

BEN GALLEY

BLOOD MOON



BOOK TWO OF THE SCARLET STAR TRILOGY

B L O O D M O O N



BY BEN GALLEY

Book 2 of The Scarlet Star Trilogy

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“This book is a work of fiction, but some works of fiction contain perhaps more truth than first intended, and therein lies the magic.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ben Galley is a young indie author and purveyor of dark fantasy from rainy old England. Harboured a near-fanatical love of writing and fantasy, Ben has been scribbling tall tales ever since he can remember. When he's not busy day-dreaming on park benches or arguing the finer points of dragons, he works as a self-publishing consultant, aiding fellow authors achieve their dream of publishing.

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ALSO BY BEN GALLEY

Bloodrush
The Written
Pale Kings
Dead Stars - Part One
Dead Stars - Part Two

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Below are some of the songs that inspired me along my writing journey. I hope they inspire you too, in any way that they can. Enjoy.

Warriors

Imagine Dragons

It's Bigger Than Hip Hop

WTF, Dead Prez

Riptide

Vance Joy

Shout at the Moon

Mallory Knox

Take Me To Church

Hozier

No Parallels

Hands Like Houses

Bloodflood

Δ

Young Blood

Saint Raymond

Canyon Moon

Andrew McMahon in the

Wilderness

Dig

Incubus

Aibilene

Thomas Newman

All Along The Watchtower

Jimi Hendrix

Where Is My Mind?

Pixies

Hearts Like Ours

The Naked And Famous

Gun

CHVRCHES

Holy Diver

Killswitch Engage

The Way I Tend To Be

Frank Turner

Sæglópur

Sigur Rós

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This book is for Lily.



CHAPTER I

OF GOATS

7th June, 1867

Goats never do what they're told. They think they're smarter than us, think they know which way is best, like they've got a secret they won't tell.

At least that's what Barnamus perceived, as his narrowed eyes glowered, almost murderous in the meaning, at each mischief-making one of his herd in turn. He swivelled his head—though not his eyes, for you never take your eyes off a herd of goats in the desert if you can help it—and spat to the side. A quick flick of his gaze, and he arched a lip in wry dismay. Another miss: the sliver of driftwood lay unsoiled, just sunbathing smugly in the day's scorching glow.

The tobacco-stained spit sizzled softly in the sand, adding melody to the clomping rhythm of the goats trotting about, and digging up whatever roots and nibbles came their way. The earth wasn't as barren as it could have been. Rivers tend to help with that. This one glittered away behind him, crisp and calm as a slab of pure marble.

Barnamus didn't much care for water, especially not great vast lumps of it, lapping casually at the heat of the desert, distracting his goats. Goats like water, though to look at them, you'd never know it.

The goatherd snorted, hawked, and spat again. Another shift of the eyes, and this time he grinned, baring two rows of tobacco-stained teeth. A hit.

That meant it was time. With a grunt and a sigh, the old goatherd planted the trail-bitten soles of his boots on the ground and hoisted himself up with his stick. He gave a sharp whistle and poked the goats

one by one into a rough group, as together as goats like to be. They needed a firm hand at all times, and he liked to be more than firm.

As Barnamus led his herd a winding muddle through rocky outcrops and cactus patches, following the shoreline, he cast wary glances at the water's edge. Driftwood, lots of it, had been pushed ashore by the desert breeze. Each piece was charcoal-black and smoothed by fire. Barnamus wrinkled his brow.

An hour trudged past, one thankfully free of any escape attempts from the mischievous goats. The river bent, and the shoreline with it. The goatherd and his charges had to scrape through a cut in the rock to reach the flat, open ground beyond the curve.

Destruction has a penchant to be noticed and adored. It tugs at the eyes, yanking a gaze into its clutches before the mind can get up out of its chair. Whether it is manmade or Maker-wrought, you can't help but stare. And so it was that Barnamus stared, wrinkled eyes cranked wide, at the smoking hulk of a mighty riverboat that was crumpled against the far shore.

The once grand-looking vessel had been gutted by fire. It slumped like a drunk in the water, still clinging onto its anchors, a black shell of broken iron, still smoking in places where the cinders burnt on in the daylight. The river water around its belly was stained oily, black as the iron in places.

Barnamus tapped his goats away from the water, whacking their skinny legs with his stick and whistling at them sharply. One started to trot away, but a hoarse shout and a look that promised a firm grip and a sharp knife brought the little beast right back.

The old goatherd fished a spyglass from his beaten-up satchel and peered through it, screwing up one eye. He could see nothing but ash and dead metal, and nothing in the water for the old goatherd to scavenge. Barnamus shrugged disappointedly and poked his goats onwards.

He got them ten paces further on before one of the beasts made a break from the herd. Spooked or distracted, it cantered down to the shoreline, with an angry Barnamus hot on its wiggling tail.

'Get back here!' he barked.

But true to stubborn form, the goat trotted on, finally coming to a halt next to a large lump of driftwood lying on the shoreline, a large lump of driftwood with hands, and ripped clothes ...

Barnamus rushed forwards as fast as his aching legs would allow and slid to his knees. It was a young woman, lying face-down in the sand, pale where she hadn't been burnt black. He gulped, feeling a cold sweat come to chill his roasting forehead. There were vicious red burns running over the right side of her head, where her blonde hair used to grow. What was left of it was matted and singed, sometimes right to the scalp. The burns trailed down her neck, and spread across her right shoulder and upper spine.

He had that awful urge to touch her wounds, as if his brain were having trouble processing their reality. He bit his lip and bent down. As his finger gently grazed her raw shoulder, the body moved and something hissed against the wet sand.

The goatherd had thought her dead, and staggered back. With all thought of his goats forgotten, knowing they would be halfway to Missipine by now, he set about trying to lever her up with his spare arm and his stick. She moaned, crying out weakly as he manhandled her into a sitting position. He tried to lean her against a rock so she could rest. With his eyes screwed shut, so as not to see the burns hovering just inches from his face, he managed to prop her up, letting her head and shoulders slump over her soot-smeared chest.

The goatherd pulled a flask from his satchel and poured a little water into the cupped palm of his dirty hand. He held it under her mouth so she wouldn't have to move. 'Drink, girl,' he croaked at her. 'Drink it up now.'

For a moment, the girl did not move, and Barnamus feared she had finally drifted off, that he'd killed her with the strain. Then he felt her face move, and felt her mouth on his hand. She choked, managing only a little, but that was a start.

'What's your name, girl?' he asked, trying to peer under her matted hair to see her face. 'Who are you?'

'Mmm—' was all she could manage. Barnamus rubbed his sweaty brow, letting his hat slide back for a moment, wracking his brains. He couldn't just leave her. But he had the goats to care for. Though she was in a bad way. He scratched an itch deep in his thinning hair, and pondered.

Barnamus moved to the water and brought some back in his hat. He poured it gently over her burns, washing the sand and soot away. He

wincing as she moaned again. 'I'm sorry,' he muttered. Barnamus went back to the water three more times, until the girl was soaking wet, but cleaner. Infection and desert tend to go hand in hand. Then he sat with her until she came around again. She tried to lift her head, and the goatherd moved a strand of her hair so she could look at him sideways, through one bloodshot, raw and smoke-poisoned eye. 'Who are you?' he asked again.

'I'm ...' she paused, her eye roving about, taking in her surroundings. 'Maid.' It was just a hoarse cough.

'A maid? On that?' Barnamus pointed at the smoking wreckage on the far shore. It took a while, but she nodded. The goatherd narrowed his eyes and scratched his chin. 'What happened?'

The eye closed and the girl shifted against the stone, wincing when she caught her burns. A tear rolled down her grimy cheek. Barnamus could sense her pain. He bit his lip.

'A boy came,' she muttered. 'Started a fire.'

'A boy?' Barnamus echoed.

There was another faint shift of the head that might be construed as a nod.

'Mmm,' grunted the girl. 'We asked too much ...'

Barnamus scowled. 'What's your name, girly?'

With a great amount of effort, wincing and biting her raw lips, the girl raised her head so she could stare at the old goatherd with both eyes. As her matted hair fell back, he couldn't help but gasp. The fire had kissed the right side of her face too. The raw red burns wandered across her forehead, cheeks and jaw, reaching almost to her nose. Her ear was fused to the side of her scalp, and her right eye was a puffed-up slit through which she could barely see.

'My name?' she croaked. 'Calidae.'

