewolves. Scandinavia became a land of ogres. These new nation-tribes became insular.

I've taken to calling this place 'OthEarth', short for 'Other Earth'. The only thing that keeps me from dismissing the entire thing as a work of fantasy is the skeletal remains found with the book. Seven feet tall. Claws like a bear. Maw like a wolf. But plantigrade legs, as if this... thing walked around like a human.

Surely an elaborate hoax. Surely.

- Leo K. - 1928

Chapter 1

My will is the will of the Queen. She commands, I obey without hesitation. Her word is law, and as an instrument of Her word, no law of the human realm applies to me. My father's will was the will of his own Queen. My grandfather's will was the will of his Queen, and so on and so forth, through every age either written or remembered.

My soul is the soul of the Queen. I hold a piece of her eternity within my breast. If ever Death finds Her, Death finds me. It is this pure bond that allows me to be Her Witness. A Witness cannot lie. A Witness cannot knowingly record a falsehood. My word is considered indisputable fact within every courtroom in the land. And though this final detail is often whispered rather than spoken aloud with the pride that it deserves: Let it be known that a Witness can reach into the realm of demons to find power, protected from all possible corruption by the Queen's divine purity.

My heart is the heart of the Queen. Whosoever She loves, I too love. I am a member of the royal family by the power of Her grace. My presence is never questioned, my place at the table never withdrawn. I am Her surrogate in all social and intimate affairs. If She cannot or does not wish to participate in an encounter, I am sent in Her stead. My lips become Her lips. My body serves as Her body. To bed me is to bed Her. It is still considered quite an honor, or so I'm told.

There was nothing special about me before I took the oath, a dozen seasons back. My bloodline is not blessed with great might, nor with athleticism. Our family's role, when not called to serve, is cultivating the fields adjacent to the royal palace. I was a farm boy named 'Andy'. I tended to the chickens and slopped the pigs. I would still be there to this day if She had not reached out Her hand and chosen me over all of my brothers. It was Her eighteenth birthday. I didn't know it at the time, but in every way that mattered, it would be my birthday as well.

I only relate these things because She asked me something at breakfast today. I did not fully understand the question, for She asked if I 'wanted' to keep a journal. I want what She wants, of course. So I asked if *She* wished for me to keep a journal. But my question was answered only with a smile. I begged Her to tell me what She desired, but my begging was met with a tender kiss and a soft dismissal. I withdrew from the halo of Her blond hair, allowing it to fall from my ears and shoulders as I beat a hasty retreat.

It was the latest in a series of strange experiments. My beloved Queen was concerned that I had no 'free will', as She called it. I understand the concept of course. I possessed this kind of self-direction when I was a youth on the farm. My birth mother would often tell me that I had a little too **much** 'will'. But as a Witness, what need have I for independence? I am unified with a Queen who knows me better than I know myself.

Still. After much reflection, I believed that deep down... She wished for me to write these things. And though I might find the exercise to be nothing more than penmanship practice, if it brings an ounce of joy or solace to Her, I will take up the quill gladly.

A moment. She just walked into my room to see me writing. Her smile makes the oil lamp's flame seem dim by comparison.

I asked Her, "Do you need me, Your Majesty?"

She said, "Always."

But before I could rise, She pressed upon my shoulders, urging me to settle down again. She said, "No. Finish your writing first."

"Begging your pardon, Ma'am, but I do not understand. Why is this important?"

She rubbed my shoulders for a few moments, the kind of absent affection that an older sibling might bestow upon their younger brother. After reading the first few lines of my journal, She said, "Because your *mind* is not the mind of the Queen, my love."

Then She left me. Her parting instructions were simple: Find Her when I was finished.

It is my sincere hope that any future readers of this journal do not take offense when I say this: I'm finished for the moment. My desire to be with Her outweighs my patience for this scribbling.

But I will return soon enough. And I will share every detail of what transpires. I promise.

Chapter 2

I walked down the winding staircase that served as an escape from the Southwest tower. Not that residents and visitors in my part of the castle really needed to 'escape'. It was the most elaborate of Castle Heshler's four towers, reserved for important royal dignitaries and merchant barons. I made my home there because, although I was certainly welcome in the royal wing, some of my duties required a level of discretion and distance from the rest of my adopted family.

My destination was a short walk down the worn gray granite corridor. Murmured greetings from the castle's executive staff were returned in kind. These were my companions and 'friends', after a fashion. Though they tended to keep their distance if I was acting in any official capacity. And some maintained even more distance than others.

I couldn't blame them. There was a certain degree of awkwardness associated with being a human truth engine who also served as a royal consort. I was **not** the kind of friend you wanted to share secrets with, if you wished them to *remain* a secret from your royal employers.

I entered the Queen's chambers as quietly as possible. The guards hardly gave me a second look as I slipped through the gap between their raised pikes. It was understood that my entry and that of the Queen was one and the same.

I announced myself with a simple, "Your Majesty."

Her immediate reply was, "I told you: Call me Lynne when we're alone, darling."

There were times when my training as a Witness and the desires of my Queen were at odds. This was particularly mysterious to me, as She had personally approved every aspect of my initial education. Over the last year, however, She often insisted that I break protocol. Protocol that She made law. Protocol that She was now countermanding by Her word, which was also law. But when I asked if we needed to change the rules as they applied to Witnesses, She said 'no'.

Earlier in the month, I asked Bruce what I should do in these situations. Bruce Tomlin is the castle's Master of the Household. He is the undisputed expert on everything having to do with protocol. I found his advice particularly strange, as I couldn't find reference to the procedure in any historical or legal document.

"Humor her." he had said.

So I did my best. I said, "Of course, Lynne. How can I be of service?"

Her reply was dry, like a cupcake left out in the Summer sun, “Yes, well, that sounded **perfectly** natural. Come, sit with me.”

I walked to the center of the royal chambers to join my Queen on the edge of the bed. Her room was fairly plain by regal standards, but opulent when compared to that of Her average subject... having been one of Her average subjects, I would know. Before coming to the castle, I'd never seen a mirror that let me view the top of my head and the tips of my toes at the same time. I was unaware that a carpet could stretch from wall to wall, woven from sheep's wool and cut to fit the royal chambers exactly. It never occurred to me that one might have their own privy, rather than rushing outside to the outhouse on a cold Winter morning. And I didn't know that they built beds fit to sleep three side by side by side, like the one I found myself perched upon as Her Majesty regarded me.

“You know that the lupine ambassador and his entourage are arriving just before dinner, yes?”

My scowl drew quite the unladylike snort from the Queen. I schooled my expression as best I could.

“Yes Lynne, I am aware.”

She slid a fingertip under my chin, before gently turning my head so that She could catch and hold my gaze. “My father infected me with that prejudice, and I in turn infected you. The last year and a half has taught me to be more circumspect. Despite my comment from before, you and I need to be of *one* mind on this. Do you understand?”

I found myself nodding, despite some personal misgivings. I didn't hate the wolves, at least not in the way that some of the older generations did. Their constant border clashes and the crude way that they imposed their culture upon others certainly did nothing to endear the lupine race to me, or to the Kingdom at large for that matter. But 'hate' didn't describe what I felt for them. Pity perhaps. Disgust, at least on some level. They were vulgar and primitive beasts, in my opinion. And that opinion used to be shared by my Queen. Not any longer, however.

She stroked my chin absently as She spoke, “We're right at the cusp of a true peace, Andy. Stability on the southern border means that we can be fully prepared for the ogres to the East, who've been on war footing since before father died. We need allies. Or we at least need to know that we aren't about to be stabbed in the back.”

I murmured, “I'll be on my best behaviour tonight. I swear it.”

She hesitated before speaking again. It was like She needed to gather Herself before admitting the true purpose of my visit. Moments later, She did just that.

“Odd that you should give me that oath now. Because I was going to make you swear it **after** you had all of the information.”

I groaned softly and waited for the other boot to drop.

She reached up to tousle my hair, leaving my short brown locks mussed and wild in the wake of Her fingers. "I need to be in two places at once. Officially, this is a political visit. I'll be discussing things with Ambassador Sharpe and his wife. Unofficially, they have a guest in tow. Their king's third son, Prince Gnarl of the Blackfang clan. Privately, he's expressed interest in a nocturnal hunt. And I said yes on your behalf."

As much as I tried to maintain a neutral expression, I felt my lower lip quivering. My jaw was clenched. I had to draw a deep breath before I could respond, "Of course, Lynne. I shall try to be a good host to our guest."

She continued, "I've met him a number of times, and given his particular passions, I doubt that this will come up. But if it does, I must stress: Were our positions reversed, I would make **every** personal effort to secure goodwill leading to an alliance. Every effort. Understood?"

My mouth went dry. She was telling me in no uncertain terms: Make sure the beast's happy at the end of the hunt. Secretly, I hoped that Her assessment of the wolfman's personal preferences was accurate.

Aloud, I said, "Understood. My heart is the heart of the Queen." My tone was flat, at best.

She teased, "Really? Because you said that **far** more enthusiastically when I brought home that courtesan from Oakville a couple of weeks back. Her name slips my mind..."

"Autumn. But I believe that my Queen genuinely liked Autumn. We both did."

She tilted her head just a fraction, "Yes, well. I also like Prince Gnarl, you know. Don't get me wrong; he's a brute sometimes. But he's not stupid and, under the right circumstances, he can be a lot of fun. I know this from personal experience."

I schooled my expression. The Queen's dalliances were something of legend around the castle. No other monarch in recent history had so openly avoided marriage in favor of a liberated lifestyle. To circumvent any bloodline issues, most of Her 'adventures' were with women, or carefully selected and controlled men. This foray into relations with other races was not something that I felt was healthy. But it quelled Her appetites while minimizing the risk of difficult succession issues.

She said, "Between you and I: If there's to be a permanent alliance between our people in the next few years, Prince Gnarl might very well become our royal husband."

My response was immediate, "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, Lynne."

She laughed, and then combed my hair back to some semblance of order with Her well manicured nails. "Now I feel like I have to cheer you up. So here's the good news: He wishes to see your sorcery skills on the hunt. And so, you have my permission."

My heart leapt. Permission to use Her magic was worth playing escort to a **dozen** boorish wolves, if need be!

My Queen paired her blessing with a warning, however. "Nothing too flashy unless you must. You know how some folks react to such displays of power. Our people are reliably, demonstrably superstitious."

I nodded slowly. She was right, of course. "Yes Ma'am."

I yelped when She plucked a single wild strand of hair from my head. "What was that?"

"Yes Lynne."

"Better, Andy. You see? Being a Witness doesn't mean that you can't have some fun once in a while."

I wasn't quite sure what to say to that, but She was waiting for a reply. I blurted, "Of course. I shall attempt to experience fun, if you will it."

Her soft sigh spoke volumes. Then She said, "If I could *really* order people to enjoy themselves and stop worrying so much, this job would be a whole lot easier, my dearest. But I do wish for you to be happy. With all my heart."

"I'll try."

"Good. Now, off you go. Tell the kitchen that we'll be down for a light lunch at exactly noon. We'll all want to be a bit hungry before tonight's activities. Those wolves can really eat up a storm, and they respect those who can keep pace."

I was up and jogging out the door in no time at all. On my way to the kitchen, it dawned on me that I would want to bring my journal to tonight's hunt. I'm making this entry before slipping it into my backpack. Wish me luck.

Chapter 3

The waxing gibbous moon was just starting to shine when I first set off with Prince Gnarl of the Blackfang clan. It was only a ten minute walk from the castle's back gate to the royal hunting grounds. But by the time we stepped into Heshler Forest, the royal werewolf had already discovered that I could not lie to him.

Upon hearing this fact, the first question that the shaggy gray beast asked was, "Did the Queen tell you to cooperate with me, or are ya going to be evasive-like?"

I thought that cornering me like that so early in our relationship was quite rude. Nevertheless, I replied, "This hunt is being conducted for your enjoyment, Prince Gnarl. I have been told to be a cooperative and forthcoming companion. Anything short of state secrets and sworn confidences can be discussed."

He rubbed his paws together with glee. "Hot *damn*. This is going to be a fun trip, Witness."

I grit my teeth. I wished for the hunt to end swiftly, but my silent prayers were not answered.

Then the quizzing started. He was disappointed by how boring my life had been before moving into Castle Heshler. It was clear that the lupine was digging for embarrassing material, something to lord over me as he amused himself.

About half an hour into our trip, he struck gold. He asked, "What was the dumbest thing you had to admit to Lynne?"

I bristled a little bit every time the mangy mutt used my Queen's name rather than Her title. Apparently, She insisted that he drop the formalities when they were alone. And as I was standing in Her stead and we *were* alone, I begrudgingly had to accept this breach of protocol.

But my annoyance was quickly washed away by the realisation of what he was asking me to admit. I frantically tried to think of a way that my naivety could be classified as a state secret.

Prince Gnarl crowed, "Oh this must be good. Even in just the moonlight, I can see you turning as red as the belly of a newt. What is it, then?"

I stammered, "When I f-first left the farm, I wasn't... educated in the ways of the world. Of w-women. I mainly took care of chickens, and never got involved w-with the mechanics of... breeding."

"What are you saying, boy?"

I blurted, “I didn’t know where babies came from. H-human babies at least. I thought eggs were involved, and after an unfortunate incident... I had to ask her.”

The gray wolf started howling with mirth. If there was any wild game close by, surely they ran for the distant hills.

I snapped, “It isn’t funny, Sir. I gravely insulted a duchess who propositioned me when I asked if she was in the process of clutching.”

