

BEN GALLEY

BLOOD RUSH



BOOK ONE OF THE SCARLET STAR TRILOGY

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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SUGGESTED LISTENING

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

Letters From the Sky
Civil Twilight

Run
Kill it Kid

*F**king Desert, Dude*
Khurt

Inhaler
Foals

Circles
Ludovico Einaudi & Greta
Svabo Bech

Overdone
Bombay Bicycle Club

Life @ 11
A Day To Remember

Everybody Wants to Rule the World
Lorde

Hunger of the Pine
Δ

Bleeding Out
Imagine Dragons

A Favour House Atlantic
Coheed & Cambria

Waitress Song
First Aid Kit

BomBom - feat. The Teaching
Macklemore & Ryan Lewis

Stalemate
Enter Shikari

Follaton Wood
Ben Howard

Ten Tonne Skeleton
Royal Blood

Empire
Alpines

Dreammember
Twin Atlantic

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A PRELUDE

There are many places in this world where we humans are not welcome. Antarticus, for example, has slain explorer after explorer with its wolves and winds so cold and fierce they can cut a man in half. Or the Sandara, plaguing travellers for millennia with its fanged dunes and sandstorms. Or what about the high seas, and the Cape of Black Souls, where the waves swallow ships whole, and never spit them back out? But there are darker places on this earth. Much, much darker places.

These are places that time has forgotten, that *we* have forgotten, now that we've turned our attention to industry, to business, and to science. Our steam and our clockwork may have conquered the globe, but we have built our cities on old and borrowed ground, a ground that knew many creatures and empires before it felt the kiss of our own feet. These were the ages that spawned fairy tale and folklore, dreams and nightmares, the world that we trampled in our march for progress, burying it beneath cobble and railroad.

But stubbornness is a trait of victors, so they say. The vestiges of this old world are still clinging on, hiding in the dark places, lost in the shadows, glaring at us from behind their magic. Oh, they are very much alive, friends, hiding in the cracks of reality, the spaces between your blinks. And woe betide anybody that dares to go hunting for them. You would have better luck in the Sandara.

Of course, you have known this all along. If you have ever felt the hot rush of fear in your stomach when a twig snaps in the twilight woods, then you have known it. If you have ever felt that chill run up your spine every time you cross the old bridge, you have known it.

We humans remember the darkness very well, and how its monsters prowled the edges of our campfires and snatched us into the

night. We simply refuse to acknowledge it is anything other than irrational fear. Ghost stories. Boogeymen. Old wives' tales. Nonsense, though we secretly know the truth. So much so that when we read in the newspapers that a man was ripped to shreds by a mysterious assailant in the old dockyards last Thursday, we do not think psychopath, we think *werewolf*. Maybe we would be right.

There are dark things in the shadows, and they are far from fond of us humans.

CHAPTER I

“TO THE LOST”

18th April, 1867

‘To the lost.’ The surgeon raised his tiny glass with a gloved and rather bony hand.

Tonmerion Hark did the same, though he could only summon the wherewithal to raise it halfway. He let it hover just beneath his chin, as if he were cradling it to his chest. The liquor smelled like cloves. Sickening. However he tried, he couldn’t tear his gaze away from the pistol, that sharp-edged contraption of humourless steel and stained oak, lounging in an impossibly clean metal tray at the elbow of his father’s body.

‘The lost,’ he murmured in reply, and flicked the glass as if swatting at a bothersome bluebottle.

A pair of wet slapping sounds broke the sterile, white-tiled silence as the liquor painted a muddy orange streak on the milky vinyl floor. So that was that. What precious little ceremony they must observe was over. Lord Karrigan Bastion Hark, the Bulldog of London, Prime Lord of the Empire of Britannia, Master of the Emerald Benches and widower of the inimitable Lady Hark, had been pronounced dead. As a doornail.

Tonmerion could have told them that from the start, but such was tradition. His gaze inched from the gun to his father’s pallid skin, bruised as it was with the blood settling, or so the surgeon had told him as he worked. Tonmerion had decided he did not like surgeons. They were rude; being so bold as to poke around in the visceral depths of other people. Of boys’ dead fathers.

His gaze moved to the neatly sewn-up hole in his father's chest, directly above his heart. The oozing had finally stopped. The puckered and rippled edges of white skin around the black thread were clean. Not a single drop of corpse blood seeped through. Not surprising, thought Tonmerion, seeing as so much of it had been left on the steps of Harker Sheer's western garden.

For a brief moment, the boy's eyes flicked to his father's closed eyelids. He thanked the Almighty that those sharp sapphire eyes were hidden away, not bathing him with disappointment, as was their custom. Even then, in the grip of cold death, Tonmerion could almost feel their gaze piercing those grey eyelids and jabbing him. His own eyes quickly slunk away. Instead, he looked at the surgeon, and was somewhat startled to find the man staring directly back at him, arms folded and waiting patiently.

'And what now?' Tonmerion piped up, his young voice cracking after the silence.

'The constable will be here in a moment, I'm sure.'

'Is he late?' asked Tonmerion, biting the inside of his lip. *The body was so grey ...*

The surgeon looked a smidgeon confused. He pushed the wire-framed rims of his round glasses up the slope of his nose. 'I beg your pardon, Master Hark?'

Tonmerion huffed. 'I said, is he late?'

'No, young Master. Simply finishing the paperwork.'