CHAPTER II

OF HUNTING

16th June, 1867

The soldiers trudged in through the gate with bleary eyes and heavy feet. The smiles with which they had strode out just four days before had long since faded, stolen by fear and replaced with masks of grim resignation and furious resentment. Battle-stunned, they called it.

No soldier likes to be shown their weakness, and that goes double for an officer. Weakness meant losses, and it was painfully obvious that this column of men and women was decidedly shorter and thinner than when it had left. Nobody was more aware of that fact than the good Major Doggard. His eyes, wide and red-rimmed, stared down the spear-straight thoroughfare that led to the door of the Brigadier General's lodge, square in the centre of Fort Kenaday. His face was devoid of colour save for a few crimson scratches here and there, and his flaming red hair, usually so neatly groomed, was a sweat-soaked mess.

There was a bang as the door to the lodge was thrust open, and a rotund, red-cheeked man came striding out. His body screamed of a lifetime spent in a sedentary occupation, eating food of dubious vitamin content. His thinning hair was slicked back behind his head to cover his baldness. Flapping jowls puffed from blushing cheeks. He had a mean glare in his little eyes, which were like two flecks of coal poked into a red cushion. In short, Brigadier General Linton Lasp, of the Third Frontier, Master of Fort Kenaday, did not look the slightest bit amused.

'Brigadier General Lasp, Sir!' Major Doggard swung a very long and very large gun off his shoulder and hefted it into a salute, then signalled for the column of dusty, bloody soldiers to halt.

‘You’re all dismissed,’ ordered Lasp. His words would have practically dripped from his mouth had his tone been any oilier. To the Brigadier General, sarcasm was nought but an accent, so natural that contempt might be mistaken for a speech impediment.

He was a high-born officer with a penchant for throwing his ample weight around, and Major Doggard knew this very well. If he could have turned any paler as he stood there, in front of all the people gathered to hear his dressing down, he would have. But by some luck of the Maker, it never came. Lasp simply leant in close and spoke two words low and firmly.

‘Inside. Now,’ he ordered.

The major nodded, saluted, and marched briskly towards the lodge, leaving his soldiers to disperse into the crowds, silent and grim.

Before he turned to leave, General Lasp cast a scowling glance around at the gathered people, refugees from the frontier towns. They were a bother to his operation, as far as he was concerned. His gaze found a particular pair of eyes, eyes he recognised, and he scowled all the more.

Tonmerion glared right back, until the general was forced to turn away.

‘I have no idea why that man despises me so much, but I can assure you that the feeling is utterly mutual.’

Lurker scratched his chin and rumbled. ‘Seems to me like he don’t like havin’ somebody of higher birth than him around. That’s what I reckon.’

Merion shrugged, looking up at the dark shadow of Lurker’s face under his dusty hat. His eyes had that squint to them, the one that told Merion he was deep in thought. Several of his old scars could be spied beneath his collar. Merion had always marvelled how the prospector stayed so stocky, instead of sweating away to nothing under the leather coat and britches he always insisted on. Merion stared at the little scratches in the elbow and shoulder of the coat, and idly wondered where Jake the magpie had got to.

‘Doesn’t make any sense. I couldn’t care less about who he is, or his precious fort. All I care about is why he isn’t letting us leave. We need to be heading east,’ Merion said.

‘Buffalo Snake ain’t givin’ up easy, that’s why. Lasp is worried we’ll all be snapped up as hostages, or worse, cut down. An’ his superiors won’t like that. Not one bit.’

Merion still wasn’t convinced. He shook the dust from his sandy blonde hair, which had been cut and hacked at by his own aunt just that very morning. He still wasn’t sure about the length, or the way it persistently spiked up. Merion scowled. ‘But we’re not even close to the frontier any more.’

Lurker lowered his voice. ‘Mayut’s come further than you think, boy. He’s pushed past Linger Hill already. That’s only two days’ march.’

Merion paused to look at a nearby soldier, hanging limply over the shoulders of another, older man. The soldier was missing an ear, and his eyes, as hollow and cold as winter’s breath, stared vacantly at the dusty ground.

‘Shamans again?’ Merion asked.

Lurker sniffed, smelling the sulphur and ash on their jackets. ‘Probably.’

‘Now I understand that look in their eyes,’ Merion replied, remembering a night not so long ago when he had watched the Shohari shamans in frozen awe. He rubbed his fingers together in his pockets, thinking of magick. ‘Come on, let’s go meet my aunt, before she and Rhin go hunting.’

The prospector grunted his assent. ‘You reckon he can get her out of the fort?’ he asked.

Merion shrugged again. ‘Says so,’ he answered, his voice a little lower, a little harder. Lurker caught it in an instant.

‘Then hopefully we’ll have some fresh meat for dinner.’

Merion’s stomach rumbled in agreement. The food at Fort Kenaday was truly awful, to say the least. Tough old meat, if they were lucky, and watery stew if not. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Lasp had billeted all the ‘refugees’, as he called them, in one cavernous shed, where hammocks were stacked five high and bumped together in the night. Merion could barely keep track of which hammock was his. He had almost lost his bag twice, and a faerie along with it. Rhin had taken to sleeping under the lodge, eavesdropping on all the unsuspecting refugees’ precious secrets. Maybe he hoped this would make Merion

curious, and cause him to break his vow of silence. Tonmerion Hark snorted at that.

Lilain was waiting for them at the shed, leaning in the shadows of its doorway, out of the scorching rays of the afternoon sun. The summer in south Wyoming was mercilessly hot. She wore a wide-brimmed hat just like Lurker's, and was leaning heavily on a crutch Lurker had made for her from some old table-legs. Her knees were still wrapped in bandages, and her face, though on the mend, was a mishmash of bruises and lumps, spanning a spectrum of yellow, purple and green.

Stiffly, Lilain tottered out to meet them, ruffling Merion's hair when he got close enough. Merion endured her affection with a grimace, and she rolled her eyes. He had become a different boy since his final night in the Serpeds' company. He was quieter, more withdrawn, as if some of the childhood in him had been cut away. Every night since then, she had prayed silently to the Maker that it was only temporary.

'Where's Rhin?' Merion asked.

'There,' Lilain pointed to a barrel over by the fort's tree-trunk walls, where a faint shiver hid in the shadow.

Merion nodded firmly. 'Do you really think he knows a way out?'

Lilain shrugged. 'I don't know, but my stomach is set on tryin'. It's getting hard to ignore its rumbling.'

'And if ...'

'And if so, then we'll eat well tonight, and leave tomorrow. Maybe that'll cheer you up, hmm?'

'Be careful,' replied her nephew, almost begrudgingly.

'I will,' Lilain replied. Merion just nodded again and trundled past her and into the shed, wrinkling his nose at the smell of too many fort-ripe bodies in close proximity.

'That boy's not so much a boy any longer,' commented Lurker.

Lilain watched her nephew leave, and tutted. 'Shame on you, John Hobble. That boy has been through a lot. He's lost his father. He's both drunk and drawn blood. Now he's lost a friend, and found a murderer instead. He's only thirteen,' she admonished him, lightly.

Lurker adjusted his hat, saying nothing.

Lilain broke, letting her shoulders sag and her head hang low. 'Though you're right, darn it. He's not the boy that I met at the railroad station.'

Lurker put a gloved hand on her shoulder, almost hesitantly. 'He'll be fine, Lil,' he offered. 'Rhin's waitin'. You sure you'll be alright?'

'I need to get these legs movin', need some fresh air,' she said, then she took a breath, and patted the hand before hobbling away towards the shadows.

Lurker looked up at the sun, drifting westwards with all the leisure and laziness of an undisputed king. Reaching inside his leather jacket, he fished out a pipe, and then struck a match against his several days' worth of bristly stubble. The pipe clacked against his teeth as he puffed.

The wind blew then, a strong, warm gust from the desert that whipped up the sand and sent the smoke curling into his eyes. Lurker cursed. As he raised a hand to wipe the grit from his face and the sting from his eyes, a scrap of paper cartwheeled across the dust and flapped against his boot. Lurker trapped it with his heel and bent down to read it. The prospector hummed to himself before picking up the paper and folding it into his pocket. The pipe clacked against his teeth once more.



'Are you sure you're alright to hunt?'

'I'll be fine. Stop asking,' Lilain replied between grunts.

Rhin stared at the ground. He flickered on the edge of visibility, just in case. 'Sorry.'