This fact was apparently even **more** humorous to the smelly creature. Prince Gnarl lost his footing and curled up into a ball, his knees tucked to his chest. He couldn’t stop laughing. Almost a minute passed before the wolf panted his way back to sobriety.

He looked up at me, tears in his eyes, and said, “I need a break after that. Take a seat, Andy. You’ve earned a little rest.”

It was the first time he used my actual name rather than my title. I didn’t like the way it sounded coming from his beastly muzzle.

Nevertheless, I sat on the forest floor. The early Fall leaves that carpeted the ground were still mostly green. I knew from experience that they would turn a brilliant orange or red in just a couple of weeks. But I found myself hoping that my newfound companion would be long gone before he got to see such a glorious sight.

Prince Gnarl was digging in his pack for some jerky, and taking his time about it. I took a moment to examine the beast, or at least as best I could in the pale moonlight. He was easily a head taller than me, and far broader at both hip and shoulder. The longbow and warhammer resting on his back would have been a challenge to wield, even for the strongest humans in the Queen’s personal guard. The wolf was clad in a set of oddly mismatched armor. A leather and ring vest protected his chest and back, but left his arms mostly bare. I say ‘mostly’, because solid steel vambraces adorned the bottom half of each forearm, presumably acting as small shields in combat. A chainmail kilt hung down to the werewolf’s knees, leaving his lower legs and rear paws exposed. I wondered if this odd attire was to facilitate his shapeshifting.

I asked, “Sir, I only ask because I’ve not seen such a thing with my own eyes; but being a werewolf means that your body can make a transformation, yes?”

The royal lupine glanced up from his fist full of beef jerky. “Huh? Oh yes. Our people are blessed with the ability to become full wolves. Though much larger than the little cousins that you have running around the countryside in these parts.”

“Can you become a full human too?”

He gagged a bit. After hacking up some phlegm and meat fragments, he said, “**Human?!** Who in the Hell would want to do that? Disgusting.”

Silence fell over our impromptu campsite. I only hoped that I didn't offend the beast too badly.

Canteens were fetched and uncorked. After taking a long swig of water, Prince Gnarl wiped his muzzle with the back of one paw. Then he asked, "Kid, why do you want to know about that stuff? Are you writing a book?"

I admitted, "Well sir, I *am* keeping a journal at the suggestion of Lynne. But I was mainly wondering if your shapeshifting is what caused you to wear such an... *interesting* selection of armor."

He tilted his head at me, looking much like a confused dog for just a moment. It amused me, picturing the creature sprinting around on all fours to keep a herd of sheep in line.

Then the other man rumbled, "Oh. Yeah, I can see how it might seem odd to you. Your people tend to wrap up in the stiffest stuff available, head to toe, right? My people value mobility. Lighter chest armor allows us to get in and out quicker. Steel pauldrons let us parry a blow without lugging around heavy shields. Chain kilts protects our vitals, but still let us mount up on giant lizards when we need to. Bare paws means we can climb, or even slash with our claws if we need to. Understand?"

But I was too focused on one detail to answer his question. "You ride giant lizards, Your Highness?"

Prince Gnarl snorted. "Of course. Only way to travel. Now if what I'm wearing meets with your approval, Witness, how about we get our asses moving?"

I took a quick gulp of water before sealing my canteen and settling it into the netting that hung from my belt. "Of course."

He led and I followed, a comfortable arrangement as far as I was concerned. My only complaint was that we were walking into the wind that was passing through the tall oak trees. Logical for a hunt, but having the unfortunate side effect of filling my nostrils with wolf musk. I bit my tongue rather than say anything. He was a foreign dignitary, after all.

Our pace slowed as the Prince picked up a trail or a scent of some sort. I didn't see anything, but I assumed he was a far more experienced hunter than I. Fifteen minutes of stalking in the near darkness brought us closer to our prey. At one point my companion stood stock still, and gestured for me to hunker down.

He fell into a crouch next to me and whispered, "What about you?"

I honestly had no idea what the daft wolf was talking about. I murmured, "Your Royal Highness?"

“You’re wearing almost no armor. Just leathers. And a tiny pig sticker. Why?”

It took me a moment to realise that he was picking up the conversation from a donkey’s age ago. When the context dawned on me, I explained, “Too much metal prevents a Witness from making a connection with the Hellscape. It prefers natural, skin-like mediums. So no metal armor, no jewelry. I carry the rapier for protection, but that’s all. I even considered getting rid of the basket hilt, but it turned out to be fine.”

The werewolf rumbled, ponderously, “Magic. Real magic. Anything that can speed this hunt along?”

I nodded and then whispered, “Yessir, but if the animal is too close, the experience might spook them.”

Prince Gnarl shook his fuzzy head. He spoke in short, soft bursts. “Naw. Trail went cold. Which is really odd. Because we were gaining. Need to see why. Do your witchcraft, Andy.”

The werewolf prince’s tone was calm, somber. This time when he used my birth name, I felt only a tiny sense of revulsion. I murmured, “Okay. Please watch over me for a moment, sir.”

Crouched in the damp leaves, surrounded by darkness, I closed my eyes and sought the light.

The concentrated pool of purity beat within me like a second heart. Through my mind’s eye, I focused on the living, silvery-white fluid. It flowed like mercury in an alchemist’s bowl, reacting to the approach of my illusionary fingers, recoiling as if in horror. Then the mental projection of my digits brushed the surface, and everything changed.

The divine blessing of my Queen surged over my fingers, coating the length of my arm up to the elbow. That slick, cold energy continued to pulse as it hugged my skin, in time with Lynne’s own heartbeat despite her being miles away.

I opened my eyes and found the Veil waiting for me. Superimposed over my vision of reality was the door between worlds, manifested as a thin length of black silk, fluttering in the ebbing and flowing spiritual tide. I pushed my shielded arm through the curtain and into the Hellscape beyond.

The fires of Hell hissed and screamed as they touched the purity of my Queen’s soul. The rippling heat and living shadow rolled away, retreating from their antithesis. Soon, only the dusty orange-red plains remained. I twitched my fingers, calling to the soil. A chunk of crimson cracked away from the other plane and floated into my waiting palm. Mercilessly, I balled my hand into a fist, listening to the screams of lost souls as I crushed the rough dirt into a fine powder.

When I withdrew my arm, the Veil vanished. The glove of liquid purity steamed away, boiling into nothingness as motes of silver flowed back into my breast. I was left with a fragment of power clenched in my frigid hand.

“Sweet mother of all canines.”

Only when he spoke did I remember Prince Gnarl’s presence. I knew from experience that he would have seen everything that happened external to my body and on this side of the Veil. From his eyes, my arm would have reached into nothingness and disappeared, only to return with something in my grip.

I murmured, “Are you okay?” It was important to assess the reaction of mundane observers, even those professing to be friendly.

He rumbled, “Y-yeah. Never seen anything like that, not up close. It was intense.”

I nodded. The two of us were in full agreement on that count.

I opened my hand to observe the warm red dust sitting in my palm. Some parts of the Hellscape were more malleable than others. The locale that I had just visited was rather raw. But my ritual refined the soil into something usable.

Now it was just a matter of directing the boon. I blew gently on the captured fragment of Hell, purified and bent to my will. It floated up towards my nostrils, and towards the Prince’s great snout.

I instructed my companion, “Inhale deeply, Your Highness.”

We breathed in the arcane dust, and it made an indelible bond. I could feel where each mote of magic was drifting. I sneezed, and that unleashed a glowing red cloud into the air. The cloud elongated into a tendril, an eldritch magical construct that twisted in the darkness before pointing northwards. It flew towards an unseen target, eerily silent. Prince Gnarl charged after it, rear claws digging into the soil for extra traction.

The hunt was on.

There was no way that I could keep up with a werewolf who moved like the wind. Instead I concentrated on maintaining a swift but steady pace. Through my connection with the particles possessing his lungs, I could *feel* Prince Gnarl panting like a dog. He was using our link with the tendril to monitor the wind, and position us so that our scents didn’t reach the nose of our prey. His pull on me, and mine on him, allowed me to shadow the experienced hunter long after losing sight of him.

So I knew when to slow down so as not to startle the prey. And I knew when to drop to all fours and crawl to the crouching werewolf’s side. He was just pulling out his massive recurve bow when I joined him behind the stand of lacebark shrubs. His heart rate plummeted as he

fell into a marksman's trance, something that I had never experienced before. Through him, I felt my own breathing slow. Together we peered out above the line of the brush and took aim.

The tendril followed the Prince's broadhead arrow, streaking in like a second harbinger of Death. It was hardly required. As the construct of smoke and dust bounced harmlessly off the small buck's hide, the real projectile took the hoofed creature through the heart. The deer staggered and fell where he stood.

Prince Gnarl vaulted over the shrubs and rushed over to his fallen quarry. In a moment of swift, brutal compassion, his warhammer found the dying buck's head. There would be no trophy, but the creature would not suffer for even a moment longer than necessary.

But my focus was not on my companion's savage mercy. It was on the tendril. The glowing red cloud reformed for a moment before chaotically tearing itself apart. Soon there wasn't a single arrow, but four hovering in the night air. They twitched and danced. Tracking something close to the werewolf.

Tracking.

I shouted, "Get down!"

To the Prince's credit, he knew how to take an order when it was absolutely necessary. The first spear found only the air where the lupine stood a fraction of a second ago. He rolled across the buck's corpse and dug his claws into the carcass. The second and third spears pierced the deer's thick hide, Prince Gnarl using it as a makeshift shield.

The fourth spear flew through the brush. Shouting gave away my position, and I paid the price. Pain shot through my neck and spine as the sharp steel spearhead grazed off of the right side of my head. It sliced right along my jawbone before flying over my shoulder. I screamed. The grating of metal on bone was almost enough to make me forget my training. Almost.

I allowed the pain to wash through me like a cleansing benediction. Those who would bring me suffering, those who would bring me fire and torment, they did not understand my relationship with the Beyond. For those things were the tools of the Underworld. And *that*... well, that was my speciality.

The power of my pilfered piece of Hellscape was dwindling, but I knew that there was enough arcane energy remaining for one final trick. I held my hand in the air, fingers curled and claw-like. The red dust was drawn from the air, from my lungs, and even from the Prince's panting maw. Every mote of the stuff gathered in my beckoning palm. As my masked attacker stepped into the moonlight and drew his scimitar, I balled my hand into an angry fist. By the time he was leaping over the lacebark shrubbery, it was too late.

I opened my hand and unleashed what I had gathered. The bullet of demonfire flew faster than the eye could see, as if fired from Satan's own sling. I played the role of Witness, dispassionately noting the physics of the impact. My attacker's momentum was completely reversed, flying away from me while his ringmail fragmented. His breastbone cracked and exploded. There was no splash of blood. The crater in his chest was instantly cauterised, leaving only a rising cloud of sulfur and ash.

I struggled through the brush before sprinting to Prince Gnarl's side. I was reaching across my body to clutch at the open wound with my left hand, doing my best to stem the bleeding. While I was dispatching my attacker, the werewolf had thrown his deer-shield aside and grabbed his warhammer. He was deftly fending off two more of the masked men, meeting flashing swords with spinning steel. I managed to cut off the last attacker before he could approach my new companion's flank. Drawing my basket hilted rapier right handed, I took up the en garde position.

I may have been a farm boy in my former life, but my last few years were spent as a royal surrogate; a virtual prince so far as anyone in Castle Heshler was concerned. And with that status came training. I was only a competent horseman, and my bow skills needed quite a bit of work. But I took to fencing like a duck takes to water. In competition, my Queen would look on in pride as I bested most of the younger guards. I only fell to the most seasoned combatants. And I'd be damned if I disappointed Her now.

My opponent's blade was a blur as he flicked it into en garde in tierce. The moon was bright, and my night vision was keen enough to follow the action. Still. This would be tricky.

The assassin lunged with his scimitar, but I parried en sixte, driving his blade high and outside. He managed to recover before my riposte found his ribs. He hesitated. I knew that his ringmail armor would offer no protection against a thrust from my thin blade. And with that fearful pause, I knew that *he* knew the same.

One of the Prince's attackers tried to get cute, slashing at his hip as he attempted to spin and brush past. The werewolf was having none of it. He took the blow on the wrist instead, heavy metal bracer stopping the curved blade dead. A quick extension of his claws and an upward sweep caught the underside of the assassin's arm. The man screamed and hopped away, tattered flesh his only reward. The other attacker tried to press home with a low attack, but Prince Gnarl drove the head of his warhammer into the ground and stepped around it, allowing the slash to deflect from the metal haft of his weapon.

I refocused on my own battle when my opponent slid his foot forward through the fallen leaves. He slashed at my ankle, but I stepped out and parried prime, dropping the tip of my blade low and rolling it towards the incoming scimitar. He tried to bounce off the block and attack my outside shoulder, but I deftly supinated my wrist and flipped my blade into sixte. He was in too deep to recover as I slashed at his face. I sliced through the cloth mask. If his scream was any indication, he and I had now had matching wounds.

His next thrust met a parry. My thrust met a stop-thrust, dodged by my side step. Thrust high into riposte, which I parried. He feinted overhead, I bit with quinte, he slashed at my belly. Only my leathers saved me. Thrust, halted, into riposte, into counter-riposte that flew wide outside. His final thrust was met by a sudden hard beat quarte. The scimitar was pushed wide by my unexpected show of wiry strength. I took him through the eye.

As my opponent fell, gravity unsheathed my blade from the assassin's skull. I turned to help the Prince, but I was too late. His first attacker was on the ground, head facing the wrong way around. The man with the bleeding arm tried to parry the werewolf's two handed blow, but the warhammer crashed through his weak guard. Much like the deer, the man's skull was splintered, his end coming mercifully quick.