Tonmerion scratched his neck as he tried to think up something clever and commanding to say. Gruff words echoed through his mind. *Get your chin up. Stand straight. Look them straight in their beady little eyes.*

Words from dead lips.

'Then he must have been late earlier in the day. Why else would he not be here, on time, when I am ready to leave. Instead I am forced to stand here, stuck looking at this ... this ...' His words failed him miserably. His tongue sat fat and useless behind his teeth. He waved his hand irritably. 'This ... *carcass.*'

For that was what it was. *A carcass.* So callous in its truth. Tonmerion could see it in the surgeon's face, the condemning curl in that hairless, sweat-beaded top lip of his.

The surgeon took a sharp breath. 'Of course, Lordling. I shall fetch him for you.' And with that he turned on his heel, making to leave. The leather of his shoe made a little squeak on the white vinyl, but before he could take a step, the sound of heavy boots was heard on the stairs. 'Ah,' the surgeon said, turning back with another squeak. 'Here he comes now. You shall have your escape, young Master Hark.'

'Yes, well,' was all Tonmerion's tongue could muster. He folded his arms and watched the barrel of a constable emerge from the stairwell. The constable's bright blue coat strained at the seams, pinning all its hopes on the polished buttons that glinted in the sterile light of the room. *Now here's a man who has seen too much of a desk and not enough of the cobbles*, his father would have intoned. Tonmerion almost felt like turning and shushing his dead father.

'Master Hark,' boomed the constable, as he shuffled to a halt at the foot of the table. His eyes were fixed on Tonmerion's, but it was easy to see they itched to pull right, yearned to gaze on the body of Tonmerion's father. Tonmerion didn't blame him one inch. It wasn't every day you got to meet a Prime Lord, especially a freshly murdered one.

'My apologies for ...' he began, but Tonmerion cut him off.

'Apology accepted, Constable Pagget,' he replied. 'Have you captured my father's murderer yet?'

Pagget shook his head solemnly. 'Not yet, I'm afraid ...'

'Well, what is being done about it?'

'Everything that can be done, Master Hark.'

'Well that's not ...' Tonmerion began, but it was his turn to be cut off.

'Please, young sir, it's about your father's will.'

Tonmerion threw him a frown. 'What about my father's will? What and where must I sign?'

There was a moment of hesitation, during which the constable's mouth fell slowly open, the ample fat beneath his chin gently cushioning the fall. Not a single sound came forth for quite a while.

'Whatever is the matter?' demanded Tonmerion impatiently.

Constable Pagget summoned the wherewithal to shut his mouth, and soon afterwards he found his voice too. 'It's your father's last wishes, Master Hark, they concern you directly,' he said, his eyes flashing to the surgeon for the briefest of moments.

Tonmerion huffed. 'Well of course they do! I'm the only Hark left. The estate will be left to me,' he replied, trying to ignore the truth in his own words. It frightened him a little too much.

'Not ... exactly,' Pagget croaked. 'That is to say ... not yet.'

'Yet? What do you mean, *yet*?'

The constable took a step backwards and waved a couple of fat fingers at the stairs. 'You'd better step into my office, I think, young Master Hark. We apparently have much to discuss.'

'This is highly irregular,' Tonmerion began, his father's favourite phrase, spilling out of his mouth. He bit his lip and said no more. Fixing a frown onto his face, the young Hark raised his chin and went to take a step forwards that said everything his traitorous mouth could not: a confident step that said he was inconvenienced, displeased, that he deserved respect, that he was in command here, and not crumbling with worry and fear and disgust and all those other things that lords and generals and heroes don't feel. Sadly, Tonmerion's step forwards was quite the opposite. It was a step so lacking in grace and dignity that Tonmerion would forever shiver at the very thought of it. As his foot hit the floor with a wet slap, not a squeak, Tonmerion realised his mistake. The liquor.

His foot slid away from him, betraying him so casually that his leg, and the rest of him for that matter, were powerless to resist. Tonmerion performed an ungraceful wobble and grabbed the nearest thing his flailing arms could reach ... his father's dead arm.

A small wheeze of relief escaped his tight lips as he found himself upright, safe. A similar sound came forth when he realised what exactly it was that had saved him from the most embarrassing fall, though this time it was strangled by horror, and disgust. Tonmerion's gaze slowly tumbled down his arm, from the expensive cloth to his ice-white knuckles, to the dead, bruised, slate-coloured flesh that his fingers were squeezing so tightly. Tonmerion gurgled something and quickly righted himself, red in the face and wide in the eyes. He quickly began to smooth the front of his shirt, but stopped hurriedly when it dawned on him that he had just touched a dead body. He held his hands out in the air instead, neither up nor down, close nor far.

'A cloth,' he murmured. The surgeon obliged him, leaning over to pass him a startlingly white cloth from beneath the bench. Tonmerion

dragged it over his knuckles and fingertips, and nodded to the constable. 'Lead the way.'

Pagget had not yet decided whether to stifle a laugh or to share the boy's revulsion. He simply looked on, one eye squinting awkwardly, his face stuck halfway between the two expressions.

'Jimothy?' the surgeon said, and Pagget came to.

'Right! Yes. This way if you please.' He only barely managed to keep from adding, 'Mind your step.'

Tonmerion followed him without a word.



'America.' Tonmerion gave the man a flat stare that spoke a whole world of disbelief.