Lilain huffed. 'Don't tell me you're mopin' too. I already get enough of that from my nephew.'

Rhin narrowed his gaze, though he kept it lowered. 'I am not moping. Though I would have plenty of right to. It's been a week, and still he doesn't say a word to me.'

Lilain wanted to reply with 'Do you blame him?', but she held her tongue for once, and kept hobbling.

They were close by the northern edge of the fort, where the walls narrowed into a point. There was a small gate nestled into the walls. No soldiers were in sight, just a few stableboys and a farrier, who was snoozing in the shade of a stable. It was exactly as Rhin had told her, and it had been like this for two days now.

Rhin led Lilain forward, barely casting a shadow even in the sunlight. She pretended to be wandering aimlessly, staring up at the sky and the spiked walls of the fort. When she looked back down, she had lost sight of Rhin. She kept going, her eyes rushing over the dust and stones. Then she spied a little hand waving towards the gate. The stableboys were distracted by throwing nutshells at the dozing farrier, trying to land one on his lolling tongue. Lilain kept her head down, and ducked as low as her wounds would allow. Even this nervous beating of her heart was far better than lying in a cramped hammock with nothing to do but glare and itch.

Rhin was now climbing to the lock on the small wooden gate, cut from the tree-trunk walls, resting on thick hinges. There was a rattling of sharp steel in the lock's mouth, and open it sprang. Lilain helped with the bolts, wincing every time one squeaked. She needn't have worried; the stableboys were far too immersed in their game. Lilain squeezed through, and then they pushed it to, wedging a boulder under its lip so as to make it appear locked. 'This way,' Rhin said, becoming a little more visible so she could follow him.

A cluster of buildings sat around the angle of the walls, huddled and bunched as if they were queuing to get inside. A few more stables, another blacksmith's shed, and a handful of houses was all that stood between them and the scrub of the hills to the north. Rhin licked his lips as his keen eyes roved over the buildings. Most of them were abandoned, on General Lasp's orders, but the stables still held the running horses for the post, and a few messengers.

'Easy,' snorted Rhin, as he led Lilain a meandering route around the back of a tumbledown house and out behind an outcrop of rock. Before they knew it, they were in the desert, taking in the warm glow bouncing off the sand, their noses full of the smell of the burning earth.

'The sun'll be falling soon,' Lilain said, casting a look back at the fiery orb that dominated the blank, endless blue of the Wyoming sky. There was not a cloud to be spied, not even on the jagged horizon.

'What do you fancy?'

'Rabbit?'

Rhin patted the sword at his waist, feeling the heat of the pommel against his palm. 'Easy again,' he chuckled. Lilain had to smile. The faerie certainly did make hunting more interesting. Lurker said it was

boring letting Rhin do all the work, but Lilain wasn't quite ready to go loping after prey across the hot wilderness. She was already sweating buckets from the effort of using the crutch, and suffering from a dull pain in her legs.

The odd pair made their way out into the desert, weaving through rocky gullies and between boulders. Rhin sniffed the air and poked into cracks and shady holes. Once a scorpion came out of one to challenge him, but it quickly retreated when a black sword clanged against its armour.

After an hour, maybe more, Lilain noticed some tracks in the sand that led them a meandering path to a hole between two boulders. Rhin quickly ducked inside to sniff.

'Smells odd. Could be rabbit,' he mused.

She hobbled back so she could rest up against a rock, close to the mouth of the burrow. She took off her hat and let the sun shine down on her sweaty and tender face. Poking experimentally, she winced as she felt each cut, bruise, and loose tooth. One of her eyes was still swollen. Rhin would not have dared to say she looked awful, she knew that. Sometimes even a known truth is best kept behind a tongue, and this was one of those times.

'It would have heard our footsteps already,' she said.

'Probably,' Rhin replied. 'I can draw it out once it thinks you're gone. Just stay there a while, and he'll come out to sniff.'

Lilain shrugged. It suited her just fine. 'How do you know it's a he?' she smirked.

Rhin rubbed his chin, narrowing those purple eyes of his in thought. 'Just a guess.'

They settled down in the hot sand and fell quiet, listening to the desert shiver around them in the breeze, to the rattle and buzz of the insects, and the vultures' cries, urging the living to hurry up and die.

Another hour passed, and Rhin decided it was time to creep a little closer. His feet fell softer than feathers upon the sand, and he drew his sword without a single whisper of metal. Fae steel can be quiet when needed.

Rhin peeked around the edge of the rabbit hole and raised a hand. He began to rub his fingers against each other, so they made a strange creaking sound: tough Fae skin rasping against itself. It was loud enough

to elicit a soft rustling from deep in the burrow. Rhin fell back from the lip of the hole. He froze there, eyes unblinking, limbs unflinching, just waiting for whatever had burrowed below to rear a head, so he could lop it off. Lilain looked on, as rapt as the faerie was. Rhin faded to nothing, letting his magick hide him.

It took several moments for the owner of the rabbit hole to present himself, and he did so quite spectacularly, for it was not simply a fluffy pair of ears or a twitching snout that appeared first, but a pair of wickedly curving brown antlers, like those of a stag. Though much smaller, of course, tiny in comparison, they were still dangerous enough for a creature of Rhin's stature. They reached almost higher than he did. Lilain looked on, her face wincing with excitement.

Rhin's body ached to leap forward, but he held back, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Now came the twitching snout, like that of a hare's. Indeed, the rest of the head that quickly followed it was very hare-like as well. Black eyes embedded in a brown furry face, with long ears that stuck out behind the strange antlers.

Without a sound, Rhin plunged forward, bringing the sword down like a hammer on an anvil. The strange little beast noticed him at the very last second, as the faerie shivered into view. But by then it was too late, and the sword plunged into the base of its skull, stealing its life away before it had a chance to blink.

'It's a jackalope!' Lilain hissed, as though she could scare its corpse away.

'A what?' Rhin asked, wrenching his sword free and wiping it on the creature's fur.

'A jackalope, a horned rabbit. And I'd always thought them to be a wives' tale.'

Lilain crawled further forwards so she could look at the strange little antlers, sprouting from a bony growth in the jackalope's forehead.

Rhin put his hands on his hips. 'You, a letter who sells the blood of mythical creatures, who not last week had a bunch of wives' tales sitting in her basement?'

Lilain frowned. 'Some myths turn out not to be a lie, you know. But some are just, well, silly.'

'You'll offend the jackalope,' Rhin replied, hauling it towards her.

‘And thanks for reminding me,’ Lilain muttered stonily as she tested one of the horns with her thumb. Sharp as a tack. Lilain poked and prodded at the dead jackalope as Rhin sheathed his sword.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled sheepishly for the second time that day.

‘It’s fine,’ she replied, as she hummed over the strange little beast. ‘Best take the horns off. Don’t want to arouse any attention at the cooking fire later.’

Rhin took out his sword once more, and set to hacking the antlers away. The black steel made short work of them. They soon fractured away, and Lilain laid them atop a stone above the burrow’s mouth before slipping the limp jackalope into a bag she had brought.

‘Better head back,’ Rhin advised. ‘Before the gates are checked for the evening.’

Lilain nodded, shouldering the jackalope and reaching for her crutch. Rhin walked alongside her, slower now their work was done. His mouth was already salivating at the anticipation of roast meat.

‘Do you think he’ll ever talk to me?’ Rhin asked abruptly, as their feet crunched over the stones. Lilain thought about that for a moment, trying to find an answer that sat comfortably between honesty and hope. Those were always the best kind.

‘You’ll have to give him time, Rhin, possibly a lot of it. He’s dealing with so much, and it’s only been a week,’ Lilain replied.

‘I suppose this is my punishment, then,’ Rhin mumbled.

Lilain looked down at him, eyes roving over his black and brown armour, his pale grey skin, his jet-black hair, and of course, the dragonfly wings that hung low as he trudged. ‘I suppose it is,’ she said. ‘But hey, it could be worse. He didn’t try to kill you or anything.’

Rhin growled softly at her knack for being right.

The faerie followed in Lilain’s shadow as they retraced their steps back to the fort. She was tired, and could feel without looking that the bandages around her knee had turned bloody again. A permanent sweat had affixed itself to her brow, and she leant on the crutch all the more with every mile.

Fortunately, the fort was not far, and within an hour they had reached the out-buildings and were creeping through the lengthening shadows of their alleys. The sun was now lingering low in the sky, and the west burnt with oranges and yellows.