Though the werewolf had minor cuts on his arms and left calf, his expression upon seeing my wound spoke volumes: He thought I was in far worse shape. And though I said nothing aloud, I had to agree with that assessment.

Unceremoniously, he pushed me into a sitting position on the forest floor. He snarled, "Just the face, or did he get yer belly?"

Titles and jeers were conspicuously absent. The wolf was all business.

I mumbled, "Leathers stopped that one, sir." Pain shot through my spine whenever my jaw moved. I vowed to speak as little as possible for a while.

Whatever fluid the werewolf dripped into the wound burned like a thousand embers. I know I screamed. Tears streamed down my face, but that paled in comparison to the rivulets of blood dripping down my shoulder. The Prince didn't comment on either. Instead he took out a hooked needle and fine, strong thread.

I was about to protest, to beg the lupine for some strong spirits at the very least. But there was no pain as he started to stitch me up. My eyes went wide, amazed by this strange wolveren anaesthetic. He saw my reaction and snorted. Then he bent his attention to closing my wound with over a dozen tiny stitches.

All the while, Prince Gnarl was prattling on, doing his best to distract me. "Yeah, that's going to make a fine scar. Your face was too pretty anyway. The ladies, they like 'em a little bit rugged. Even your Queen."

I grumbled, "Hey."

He shrugged one shoulder, the other still rock solid so that he could perform his surgery. He rumbled, "It's true. I know you're a fan of the truth. Anyway, you'll surely pull the ladies at your local tavern now. Um. Or the guys, I suppose. I know you need to be flexible as Lynne's stand-in. But yeah. They're gonna be hanging *all* over you."

Briefly, I wondered why this creature was being so nice to me, after spending most of the night interrogating, tormenting, or teasing me. It wasn't really a puzzle that I could solve with the information available. The optimist in me considered that Prince Gnarl might genuinely be a kind man, but he put on a gruff act to keep his people in line. The pessimist in me thought that he was just trying to score personal and political points with the Queen. I tended to agree with my inner pessimist. Either way, his grip on my shoulder was firm, but tender. His ministrations of my wound were careful and thorough.

When he finished, the Prince said, "That's going to sting like the nine Hells in the morning, but the medicine should keep the area numb and cool throughout the night. No bandage for now, that stuff needs to breathe and evaporate. Your court physician will tell you what to do tomorrow."

I mumbled a soft, "Thank you."

Then it was on to business of a different sort. A search of the bodies brought up literally nothing. Or at least no new information. They were masked humans. Their only possessions were clothes and weapons. They had nary a coin or personal item, no food or drinking water. Which meant that these were either locals, or that they had help nearby. A base of operations somewhere in the wilderness might mean backup was on the way. We didn't plan to stay in this area long enough to probe for the truth.

Prince Gnarl said, "Carry their weapons, Witness. Maybe the metal will provide a hint. If you need your magic, just drop them. Me, I'll grab dinner."

I watched as the werewolf hauled the deer's corpse up onto his shoulders, as easily as a mountain man might hoist up a small child. No stranger to following instructions, I gathered and sheathed the scimitars. They only weighed a couple of pounds each. I cradled them in my arms as we made our way back to Castle Heshler.

The going was slow, as we were on high alert the entire time. It was close to midnight before we made it home. The campsite outside of the castle was in use by, and under the protection of, the guards. After I informed them of the situation, the camp became far less populated. A patrol assembled to check out the ambush site, the corpses, and anything unusual in the surrounding area.

Neither of us had an objection when the night sergeant suggested that we remain until their investigation was complete. Prince Gnarl handed off our kill for preparation, and a couple of the guards had passable venison steaks cooking in short order. We donated the remainder of the carcass to the men and women on duty. It was the least we could do after turning their boring night watch into a frantic search of the royal hunting grounds.

The night sergeant assigned us a tent for the evening, and then went about his business. We ate by candlelight; he voraciously, while my bites were smaller and more tentative. The stitches still didn't hurt, but pulling or snagging one might deepen the scar. Besides, I wanted to show the beast how civil people conducted themselves at dinner.

All the while, the Prince told tales of past hunts. Although I wasn't particularly interested, the sound of his voice was somewhat comforting. By the end of the meal, I was feeling somewhat less wary about the wolf. Perhaps my Queen had been right. Still, if I were to judge the werewolf solely by his actions rather than his alien visage, he wouldn't fare well. Strange at best, rude at worse.

He noticed my introspection and lapsed into silence. My murmured apology was waved off with one paw. Now the lupine creature was examining me. I didn't understand why until he next spoke.

"Andy. Just to be clear: Lynne said that you should do *anything* to please me, correct?"

I blinked at him. Then I murmured, "Yes, Your Royal Highness. Why do you as-"

But the question didn't even clear my lips before he was upon me with a spry pounce. His bulk pinned me to the borrowed sleeping roll and blankets. I found myself at the mercy of a grinning werewolf.

My assessment: Lynne had been wrong about the scope of the Prince's appetites.

Chapter 4

Full disclosure: I just used a sharp knife to carefully cut a few pages out of this journal. Please allow me to apologise for not being able to share every aspect of my recent experiences. After reviewing the detailed account of my post-hunt activities, the Queen forbade me from including 'the kind of tawdry smut peddled by common pornographers'. It was not my intention to withhold, but the Queen's word is law.

Suffice it to say that Prince Gnarl was pleased by my ability to 'stand in for Lynne', though precious little standing was involved.

When we woke in the morning, still under guard, not much had changed. Patrols recovered the bodies from the woods, but found no trace of a broader organization or conspiracy. I was starting to feel the bone-deep pain in my jaw. The Prince insisted that he be allowed to take me to the court doctor. Our escort brought us to the Northwest tower to visit Doc Madelyn. She approved of the stitches, applied an aloe and cannabis tincture to the wound itself, and then gave me a mild dose of laudanum to ease the pain. Although not quite as effective as the Prince's brew, I was feeling very little pain by the time I got back to my quarters.

The werewolf's assessment was frank, "What a pit."

Inwardly, I bristled. The creature had proven himself to be little more than an animal last night, which meant that he was *hardly* qualified to critique my decor. Besides, I preferred to think of my chambers as austere. I had my writing desk, a dresser for my clothes, a chest for my sword and other personal items. I had a nice big bed. What more did I really need?

After the Queen stopped in to check on me and make Her creative edits, She dragged Prince Gnarl into the hallway for what was supposed to be a private conversation. Their escalating volume negated some of that privacy. I could tell that I was one of the topics of conversation, and continued to be even when the werewolf stomped back into my chambers.

He growled, "God's sake Lynne, he's fine."

She followed the lupine inside, and closed my door behind Her. "Just be more careful if there's a next time, Teddy. He needs to be able to *walk without limping* afterwards."

I looked up from my writing and asked, "Teddy? Am I allowed to privately call you that, Your Royal Highness?"

The wolf said 'no', but at the same time my Queen said 'yes'. There could be no doubt as to who I was going to listen to.

The werewolf snarled a bit. "Besides, I'm not the one who tried to kill him. That was a bunch of crazy humans."

Lynne took in a deep breath, then exhaled it with a sigh. She said, "You have a point. But that's just as much a mystery to me as it is to you. We don't have any separatist factions anywhere near the castle. There are certain religious groups who hate Witnesses... no offense, Andy my love."

"None taken, my Queen."

"...but those groups don't hire assassins, generally speaking. Similar groups hate the idea of an alliance with your people, but again, we've never seen them hire outside of their own ilk."

I scribbled away dutifully. Then I paused to ask, "Are these state secrets? Should I be careful about what I record?"

The other two traded glances.

Teddy rumbled, "My people can keep their muzzles shut if I tell them to. But it's your state."

Lynne started pacing. Her simple autumnal dress fluttered and swayed as she moved, in a vivid display of orange and red. Her final verdict was, "No. In fact, I think we need the people to help us. We should spread word of these events far and wide, and offer a reward for information."

I nodded, then dipped my quill to gather more ink.

Teddy said, "Maybe that will help. Hey. Do you think it's a reaction to... you know. Us?"

Lynne had to laugh, "No. 'Us' is a well kept secret around these parts, barring a couple of members of the royal family. Hells, even Andy was kept in the dark until yesterday. I intentionally had him covering for me here in the castle whenever I made trips out to see you. I just told him about the possibility of marriage hours before your hunt. And although it would be quite clever of him to stage an ambush where he gets wounded to allay suspicion, he didn't have the time."

I didn't mind my Queen pointing out that I might have had motive, but no opportunity, to plan the attack. It was only logical.

The werewolf nodded his great head, slowly. "My mom and dad know our intentions, of course. Some on the Alpha Council suspect, I'm sure. Gods, what a mess this could be."

The three of us lapsed into silence. I glanced over at the royal pair, only to see them perched at the edge of my bed. His paw was wrapped around Her petit hand. A myriad of emotions thrashed within the pit of my belly. I was jealous, but of whom and why, that was unclear.

Instead of entertaining or discussing those feelings, I offered a simple plan of action, “As we wish to announce this to the people, shall I gather the High Council? Invite the werewolf ambassador and his people, perhaps?”

My Queen said, “Yes Andy, that’s probably the best course of action. And invite Bruce as your personal aide, please. I want the Master of the Household there to make sure protocol is observed. And I need him there to protect your interests as a Witness specifically. Bring your journal, I want a full record of proceedings.”

So now, with the appropriate edits made, I’m all caught up. As I scribble, I find myself sitting next to Bruce in the Royal Hall. I’m the subject of many stares, particularly from the lupine side of the table. There are perhaps two dozen people here in total, though the remainder of the royal family is conspicuously absent. There’s a policy about having too many royals in the same place after any assassination attempt. Wise, I think.

Bruce just leaned over to whisper in my ear, “Aye laddie. Them doggos trust ya just about as far as they can throw ya. Or maybe, as far as they could throw me. I’m a good three stone heavier than ye are after all. Keep yer wits about ya, boyo.”

I can’t help but smile a bit at Bruce’s quiet rant. When I first completed my training as a Witness three years ago, I had precious few friends or allies in the castle outside of the royal family. Just about everyone shunned me, despite some of the older staff members having worked with my father.

But not Bruce. The Master of the Household took me under his wing. He helped me cope with my role in the Court’s highly complex social structure, despite my relative innocence and naivety. Seeing our friendship blooming, the Queen passed a new law: The Master of the Household was not required to comply with any formality regarding Witnesses. From that moment on, the older man never used my title when we were speaking privately. He never beat around the bush or used flowery language in our conversations. He was just Bruce.

My attention was drawn to the head of the large oval table, carved from sheets of patterned granite. The Queen was making Her entrance, with Prince Gnarl in tow. She sat at the head of the table, and the werewolf took the seat just to her right.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I promise, we’ll keep this as brief as possible. Lunch will only be served after we finish, to encourage swift and frank discourse.”

There were some snorts and chuckles from around the table. Most of the werewolves didn’t look very amused.

“In the spirit of honesty and brevity, I’d like to present the royal Witness. He will recount the relevant details in regards to last night’s assassination attempt.”

I stood to pay Witness.

My account of events, as always, was factual. I focused as much as possible on times, distances, and circumstantial changes. My words were devoid of emotion, despite my brush with death. I avoided gory details that might bias the account, and simply confirmed that four attackers of moderate skill were involved. I catalogued the wounds that we suffered, and how we got back to safety. The faint throbbing in my jaw curtailed any temptation to provide ancillary facts.

Even before my final words finished echoing through the chamber, the werewolf ambassador was on his feet. He growled, "We would like two of these scimitars, to subject them to our own alchemic testing."

The Queen nodded, gesturing off to Her right. "It is done. Your Prince will be handing them over to you shortly after these proceedings end."

Prince Gnarl noted, "It is uncertain if I was the target of this attack. I want to make it very clear: The Witness suffered the most serious wound. The attackers could have easily seen me as a bodyguard of sorts, and tried to clear the way in order to take him out."

A shaggy gray wolf sitting to Ambassador Sharpe's left snarled, "Preposterous. This was human bigotry gone awry! They probably saw one of their own as collateral damage. Who knows if they would have even bothered with the Witness if they had killed you, Your Royal Highness. Assuming his own innocence in the whole matter."

Bruce leaned over to murmur in my ear, "Cole Longfang, head o' their merchant guild."

The Prince came to my defense. "Citizen Longfang, I'll note that although he's too humble to go into detail about how the assassins were slain, it was the Witness who got the first kill. And another after that. He was my equal in battle. I'd gladly have him along on my next hunt."

Several of the wolves peered at me through narrowed eyes. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

He continued, "Let's conduct the investigation before we start baring fangs. There are plenty of wolves who want me dead. There are plenty of wolves who hate and fear Witnesses. Until I can be reassured that those types aren't working across the border with an assassin's guild, I won't limit the scope of my inquiries to any singular race."

There were murmurs of agreement from both sides. Thieves and assassins often worked across political borders, with no regard for race or creed as long as the right amount of coin was involved.

A shrill, all-too-human voice piped up from a few seats to my left, "If this is retribution for meddling with the power of God, we should not be involved. Divine retribution is the Lord's right, and not a mortal concern. The Witness reaps the fruit that he sows."

I kept my eyes fixed on the stone tabletop. Standing orders from the Queen forbade me from involving myself with that man.

Bruce gripped my shoulder, firmly. His voice was a low snarl. “Dun worry laddie. Bishop Wren is a peely-wally, ancient arse who ain’t had the good grace to die yet. If there’s a special place in Hell fer bigots, you’ll see him there some day.”