Witchazel was his name, like the slender shrub, and it was a name that suited him to the very core. He was more stick than man, loosely draped in an ill-fitting suit of the Prussian style, charcoal striped with purple. His hair was thin and jet-black, smeared across his scalp and forehead like an oleaginous paste. Tonmerion had never liked the look of the lawyer. *One with power should dress accordingly.* His father's words, once more.

Witchazel shuffled the wad of papers in his leather-gloved hands and coughed. It meant nothing except a resounding yes. Tonmerion looked at Constable Pagget, but found him idly thumbing the dust from the shelves of his ornate bookcase. Tonmerion looked instead at his knees, and at the woven carpet just beyond them. He tugged at his collar. The constable's office was stifling, heavy with curtains, mahogany, and leather. The news did not help matters, not one bit.

'And this aunt ...' he asked.

'Lilain Rennevie,' filled in Witchazel.

'Lives *where* exactly?'

Witchazel's face took on an enthusiastic curve, a look of excitement and wonder, one that had been well-practised in the bedroom mirror, or so it seemed to Tonmerion. 'A charming place, right on the cusp of civilisation, Master Hark,' he said. 'A frontier town, don't you know, going by the bucolic name of Fell Falls. A brand new settlement

founded by the railroad teams and the Serped Railroad Company. They're aiming for the west coast, you see, blazing a trail right across the country in search of gold and riches and the Last Ocean. An exciting place, if I may say so, sir. I'm almost envious!' Wichazel grinned.

'Almost,' Tonmerion replied drily.

Wichazel forced his grin to stay and turned to look at the constable, hoping he would chime in. All Paget did was smile and nod.

Wichazel produced a map from the papers in his hand and slid it across the desk towards the boy. 'Here we are.'

Tonmerion leant forwards and eyed the shapes and lines. 'It looks small.'

Wichazel templed his fingers and hid behind them. 'Yes, but it has so much potential to grow,' he offered.

'Very small.'

'You have to start somewhere!'

'And forty miles from the nearest town.'

'Think of the peace and quiet. Away from the hustle and ...'

'It's literally the end of the line.'

'Not for long, mark my words!'

'And what does this say: desert?'

Wichazel's temple collapsed and he spread his fingers out on the desk instead, wishing the green leather would magically transport him out of this office. What a fate this boy had inherited. Whisked away to Almighty knows where. No mansion. No servants. No money ... Wichazel almost felt sorry for him.

'Desert, yes. It seems that the territory of Wyoming is somewhat *wild*. Deserts and mountains and, oh, what was the word ...' Wichazel clicked his gloved fingers, resulting in a leathery squeak. '*Prairies*, that was it. But surely that's exciting, isn't it?'

Tonmerion had crossed his arms. His eyes were back on the lawyer, trying with all his might to drill right into the man's pupils, to wither him, as he had seen his father do countless times. 'Do I have any say in the matter?'

Wichazel made a show of checking the papers again, even though he already knew the answer. 'I'm afraid the instructions are very specific. You are to remain in the care of your aunt until such time as you

are of age to inherit, on your eighteenth birthday. Until then all assets will be frozen in law, under my authority.'

Tonmerion let out a long sigh, ruffling the strands of sandy blonde hair that stubbornly insisted on hanging forwards over his forehead, rather than lying to the sides with the rest of his combed mop. 'And what manner of woman is my aunt?' he asked. He had barely known of her existence until twenty minutes ago. Now he was staring down the barrel of a five-year exile, with her and her alone. He felt a lump in his throat. He tried to swallow it down, but it held fast. 'Is she the mayor? A businesswoman?' he croaked.

Witchazel flipped through a few of his pages. 'She is a businesswoman indeed, you'll be pleased to hear.'

Tonmerion sagged a little in his chair.

Witchazel peered closely at one line in particular. 'It says here that she works as an undertaker.'

The boy came straight back up, stiff as a board.



It was a day for wanton staring, Tonmerion had decided. He may have escaped the body of his dead father in the surgeon's basement, but now he was trapped by the dried pool of blood on the steps of one of the Harker Sheer estate's many vast patios. The stone beneath was a polished white marble, which made the blood, even now that it had dried to a crumbling crust, all the more stark. Tonmerion watched the way it had settled in a thick, rusty crimson slick that dripped down the stairs, one by one, until it found a pool on the third.

When Tonmerion finally wrenched his gaze from his father's blood, he turned instead to the thin fold of paper he clutched so venomously in his left hand. He held the paper up to the cloud-masked sun and scowled: tickets for a boat to a faraway land. Tonmerion didn't know which to hate more: the blood or his looming fate.

'What have I done to deserve this?' he asked aloud. Unable to bring himself to utter a response, and having none to offer, he let the sound of the swaying elms and whispering pines fill the silence.

During the coach ride home, Tonmerion had pondered every avenue of escape. Once his mind had drawn out all the possibilities, like wool spilling off a reel, neither running nor hiding had seemed too fortuitous. He had no money save what he had found in his father's desk: a handful of gold florins, several silver pennies and a smattering of bronzes and coppers. That would not last more than a few weeks. He had given complaining a little thought too, but had come to the decision he'd done enough of that in the constable's office. In truth – in horrid, clanging truth – Tonmerion was stuck.

He was bound for America, the New Kingdom.