Rhin shivered into nothing and ran ahead to check the door. The stone was still wedged against it, and once he had shoved it aside, the pathway seemed clear.

‘The stableboys are gone,’ Rhin whispered as Lilain hobbled up. ‘No sign of the farrier.’

‘Off for dinner, I expect,’ she suggested.

‘Let’s hope so,’ Rhin replied, moving through the small gap in the door. The hinges squealed again as Lilain shuffled through. It was darker on that side of the wall, and Rhin had to blink hard to kick his night-eyes into action.

They made it twenty paces before a shout rang out from the stable. A lone soldier doing the sunset rounds stepped out of a shadow and cocked his rifle. ‘I said stop!’ he shouted again.

Rhin had already vanished, leaving Lilain alone to deal with him. She leant a little harder on her crutch, let her eyes go glazed, and bit her lip.

‘What are you doin’ back here, skulkin’ about?’ barked the soldier, as he came near. The orange sky painted his blue coat a dull brown, and set the bright buttons aflame. It matched his flaming red hair. The man half-lowered his gun as he looked Lilain up and down.

‘Major Doggard,’ Lilain began, trying to drop a little more croak into her voice, ‘You’ll forgive a beaten-up old woman, won’t you? I was just barterin’ for some meat, behind the wall. There was a man selling rabbits.’ Lilain hefted the bag.

Doggard eyed the bag, noting the blood, and then back at the woman, noting her bruises and scrapes, and the way she used that crutch like another leg.

Lilain leant closer, swaying slightly. ‘We haven’t eaten right since Fell Falls. The food here ain’t the best, if you’ll forgive my honesty.’

Doggard had to agree with that. He shouldered his rifle and looked around. ‘Fine,’ he said quietly. ‘Off you go.’

Lilain smiled, a real smile, not a dodderly old woman’s. She nodded her head. ‘You’re a good man, Major Doggard. You deserve better than a general like Lasp,’ she said, beginning to hobble away.

The major flinched at that, but said nothing, merely waving her on.

Lilain looked back over her shoulder. ‘Oh, and if you find yourself wantin’ some real food later, follow your nose.’

The major smiled and nodded, staring after the woman until she disappeared behind a curve of the wall. He scratched his head and whistled low.



‘All I’m saying is that I’ve never seen anybody act so well under pressure before, especially in front of the major,’ Rhin said, from his hiding place between two barrels.

‘All men have their weaknesses, great and small, but every man has one in common, and that is his mother. I guessed the good major would be kind to a frail, beaten-up old refugee.’

‘You do look the part,’ Lurker smirked, and then instantly realised his mistake. He winced as Lilain smacked him on the arm. ‘I meant the beaten-up part, darnit.’

Lilain flashed him a smile before tending to the jackalope. It was skewered on a spit balanced between two boxes. Lilain turned it to roast on another side. She took a deep noseful of the smell. ‘Hurry up,’ she hissed at the roasting jackalope.

Lurker was avoiding breathing through his nose at all. His keen sense of smell made his mouth water too much, made his stomach rumble like a landslide. Rushing magpie blood did have its downsides. ‘It’ll be ready soon, I reckon,’ he whispered, as if intoning a secret prayer.

‘I hope so,’ Rhin muttered, nursing a growling stomach. Faerie appetites are not proportional to their size, and should never be underestimated.

‘Smells good,’ said a voice, and the three looked up to see Merion standing over them, hands in his pockets. ‘May I?’ he gestured to a spot next to Lurker, and Lurker shrugged before moving aside.

‘What is that?’

‘Jackalope,’ Lilain replied quietly. ‘A horned rabbit. Thought they were a flight of fantasy until this very afternoon.’

‘I’ve seen plenty, I told you,’ Lurker rumbled.

Lilain was indignant. ‘You absolute liar, John Hobble. You’ve never said a word to me about jackalopes,’ she said, waving a finger at him. ‘Not in all these years of me letting blood.’

Lurker just grunted and lowered his hat.

‘Horned rabbit,’ Merion murmured. ‘Wonder what its blood did?’

‘I told you, don’t have my tools,’ Lilain replied, stiffly. It was a sore point with her. Her collection of shades and veins, her tools, and her animals were all gone, and she did not dare dwell on those thoughts too long. She would not descend into moping like the others. ‘I’ll catch another, one day.’

‘*You* caught it then?’ Merion asked, intrigued.

Lilain shook her head. ‘No, Rhin did. Quite impressively,’ she said, pointing to the little shadow between the barrels. Merion refused to acknowledge him.

‘Best huntin’ dog you’ll ever have,’ Lurker mumbled. He had obviously been at his flask. Alcohol never likes to let a silence go unfilled.

Rhin hissed something in the Fae tongue and chuckled. Lurker chuckled as well, nudging the boy to see if he would bite. Merion just watched the flames, but spared a smile.

He only spoke when the jackalope was being sliced and served. They pinched the warm meat between their fingers, ripping it with their teeth, and afterwards licking the grease from their lips, swigging bartered wine and feeling like true lords and a lady.

‘Fine supper. Well done,’ Merion said, and although nobody knew who exactly he was addressing, the boy was right. The jackalope was delicious.

Between the barrels, a small smile curled around a mouthful of meat. Rhin took that as a good sign.

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE IN THE EAST, TROUBLE IN THE WEST

20th June, 1867

The Shivering Pines earned their name. The wet breeze shook their needles and boughs, making them rattle and sigh as the drizzle came down. In amongst the branches, ravens flapped and cawed, shaking the rain from their silky black feathers, arguing with each other. It was the ravens that gave the queen's ancient palace its name.

Through the forest ran a wide path that curled outwards from the palace gardens and into the pines. It was divided in two by a high fence. One path for the queen, and one path for her visitors, side by side. Ever the one for mystery and privacy, was Queen Victorious.

All that Bremar Dizali, the Prime Lord of the Empire of Britannia, could see of the queen was the bobbing of a black umbrella which kept the drizzle at bay—held by a servant, no doubt. The queen would not sully herself so. And all Bremar Dizali could hear was the scraping and shuffling of Her Majesty as she walked, or even slithered, along the path.

Lord Dizali suppressed a shiver, wary of the watchful ravens above. The queen had a fascination with these birds. Dizali swapped a glance with Gavisham, who held his umbrella for him. His manservant wore a concerned frown, his strange eyes—one blue, one green—cautiously narrowed.

The queen had not spoken since they had left the palace, and Dizali did not dare to speak first. He was a quick learner. He had been kept waiting for almost a week since he had stormed into the palace

courtyard, asking for an audience. Victorious had denied him, and he was forced to wait for her summons. Almost a week! A lot can change in a week on the other side of the world.

The shuffling stopped, and they came to a halt where the pines bowed overhead, sheltering them somewhat from the infernal drizzle. It was dark under the trees, not much more than twilight once the sun was lost behind a thick blanket of grey clouds. The ravens hushed their cawing, which sent a shiver running down Dizali's spine.

Victorious spoke at last. 'There is trouble in the east, Prime Lord.'

'Your Majesty, there is indeed. The Ottoman Empire is crumbling, piece by piece, swiftly falling prey to Tzar Alekzander's greed. Another war is coming, I believe, with Rosiya.'

'You speak so dramatically, Lord Dizali.'

Dizali bit his tongue.

'We must protect our interests in Constantinople,' the queen continued. 'I will not have our grip on the axle of central Asia weakened.'

'Yes, My Queen,' answered Dizali. There was a silence, filled with soft cawing.

'Do not just agree with me, Dizali. Explain to me how we will do this!'

'Well, My Queen, this is what I came here to speak to you about. Our plan to take control of the Hark estate, and quieten the Benches, has hit a ... a *snag*, Your Majesty.'

'Speak,' spat Victorious, clearly unamused.

'Gavisham?' Dizali requested, holding out his hand. Gavisham reached inside his black coat and brought forth the morning paper. Dizali took it, unfolded it at the right page and then held it over the top of the fence to be fetched by another servant. A mottled hand took it, and there was an awkward, pregnant pause as the queen read.

Dizali summarised for her: 'The Serpeds are dead, My Queen. And the Bulldog's boy lives. But what that article doesn't tell you is that it was not a Shohari war party that caused the fire. It was the boy himself. He slaughtered the whole family and set the riverboat on fire. They had invited him and his aunt to dinner.'

'How do you know of this?' Victorious hissed.