My friend’s words probably shouldn’t have comforted me. But they did.

That wasn’t the end of the conversation, however. The ambassador’s wife, also serving as the cultural attache for all matters relating to werewolf tribal life, piled on. “Whether or not your God has been angered, we do not want that... **thing** involved in this investigation. It plays in the demon realm, and admits to using sorcery. Our kind does not accept such witchcraft.”

The sound of a fist hammering down on the stone table reverberated throughout the chamber. Mugs rattled as sturdy oak legs shook with the impact.

“But I accept Andy. If he chooses to be involved, he is welcome at my side. And I consider the subject *closed*.”

I must admit, my jaw hung open at Prince Gnarl’s adamant defense of my character. Or perhaps it was the numbing effect of the pain medication. Either way, I wondered why this creature felt so charitably towards me. The feeling was quite clearly not mutual.

The Queen reached over, touching the Prince’s arm ever so briefly. The stiffness of the werewolf’s muscles fell away, and he took his seat once more.

“I believe my esteemed monarch from the South is trying to say that we cannot leave our most potent resources on the sidelines of this particular tilt yard, if I may borrow a jousting adage. I need the Witness in play, as both my surrogate and as a keen investigatory tool. If assigning him directly to the Prince will help keep the peace, that is what shall be done.”

During the round of muttering and commentary that followed, Bruce leaned over to inform me, “Ya ain’t been thrown to the wolves, laddie. Just one wolf in particular.”

I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t very funny to me. But the Master of the Household seemed more than a little pleased with himself.

My Queen had something to add once the hubbub faded. “But they cannot do this alone. Are there a few brave souls willing to lend their minds to this inquiry, and dedicate their bodies to the protection of both Prince Gnarl and the Witness?”

Bruce’s hand immediately shot up. But he was politely turned down.

“Master Tomlin, as much as your spirit is without peer, and your crossbow skills without question, your mobility issues in the past might hinder proceedings. Besides, I need you here.”

Bruce muttered to me, “Snap yer leg just once, lad, and they put ya out to pasture.”

I reached over and squeezed his hand. My friend’s support was appreciated, either way.

Then I heard a polite, but insistent tapping coming from the far side of the table. A werewolf’s claw was rhythmically poking at a drawing slate, which in turn reverberated against the stone tabletop. When the brown wolf had everyone’s attention, she silently raised a paw.

After a moment of pregnant silence, one of the human councilmen snapped, “Well? Out with it, woman.”

Bruce snorted aloud, staring daggers at the other human. He murmured to me, “Always count on Barron Watney ta be a pair o’ shrivelled bollocks in any setting.”

Prince Gnarl snarled, “She does not speak, *sir*.” His tone was less than polite. Then, turning to the lupine with her paw in the air, he said, “Really Tessa?”

Her nod was firm.

“Well then. Cartographer Lope is more than welcome within my cadre. Her feats of exploration are legend among my people.”

I flashed a well rehearsed, polite smile at the wolf when she glanced my way. I was rewarded with a tentative if toothy smirk, as her fuzzy hand fell back into her lap.

The Queen asked, “Any more brave souls?”

I almost thought that I imagined the soft reply from somewhere behind me. “Begging your pardon. I... f-forgive me Your Majesty. Is the invitation for anyone?”

Chairs scraped and heads craned as we all turned to regard the speaker. It was just one of the guards, and a young one at that. I knew him, vaguely. He was in his second year, arriving at the castle a while after I did. I don’t believe I ever heard his name aloud.

My Queen soon rectified the gap in my knowledge. “Guardsmen Fry. You may speak.” From my years with Her, I could tell that She was trying to hide a smile. But the very corner of Her lip betrayed amusement.

The young man, clutching his war spear for dear life, had to clear his throat before he found his voice again. “I would... that is, if I could be spared here Your Majesty. I w-would very much like to help.”

Despite my outward neutrality, I almost laughed aloud when one of guardsman Fry's peers hissed, "Aaron, you complete pillock."

There was a vague murmur as those seated at the table discussed this odd breach of protocol. A couple of the human noblemen were eyeing the guard balefully.

"Yes. He'll do."

I didn't realise who had spoken, until I heard my own voice echoing back from the chamber's walls.

Before there could be any objection, Prince Gnarl rumbled, "Fine. Good enough for now."

And on the tail of his sentence, the Queen quickly brought proceedings to a close. "Thank you, everyone. The Prince's new team will meet in the Witness' chambers directly after lunch. The rest of us will coordinate police and martial forces and cast a wide net." She clapped twice, quite loudly. Soon the room was flooded with servants, and it was clear to everyone that discussing state secrets was off the table.

Bruce slapped me on the back, causing me to grunt and rock forward. He didn't say a word as he rose to take care of his other duties, but I suspected that he was proud of me for taking the initiative. I might have been proud of myself as well, if my selection of the guard had been a conscious thought instead of an irrational impulse.

I need to put this journal away now. The potatoes are soaked with gravy. Things could get messy.

Chapter 5

It was rapidly becoming clear: Aaron and I weren't cut out for this 'adventure' stuff.

This first crossed my mind when our newly formed company met in my room after lunch. I had been the last to arrive, delayed by the requirement to sign my account of events into the official Court record. When asked what our first steps should be, the young guardsman and I agreed that we should wait for the blacksmith's metallurgy report.

Prince Gnarl nodded, then rumbled, "And if that bears no fruit?"

And already, both humans were stumped. Luckily, Tessa and Teddy had far more initiative than we did. They sprawled out on my bed like they owned it, and began brainstorming.

The werewolf female began with her maps. She diagramed the radius that our assassins could have reasonably travelled on foot, if word of our hunt had been leaked shortly after a decision was made. A smaller circle was drawn, indicating the area that we would surely find a stash of basic supplies like food and water, given the lack of such necessities on the corpses.

Silently, I thanked God that both of the werewolves had a command of the English language. The alternative would be the lupine tongue, which was completely incomprehensible to the human mind. Every once in a while, the Prince would rumble something sounding so alien, it sent shivers up my spine. Aaron paled when he first heard the guttural, oddly lyrical words drifting from our de-facto leader's muzzle. Tessa's reply, written in chalk on her slate, was a jumble of letters with strange arcane symbols attached. I had to gather up all of my courage to even ask what they called this demonic script and the associated verbal abomination.

"French." was his reply.

I shuddered. It was horrific.

The creature regarded my revulsion with curiosity. He noted, "You use many French words in your journal. Fencing terms, particularly."

I fought down the surge of anger in my breast and belly. But my tone was crisp when I asked, "You read my journal?"

"Sure. You were late, and I was bored."

My retort was sharper than intended, "Your Royal Majesty, I'll have you know that those terms are from the *'Hanging Sword Lane Guide on Fencing'*. A proper English manual."

My defense of the English language resulted in a bark of laughter from the Prince and a sad shake of the head from his cartographer. Barbarians, the both of them.

After planning out a few potential courses of action, Tessa tapped her Prince's shoulder. She pointed at something that she scribbled on her slate. It caused Teddy to guffaw.

I asked, "What did she say?"

He rumbled, "She said that **you** two need to start pulling yer own weight. Listen, Andy. I know that you're used to following orders and serving Lynne. But in a group like this, you need to contribute. And the same goes for you, Aaron. When the claws come out, you need to use your intuition. Can't be waiting for orders all the time. Understand?"

Without thinking, and simultaneously, the both of us said, "Yes sir."

The Prince scrubbed at his face tiredly. "And we don't have time for the 'Sir' and 'Your Grace' and 'Witness' stuff either. I never liked that crap anyway."

I asked, "So we should call you Teddy?"

The wolf paused upon hearing that aloud. The somewhat murderous expression on his fuzzy face was probably an indication that I had misinterpreted his intentions.

But the cat was out of the bag, so to speak. Tessa scribbled on her slate and held it up. It read, *'They call you Teddy?!'* Her jaw hung open in a silent lupine laugh as her tail thrashed against the bedclothes.

Aaron was on board, "Okay Teddy."

"It's Theodore, but... you know what, fine. If that's what it takes to get the sticks out of your arses, call me Teddy. When it's just us, of course. Don't spread it around."

The other human then turned to me, "And I can call you Andy?"

I instinctively wanted to correct Aaron, as a matter of protocol. But something curious happened. His face seemed to light up at the prospect of using my name instead of my title. I wondered how many friends the novice guard had among his peers. I considered that he might be far from home, as people come from all over the nation for a chance to work at Castle Heshler.

In the spirit of what the Prince was trying to do, I managed to forget about protocol for just long enough to say, "Of course you can."

It was done. The rules were bent. I waited for feelings of guilt or regret to overwhelm me. But there was nothing, at least nothing negative. If anything, the smile that the other man offered me buoyed my spirits.

All the while, our cartographer was busy scribbling with her chalk. Then she showed us, *'Call me Quintessa Surepaw Lope the Second.'*

Teddy answered flatly, "No."

She stuck her tongue out at her Prince. I could hardly believe that the interaction between a monarch and his subject was that casual. Perhaps that kind of comradery was what Lynne was striving for in our relationship. I made some mental notes.

Aaron asked, tentatively, "Should I... should I go and see if there's any news from the blacksmith?"

Teddy rumbled, "Try again. Not a question."

The young guard paused. Then he said, "I'm going to see if the blacksmith has any results yet."

"Good lad. Go."

When Aaron had left, the Prince asked me, "Out of curiosity, why did you say 'yes' when he stepped up?"

I shook my head and answered honestly, as always, "I have no idea. I just blurted it out. But after the fact, it seemed like the right thing to do."

The wolves shared a quick glance, then peered at me for a few moments. Teddy shrugged his muscular shoulders and said, "Fate, then."

Tessa looked less than comfortable with that conclusion. But she didn't offer an alternative. She held up a single clawed digit, and then padded out of the room. I took that to mean that she would be back momentarily. I watched as she closed the door of my chambers behind her.

"Andy."

I turned my head to regard the big wolf. "Yessir?"

"Come 'ere."

I walked to within arm's length of where the werewolf sat.

He said, "I wanted to clear the air between us. Normally putting your life in someone else's hands forms a kind of bond. A brotherhood. And if not, what we did afterwards tends to form a different kind of-

I cut him off. "Your Highness. As a Witness, I must remain neutral. If I seem distant-"

But he, in turn, cut **me** off. "You aren't neutral, yer adversarial. What in the Hell did I ever do to you? Other than try to get to know you and fight by your side?"

Forgetting my training, I shot back, "Other than dig around my personal life, sir? Other than probe for the most embarrassing things to use against me, sir?"

The werewolf's scowl came complete with flattened ears and a stiff tail. He rumbled, "That's what guys do, they pal around. I'd never really use anything against you, Andy. I was just treating you like one of the pack."

"It should be plainly obvious that I'm not interested in being part of a *'pack'*, Your Highness. So far, I've found everything about your culture to be brusque and without nuance."

The Prince couldn't help himself, "Brusque and nuance are both originally French words."

I rolled my eyes. Then I started to turn away, thinking the conversation was over. His big, heavy paw on my shoulder stopped me in my tracks.

"Is it because of what happened after? Your role as the Queen's substitute implied a kind of willingness. You were saying 'yes'. And you certainly seemed-"

I didn't let him finish that sentence. Instead my mechanical reply was, "My heart is the heart of the Queen."

His reply chilled me to the core, "But not really. Because if that was true, you would know that I love her. And that she loves me, with all of her heart."

Much like earlier in the Royal Hall, I had no idea where my next words came from. "Bite your tongue, you lying **cur!**"

For some reason, Prince Gnarl's shouted reply was directed over my left shoulder, "Give us a bloody minute!"

I heard the door slam behind me. I wasn't sure which of our companions had returned, but I was fairly sure that they'd knock before they tried to enter next time.

He said, in a softer tone, "It's true. This isn't strictly a political construct, though I admit that it will be very nice for our people. Lynne and I love one another. But she was right about you. Your people poisoned you against us. Even after you moved to the castle, her family trained you to hate werewolves. And now you won't let it out of your teeth, will you?"

I stood, mouth hanging open. I felt blood rush to my cheeks. I knew that I couldn't say anything in denial of his accusations; he was right about my feelings towards his race.

Whether I called it 'hate' or 'disdain' or 'disgust'... it was what I had been taught. It was all I knew.

The only thing that I could offer him was a simple but heartfelt request, "Give me time, Teddy. Please. I don't want to feel this way."

The shaggy gray werewolf nodded slowly. Then he rumbled, "Go splash some water on your face. I'll let them in."

I retreated to the washroom and poured water into a basin. I looked at the small circular mirror sitting atop the shale countertop. I was crying. It was a rare experience for me. This wolf, who I had known for less than two days, laid me open emotionally. Despite being true to form in some stereotypical ways, Prince Gnarl was also articulate, protective, and caring. I was unprepared for that.

Then something dawned on me: The Prince. He could have displayed his power over me to our new compatriots. Instead he sent me in here to save face. That fact made me feel better and worse, all at the same time.

I washed my face, then dried it with a white towel. It came away pink when I dabbed at my stitches. Regardless, I stepped back out into the main chamber. Everyone was present. And packing.

Aaron told me, "We have two separate leads. One from the blacksmithing and alchemy, and another from an eye witness seeking a reward. Come on, Andy."

A shiver went up my spine when the young guard used my name. It felt so wrong. At the same time, I wanted him to say it again.

Putting aside my feelings for a moment, I opened the chest at the foot of my bed. Soon my pack was bulging with a strange assortment of accessories. This kind of investigation might require some of my more esoteric tools.