That was the source of the hard, brutal lump wedged in his throat. He lifted a hand to massage it and tried to swallow. Neither helped. He took a gulp of air and felt immediately sick. The blood beckoned to him, but Tonmerion steered away from it. He was not keen to repeat the liquor episode.

Remembering the water fountain at the bottom of the steps, he let his shaky legs lead the way. His wobbling reflection in the hissing fountain's pool confirmed that he was indeed paler than a sheet of bleached parchment. Tonmerion put both hands on the marble and dipped his head into the water to let the cold water sting his face. It was refreshing and calming. He took in three deep gulps and felt the coldness slide down into his belly. Wiping his mouth, he stared up at the pinnacles of the pines.

'By the Roots, you're white.'

Upon hearing a voice speak out from the bushes, on an estate that was supposed to be emptier than a beggar's purse, any other person would have jumped, or even squealed with surprise, but not Tonmerion. He did not flinch, for this was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

'He's dead, Rhin,' he muttered, still staring up at the trees.

'Speak up.' The voice was small yet still had all the depth and resonance of a man's voice.

'It's all going to change.' Tonmerion looked over at the blood, stark against the marble, and nodded.

There was a polite and nervous cough, and then: 'I'm sorry, Merion, for your father. I truly am.'

Merion's gaze turned to the marvellous little figure standing in the dirt, half of his body still hidden by the shadow of the ornamental bush –

no, not hidden, *fused* with the bush in some way. Merion did not bat an eyelid.

‘It’s all changed, just like that,’ he clicked his fingers, and the figure stepped out of the shadows.

To say the small gentleman was a fairy would be doing him a great injustice. Contrary to popular belief, there is a great deal of difference between a fairy and a *faerie*. The former are small, silly creatures, more insect than human, and prone to mischief. The latter, however, are a proud and ancient race, the Fae. They are larger, smarter, and infinitely more dangerous than fairies, and bolder. For millennia they have lived unseen in the undergrowth and forgotten forests, just out of the reach of human eyes and fingers. They are now nought but folklore, wives’ tales, rubbish for the ears of children. No man, in his right mind, would believe in such a thing as a *faerie*. But here one stood, as bold and as bright as a summer’s day.

Rhin stood just shy of twelve inches tall, big for Fae standards. He was long of limb, but not scrawny. Between the gaps in his pitch-black armour, it was easy to see that the muscles wrapped around his bony frame were like cords, tightly bunched.

Rhin’s skin was a mottled bluish grey, though it was not uncommon to see him glowing faintly at night. His eyes were the only bright colour on his person, glowing purple even in the cloudy daylight. The thin metal plates of his Fae armour were jet-black, held in place by brown rat-leather. His boots, rising to just below the knee, were also black.

And of course, there are the wings. Thin, translucent dragonfly wings sprouted from the ridge of Rhin’s shoulders and hung down his back, hugging the contours of his armour and body and glistening blue and gold. The Fae lost the power of flight centuries ago. Their wings are weaker now, but they still have their uses.

Four years had passed since Rhin had crawled out of the bushes and straight onto Merion’s lap, bleeding and vomiting. Merion had been just a young boy, only nine at the time, and the sight of a strange grey creature with armour and dragonfly wings, sliding in and out of consciousness, would have frightened any child half to death, but not Merion.

Rhin crossed his arms, making the scales of his armour rattle. He tapped his claw-like nails on the metal. It was in need of a polish. 'It's not right, what was done to your father. Roots know I didn't know the man, but he didn't deserve this, and neither do you. Neither do we.' Rhin bowed his head. 'Like I said, I'm sorry, Merion.'

The lump in the young Hark's throat had returned, this time with vengeance. Maybe it was the faerie's condolences, maybe it was the crimson streak in the corner of his eye, or perhaps it was the crumpled fist of papers by his side, Merion didn't know, but he knew his lip was wobbling. He knew it was all suddenly terribly real.

Real men cannot be seen to cry.

More of his father's parting words.

Merion swallowed hard, and tucked his lip under his top teeth, biting down. He nodded and, when he trusted himself to speak without his voice cracking, he said 'Thank you.'

Rhin shuffled his feet and ran an absent hand through his short, wild hair. Jet-black it was, and thick, slicked back and cropped short at the sides. 'Do they know who did it?' he asked quietly.

Merion stamped his foot and paced out a tight, angry circle. 'Pagget doesn't have a clue,' he grouched. 'Nobody has any idea.'

'That's ...'

'An outrage. Yes, I know. And guess what? That's not even the worst part.'

'Not the worst ...? What could be worse than ...' the faerie gestured at the slick of blood on the marble steps. '... that?'

Merion turned and brandished the folded paper. '*This!* It's an abomination. A disgrace. An insult!'

Rhin looked worried. 'Yes, but what is it?'

Merion pinched the bridge of his nose and swallowed again. *Say it out loud and, who knows, it just might sound a little better*, he told himself. 'We have to move to America.'

No, no better.

Rhin's lavender eyes grew wide. 'The New Kingdom? Why?'

'My father left instructions, Rhin. All of Harker Sheer, all of his other estates, all of his money. It's mine now, but not until I turn eighteen.' Merion aimed a kick at the base of the fountain. 'And in the meantime I, *we*, have to go live with my aunt, in Wyoming.'

‘And where the hell is that?’