‘We received a wiregram, Your Majesty, from another survivor. One of Serped’s lordsguards. He saw the boy,’ Dizali replied. He took a breath, and spoke gently. ‘That is what I came to speak to you about, almost a week ago, My Queen.’

‘One does not simply arrive uninvited at the Palace of Ravens, Dizali, not even a Prime Lord! Karrigan Hark did well to remember that and so should you,’ she snarled. Dizali bowed his head even behind the fence. There was a crackling of stones as she moved. ‘Trouble in the east, trouble in the west. Tell me again, Lord Dizali, what the Hark estate consists of.’

Dizali puffed out his chest. He had stared at the reports many times, long into the night, until the candles had burned to nothing, the brandy was poured, and his fingers itched. ‘A wide range of businesses, large and small, My Queen: warehouses and dock buildings; mills, both cotton and steel; ironworks; mining operations across Europe; trading companies in the East Indus Seas; shipyards; a bank as well, I believe; a hospital; several insurance companies; a string of properties such as towers, inns, shops, and various factories.’

‘And what do these various factories manufacture? Tell me,’ she commanded him, her voice gentle yet altogether terrifying.

Dizali ground his teeth together. Victorious was playing with him, cat and yarn. ‘A range of things, Your Highness, but predominately machine parts, wheels, and armaments.’

There was another pause, which prickled.

‘Does it not then appear to you, Lord Dizali, that if war were soon to erupt, then the late Lord Hark’s estate might be needed in the hands of the Crown?’

‘Most definitely, My Queen, and that is what I have been—’

But Victorious cut him off cold. ‘Not very well, Prime Lord Dizali, not very well at all. After all these centuries, must I still pull each and every string myself? What of our other friends in the west, those who have not been reduced to corpses? I pray you have some good news for me, Dizali. I do not enjoy my time being wasted, especially not in the rain.’

Dizali did at least have something good to report. He puffed out his chest. ‘The course is set, Your Majesty, and already the talks have been prosperous. We think Lincoln might agree to it, despite his recent

meetings with Tzar Alekzander of Rosiya. I have several ears placed inside his cabinet, and the pretender Lincoln is as yet undecided about which way to lean.'

There was a rustle, and a wet sound as of smacking lips. 'It will not matter in the end. How soon?'

'A few weeks, perhaps more, My Queen,' Dizali replied, staring up at the ravens. A few had hopped down to the lowest branches of the trees, so they could listen in and caw rudely to one another. Dizali stared up at their beady black eyes.

The queen outlined her plan. 'Entwine his fate with the boy's. Perhaps our friends can teach them both a lesson or two. Tonmerion Hark must be branded as a murderer, or traitor, so that the crown can rightfully claim the estate. Send a man to see it done. Caught. Killed, and his body in the cursed newspapers for all to see.' The paper flew back over the fence in a flurry. 'We shall claim the estate as penance for his sins against the Empire. The Benches will understand.'

Dizali turned to Gavisham once more, and the man nodded firmly. There was a hard look in his eyes. 'I have just the man in mind, My Queen. He will see the job done. The boy will be dead in no time at all, and the estate will be Your Majesty's.'

'And fetch me the deeds and the executor of the Bulldog's last will and testament. I will speak with him. Then we shall have our wars.'

'Yes, Your Majesty. Right away,' he said.

Dizali bowed, as did Gavisham, and the two men began to hurry back towards the palace.

'Do not fail me this time, Prime Lord,' Victorious called after him, just before he was out of earshot.

The two men marched through the palace, eager to leave, the echo of cawing ravens still loud in their ears. The marble halls and cavernous rooms were empty, as if the servants were all in the middle of a nap. Perhaps the queen deciding to take a stroll through her Shivering Pines was the only chance of rest they got.

Dizali and Gavisham waited until the carriage doors had shut with a bang, and the wheels were rattling beneath them before speaking, Dizali first, as was his right.

'You heard her: you're to go America. You will have your revenge after all.'

‘Try not to miss me, Milord,’ Gavisham smiled, flashing that new gold tooth of his.

Dizali glared. He was still nurturing a mood after being berated by the Queen.

‘I will see it done,’ added the manservant. ‘I know where to look.’

‘No, you know where to start. You’ll need to travel fast to pick up their trail.’

‘I’ll see it done, fear not.’

Dizali narrowed his eyes and stroked his sharp goatee. ‘I know you will. And I want regular updates.’

Gavisham stared out of the window. ‘And how would you like it done?’ he asked, almost absently.

‘Pardon?’ Dizali looked at him oddly.

Gavisham mimed a choking action. ‘The boy, how do you want it done?’

Dizali leant forwards, and spoke low, so that Gavisham had trouble hearing him. ‘You can shoot him, stab him, skin him, scalp him, flay him, strangle him, drown him, burn him, bury him, or blow him up. I don’t care how you do it. I just want that Hark boy put down. It suits our plan,’ he growled, his eyes bereft of any emotion.

‘Our plan, or her plan?’

It was Dizali’s turn to look out of the window. ‘Ours, always ours. Curse it, she’s growing mad! Horrendously out of touch! The Benches will do no such thing as *understand*. They have been rubbing their greedy little hands ever since somebody put a bullet in Hark’s chest.’

‘Time for some fresh blood in the ranks, Milord,’ Gavisham mused.

Dizali nodded. ‘I believe we have just been given the perfect opportunity, Gavisham. The pieces are coming together. What the old fool does not know is that I’ve been watching that executor, a Mr Witchazel, since Hark died. He looks like the squawking type. He will give us what we need. And I have heard of a man that can handle it all.’

‘Did you ever find out who did it? To Hark I mean?’

Dizali frowned, almost as if it still irked him. Perhaps he was somewhat jealous. He had been planning Hark’s downfall for years. Dizali had felt slightly cheated by the murder. ‘No,’ he muttered. ‘Let’s get you back to Clovenhall. You can get your supplies and then head to

the docks. You will leave immediately. I shall despatch a rider to find a ship for you while you're gathering your things.'

'That suits me fine, Milord, though I do hate to travel by sea.'

Dizali looked him up and down and sneered. 'And here was I, believing you had an iron stomach, what with all the bloods you mix.'

'Seawater's a different beast, Sir, and I've not had the best luck with ships, have I?' Gavisham winked, and strangled the door-handle, already eager to get some red in him and introduce this blasted boy to his grave. *My brother will meet him in hell*, he thought smugly to himself.

And so it was done. The carriage had barely passed the gates of Clovenhall, Dizali's ancestral home, before a rider was swinging up into his saddle and spurring on his horse. Dizali was a man famed for his dislike of dalliance.

Gavisham hit the courtyard running. He leapt up Clovenhall's steps and went inside. Dizali followed at a more leisurely pace, his long black coat billowing around his booted ankles. The drizzle had now stopped, leaving a humid haze behind, and Dizali found himself sweating. *Damn this Britannia weather!*

Clovenhall was calm and still, just how he liked it. The servants went to and fro about their errands swiftly but silently. Only the butlers spoke, and they hissed like lizards as they chased the other servants, checking and reprimanding. Their hushed tones washed over Dizali as he strode through his house.

'You've forgotten to dust the wolf head, I believe, young lady.'

'There, to the left, no, back I say!'

'*Under* the vase, not atop it, stupid man.'

Dizali soon found himself in his office, uncorking a decanter of dark red brandy. He strode about, glass in his hand, staring out of his vast windows at his even vaster estate. He looked at the huge spires of London prickling the horizon, grey and smudged by the drizzle that still drenched the inner city. Smog too, rose on the breeze, belching from chimney stacks. Cranes swung about lazily, building London ever higher and grander.

Dizali turned his eyes to the crooked towers of the Palace of Ravens, which dominated the western centre of the city. He frowned, and took a deep swig of his brandy. The Master of the Emerald Benches would not be needed until this afternoon—he had time to brood and

glare. There was plotting to be done, and nothing stokes a mood for scheming and self-preservation like a slug of blood-red brandy.

The Prime Lord swept away to sit at his desk and shuffle his papers, then steeped his fingers and stared at the door. He let his mind tumble and fall over ideas, reeling in the threads of possibility to see where they led.

The Emerald Benches and the Crown had been keeping a steady truce. The people had forced Victorious to let their voice be heard in a parliament several centuries ago. And since then the queen had been raised constitutionally ever-upwards, like a grand but useless weathervane, as the Benches ruled the Empire from beneath, toiling feverishly. They leeches power from her tiny morsels at a time, wrapping up rules and spinning their webs of power to lock her out, one line of law at a time. For just a handful of words can topple a throne when used in the right way. That, and a dash of madness. Dizali had been brooding over one handful in particular since Hark had found his way onto the slab: the Clean Slate Statute.