Chapter 6

I spun the silver locket in front of the grizzled farmer's eyes as the entire Court looked on. People of every stripe and caste maintained complete silence as I worked.

This man claimed to know things about the assassins that nobody else would. It was up to me to determine if he was telling the truth, or if he had made some lucky guesses in order to secure a reward.

"Watch the silver spin. Feel yourself drifting into the light. You have nothing to fear."

I always felt that I had to add that last sentence. But it never helped. This man was terrified of me, as most commoners in such a situation would be. The burly man's frame shook as I gripped his shoulder, sweat dripping from his short brown beard. He really had nothing to fear if he was telling the truth. I would not be using the Queen's magic.

al-Wahm al-Amil is what the people of Asia called it, the techniques drawn directly from *'The Book of Healing'* more than five centuries ago. It predated the Hell Plague, and any kind of magic save for the far less reliable rituals of ancient gods, and some Kabbalistic rights.

After a couple minutes of soft encouragement, I felt the farmer's shoulders slump. His eyes were fixed only on the motion of the locket. His gnarled hands unballled, fists turning into lax hands hanging by his hips.

I murmured, "You said that you knew where the assassins travelled from, correct?"

"Yes, Witness."

"Tell me the name of the town."

"Ol' Whitby."

There was an undercurrent of muttering. This was not a popular answer within either contingent. Whitby was far to the North, closer to the ogres than the wolves. It didn't fit with any theory presented thus far.

The Queen made a sharp, horizontal cut through the air with Her hand. Silence fell over the chamber once more.

I asked, "How do you know this, sir?"

The other man murmured, "They paid me ta water 'n graze their horses fer a couple days. But I knew the brand, so I did. T'was Vance Foster's herd, plain as day, Witness."

“And mister Foster rents steeds up near Whitby?”

“Aye, Witness.”

I paused for a moment, thinking. A quick glance at the rest of my newly formed group wasn't helpful. Prince Gnarl was watching intently from the Queen's side, unmoving. Guardsman Fry was looking over Cartographer Lope's shoulder, as the werewolf located the correct map of the northlands and began to plot distances.

It wasn't enough. Circumstantial at best. Finally, I asked, “You've already seen the bodies and confirmed that these were the men in question. Did they speak in front of you?”

The man shifted uneasily. His answer was, “Not meanin' ta do so, but yes.”

I was confused for a moment. Then the gist of what must have happened clicked in my brain. “You eavesdropped on them.”

The man reddened somewhat, but admitted, “I did, Witness.”

“It's okay. Speak more of the incident, please.”

“They were camped out by th' barn. Didn't know I could get from th' house's attic right ta the loft. Hid behind the hay and listened.”

I said, “That was very clever of you. What did you hear?”

The man seemed encouraged by my approval. His voice held a conspiratorial tone as he related, “They talked 'bout killin'. But they talked weird. Like the deed was already done. An' since I woulda heard if somethin' like that happened, thought they were just nutters talkin' big.”

I pressed, “They said that they'd already killed me and Prince Gnarl?”

“No, Witness. The Queen. They said they'd killed the Queen.”

There was an immediate uproar. If the noise didn't break the man's trance, the shattering of crockery and wine glasses would have, as one of the noblemen accidentally knocked over a passing servant with his wild gesticulating.

The farmer's eyes shot open wide as chaos erupted around us. But I gripped his shoulder firmly and pulled myself in close. My lips were less than an inch from his ear.

“I believe you.”

My murmured reassurance drew a half-sob of relief from the farmer. I pulled back and gave him a sharp nod. The heart-shaped silver pendant found one of my pockets, and I waited for some order to be restored to proceedings.

That level of order wasn't going to be imposed by my Queen. Her face was pale, and Her green eyes were focused on the middle distance. Teddy had a big arm looped around Her back and the werewolf was rumbling something to Her, unheard above the din.

It was Bruce who restored proceedings to some level of civility. Shattered cups and bowls were swept away, and a fresh round of table wine ordered for everyone involved. Even the frazzled farmer was served a tall glass of our best red.

I decided to remain completely sober as I delivered my verdict, "I find this man's account to be credible. I sense no intent to deceive. Have him paid, and assign a patrol to the road running past his farm for the next two weeks."

Barron Watney started to voice an objection, but I stopped him with just a glare. He didn't need to be reminded: My will is the will of the Queen. Particularly when She was in no condition to make Her own declarations.

The farmer was escorted out via the kitchens, looking somewhat dazed as he walked and drank. I only spoke again when the chamber was sealed once more.

"Someone please present the findings from the blacksmith and alchemist?"

It was the ambassador himself who stepped up, every word pushed through a twisted, snarling muzzle. "Our findings, Witness, lead us in the exact opposite direction! All of the swords have a high nickel content. **Far** too high. This is a trait often found when the source materials were drawn from the Pas-de-Calais iron pits, right on the border of human and werewolf territory. The trail leads South, despite your little lizard and pony show."

"Ambassador Sharpe. When you speak to my Witness, you speak to **me**. Need I remind you what happened to the last lupine representative who openly mocked me?"

The Queen was back to Her full mental faculties. And the threat that She made was completely naked. Last year, the previous wolveren ambassador publicly declared that the Queen had no King because nobody in their right mind would marry Her. He thought that the Alpha Council would side with his show of moxie. That was the last time he was seen in a public forum. Ambassador Sharpe was appointed weeks later, and despite some rough edges, he was a vast improvement over the old representative.

But She was making it clear: She would gamble for someone better if push came to shove.

The werewolf took a deep breath, and then let it out in a low growl. The next words out of his maw were more civil. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. It has been a long couple of days, and I've allowed my frustration to get the better of me. You have my apology, Witness."

My reply was instinctive, "Accepted, of course."

Cole Longfang was the next werewolf to go on the offensive, albeit in a more restrained fashion. "And yet, what are we talking about here? Four identical blades, recently forged, making their way up to an obscure human town in the far North? That's a whelping's fancy. Would you agree, Witness, that it is far more likely for horses to wander off than hunks of steel?"

I held up a hand, wagging my index finger just a bit. "I reject the premise of the question, Citizen Longfang. It is at least equally possible that the weapons were waiting for them locally. It isn't unheard of for assassins to use dead drops to move around weapons and money."

Bishop Wren's strident voice was the next to weigh in, "Am I correct in saying that when our Queen passes on, an event which I pray is a century or more in the future, your life also ends, Witness?"

I was bewildered. I said, "Yes, you know that is the case, Your Most Reverend Excellency." I managed to utter the honorific without gagging.

"Then who is to say whether or not an attempt against the Queen's life is actually a veiled attempt against your own?"

I knew there was quite a bit of shouting after the Bishop's blunt statement. But I wasn't fully cognizant of the immediate aftermath. I couldn't help but wonder: *'Was he right?'*

The possibility never even occurred to me. It was a distracting line of thought, to say the least. So distracting that I didn't even feel Bruce tugging me back to my seat as someone managed to restore order.

"Everyone **shut the Hell up!**"

Prince Gnarl's voice filled the chamber completely. His claws were out and gripping at the surface of the stone table. Anyone who didn't settle immediately was met with a glare and a snarl from the royal werewolf.

Only when silence had returned to proceedings did the Queen speak once again, "Madmen do mad things for whatever convoluted reasons they can justify. It changes nothing. We have to assume that three lives are in danger, no matter who the ultimate target may be. Witness, as one of those endangered lives, I'd like to hear your preferred course of action."

Her words calmed me. She was right of course: We were all targets until we figured out exactly what was going on. I said, "It would seem that both leads are worth investigation. A situation on the border to the South would require the resources of the larger investigatory

body. Our small group of four can benefit from stealth and agility, so we should take the lead to the North. We can return those horses in the process, and perhaps earn some good will.”

“I concur. Prince Gnarl, if your government agrees, please make it so. We will remain to organize a joint force that will examine thief and assassin’s guild activity along our border, as well as the forging of assassins’ weapons with southern iron.”

As proceedings were breaking up, I walked over to Ambassador Sharpe, intending to reassure him that we were on the same side. Before I could say a word, the werewolf spoke.

“Ah, Witness. I’m glad you’ve decided to mind your own matters in the North. Let the soldiers and tactical experts do what they’re paid to do. You just keep the Prince out of harm’s way. He may only be third in line for leadership, but he’s a beloved figure amongst my people.”

It wasn’t exactly the sentiment I was hoping for. But I could understand why he felt that way. “Yes Ambassador, I will endeavour to keep us *all* safe. And with the grace of God, discover who is behind this plot against one or both of our Crowns.”

The smirk he shot me was dismissive at best. He wandered over to consult with the Queen, leaving me in the presence of his wife.

Her words were far less kind, “I don’t care if these people bow and scrape to you, child. Consorting with demons nearly killed my people centuries ago. You will keep your distance from me and mine. And if you attempt to corrupt the Prince to your evil ways, know that the night belongs to **my** people. If I find that he has been charmed, or ensorcelled, or beguiled in any way... practice sleeping lightly.”

She added injury to insult, brushing by me with a heavy shoulder bump that rattled my jaw. I felt my stitches tug a bit as a dull, throbbing pain pulsed in the base of my skull. I took half a dozen deep breaths, and managed to keep the tears from welling in my eyes.

Just as I was about to slink out of the chamber, a strong hand found my wrist. An oak bounded square of slate was shoved in front of my face.

‘Are you alright?’

I looked up to find Tessa staring at me. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, and her brown furred face was scrunched up. I vaguely recalled the old farm dog looking at me that way after I tumbled head first over a fence.

I murmured to her, “I just... I need to get out of here.”

Immediately, the werewolf looped her free arm through mine, as if she was the finest escort in the land. She walked me towards the outer hall, brushing aside any attempt to interact with either of us. Her mute advantage: Nobody could accuse her of being rude for offering no explanation.

Standing behind some tall ferns, we paused to see if anyone followed. Then the wolfess erased her slate with the back of her paw. She started writing.

'What happened in there?'

I said, "Just some... rather unkind words from the Ambassador, and rather violently unkind words from his wife. Nothing I haven't heard before, Lady Lope."

She quickly scribbled, *'Tessa.'*

"Right. My apologies, Tessa."

She wiped the slate clean again, before embarking on a rather long sentence. I leaned up against one of the stone columns, allowing the residual pain from my encounter to fade away.

Tessa tapped the slate so that I would read it. *'They aren't the most accepting examples of my race. Their kind would have had me killed at birth after discovering my defect. It offends them that someone so different could become so strong.'*

I sighed softly, "Yes, well. They also blame my kind for things that happened centuries ago, when it isn't even clear if Witnesses were involved in their particular woes. I just don't understand."

She just stared at me for a few moments. Then she wrote something that I'll never forget: *'You do understand. It is exactly the same attitude that you have towards my people.'*

It took me a moment to wrap my head around her perspective. I protested, "This is about a sacred trust and their objection to it. It isn't the same-"

She cut me off eloquently, with a gentle punch to the forearm. She underlined two of her previous words.

'It is.'

As she hurriedly wiped out her prior scribbling to gain more writing space, I was left to contemplate her exact meaning. Then she showed me.

'You're treated differently by folks who don't know you. Not for actions. For what makes you up. They assume they know you. You assume you know us.'

Her chalk skipped off the wooden boundry of her slate. She snarled silently after running out of space, upper lip curling to expose white canine teeth.

Before she could erase her message, I reached out and gently held her wrist. "Wait."

I allowed her written words to burn into my brain. My logical mind performed all manner of calculations. I banished emotion, going over the parallels several times. But it was only when I allowed my feelings to creep back into the picture that I fully appreciated Tessa's meaning. I wasn't sure she was completely right. But I was absolutely certain that she wasn't completely wrong.

I let go of her wrist. Slowly, I reached up with my hand to lay it upon the side of her brown muzzle. She didn't shrink away. Her fur was soft beneath my digits. And under that, flesh. Flesh not unlike my own. And under that a pulse that beat just like my own heart. Just like the purest piece of my Queen's own soul, alive and eternal within my breast.

"Please tell the Prince that I'll arrange for our supplies? I'll meet you all in the courtyard."

The brown werewolf tilted her head at me, then offered me a shrug of acquiesce.

I spoke to the Quartermaster on the way out of the castle. Our supplies would come with an escort, so that the horses from our own stables could be led back home after we switched to the mounts from the Foster ranch.

As I finish writing this passage from just inside the castle gates, I realise that my journal will clearly illustrate what a prejudiced idiot I've been. I'm ashamed that the true scope of my moral defect only came into full focus when it was quite literally shoved in front of my nose.

Now I find myself relying on these new companions not just for protection, but for salvation. In their presence, I hope that I can grow to be a better man. My Queen deserves more than what I can currently offer.

Chapter 7

I've never been an experienced traveller. The Queen tried, whenever possible, to give me assignments near Castle Heshler or at least in the vicinity of Heshler County. But when circumstances dictated, my feet were the feet of the Queen.

And unfortunately, at least for the first leg of the journey, our horses were the horses of the Queen. The creatures from the royal stables had a real issue with their werewolf riders. The heavy lupine scent gave our normally reliable steeds fits. They bucked, they balked, they refused to take commands. It was quite a relief for everyone involved when we reached the farmer's barn and switched over to steeds belonging to the Foster estate. They seemed to have no problems with the werewolves.

Despite the turbulent ride, Prince Gnarl's only complaint came after he was astride his new, far calmer mount. "I hate long road trips."