‘In the western deserts of America, the arse-end of nowhere, to put it plainly. Full of filthy rail workers, peasants, sand, and horses and cows, no doubt.’

Rhin rubbed his chin. ‘It sounds perfect,’ he said. Merion was about to snort when he realised there hadn’t been the faintest tremor of sarcasm in Rhin’s words. He stared down at the faerie.

‘You’re serious?’

Rhin shrugged. ‘It’s the perfect escape.’

‘Yes, for you maybe. I suspected you might like this god-awful fate of mine. Not all of us are runaways and outcasts, Rhin. I’m not in hiding. I have a future *here*, in London. I have a great responsibility to inherit, and a murderer to catch, for Almighty’s sake! My father must have justice. The Hark name needs protecting ...’ Merion trailed off, flattened by the impossibility of it all. ‘I can’t just leave. I can’t just let it fall to the dogs.’

‘You’re thirteen, boy.’

Merion flapped his hand. ‘But I’m the only one left! It’s my duty. And don’t call me boy, you know I hate that.’

Rhin took a step forwards, eyes wide. ‘You would still have to wait until you were eighteen, even if you father hadn’t been killed.’

‘Murdered, Rhin. *Murdered*.’ The fountain received another kick. ‘And no difference, you say? Hah! At least if he was still alive, I could have lived my life in comfort, in society, within reach of the capital. But no, he was *murdered*, and now we have to go live in a shack in some place called Fell Falls. No dinners, no balls, no trips on the rumbleground trains, no visits to the Emerald Benches. Nothing. Sod all.’ It was at times like these that Merion wished he’d asked the kitchen staff to teach him more swearwords.

Rhin was not convinced. ‘All I heard was no tedious ceremonies, no politics, and no father watching your every move, no offence. We can be *free* in America, Merion. Free to do what we want, safe in the knowledge that you can come back to *this*, to a fortune and a life in high society.’

‘In five bloody years!’

‘More than enough time to turn you into a proper man, to toughen you up. Not like one of these silk-clad dandies you idolise. A man with

rough hands and bristle on his cheeks—ladies would love that.’ Rhin dared as much to wink. Merion pulled a face.

‘Rubbish.’

‘Trust me, I know. Listen to your elders.’ Rhin was over two hundred years old. He had a point.

Merion slumped in every possible way a person could slump. He crumpled to his knees and then to his backside, letting his shoulders hang like loose saddlebags and his hands splay across the marble. ‘I just don’t know. I can’t put it into words. The world is upside down.’

Rhin walked forwards to put a small hand on Merion’s knee. ‘It doesn’t have to be a punishment, Merion. It could be an adventure, something that could change you—put some fire into your belly. Five years isn’t that long a time.’

Merion snorted. ‘Easy for you to say.’

‘Are we in agreement. Adventure?’ Rhin asked.

With great solemnity, Merion lifted his head and stared up at the roiling grey skies, not a patch or stray thread of blue anywhere to be seen. Merion was going to miss these skies, and their rain, the staple of the Empire. He let the cold breeze run its fingers across his neck and face, savouring that moment. He swallowed one last time, and found that the lump had disappeared—for now, at least.

‘I’ll let you know when we get there,’ replied the young Hark.

CHAPTER II

TAMARASSIE

I've done it. I've bloody done it. What it'll cost me, I don't yet know. I'm out, but I can hear them shouting. They're still searching. Got the rats out for me, and the moles.

26th April, 1867

What is remarkable about the human stomach is that, though small, when given the chance to vomit continuously, it can conveniently offer a seemingly endless supply of bile with which to facilitate the act. Merion discovered this fact of biology as he heaved his guts out over the railing for the hundredth time that day. You would have been forgiven for thinking that the sailors would have stopped laughing after the first day, or the second—perhaps even the fourth. But no, it was their sixth day aboard the *Tamarassie*, and the sailors still found his puking the very pinnacle of hilarity. Perhaps it was because he ruined so many of his good clothes.

Merion winced as he felt the acid-burn on the back of his throat. His hands were slimy and his chin wet. Even without looking down, he could tell his rather expensive coat was already soiled. He closed his eyes and pushed himself to try and enjoy the gentle swaying and pitching and rolling ... More laughter erupted from the bow as Merion introduced his innards to the sea once more. When he had finally finished, he stared up at the horizon, as Rhin had suggested. It hadn't helped yet, but there was always hope.

The Iron Ocean was a desolate place—a desert in its own right, only one of rolling granite-coloured waves, of whirling foam and drifting, sapphire-blue ice. The day was cold and grey, as it had been since they left Port’s Mouth. So cold and bitter was it that the sea spray froze in the blustery air as it rose up to sting Merion’s cheeks and knuckles where he hung over the *Tamarassie*’s rusted railing.

Barely more than a converted tramp steamer, the ship was a bucket of rust and poorly-painted metalwork. A pile of iron and varnished wood, she sat low in the ever-heaving waters of the corpse-cold ocean, fat with cargo and passengers seeking fortune on the new continent. She didn’t steam so much as waddle towards the city of Boston, far, far away in the hazy, cloud-smeared distance. From where he stood, Merion could hear the slapping and deep resonant churning of the ship’s twin paddles, sticking out of the ship’s ribs like the fat wheels of a cart, buried to their necks in the water. A jagged-topped funnel sat squat behind the bridge, and the sickly soot-smell of the thick pillar of smoke it belched into the cold air was not helping Merion’s stomach one bit.