The Prime Lord let his mind drill down into detail and sort through countries and colours, clashing them together one by one, until he had them in the order he wanted, until he had the fate of the world entangled between his fingers, like a cat's cradle, and he was busy flicking the strings.

The door shuddered under an eager knock, and Gavisham strode into the room. He had barely changed. The dark grey bowler hat was still wedged onto his shaved head, covering the spiral scar he had received in the war with Francia. He still wore the red tie he always insisted on, and had simply added a long grey coat while a small hog-leather bag hung at his side. If Dizali was not mistaken, the hint of an eager smile hovered on the manservant's lips.

'Are you ready?' Dizali questioned over the rooftops of his fingers.

'And raring, Milord,' Gavisham fired back.

'Show me.'

Gavisham set his bag on the floor, and unbuttoned his coat. He held it wide, showing off the myriad of bottles and vials that hid within. Each sat in a pocket of its own, fastened into place with a little loop of twine, ready to break when needed. Each one flashed a different colour:

mostly red, but there were some faint blues, browns, and yellows for good measure. Dizali's eyes roved over them, losing count.

'Fine,' said Dizali, leaning back in his leather chair. 'To the docks with you then. Have your revenge.'

Gavisham nodded, and then leant forwards to extend a hand. Dizali stared at it for a while before standing and reaching to shake it, briefly.

'I will not fail you, Milord.'

'I'm counting on it, Gavisham. Dismissed, and good luck.'

'You don't need luck when you can bloodrush, Lord Dizali,' Gavisham smirked, flashing gold, before turning on a heel and slamming the door.

Dizali raised an eyebrow. He had to smile as he reached for his brandy. 'No, you do not,' he replied.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROAD

20th June, 1867

Merion lingered beneath the eaves of the shed, watching the soldiers and guards on their rounds. The fort's mood had not lifted in the past few days. A sullen air followed the gun-toting figures like a miasma as they milled about, eyeing the refugees with mild disinterest.

Sniffing the night air, Merion took in the dust, the wood, and the stink of sweaty horses. His feet itched, eager to move, hopefully east. Hell, his whole body itched, as it had since that weary morning trudging through the desert, with the heat rising around his cracked, blood-caked shoes, the magick still buzzing in his veins. He had itched for that feeling again every day since.

Merion bit the inside of his lip. He felt frustrated, more than anything. The war further down the railroad had forced him to languish, forced him to confront the feelings that constantly swirled beneath his otherwise sullen and quiet exterior. Not just the itching for blood, but the outrage, the sorrow, and, though he disliked to admit it, the chilling fear that time was being wasted, crumbling like stale bread. Out on the road, these feelings could be brushed aside or trampled. Here in the fort, there was nothing to be done but sit and stew in them. And he hated it. Fortunately for Merion, tonight was finally the night it would change. *Lasp's orders be damned.*

'Where are they?' he muttered to himself, just to fill the boredom of silence.

A small voice piped up beside him. ‘Lurker went to fill his flask. Lilain moves a little slower these days.’ Rhin appeared a short distance away, perched on the brink of a step, half-faded.

Merion could not help but jump. A short lifetime of living with a faerie, and still it never failed. He groped for an answer.

‘I’m sorry for making you jump,’ the faerie apologised. ‘I thought you were just ignoring me. I didn’t have anywhere else to go.’ Rhin’s words sounded small, even for somebody twelve inches tall.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Merion told the dust at his feet.

Rhin attempted to flash one of his old trademark grins, but it quickly withered. ‘Excited to be getting out?’

‘Mmm,’ was all Merion said in reply.

Rhin kicked his boots together, and sighed.

Lurker soon rounded the corner, listing slightly to the left. Something sloshed in his pocket as he walked. He made no apology, and simply sniffed, rubbed his nose, and looked around. ‘Where’s Lil?’

‘Yet to arrive,’ Merion answered.

‘Think this’ll work? It’s failed the last three nights,’ Lurker grunted, looking between the boy and his faerie. ‘We’ve been lucky to get away with it so far. Now the soldiers are back, and Mayut’s drawin’ ever closer. They’re tightenin’ security.’ He was always more loquacious when he’d had a few, and Merion had to smile wryly. The mildly pickled prospector was right. They had been caught, or almost caught, three times since roasting the jackalope. Escape had been snatched from their hands like a starving dog deprived of its bone.

But tonight was the night, Rhin had promised. Tonight was none other than Brigadier General Lasp’s birthday, and there were to be celebrations in the mess hall, war be damned. With half the soldiers ordered to attend, smiles firmly plastered on their faces, escape would be theirs at last.

There came the sound of voices along the thoroughfare, and their heads snapped up. Rhin shivered out of sight, and Merion stood a little straighter. Lurker just sniffed as always.

‘As I was saying, Major, he’s right here. Aren’t you, Tonmerion Hark?’

‘I am indeed,’ Merion replied.

‘Like I said, up to no mischief.’ His aunt flashed him an urgent look with her eyes, and Merion stepped forwards.

It was Major Doggard. His face was more flushed than usual, stress glinting in his eyes, a sure sign that the general had given him forty lashes of his tongue. ‘Be that as it may, Ma’am, the Brigadier wants a word with the young man.’

‘For what reason?’ Merion asked.

‘What reason?’ echoed Lurker.

Doggard looked Lurker up and down, and his grip on his rifle visibly tightened. ‘What with all the suspicious goings on, and finding you three all about the fort at night, the Brigadier’s got to wondering. Wants to set the boy straight.’

‘He lays a hand on—’

‘Not like that, Ma’am,’ Doggard hissed. He ran an exasperated hand through his hair, which burned orange in the torchlight. ‘If it makes you feel better, I’ll be there the entire time.’

‘That it does, Major,’ Lilain said, jabbing her crutch into the ground, another flash of the eyes for Merion. ‘Nephew, come along.’

‘Fine,’ Merion mumbled, and followed Doggard up the path.

Merion waited until they were out of earshot of Lilain and Lurker before interrogating the major: ‘So what is he bent out of shape about now?’ he asked, casually.

It could have been a snigger, it could have been a cough, Merion wasn’t sure, but either way Doggard suppressed something. ‘I already told you.’

‘Tough fight, was it, the other day?’ Merion found himself saying, his boyish curiosity leading the way. It is a trait that all boys of Merion’s age and older are prone to, the desire to bask in the horror of some reality they cannot touch. Yet Merion had taken one step further: he had already tasted the horror, and wanted to understand more of it.

Doggard mulled over that for a while, replaying some vivid scene behind the eyes.

‘Tough as it gets.’

His reply was gruff, full of ice. They were coming up to the lodge, and the major fixed his eyes on the door as though his gaze could drag it closer.

‘Shamans, I imagine.’ It was a question, cleverly disguised, and Doggard nodded, eyes still locked ahead.

Merion sighed. ‘You have to attack them from all angles. Surround them,’ he commented, almost idly. He remembered crouching on his aunt’s roof, staring through the spyglass at the chaos.

Doggard raised his hand to the door and offered Merion a bitter look. ‘And what would a high-born Empire boy know of magick and battle?’ he whispered, before knocking.

‘Enter!’ somebody barked. No prizes for guessing who.

Merion combed his hair back with his hands and flashed a sweet smile. ‘Oh, I have quite a bit of experience, Major. Don’t forget where I crawled out of. Fell Falls still smoulders, or so I’ve heard,’ he retorted, before pushing his way through the door and leaving Doggard standing on the step.

‘Ah! If it isn’t Master Hark, our little escapee,’ Brigadier General Lasp hissed, striding out from behind a desk swamped with papers and leather-bound reports. It was a desk of war. The general had managed to pour himself into his finest formal uniform. He wore a bright yellow sash and had a swathe of medals, some of questionable origin, splayed across his chest. All he lacked was a magnificent steed and a painter to capture it all—something for the wall behind his desk, perhaps.

Merion’s smile tightened. ‘It’s actually *Lord* Hark, General, and correct me if I’m wrong, but to be an escapee, you actually have to escape at some point.’ Both were cheap shots, but Merion was never one to waste an opportunity.