Secretly, I rather enjoyed the occasional longer trip. I've read about **so** many townships in the history books and farming almanacs, but I've seen precious few. So while adventure for some might involve swashbuckling and campfire stories, for me it was walking in the footsteps of the past.

"Oh! We're approaching the heart of Old Britannia. And... yes, right about here. This is where King John's first recorded mistress lived. He was still married to Isabella at the time. Then he started to visit the smith's eldest daughter. And at the same time, he was seeing not one, but *two* women of noble houses! Scandalous."

I glanced over my shoulder to gauge the interest of my companions. The werewolves were both staring at me as if I was a madman. Aaron looked puzzled more than interested, as such. I tried to lure him deeper into the tale.

"Isabella was quite young at the time you see, and King John was said to be a man of great passions. Still."

The guard asked, "How do you know all of these... things, Andy?"

I told him, "There's a fourteen part series that covers the War of the Barons. This is all before the monarchy was moved to Heshler, of course. If you like, I can see that the royal librarian reserves them for you when we get back."

Aaron answered quickly, "Oh no. N-no, I fear they would be wasted on me. But you can tell me the best bits as we ride."

I nodded to the other man, then turned to keep an eye on the road ahead. Shortly afterwards, I heard muffled yelp behind me. I craned my head over a shoulder, but only saw

the aftermath. Aaron was rubbing his flank as Tessa absently shook her stinging paw in the air. My best guess was that she caught part of the gelding's saddle when she went to swat the riding human's rump.

I turned fully forward to hide my faint smile.

A couple of minutes later, Prince Gnarl's mare drew shoulder to shoulder with mine. "How's the jaw?"

"It's tolerable, thank you for asking."

He rumbled, "So. What d'ya think? About another hour, and then we'll call it a day?"

As with most decisions over the past day, the werewolf was leaving the final course of action up to me. I suspected that this was my Queen's doing. She probably asked him to encourage my assertiveness, all part of Her drive to make me more '*independent*'. It made me a bit nervous, but I had a safety net: I was certain that the experienced lupine would correct me if I did anything truly disastrous.

"Yes Teddy. We're nearly at Whitby already, but given the subject matter of our investigation, I agree that we should arrive well rested. Just in case the whole thing turns violent."

The werewolf Prince said, "Just in case? Well. I like your optimism. But in your head, you might want to be prepared for the worst. At the very least, someone hired those guys. And zealots rarely give in without a tussle."

I exhaled audibly, disappointed by Prince Gnarl's assessment. Not that I thought he was wrong. I was just hoping for reason to carry the day.

Seeing my mood shift, the Prince nudged his horse closer, so that we were riding leg-to-leg. He reached over and squeezed my shoulder with a big gray paw. "We'll see how it goes. Oh, hey. What do you think of Tessa?"

I said, "She's amazingly competent. I'm certain that you made the right choice in allowing her to accompany us."

I was surprised at how expressive a werewolf's visage could really be. I distinctly saw two or three reactions ripple over Prince Gnarl's face, his muzzle contorting while his eyes narrowed or widened a fraction. Patiently, he said, "No Andy, I mean on a personal level."

I blinked at the lupine. "Oh." Then I paused, because such assessments weren't my forte. A couple of dozen hoofbeats later, I said, "From everything I've seen, she's quite passionate about... life. Everything. I don't know where she gets the energy to care about so many things so deeply."

He chuckled a bit. "Yeah. That sounds like Tessa."

"Why do you ask?"

After a moment of hesitation, he admitted, "She's been talking about you non-stop since we switched over to the Foster steeds and lost our royal escort."

I was slightly alarmed. "What? *Why?*"

I received another squeeze on the shoulder. He kept his volume low as he rumbled, "Well, you've either become a project of hers, or she fancies you, Andy. Hell if I know which."

I rubbed my eyes, unable to fully parse this new information. "But we just met. And I haven't exactly been... kind to your people."

"Hey, I don't try to guess these things. In case you haven't noticed, '*my people*' are pretty blunt. Didja want me to ask her what her intentions are?"

"No! I mean, no thank you, Teddy. We'll be camped soon enough, which will leave plenty of time for a more private conversation, if she wishes."

He said, "Suit yourself." Then the wolf snapped his reins, and the mare that he was riding trotted out into the lead.

While the sun was setting, we veered into the lightly wooded foothills that bordered the Great Northern Highway. Though there were more readily accessible campsites, Aaron suggested that we stay well off of the beaten path, for security's sake. As the young guard knew these roads better than any of us, I was happy to defer to his experience and training.

He said, "There's a little brook running through the hills just Northwest of here. Potatoes and carrots grow wild around these parts, so we can do a bit of foraging."

I asked, "Did you spend a lot of nights sleeping in the rough?"

"Oh, it wasn't like that Witn- um. It wasn't like that, Andy. My ma travelled for a living. She called it the 'curse of the merchant'. So sure, we ended up camping all over the country. But it wasn't like we never had a place to stay once we reached a big town. The Clothiers Guild often arranged for an inn stay or other shelter while ma did business."

I urged my mare to the right, avoiding a tangle of roots. "Interesting. What did your father do for a living?"

The other man's voice was soft. "I didn't know him."

"I apologise if that's a subject that I should be avoiding."

Aaron laughed. He said, "You don't need to be so formal with me." Then his back stiffened a little bit. He stammered, "U-unless you want to o-of course. Forgive me, I didn't mean t-

I saved him before he could worry too much, "There's nothing to forgive, Aaron."

He sucked in a deep breath, then let it out in a relieved sigh. "Okay. My father is a subject I don't know much about, that's all. Maybe I'll learn more, in time."

He offered me a ghost of a smile before pulling away. Being an excellent researcher, I silently vowed to help Aaron with his quest for knowledge, when we had access to the appropriate materials.

Tessa picked an ideal location for camp. It was a flattish spot high up on a hill, but not quite at the top. The few feet of remaining rise gave us ample protection from the northern wind, and the dozen or so elm trees growing on the crest of the hill provided firewood and could potentially give us (and the horses) shelter from any sudden storms.

Teddy rumbled, "After we eat, Aaron can have first watch while there's still a little light. Then I'll get second watch, and Tessa third."

I piped up, "What about my watch?"

The big werewolf snorted. Then he peered at me, "Oh, you're actually serious."

I couldn't keep the irritation out of my voice as I said, "Of course I'm serious."

Tessa was scribbling on her slate. She wrote, '*You need to be well rested.*'

Aaron chimed in, "Lady Lope is right. Besides, our eyes aren't exactly ideal for the task, at least not as ideal as theirs."

But I insisted, "I don't want to be treated any differently than the rest of you. We're companions, right? It isn't fair to-

Prince Gnarl cut me off, "Fine, fine. Tessa, wake him up early, would you? He can watch while the sun is dawning, and that will free you up to check the snares and such."

I caught our cartographer rolling her eyes. But in the end she nodded her agreement.

Dinner was dried beef jerky and some wild carrots fried in what butter we had left. Then the lupines headed off to set up traps to catch small game. Similarly, Aaron put up a couple of tripwires between the trunks of the trees above us. His efforts were meant to be a kind of early warning system.

That left me to care for our mounts and set up the tents. The horses were nowhere near as ornery as some of the more militarized beasts back at the castle. I inspected, watered, and fed them in short order.

Shelter was another matter entirely. I was worried at first, because normally someone else constructed my tents. And I knew that after talking about how I didn't want to be treated differently, I would look like a complete idiot if I asked for help with such a basic task.

I needn't have worried. The kind of shelter that the wolves brought was exceedingly simple. Each of the lightweight canvas contraptions was little more than a lean-to. The fabric was stretched over a central line that was kept taut by a front pole and a rear stake. Two more stakes kept tension on each side, and a net was draped over the whole thing to keep the bugs out. It wasn't exactly the warmest or driest of arrangements, but it was certainly quick and functional.

Aaron called down encouragement from the ridge above, "Well done. I'll clear down the fire and start my watch. You get some rest."

I didn't argue. My jaw was starting to ache and my legs were shaking after an entire day in the saddle. I crawled into a lean-to and laid atop my blanket. Before settling in, I opened a small jar and brushed the court physician's tincture of laudanum over the puffy red skin of my stitches. Not knowing who would be joining me later in the night, I left enough space to my left for either a wolf or a human. I was unconscious in no time at all.

"Wake up Andy. Dammit boy, *wake up.*"

The half-hiss, half snarl managed to rouse me from a deep, dreamless slumber. I smelled a slightly damp dog, and for a moment I thought I was going to have to kick one of the castle's hounds out of my room. Then the reality of the situation caught up to me, and I remembered where I was.

There was a big wolveren paw on my chest, restraining my movement. A second was clamped firmly over my lips, though kindly the majority of Prince Gnarl's grip was on the unwounded side of my face.

"Something below. Half dozen, maybe more. Get ready, stay low."

I pried at the fuzzy fingers over my mouth. The Prince allowed them to be peeled away now that I was aware of the situation. I whispered, "Can I use the Queen's grace?"

In the faintly moonlit darkness, I saw the werewolf's eyes narrow. I imagined that arcane forces had never been a battle consideration for those of his race. Finally he said, "If you can do it from yer belly. Outside, quietly, as quick as you can."

Then he was gone.

I didn't bother to dress, my powers just as effective in breeches as in full combat gear. I only grabbed my rapier with my left hand, leaving the sheath behind given the urgency of the situation. Then I crawled to the lip of the lean-to and lifted the netting over my head. A light drizzle greeted my emergence, spattering into my hair and onto the bare skin of my neck and shoulder blades.

I closed my eyes to focus my vision inward, allowing the pitter-patter of rain to draw me deeper into the trance. I found the Queen's purity and reached towards it, the angelic core pulsing and flowing in my chest. I touched the ball of liquid silver, and after only a moment's hesitation, it crawled up my arm like a slick, icy glove.

When I opened my eyes, a black Veil hung before me, easily discernible even in midnight's gloom. The arcane passageway between our plane and the netherworld, seeming almost trivially thin as it fluttered in the wake of a nearby leyline, parted for me. My shielded arm reached into the Hellscape.

This time, I didn't allow the Hellfire to slink away. I beckoned it into my grasping fingers. Torturous screams of the immolated souls of the damned filled my ears. I gathered the heat in my palm, crushing the living shadow and allowing the black stain of sin to seep through my digits and drip down to the dusty red soil below. That left only the flame. I felt the infernal energy burrowing into my palm, but it was unable to pierce the barrier of my Queen's divinity.

The Veil vanished when I withdrew my arm, and ghostly butterflies flaked from my skin to flutter back into my breast and rejoin my spiritual core. Soon I felt the heat of pure Hellfire attempting to boil away my frigid flesh. Still belly-down on the damp ground, I allowed my fingers to spring open and commanded the infernal element to do my bidding.

Dozens of arcane motes surround the hill, leaving us in darkness but illuminating our enemies. After worming my way over to Aaron's side, I peeked over the lip of our little plateau. The Hellfire torches portrayed a distorted reflection of reality. Everything the foul light touched seemed drab, pale, and dying. Gaunt assassins sprinted through the withered grass, seeking what little cover they could reach.

The other human whispered, "What did you do to them?"

"Nothing yet. That's just how the fires of Hell illuminate the world."

Aaron nodded. He murmured, "Stay close to me. I have your back."

I rolled slightly to shift my rapier to my right hand, then settled in. These assassins would have to charge uphill to get at us, leaving them vulnerable to both spear and arrow on the ascent. Teddy and Tessa were laying in wait, their bows strung and at the ready as they peered over the edge of our natural shelf.

I murmured, "If they're following the same protocol as the last time, we can wait them out. We have food and supplies. Our last group of attackers did not. Which is effective for remaining anonymous, but not for a siege."

The other human didn't reply. I reached over to lay my free hand on his mailed shoulder. My pinky strayed over to touch the back of his neck. His muscles were tense, incredibly so. I could feel his thundering pulse through fevered skin.

"You need to *relax*, we could be waiting all night. You'll give yourself a heart attack. Allow the rain to calm you. Take deep breaths; in through your nose, then slowly out through your mouth."

I monitored Aaron's heartbeat as he followed my advice. It took him two or three minutes, but soon the young guard's shoulders unbunched. His pulse slowed and the rain washed away some of his excess heat.

Powerful twangs from my far left broke the silence, and pained screams from downhill followed. In the light of my Hellfire, I saw a pair of withered hands clutching a wounded leg. My best guess: The man carelessly allowed one of his limbs to break cover, and when the werewolves spotted flesh poking out from behind the small boulder, they let loose. The arrows that the lupines were using dwarfed anything a human archer might consider. It was as if a tree branch slammed into flesh and bone with the force of God Himself. That man was out of the fight.

A thought occurred to me. I asked, "Where are the horses?"

"The Prince let them loose. They trotted down and off to the West."

Our stalemate continued for the better part of an hour. We laid on our fronts until we were soaked to the bone. The werewolves must have looked like drowned rats, though my all too human eyes couldn't pierce the darkness to observe anything first hand. I could have moved one of my flames closer, but my curiosity wasn't worth the cost of the wolves' night vision. The Hellfire motes were burning strong, maintaining their unholy power effortlessly. It didn't surprise me, given that their only duty was to bathe the world in their preferred, ghastly perspective.

The balance of power only shifted when something crashed into the ground behind us. The sound of pans clattering against spare parts for repairing armor could be heard clearly through the dull metronome of falling rain. Aaron's tripwire had worked.

It was instinct. I pushed away from the edge of the hill and flipped onto my back. I craned my neck up and gazed at the top of the trees that towered over us on the crest of the hill. Half of my summoned Hellfire soared through the air to find trunk and branch and leaf. The rain-soaked trees went up like dry tinder. A chorus of shocked screams, music to my ears, echoed into the wilderness.