It seemed his father had left little money for a luxurious voyage in his final will and testament. Perhaps Witchazel had cut a larger-than-normal fee. In any case, the *Tamarassie* was a far cry from the ocean liners Merion had seen in the penny dreadfuls, or rising proudly against the murk of the Thames shipyards.

Merion wiped himself as best he could and tottered across the metal and wood deck towards the door he had left open. He could still hear the tittering mirth of the sailors, who seemed to have spent the whole voyage lounging about on deck. Merion ignored them, and went below to his all-too modest cabin.



Rhin was enjoying a biscuit in his usual spot atop the edge of Merion’s largest trunk, where it was piled in the corner with the others. He had shed his armour, but still wore his little knife at his hip, no more than an inch-long shard of black Fae steel. To the innocent bystander, the faerie’s blade might have seemed insignificant, a pinprick. But the Fae had learned long ago which arteries, veins and nerves were the ... *tender*

areas of men, when humans had still been young and wild, before their gunpowder and their machinery.

In Rhin's hands the biscuit was as large as a dinner plate, but he was making a considerable dent in the side. Rhin had a sweet tooth—well, more of a sweet fang. Sugar to him was like rum to a sailor. His eyes were half-closed as he chewed and his crystalline wings fluttered.

There was a bang and a thud on the wall outside the cabin, and Rhin fell back into the trunk with a soft thud. As the metal lock started to rattle, Rhin was already half buried in a dark blue shirt, skin and armour shimmering as it became translucent. Faerie skin is a marvellous thing. Its magic delights in tricking the eye, adapting to the colours and light. It is one of the oldest spells of the faeries, and their most coveted. Within moments, he was more shirt than faerie, and his black knife spared not a glint.

'It's me,' said a hoarse voice, thick with phlegm and retching.

There was a quick buzzing, and Rhin hopped up onto the lip of the trunk. 'So it is. Feeling better?'

'Not in the slightest. How long?'

'One thousand two hundred and fifty-six miles to Boston. No, wait. Fifty-five. Four days maybe.'

This particular faerie trick never failed to boggle Merion's mind. Rhin could tell you the distance between any two points on the map as quick as a flash. Rhin had tried to explain it to Merion a dozen times, but the boy could never understand it. All Merion knew was that it actually wasn't magic, as he had originally guessed, but something to do with magnets and poles. An inner compass, so the faerie said.

'I'm going to sleep,' Merion sighed, dropping down into the tiny cot that was fighting for space with his luggage. A broom cupboard would have offered more volume.

'Again?' Rhin asked, rolling his eyes.

'There's nothing else to do on this cursed boat.'

The faerie couldn't argue with that, and he shrugged as Merion covered his face with the dubiously stained blanket that had come with the cot.



Something sharp began to slice through Merion's slumbers and mangle his dreams, shred by shred. He could hear a distant clanging, the muted notes swirling around his head. Slowly but surely, he was dragged from the sucking depths of sleep.

The first thing he saw was Rhin waving to him from the trunk. The biscuit was nowhere to be seen. 'Rise and shine, Lordling.'

'What is that infernal racket?' Merion mumbled, wiping the drool from his face.

Rhin pointed at the wooden ceiling as if the answer was written amongst the flakes of peeling varnish. 'Ship's bells. Better go and have a look.'

The prospect of going back on deck was about as alluring as a sausage from a leper's pocket. Merion sighed, something of which he was quickly making a habit.

'Who knows, it could be important,' Rhin coaxed him.

Merion frowned. 'If you're so bored, then why don't you go and have a look?'

Rhin thought for a moment, and then shrugged. 'Fine by me.'

Merion sat upright and immediately regretted it. He clamped his mouth shut, expecting to be sick, but nothing came. The nap had done him good. 'No, you can't go out there alone. The ship is stuffed to bursting with sailors and passengers. You'll get seen, or tripped over, or ...'

Rhin smiled, his sharp white teeth a gleaming contrast to his mottled grey skin. Merion would never have told him, but the colour kept reminding him of his father's pallid body, lying on the sterile white tiles of the surgeon's table. The boy shook his head, pushing that thought into the dark recesses of his mind. 'Then come with me,' said the faerie.

'I believe you mean you should come with *me*,' Merion corrected his friend. 'Let's use the bag.'

One of Tonmerion Harlequin Hark's most prized possessions was, to the untrained eye, a simple rucksack. A relic of his father's days spent exploring the frozen mountains of Indus, Merion had found it in Harker Sheer the summer before last, lodged behind a bookshelf in his father's study. His father had grudgingly allowed him to keep it, just as long as it was put to good use, and kept safe. Merion had done just that. Made

from a rough green material, and functional to the core, it was full of pockets and holes and grit. It became immediately and permanently affixed to Merion's shoulders. He would wear it to dinner, and he would wear it to bed, having turned it into the perfect receptacle for smuggling a faerie in.



A crowd of passengers filled the deck: a sea of people all wrapped up in coats and scarves and blankets. They muttered to one another in hushed tones, staring at the man on the *Tamarassie*'s bridge, who was hitting the bell with a hammer every handful of seconds. A fog had fallen on the ocean, muffling the churning of the paddles, which echoed eerily about the ship. Every now and again, a lump of ice would bang loudly against the hull, and cause all the passengers to flinch.