With much flapping of the jowls, Lasp drew himself up to his full height and strode forwards to stare down at Merion. But the boy was taller than he looked, and the effect was clearly not as intimidating as he had hoped. He used his belly instead, forcing Merion to step back or be knocked to the floor.

‘Three times now, my men have caught you at the northern gate, near the stables, putting your noses where they aren’t wanted!’

Merion shrugged nonchalantly. ‘We were simply trying to find better accommodation. The horses seem to sleep better than us. We thought they wouldn’t mind a few humble refugees sharing their hay.’ He was not in the mood for this pompous man’s opinions. Lasp was a boulder in his path, which he wanted to hammer to pieces.

‘Why you ungrateful ...!’ Anger choked him, and for a moment Lasp looked as though he would slap the boy around the face, but Doggard crept forwards to clear his throat. The general snarled and walked a circle around the room, like a portly shark swimming around a seal pup. ‘Ungrateful little Empire whelp. You would rather be out there with the savages than in here, safe under the protection of my soldiers? I bring you under our wing, shelter you from the fighting—’

‘Stuff us all into a shed,’ Merion interjected.

Lasp turned a darker shade of beetroot. ‘I gave you bed and board! I will not be interrupted, Master Hark,’ Lasp barked. His voice had gained an edge.

‘And I will not be cooped up in a fort, kept as a prisoner instead of walking east like the free soul I am, Brigadier General!’

Lasp had only one piece to play. ‘You are under military jurisdiction, Hark. If I find you attempting to escape the confines of my fort again, I shall have you put in the jail.’

Merion inwardly thanked his father for his tiresome lectures on the military. ‘As I’m not an enlisted man, and far too young to be so, and as I do not even belong to this country, I do not believe you have that right.’

Lasp just boiled on the spot. He had obviously not planned for such fierce resistance. Merion imagined that his men usually just quailed in his ample presence. To the Brigadier’s right, a slim man in a uniform stepped forwards to whisper in his ear.

‘Your speech, Sir, it’s almost time,’ were the words Merion caught. Lasp smoothed his hair back, baring his teeth in a strained smile.

‘If my men find you near the stables again ...’ He wagged a finger.

‘Do not fear, General. They won’t,’ Merion promised him, and he meant it. He did not wait to be dismissed. He simply turned and walked out of the door, leaving Doggard wondering what to do with himself.

‘I want that boy followed, Major. That is your only duty tonight.’

Doggard drew himself up and saluted. ‘Yes, General,’ he replied, and swept from the lodge, leaving a blood-red Lasp to curse and moan about jumped-up lordlings and foreigners.



‘What did he want?’ asked Lurker, as Merion loomed out of the darkness, hands stuck firmly in his pockets.

‘To satisfy his own need to feel important.’

‘Sounds about right,’ his aunt said.

Merion pulled a wry face. ‘Though he did order us to stay within the confines of the fort for our own safety, and said if he found any of us near the stables again, we would be thrown into the jail.’

‘Ah,’ she added.

‘The key word being “if”, however,’ Merion smirked.

‘Boy’s got a point,’ Lurker sniffed.

Merion looked around their little torch-lit circle, even glancing at Rhin for the briefest of moments. ‘I say we take the chance. Lasp will be busy giving speeches and swaggering his fat arse about. We won’t get another.’

‘If you’re certain, Merion?’ Lilain looked at her nephew.

Merion’s voice was firm as a brick. ‘Absolutely,’ he replied.

Lilain nodded, thumping her crutch in the dirt. ‘Rhin? Lead the way,’ she said.

The faerie rattled his wings. ‘Right you are.’

Half-faded and just barely visible, Rhin led them down the main path that sliced the fort in two, heading for the northernmost corner. Lurker brought up the rear, sniffing quietly to himself, his boots occasionally scuffing the earth.

Rhin held them at a small crossroads as a group of soldiers passed. Two of them were dragging a drunken comrade, grumbling between themselves about how unamused the Brigadier would be in the morning, with a hangover as sharp as a fresh-cut lemon. *They’re right about that*, Merion thought, as they waited for them to pass.

With the coast clear, the four walked on. Soon they caught sight of the familiar angles of the stable, dimly lit by the torches staked along the path. Merion silently cheered to note that there was no movement, nor any lights burning nearby.

Rhin held up a hand, and the others waited by the path as the faerie crept forwards to investigate. Long minutes rolled painfully past. All they could do was stay quiet and peer into the shadows around them. None of them particularly fancied a few days in jail, and now that it had been declared the prize for failure, it made them even more nervous.

Even Merion, so determined to see this fort behind him, could not help but clench his jaw tightly.

‘It’s clear,’ a hushed voice said, and the other three moved forward, deeper into the darkness and closer to freedom.

The stables were empty, save for a trio of horses idly wandering their pens and snuffling gently. A few fireflies flashed like lost stars here and there in the darkness. Merion kept close behind his aunt, who in turn, kept close behind Rhin.

‘Stop right there,’ hissed a voice, loud in the silence. A figure in uniform stepped out of the darkness, holding a rifle low. It was Doggard. ‘I see you didn’t listen to a word the general said.’

‘Was I supposed to? Forgive me, all I heard was a buffoon blowing off steam,’ Merion muttered, his tone darker than the shadows.

‘He is the superior officer of this fort ...’ the major began, but it was obvious from his own tone that the words were just mechanical. Any passion they had previously held was now gone, and the major could hear it in his own voice. He began to chuckle.

‘Maker, you’re a stubborn little fellow,’ he said.

‘These are stubborn times,’ Merion replied, searching Doggard’s eyes for the hint of a chance. ‘All I want, all we want, is to be back on the road, heading east. We have no interest in the war, or going anywhere near it, I assure you.’

‘Please, Major,’ Lilain spoke up. ‘I can see you’re a reasonable man. That’s rare in these parts. All you have to do is say you didn’t see us.’

Doggard wrestled with himself. ‘Lasp’ll have my guts for bootlaces.’

It was Lurker’s turn. ‘If losin’ a handful of refugees is more important to him than havin’ his men fit for war, then that should tell you all you need to know, Major,’ he said, rather poetically for a man of few words. ‘From one soldier to another, that ain’t right,’ he added.

Doggard looked at the man and met the dim glint of his eyes under the dark shadow of his hat. Lurker nodded, as if affirming some silent question. The major made an exasperated sound. ‘For Maker’s sake,’ he grunted. ‘Go, and go now. It better be something important, Hark, whatever it is that’s taking you east.’

‘Revenge,’ hissed the boy.

Doggard seemed a little taken aback, as did Lurker and Lilain for that matter, but the major nodded all the same. ‘At least that’s a reason I can understand,’ he replied grimly, and waved his rifle at them. ‘Go, before I change my mind.’

‘You’re a good man, Doggard,’ Lilain told him as she hobbled forwards.

The major stepped back into the shadows. ‘Don’t know what good it’ll do me.’

Without another word, they rushed to the door set into the wooden walls. Rhin had already been at the lock with a steel dagger, and it lay in the dust.

‘That was too close,’ he said, as they joined him.

One by one, they slipped through the doorway and out into the night. The desert was dark even with the starlight, a rolling, jagged rug of dust and rocks. Despite its monochrome bareness, the wind’s chill, and the howls and cries that floated to them on the breeze, no sight was more welcome, save maybe an ocean and a waiting steamer.

Merion hovered by the door as Rhin wedged it shut behind them. When he was done, he found Merion looking down at him, working his lips, unsure of what to say.

‘Good work,’ the boy finally muttered, before turning away.

Rhin bowed, gave him a smile, and followed the others.

Merion took a breath of the night air. ‘And here we go again,’ he whispered.



The morning sun came quick and fierce, scorching the earth as soon as it had hauled its weight above the horizon. Out on the meandering road, there was no shelter but for their hats.

The ground buzzed with heat and insects. A few dun desert birds flitted about from rock to rock, from cactus to sagebrush, catching mosquitos on the wing. Their songs were as drab as their feathers, but somehow this pinch of life helped to alleviate the monotony of walking and sweating, reminding them that life was indeed possible in this desert.

And sweat they did. By noon, their tongues were lumps of sand in their mouths, and sweat dripped down their brows in buckets. Lilain felt it the hardest. Several times her sweaty hands had slipped from the crutch, and she had pitched into the sand. Rhin was the only one who escaped the heat, sitting half in, half out of one of Lurker's larger pockets. Rhin doubted that Merion would have suffered to carry him in his bag.