There could be no mistaking the source of the barked orders that followed. "Aaron, with me. Andy, stay low and central. Tessa, keep them busy below."

I rolled to my knees. In the glow of the now-mundane fire raging above us, I was able to survey the field of battle. Aaron charged to the Prince's side, chain coif bouncing against his ears with every heavy step. I was impressed at how well the young guard managed to move in his heavy armor; chainmail over thick leather from shoulder to boot. Still, Teddy moved easily by comparison, even toting around that massive metal warhammer. As the first pair of smouldering assassins tumbled down from the crest of the hill, they were met with deadly force.

Tessa loosed arrow after arrow downhill, her soaked paws rock solid as she aimed and a blur whenever she plucked a fresh arrow from her quiver. Several cries of pain reached my ears, audible evidence of the werewolf's proficiency. But return fire was starting to come in. Sling bullets whistled past her head, forcing the archer to dive and roll.

I looked left, then right again. There were at least half a dozen attackers above, and more below. Both fronts needed my help. There was only one logical solution:

I needed to be in two places at once.

I summoned all but a handful of the Hellfire, leaving just enough so that Tessa could still make out the silhouettes of targets downfield. I rolled to my feet but remained crouched as the fireflies of Hell danced around me, awaiting instruction. The sodden earth became a temporary sheath for my rapier. My hands cut a vaguely humanoid shape in the air, and the trail of fire followed. When the form was complete, Hellfire rushed into the void and filled the volume of my small elemental. It looked to me for instruction, eyes black as coal and deep as the Abyss.

"Assist Tessa. Kill the assassins who are mounting the hill."

I knew that it was a risk to give my creation some measure of independence. But the alternative was likely death, so I felt that there was very little to lose.

The fire elemental, a foot shorter than myself but more bulky, stalked to the edge of the hill. Rain sizzled and died before it could make contact with the living immolation. After a soulless glance at Tessa, the elemental created a bow from its own makeup. It started to send bolts of fire down towards the scurrying murderers, losing a little bit of volume every time the living fire flew. Tessa rallied, using the distraction to take one of the more confused assassins through the heart.

Teddy, and surprisingly even Aaron, cursed when I stepped up to join them on the line. The werewolf was defending himself from two mace wielding fiends, while my new human friend was poking at a bear of a man with his combat spear, just managing to keep him from getting into bastard sword range.

I ignored the protests of my companions, cutting off a sneaky flanker who was looking to get on Aaron's blind side. I pointed at him with my blade and flicked the tip in a welcoming gesture, showing a measure of bravado that I certainly wasn't feeling.

I had every reason to doubt my chances. I was virtually naked, facing down a combatant in full leathers. I had only my basket hilted rapier, while the flanker carried a much heavier saber. Even if I disarmed him, the man possessed a wicked looking main gauche. But it was tucked into his belt. I was a bit puzzled as to why he wasn't fighting Florentine with that weapon pairing. Then it dawned on me: Perhaps the blades had been pilfered from a murdered foe. Something that could not be stolen was the skill to use both the long blade and the parrying dagger at the same time. I counted my blessings.

The assassin led with an advance-lunge, going right for my center of mass. Rather than let it come in fully, I performed an *attaque au fer*, slashing at the blade to push it off line. He slid closer and pulled his rear leg up into *en garde*, pressuring my space. I briefly considered taking the space back; going for a bind and pressing in *corps-à-corps*. But I couldn't gauge our relative strength just yet, so I didn't want to turn this into a wrestling match.

Instead I cut inside-high, but he deftly parried counter-six, nearly trapping me. He slashed at my neck, but I punched the blade away with my basket hilt. Crude, but effective. He slid circle-left, robbing my opportunity for a straight riposte. I waited *en garde*. He lunged, the tip of his sabre trying to bite my ankle. I committed to a volt, leaping over the blade and slashing at his exposed outside shoulder. A hit, but only to leather, not flesh. As I landed, he doubled down and back-slashed at my calf. I supinated and parried octave.

Then a war spear cleaved the surprised assassin's chest wide open.

Silhouetted by the blaze above us, I saw Aaron at full extension. My attacker foolishly wandered into his sphere of influence, becoming too engrossed in our little duel. Without another thought, I rolled under the shaft of polished hardwood. As soon as my bare feet felt the ground under them, I dug in, straightened up, and lunged. My rapier found the heart of Aaron's foe, a split second before the maniac could bring his bastard sword down on the young guard's skull.

From the far side of the inferno above us, a blowing horn sounded off. Our remaining foes turned tail and started to slide down the damp hill in every available direction. Teddy took advantage of his attackers' hesitation, his front kick sending one of them tumbling down the steepest incline at breakneck speed. The second barely managed to avoid a warhammer to the head before scurrying back into the darkness.

I turned just in time to see my elemental, now less than half its original size, start to turn towards Tessa. It hesitated, then raised its fiery bow to take aim.

I clenched my fist and twisted cruelly. The creature of fire collapsed and dissipated into so much smoke, quickly washed away by the rain and surrounding darkness.

The Prince shouted, "Anybody hurt?"

Shockingly, nobody was. At least to any degree worth mentioning. We were left winded, confused... but intact.

Aaron poked the hot metal out of the smouldering treeline, rescuing our cookware and armor scraps in the process. Tessa retrieved enough of the burning wood to make quite the bonfire just outside of our lean-tos. The Prince checked the bodies, but like the last time, only weapons and armor were present. I had no doubt in my mind that the origin of said weapons would be on Britannia's southern border.

Teddy rumbled, "**Another** damned mystery. Don't know what I expected, really. Aaron, you going to be alright for the rest of your watch?"

"Yes sir."

"Yes *what?*"

"Er. Yes Teddy."

The Prince rolled his eyes and ducked into his shelter to start the process of drying off.

I discovered who was sharing my shelter, by virtue of the big, soaking lupine standing just inside the threshold. Tessa let out a silent sigh, then dug a stiff brush out of her pack. I shook my head at the virtual impossibility of transforming this dripping mess into a dry werewolf.

"Tessa. Get comfortable, I have still have a dry towel. We'll do this in stages."

She glanced over her shoulder and gave me an odd look. Her slate was next to useless with everything so completely waterlogged, so we would have to rely on non-verbal communication for a while. She started to strip off her armor, which I took an agreement with my plan.

Half an hour of brushing, toweling, wringing out, and standing in dangerous proximity to a bonfire finally paid off. Her brown fur was somewhat fluffy again. The stench of drowned dog had been replaced by elm smoke, which I for one found far preferable. A few firm brush strokes over her back and legs, and I was finished.

We both took a minute to survey the result. I was a competent manservant for my Queen, but until that moment, I wasn't certain how well my skills could be applied to werewolves. I needn't have worried. Tessa was clean and completely snag-free. I even took the time to make some short braids in her mane, tied off with thin leather strips capped with wooden beads on either end. I found them in her pack, and assumed their intended use.

“Well there you go. We still have a couple of hours before our watch starts, plenty of time to get some rest an- *oof!*”

She was warm, and dry, and covering me completely. I would later learn that werewolves get quite jittery and euphoric after combat. This kind of ‘celebration’ was not unusual amongst their kind. It helped them sleep. That would also explain my earlier encounter with Prince Gnarl, to some degree.

But in the heat of the moment, I just assumed that she was repaying my kindness with her own brand of kindness. Considerations of race and compatibility were swept away after that first feral kiss. In fact, all of my analytical thoughts were banished to a distant corner of my mind. Though she had no way to ask permission, I’m certain that my willingness to participate was clear and demonstrable, after a fashion.

Chapter 8

Tessa woke me just before dawn, and I kept watch while she collected the small game traps from the surrounding area. A fat rabbit and a thin pheasant was the sum total of our bounty.

She and I sat back to back, sharing our watch in comfortable silence. Every once in a while, she would give me a small nudge to keep me awake. I'd return the favor with an occasional, gentle tug on her tail. Though conditions were drier and she had her writing tablet at the ready, she didn't broach the subject of our nocturnal activities. I took that as a hint, and remained mum on the subject as well.

Morning passed without incident. The four of us shared a hearty cooked breakfast before breaking camp. We saved the rabbit skin for curing, and the feathers for fletching.

The horses weren't as difficult to round up as I first feared. They didn't seem to be in much of a running mood. Aaron charmed them with carrots and the promise of a good brushing. Once he had the eldest mare, the other three equines followed without complaint.

We travelled throughout the morning and just past noon. Our progress was intentionally slow, as we watched for signs of another ambush. Perhaps these assassins had no taste for a daylight attack on a well-traveled highway... but we would take no chances.

As the foot traffic became less sparse, Aaron and I took the lead. We donned the silver cloaks that announced our membership in the Royal Guard, though mine was honorary of course. Our pins were silver as well, an accoutrement only to be worn when travelling on the Queen's business. Our more official attire should allow the werewolves in our presence to pass freely. Still, Teddy and Tessa dug out their own cloaks: Forest green affairs that bore no markings. They pulled up the deep hoods, hiding the most obvious of their wolveren features from prying eyes.

The seaside town of Whitby wasn't exactly an urban utopia, but it wasn't tiny. It was a fishing town, consisting of perhaps a thousand people. That number was growing, as the alum trade became a chief concern. The harbor was in the process of being scraped and deepened, so that bigger ships could dock.

Given my own attitude towards werewolves, despite any recent change of heart, I couldn't expect these people to welcome my companions with open arms. Despite their heavy cloaks, any real examination of the werewolves would immediately betray the nature of their species: Bare paws and fluffy tails were rather uncommon amongst the local populace. For the moment, our official escort was enough to keep any troublemakers at bay. But the most common reaction to our passing consisted of some combination of snorting, scowling, and spitting on the ground.

Exploration of the town uncovered nothing. Tessa and Teddy allowed us to do all of the talking, of course. Aaron and I made inquiries, but the gruff replies were always the same. And I believed them. Despite being standoffish towards strangers, the populace wasn't capable of a mass-conspiracy of the sort required to hide a royal assassination attempt. These people knew nothing about any plot against anyone.

In the late afternoon, we decided to move on. We purchased dry rations at a significant markup before proceeding North out of town. Secrets were often brewed and kept in more rural settings. So we hoped to have better luck making our inquiries further away from any central population.

The obvious place to start was Vance Foster's ranch. We hoped that returning his steeds would earn us some good will. Normally the ride would take half of an hour, but the horses made it to their destination ten minutes faster than expected. We simply pointed them to the Northwest and gave them free rein. They were clearly eager to get home.

We rode past the front gate, bordered on each side by a massive corral. Collies patrolled their respective pens, keeping their horses safe. Canine eyes followed our progress, but other than a stray bark or two, we remained unmolested.

The restraint of the dogs was not necessarily a trait shared by the owner of the ranch. The gray haired man held a rarity in his hands: A doglock musket. I appreciated the lovely craftsmanship. I simply wished that the device was pointed in another direction. My only comfort was that the combustible material that firearms generally required was a rarity. It was just as likely that the man was holding his gun for show, rather than function.

I should explain for those who have never seen a 'gun' before: It fires metal projectiles using an explosive powder. The volatile nature of blackpowder after the Black Plague, famously noted by Christiaan Egenloff in his seminal work *'Pyrotechnics and Hellfire'*, is nothing to take lightly. Prior to the Hell Plague and the great dawning, the stuff was used for entertainment, such as 'fireworks' displays in the Far East. Afterwards, black powder was so dangerous to create and transport properly, it was generally only used by the military, and only in dire circumstances. The production of saltpeter has been heavily policed for centuries, but that doesn't prevent bootleggers from creating vast straw and urine farms in the wilderness. Even then, it takes a real master to perfect the blend.

In an attempt to keep the peace, I held both hands in the air, as did Aaron. I decided to open communications with good news, "You may stand at ease, good sir. We are returning your horses."

The old man's reply was sharp and immediate, "But I never rented any horses to a Witness. Nor did I rent any to the werewolves. So I have questions."

Aaron said, "And we'll be happy to answer those questions. Mister Foster, is it?"

"It is."

I had to ask, "How did you know I was a Wit?"

The ranch owner never let me finish. "Soldiers would be more heavily armored. Messengers carry the seal of Britannia. Bureaucrats would have a larger escort and a fat money purse. And none of them would keep the company of lupines. No offense, my hairy cousins."

Prince Gnarl snorted. Then he rumbled, "None taken."

Aaron tried again, "Mister Foster, we really did come to return your steeds. You'll find them well fed and cared for. Can we dismount and unload our things while we explain the situation?"

Mister Foster peered at each of us in turn. Then he shouldered his musket. "Yeah, fine. Hell, might have blown myself up if I pulled the trigger anyway. Stable's this way. Let's check their shoes first."

After inspecting his horses, the rancher begrudgingly admitted that they were in good health. I didn't mention the part of our journey where they had to scamper down rain-soaked hillsides to avoid assassins and Hellfire. Being a Witness means I have to tell the truth, not necessarily volunteer it.

Prince Gnarl rumbled, "We wanted to do right by you. Now. We were wondering about the men who rented them in the first place."

"Four of them, you said? A little more than a week back?"

"Correct."

Mister Foster closed his eyes tightly. He said, "That would be after the dredge pulling. Yeah. Yeah, four guys. They paid in silver."

I asked, "Minted in the kingdom, sir?"

"No, not minted. *Raw* silver."

Aaron cursed under his breath.

Mister Foster opened his eyes, "Raw is bad?"