'What's going on?' Merion asked of a woman standing nearby. She was a silver-haired lady in her twilight years, standing bolt upright and proud as though a steel rod had been sewn into her coat. When she turned to face him, Merion could see a glint in her wrinkled eye, the spark of life. She smiled with two rows of very straight and very perfect teeth. A single, lonely scar marred her upper lip, leading from the creased corner of her mouth to her left nostril, weaving a fine, pink path.

'Mist, young'un. And an ice field,' she whispered, in a thick accent Merion had never heard before. He guessed it to be from somewhere deep in America, and he guessed right, though he did not know it. He had never been called 'young'un' before, and he couldn't yet decide what to make of it.

'Are we in danger?' he asked politely.

'Most likely!' she grinned, and rubbed her hands together eagerly.

Suffice it to say Merion did not share the old woman's enthusiasm. He heard Rhin whispering from the rucksack. 'Sounds like this old bag's got a screw loose.'

'Shh,' Merion hushed him.

'What's that?' asked the woman, leaning close.

'Er ... nothing.' Merion coughed. 'Thought I'd heard something.' Even though Merion had lied, at that moment a shout rang out from the

bow—a sailor’s voice craggy with years of cheap tobacco and even cheaper wine.

‘Berg on the port side! To starboard lads, to starboard!’

Merion felt a shudder as the ship’s innards clanked and clattered. He could imagine rusty cogs clanked and old cables shimmying from side to side, a strange dance of elderly machinery. He craned his head to look towards the bow. The paddle on the left-hand side—or *port* as the sailors stubbornly called it—began to stutter and slow while the paddle on the right-hand side, the *starboard* side, thrashed the water viciously with its flat iron teeth. Slowly, he felt the *Tamarassie* turn. Merion, his head full of stories and headlines concerning ill-fated matrimonies between ships and ice on the high seas, half-wondered if he was about to meet his watery grave.

The boy was pondering this when a loud gasp fluttered across the deck, cold breath drawn sharply into a hundred or so mouths. The passengers began to move then, some to the railing, others shying away, hurrying to cover the eyes of their children and some of the more fragile women. The crowd split right down the middle, and Merion found himself sliding inexorably towards the railing with the braver half, gaze transfixed on an ethereal mass appearing out of the fog. He was staring goggle-eyed at the bloody crown that graced the peak of that floating mountain of jagged ice.

‘Rhin ...’ he breathed, ‘are my eyes broken?’

‘No more than mine, if that’s the case,’ Rhin hissed. ‘By the Roots ...’ he said, and then swore in his own tongue.

The old woman was still nearby. She broke off from staring so she could seize the young Hark by the shoulder and drag him closer to the railing, where arms and shoulders and swaddled bodies would not impair his grisly view.

‘There, young’un! Take it all in. You don’t see this every day. No sir!’

Merion didn’t even know what *this* was. Only that it was making him feel sick again. The woman talked in his ear as he took in every tiny, grisly detail.

‘Ever been to the deep ice, lad? Me neither, though I heard tales aplenty. Endless ice, they say, far as the eye can see. Not dead though, not at all. It’s full of bears and yak and foxes—and people too. Nomads

from the mountains. They say a nomad is the only thing in this world that ice can't freeze in one place. And they're vicious folk, as you can see, lad. More animal than man,' the woman waved her arm at the top of the iceberg as it drifted slowly past the ship, as if her jaw had become tired of flapping, and her body needed something else to flap while it rested. A moment of silence passed, punctuated only by curious whispers and the slapping of the paddles. Merion craned his neck and took it all in.

The towering shard of dirty white ice wore a crown of jagged wire and slumped bodies. Half frozen to the ice at their backs, half burnt by the endless, tormenting northern sun, six men had been bound tight to the ice with their legs slashed at the calves. Merion held a hand to his mouth as he thought of how much blood must have pumped when the men were sentenced to their exile, how they must have screamed. They were far from screaming now. What hadn't been picked at by the gulls and petrels now lay, heads yawning at the murky air around about, empty-eyed, but still blissfully sailing the seas.

'What did these men do?' Merion asked in a hollow voice, whilst trying to hold back the crashing wave of nausea surging up his throat.

'Who can tell? They don't look nomad, not in the slightest. Soldiers, by the look of their black fingers. Powder will do that to you, it will, should you play with it long enough. White folks from the places where the wild pines meet the ice and stop dead. Hunting folk. Must have crossed paths with the nomads, then crossed swords. That's what you get when you go wanderin' into nomad territory. They were punished, the fools,' she lectured, almost spitting the last word. But then, in a silent moment of respect, she held her hand to her chest and watched them drift on by, just until they disappeared back into the fog.

Merion shuddered, as if the ghosts of the dead men had tickled his spine. 'I, er, thank you,' was all he could think of to say.

'Welcome, young'un,' she nodded, and then stuffed her hands into a pair of deep, fur-lined pockets. 'So where you headed?'

'Probably back to my cabin ...'

The woman laughed then, a harsh cackle, and clapped him heartily on the shoulder. Merion's jolted stomach performed a somersault, and he felt that wave rising again ... 'I meant in the motherland, son, the big wide open, the Endless Land.'

Merion scratched his head. 'Wyoming, I believe.'

The woman threw him an odd expression, the bottom half of her face pressing into her neck as her eyes and her ears lifted. A high-pitched hum rose and fell in her throat. 'Been there before, have you?' she asked.