The rough road traipsed through the desert as if it were in no hurry to get anywhere. It was a complete contrast to the railroad, which carved its own straight path through the rocks and hills, never more than a mile or two away from the wandering road. Once or twice, locomotives rattled past, heading towards the frontier, their carriage windows filled with grim-eyed soldiers and Cathayan workers. The four stayed low and watchful as the trains rattled on. The war with the Buffalo Snake was clearly more important than a few escaped refugees.

Their flasks were almost empty before Lurker found them a lake. Lori, he had called it, and it was cold and fresh. They spent an hour there, maybe longer, washing the sweat from their skin and clothes, drinking their fill of lake water, and eyeing the halo of vultures they had collected. The birds had been circling since noon, hoping for a little morsel by sunset. They soared high above on the rising afternoon heat, winged blotches against the empty sky.

The landscape seemed lost for creativity, had barely changed since they had left the fort—or even Fell Falls for that matter. The sand was perhaps yellower, and there were more plants, but the desert remained as bare as a beggar's plate, and as devilishly hot as always. By the time the sun was beginning to slip away towards tomorrow, Merion was praying for something four-legged, saddled and lost.



That night, they made camp in a ring of boulders at the foot of a scrubby hill, where the fire could crackle quietly to itself without attracting too much attention. Lurker had led them on a winding path on and off the road, to confuse their tracks, but a fire is a beacon, one that should be

kept out of sight. There were other things in this desert besides Lasp's soldiers—more dangerous things.

Lilain knew this, and sat at the edge of the firelight cleaning their only two guns. They had managed to break down Long Tom II, as Lilain had affectionately dubbed her new, or rather stolen, rifle, and stow it in Lurker's pack shortly before being taken in to Fort Kenaday. The Mistress, the pistol that had taken the lives of the Serpeds, had been hidden in his coat. Lurker had commandeered it after losing that cannon of his to the sheriffs-men of Fell Falls. The forfeiture clearly still irked him—it was obvious in the way he stared at the gleaming gunmetal in Lilain's deft fingers, and in the way he kept taking short sips from his flask. It was not lake water he was drinking.

Rhin sat beside the letter, sharpening his sword and knives on a tiny whetstone. His pointed ears twitched every time a howl or a screech rang out in the darkness.

Merion was oblivious to it all: the cleaning, the staring, and the night-noises. He just stared at a sliver of dried jackalope meat pinched between his finger and thumb, counting the days in his head. It must have been the hundredth time that week he had totted them up, and every time the total pulled the knot in his stomach a little tighter. *Fifteen days.*

Fifteen days since he had sent Castor Serped to his well-deserved grave.

Fifteen days for the news to reach London.

Fifteen more days for greedy hands to strengthen their hold over his father's estate.

The realisation had struck Merion the morning after the fire, while they were rooting through the Serped train that Rhin had stolen for the Wit, finding nothing but a few forgotten coins. As the others had cursed and muttered, he had perched on the edge of the driver's cabin, his legs dangling over the tracks, sullen and still reeling from the events of the night before.

Calidae had said 'we' when he left her to the fire. 'Everything we worked for', she had said. He had known then, even in the middle of the surging fire, that 'we' meant more than just the Serpeds. Her words had bounced around Merion's head for a week before he recalled the name that Castor had spat at him in the cargo hold.

Dizali. The Bulldog's successor. That name had been turned over and over in his mind, like a sword in a forge. Even now, staring at the jackalope meat, he wanted to mutter that name to the fire and see how it tasted. Bitter, he imagined.

'What's on your mind, Nephew?' Lilain interrupted his brooding.

'Nothing,' Merion lied.

His aunt was hardly convinced. 'People only say nothing when there's something to spit out. You've been staring at that meat for almost ten minutes,' she said.

'I was miles away,' he mumbled, hoping that would placate her. *Several thousand miles east, to be exact.*

'Mmm,' she hummed, not convinced. 'So what's your plan, then, Nephew?' she asked. She was determined to get an answer tonight. His sullen mood held no protection in the desert, it seemed.

Merion shrugged. 'Same as before. Head east. Work or barter our way to the coast, then somehow get on a ship heading for the Empire.' It sounded so easy when it tumbled out of his mouth.

'And where does this revenge part come in?' rumbled Lurker, not looking up from his flask. Lilain flashed him a look, as if he had stolen her next question.

The young Hark rolled his eyes. 'I knew there would be questions about that,' he muttered.

'Do you blame us? We don't hear a peep out of you for almost two weeks, and then you go sayin' something like that? It worries me, Nephew,' Lilain told him, as she rubbed her hands on a scrap of cloth. 'I have to ask. I'm your aunt.' Rhin was looking on intently now. The boy could feel his stare from the corner of his eye.

Merion took a breath. 'Prime Lord Dizali,' he replied.

'What's one of those?' asked Lurker.

'My father's successor, and the man behind the Serpeds' treachery.'

'How can you be so sure?' Lilain asked.

'You were there, Aunt Lilain, when Castor said his name. I'm sure of it. He means to take my estate from me,' Merion stated, in a voice as cold as the night air around them.

For a while, nobody said anything. Rhin just scraped his whetstone along his sword and cleared his throat.

Lilain stared up at the dusty stars. 'I'll ask again. What's your plan?'

'Go to London. Expose Dizali for the worm he is.'

'He's a Prime Lord.'

'And I'm the heir to a Prime Lord's estate. Your point?'

Lilain narrowed her eyes at him, and Merion felt as though he was back in her grimy kitchen, being told off for eavesdropping. It felt like such a long time ago.

'My point, Nephew, is that he has the ear of the queen, and is a very powerful man. My point is that you are a boy, and he is a Prime Lord. My point is that you have no other plan besides sailing to London and marchin' up his steps.'

Merion glowered at the sand between his legs. She was right, and that was what cut deep. He knew he had nothing besides his anger and ... *bloodrushing*. He had known this as soon as Dizali's name had first crept into his head. But he refused to let that hold him back, and he said as much.

Lilain shook her head and held her tongue, not pushing him any further tonight. The road was long, and travelling it in irksome silence would make it even longer. She changed the subject, and looked at Lurker. 'How far are we from Nebraskar?'

Lurker hummed, looking off towards the dark of the distant hills that cut a jagged horizon from the starry sky. 'Two, three days of solid walkin', maybe more,' he said, then paused, sniffing the night air. He muttered something to himself and hauled himself up from the dust. The others watched him as he trudged out into the darkness. 'Too much drinkin',' he added gruffly, before disappearing into the night.

'He alright?' Rhin asked. He had been quiet until now.

Lilain nodded, peering after him. 'He's run out of blood. Hasn't rushed in almost a week. That's longer than he normally goes without.'

'And don't you have any?'

'Not a drop, and you know that, Nephew.'

'What'll happen?' Rhin was curious now.

Lilain worked her lips. 'Possibly nothing. He might just drink through it. Then again, he might not take too kindly to it, and get sick. I've seen that happen before. It's called withdrawal, and it's more in the

mind than the body.’ Lilain’s voice told them the prospect weighed heavy on her.

‘Am I going to—?’ Merion began, but his aunt shook her head.

‘You’ve only been rushing for a month, Nephew. You’ll be fine.’

Merion stared into the night, trying to spy Lurker in the shadows, but the fire had stolen his night vision, and the desert was black and empty. ‘What about Jake?’ he suggested.

Lilain shook her head once more.

‘Shades have to be taken from specific places, where the blood is purest: heart, liver, brain—anywhere that involves either a scalpel or a long needle, and I don’t have either. It would kill the bird to try. If Lurker let me, that is. He loves that bird something strange.’

‘Where is that magpie, anyway?’

‘Scoutin’, probably. He wanders off for days on end. Always comes back, though. Always has,’ Lilain explained. Noting Merion’s worried look, she carried on. ‘There may be a few letters in Cheyenne. If we’re lucky.’

‘Good,’ Merion replied. ‘We’d better hurry then.’

There was something selfish hiding in his words, and it stung him. He was worried for Lurker, of course, but the prospect of tasting blood again made his tongue run around the backs of his teeth and the saliva flow. He met his aunt’s eyes then, as he wondered what the next few days would hold, and saw the curiosity in them. The boy felt his cheeks grow hot, and he turned so his back was to the fire and he could stare at the stars.

‘Goodnight, Nephew,’ she said to him.

‘Goodnight,’ Merion whispered.