As Tessa started to scribble something down, Teddy answered the man's question, "Raw's very bad. It means we can't even guess where the money came from." He glanced over at his companion's slate as Mister Foster answered.

"Well, I'm not in the habit of taking raw metal, but they offered more than the trouble it will take to melt it down. Can't look a gift horse in the mouth, if you'll pardon a trade expression."

The Prince read Tessa's question, "Did they have any particular accents?"

"Sure did. And even if they didn't, the littlest guy mentioned where they came from. Dorchester."

Simultaneously, Aaron and I started rubbing our eyes.

The older man snorted, "Now I **know** you don't like that answer. Why this time?"

Aaron did the honors, "It's days away sir, and nowhere near where any of us expected to be led. Through some rough terrain."

Mister Foster offered, "I can't rent to you if you're going that far, but I can sell outright. I've got a set of older mares, not quite as fast as most of my stock, but reliable. Should have a good two, three years of service in 'em before they get retired."

Prince Gnarl considered the offer, "They'll be well behaved with my kind?"

"Oh aye sir, my girls and I have no quarrel with the wolves. They'll serve you well."

All eyes turned to me.

I murmured to Teddy, "We probably have enough coin, between us."

The big werewolf nodded.

Louder, I asked, "Shall we find an inn for the night, and come inspect them in the morning?"

It was the rancher who responded, "Don't be silly, Witness. It's getting dark. My boys won't be back until the start of the season, so I have an empty bunkhouse. Least I can do after you brought back my four-legged kids. I didn't have to deal with the Rancher's Guild or the Mesta's or anything. You saved me some gold, of that I'm sure. I'll even throw in stew for dinner."

I said, "Your kindness is most appreciated, Mister Foster. We've seen precious little of it over the past few days."

The older man shook his head some. "Yeah. Well, the more you see of the world, the more you know how much of it is the same. Go get settled, there's no lock on the bunkhouse door. I'll finish up here and call out when dinner's ready."

The bunkhouse was quiet, with each of us attending to our own matters. Frustration was the primary feeling that our group was experiencing. One didn't have to be a Witness to see that. The prospect of several more days of chasing shadows wasn't appealing to me, even if it meant passing through some rather fascinating parts of Britannia. And who was to say that

Dorchester was our final destination? We could be criss-crossing the land for weeks, perhaps more.

I meditated, sitting cross-legged on the bunkbed's firm straw mattress. I thought of my Queen's smiling face; kind, understanding, loving. Below me, I could hear Tessa shuffling her maps and making notations. Across the dusty aisle, the sound of a whetstone working rust spots off of steel arrowheads dominated... that would be the prince, no doubt. Finally, I heard general bumping, sliding, and pacing sounds. Aaron was keeping true to his word, having said that he would 'have a poke around'.

Just as I was starting to fade into the comfortable space between restful thought and spiritual awakening, a voice pulled me back.

"H-hey. Hey, I think they stayed here. Maybe."

I pried my eyes open, allowing them to adjust to the light of the nearby oil lamp. The wolves were rushing over to join the young guard. Rather than crowd him all the more, I called over, "What did you find, Aaron?"

He handed a scrap of parchment over, allowing Tessa to examine it. "A receipt. From the Jowl Clan Ironworks. It's for weapons. Quite a few weapons really, more than four assassins could use. More than a score of them could use, really."

"That would seem to confirm a southern source."

Tessa elbowed her Prince lightly. She extended a claw and underscored a certain line on the document.

Teddy said, "The Jowl Clan is probably the biggest weapon provisioner in our lands. And they aren't picky who they're selling to." He skimmed the document, then read the part that interested the other lupine. "Payment: For Services Rendered."

Perhaps it was the recent meditation. Or perhaps I had all of the other pieces of the puzzle, and Teddy's words made everything fall into place. Either way: A chill gripped my heart. My mouth went dry. I had to swallow several times before I could speak.

"The horses. They aren't phased by werewolves."

Teddy followed at least part of my line of thinking. "Because they'd been South before. Even across the border to pick up weapons. That's why the ride up was so smooth for Tessa and I."

I shook my head slowly, "No. I mean, yes but those aren't the horses I'm talking about. The ones that our host wants us to buy. He said they were used to wolves."

Aaron said, "God above. All of his horses. I mean, we rode right through the middle of them. Only the collies reacted. All of the horses have been around lupines before."

I slid from the top bunk. As calmly as possible, I strapped on my rapier. "Foster was entirely nonplussed by two werewolves scant feet away from him. He knew who I was, said as much before he thought better of it, and then came up with that clever piece of logic to cover his slip up. That receipt didn't belong to the assassins."

Tessa bared her teeth in silent anger. Prince Gnarl snarled aloud, "It belongs to Foster."

"If he sent up a signal as soon as he left our sight, and his reinforcements are coming from town, we might have five minutes to flee."

Aaron was already shouldering his pack. It was clear that he was at least as angry as the wolves. He said, "To Hell with fleeing." He stalked to the bunkhouse door, spear gripped so tightly, his knuckles were chalk-white.

Prince Gnarl rumbled, "Agreed. But give us a minute, lad."

We were packed up and armed in short order. Aaron nudged the bunkhouse door open with the tip of his war spear. The only sound outside was the shifting of horses getting comfortable for the night. We crossed the compound to the main farm house, quickly and quietly.

The cool night air calmed Aaron's temper somewhat. His hand hesitated, not quite touching the back door leading to the kitchen. He said, softly, "The evidence is all circumstantial. We *might* be wrong about this."

The Prince said, "Noted."

Then he kicked the back door open. Parts of the cedar frame splintered, and only the top hinge remained attached.

The scene before us left little room for interpretation. Our host was standing above the stew pot, in the process of drizzling a thick green fluid into the stew pot. I considered the remote possibility that it was some kind of pesto, until a drop of the stuff fell upon the surface of the oak dinner table. It hissed and smoked.

Mister Foster didn't seem all that shocked by our presence. He capped the thick vial and set it on the fireplace's mantelpiece. "I was wondering if you would figure it out in time. I calculated the odds. Forty-five out of one hundred. At least before it was too late. I don't suppose you would care for some stew?"

Prince Gnarl shouldered past Aaron and stepped through the threshold, warhammer leading. "Who are you, old man?"

The old man laughed, backing towards the open door of what looked like a small study. He was moving with a measure of agility that belied his apparent age. "Oh, so you only puzzled out enough to follow the blood trail. Interesting. That bodes well."

"Why not try to shoot us when you had the chance?"

"And kill just one of you before being mobbed? We don't trade our numbers one-for-one."

Aaron was right on Teddy's tail, and I pushed my way inside of the small kitchen so that Tessa could line up a clean shot from the doorway. I called out, "What do you have against the Queen and the Prince? What do you have against me?"

Briefly, the expression on Mister Foster's face softened. He said, "Oh my dear sweet boy. I have nothing against you. I'm going to free you."

And with that, he took a step back and slammed the study door.

The Prince charged, shoulder leading. All of us were surprised when he rebounded off of the door and fell flat on his rump. He snarled and rubbed his bruised shoulder.

Aaron started to say, "Metal reinforc-

He was interrupted by a thunderous crack. A hole appeared in the door, inches above Teddy's head. The heavy slug pinged off of the kitchen's stone wall and embedded itself in the wooden roof. The scent of brimstone and death filled the air.

I said, from my new home under the kitchen table, "That wasn't blackpowder."

Aaron, lying hip to hip with me, said, "Mixing sorcery and firearms? Insanity."

Teddy scrambled off to the left side of the study door, where the stone cladding would shield him from any follow up shots. He shouted, "Cover me, Tessa." Then he started to pound his warhammer against the portal. The frame buckled a little more with each blow.

I glanced over at Tessa. Her nose was parallel with the outer wall of the farm house, letting her monitor the situation inside and out. Her right ear was cocked high, listening for reinforcements I assumed.

A final hammerblow brought the door down, those thin metal strips unable to deny the power of the werewolf forever. I had the right angle to see into the small chamber beyond. Mister Foster was no longer carrying his gun. In fact, he wasn't carrying anything at all. His hands were crossed over his chest. I knew that only I would be able to see the thin sheen of glowing red energy crawling over him like a second skin.

The old man smirked at me. Then he stepped through the Veil.

I scrambled out from underneath the table, Aaron right on my heels. Teddy risked a quick peek around the corner. His expression melted into confusion when he found his quarry gone.

I stepped up to the doorway and crossed my hands over my heart. "He stepped into the Hellscape."

I felt a meaty paw slap down on my left shoulder, "You aren't following him?!" It was half question, half command.

In the past, I might have simply deferred to the judgement of someone in power. But all of those little lessons and experiments over the last few weeks culminated in that single fateful moment. The Queen wished for me to have more free will. The Prince wished for me to show more initiative.

I granted both wishes with a simple statement of resolve. "I need to know."

Teddy's paw trembled, then slipped from my shoulder.

I touched the Queen's grace. It hesitated for a moment, then it responded. Rather than covering just my arm in a thick protective layer, the cool slickness coated my entire body in a razor-thin silver veneer. I knew that my companions would simply see me disappear as I brushed aside the fluttering black curtain and stepped through the Veil.

The flames of Hell shrieked and sizzled as they met my Queen's resolve. They retreated, but remained on the periphery. The burning spirits of the damned waited for any lapse in concentration, any opening that would allow them to consume my body and soul.

I stood across from him on the cracked red clay of our shared Hellscape. He was bathed in glowing crimson; I in shining silver. Purity and corruption. Death, ever present, looked on from the shadows.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought it would come to this, Andy. But it's somehow fitting, is it not?"

I was silent. I didn't want to give the man... if indeed this was a man... anything to use against me.

"What will it be then? Magic? Rapiers? A battle of wits? Though I suppose it's always the last thing, after a fashion."

I stalked forward, muscles tense in anticipation. The damned loomed closer, feeling the impending conflict about to erupt into the violence that they so loved.

The old man raised a brow. "Fists, Andy? I would think a man of your pedigree--"

I almost took him with a single stroke. The knights of the Far East called the technique '*iaijutsu*', and a shy young squire from that distant land showed it to me on a diplomatic mission last year. He didn't know what a Witness was. He didn't know that there was anything to fear.

And he certainly didn't know that I could draw a rapier from the air itself within this Hellscape. But my opponent did. As my spiritual blade manifested and I slashed at Mister Foster's throat, he mimed an empty handed parry to sixte. His black blade appeared just in time to stop my silver one, shutting down the outside high line.

We each shuffled back a step, metaphysical rapiers in hand. I half expected another taunt from the assassin, but it never came. The time for talking was over. Each of us gathered the power of Hell itself, a power that would gladly kill us in an instant if given the opportunity.

He started with a simple lunge thrust, which I beat away easily. He attempted a remise, just flicking his already extended wrist to whip the flexible tip of his blade towards my thigh. I caught the deceptive little attack on my basket hilt. Both of us knew that even the most minor breach of our spiritual defenses could be dangerous, even fatal.

My low slash was parried seconde. He feinted a low reply before curving his slash upwards toward the tip of my jaw. I danced back and away. Lunge attack into riposte, into parry and counter riposte, which was side-stepped. Simultaneous feints, resulting in two nervous little leaps backward.

High slash and Hellfire bolt, stopped by my parry quarte and shield of ice and darkness. My balestra into a lunge was beat aside, and the zombie hand that I caused to burst from the clay failed to grab his ankle. We both sidestepped into the clear. I stopped his overhead quinte. His blade attempted to find better leverage by sliding glissade, but I stepped back and flicked it away. My own Hellfire was dodged, and I dove out of his sphere of darkness just in time to avoid being impaled.

He quick stepped towards me as I rolled to my feet. Too quick. His loss of footing in the powdery clay was so minor, it could have been faked. I had only a split second to decide. I fell into passata-sotto to duck under his unsteady thrust and extended my arm until my shoulder nearly became unsocketed.

I rolled left out of my low counter-thrust, unable to see what happened until Mister Foster staggered past. When I kipped-up and regained my footing, the reality of the situation sunk in. The older man stared down at his punctured ankle. His veneer of protection punctured, the howling souls of the damned rushed in. His expression was almost stoic as the dark flames started to devour him.

I'll never forget the final look that he cast my way. His eyes were voids. But the corner of his lip was curled into a cruel little smirk.

"She's already dead, Andy. You just don't know it yet."

Then he was gone in a hurricane of shrieking agony.

It wasn't what he said that chilled me to my core. It was the fact that he believed every word of it, with the certainty of God's own prophets.

I quickly turned and swept my hand through the parched air. There I found the Veil. I stepped through without a backwards glance.

Three sets of concerned eyes greeted me. I managed to convey a single word.

"Home."

Then I fell forward, drained right down to the marrow. I didn't know who caught me, I simply knew that someone would.

We galloped South on stolen horses, with me firmly lashed to the saddle until well past midnight. I only caught fragments of conversations. One of them must have been Aaron talking about family friends, because I knew that when we stopped, we would be safe. His mother's connections within the Clothiers Guild saw to that.

My fevered dreams were nonsensical. They related tales of other worlds, of other Queens, and of an eternity of falling.

When I opened my eyes, the late morning sun greeted me. I lay atop bolts of colorful cloth, just another piece of cargo in a caravan bound for Castle Heshler. My new friends were riding just behind my canvas-covered wagon. Tessa reached over and poked Prince Gnarl, then pointed a brown furred finger at me. The gray werewolf chuckled, clearly relieved that I had recovered from my close encounter with the netherworld. Aaron shot me a smile.

And I smiled back before closing my eyes. I trusted them to watch over me, for just a little while longer.