'No.'

'Seems an odd choice, is all, for a young willow like you.'

Merion found himself trying to stand wider, thicker somehow. He failed. 'Trust me, madam, there was no choice in the matter.'

'Don't know many folk from Wyoming. Don't know many heading there neither, 'cept for workers.'

'Should I be worried?'

'I'd be worried about her instead. She's mad as a bucket of smashed crabs,' Rhin hissed, his voice a skinny whisper on the icy wind.

'Gods, no, young'un. I don't suppose you shouldn't,' she shook her head vehemently, but that last sentence stuck like a fishbone in Merion's gullet. *Suppose*. He hoped it was just the old woman's strange drawl, or her astoundingly appalling grammar, that made him start to sweat, even in the cold.

'Well,' the woman said, and clapped her hands. 'Best be back to my supper. Good luck to you, son. Fare well.'

'Madam.' Merion sketched a shallow bow. He abruptly felt a little foolish. Bowing, there on a rusty deck in the middle of the wide Iron Ocean. Well, he may not be in London any more, but he was London-born, a son of a lord, and that meant that it wasn't just blood flowing through his veins, but manners as well, stout, Empire-grown manners.

If you're going to get stabbed, then get stabbed by a gentleman. At least then you get an apology along with his cold length of steel. Merion had heard that whilst hiding under his father's desk during one of his long and stuffy meetings. The young Hark had been unearthed and captured shortly after, unable to stifle a sneeze. His father had beaten him in the garden. Not enough to bruise, but enough to make him think twice the next time.

'You're incorrigible, you blaggard,' Merion snapped at his rucksack, once he was good and alone.

'That one's definitely missing a few tiles from the roof,' Rhin sniggered.

Merion rolled his eyes. ‘Let’s just go inside before any more nightmares swim past.’

‘Right you are.’

As they made their way back to the main stairs, and back to their tiny cabin, Merion scratched his head and asked, ‘How many miles, Rhin?’

The faerie didn’t even have to count. ‘One-thousand, one hundred and ninety-four.’

‘What was that particularly colourful word you used that time? When you decided to “spar” with Lord Hafferford’s spaniel?’

‘Clusterfuck.’

‘That’s the one.’

CHAPTER III

THE ENDLESS LAND

It's been three days now since I left. Sift must be furious, but there's no going back. The soldiers keep on coming, spreading wider. Killed two yesterday, but now the sewers are crawling with them, which means I'll have to go over, through the streets. Damn if this isn't heavy.'

30th April, 1867

It was a Tuesday morning when the ship's horn shook the walls of their tiny cabin, shaking their tiny sanctuary down. The *Tamarassie* had reached Boston safe and sound, but the harbour was busier than a brothel on payday, as Rhin had said, looking out of the grimy porthole. Merion did not know enough to comment.

Now the faerie was crouching under the lip of the trusty rucksack, eying the towers and cranes of Boston's sprawling port, which yawned like the maw of some giant stag beetle. Between its jaws, a horde of ships and fractured islands jostled for space in a forest of masts and spars. If Rhin squinted, his keen Fae eyes could make out the clock towers and balloon docks of the city proper, lurking in the thick sea-fog that clung to the shoreline.

Merion was squinting too—not because he wanted to sightsee, but because the rain seemed to be pursuing a vendetta against his eyes. It was that horrid fine kind that soaks you to the bone in minutes. He had been standing on deck for the past hour, watching America crawl out of the fog to greet them, piece by jagged and sea-washed piece.

Boston looked like London from the water, but flatter, as though somebody had flattened the whole city with the back of a colossal frying pan. Its buildings, what few of them he could see through the confounded, blinding drizzle and sea fog, were squat and wood-built. At least by the docks they were. When he blinked, he spied a few lonely towers here and there, in the far distance, but nothing so special as the spires of his home. He felt cold on the inside, and the rain had nought to do with it.

‘Boston,’ he muttered.

‘Looks ... delightful,’ Rhin replied, in a whisper.

‘An admiral once told me that the only port worth taking the time to ogle at from the water was that of Venezia. Before the sea swallowed it, of course,’ Merion said, not knowing where that little scrap of nonsense had bubbled up from. ‘And I also remember my father saying something about the docks being the arse-hole of a city. Besides, we aren’t staying.’

‘Eloquent, that Prime Lord,’ Rhin chuckled, then immediately winced. He could even feel Merion’s body shift a little, through the straps of the pack. Strangely the boy didn’t sag, as he’d expected, but somehow *stiffened*. Rhin bit his lip. ‘Sorry. Too soon,’ he said. ‘You okay?’

Merion nodded. ‘Just fine.’

Rhin knew that was a lie, but he didn’t push the matter. *Melancholy crumbles, and anger snaps*. He knew that better than anyone. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘that arse-hole better pucker up for our arrival.’

‘If we ever get to the wharf, that is,’ replied the boy.

Merion was right. There was a long, winding queue of ships between the bow of the *Tamarassie* and the wharfs of Boston’s inner harbour. They jostled like rats in a barrel. Merion scowled and pouted, and stuffed his gloved hands deeper into his pockets, trying to dig out some warmth. ‘What a foul welcome this is.’

It was then that a familiar voice rang out. ‘Hey, son! There he is. C’mere!’

It was the old American woman, swaddled in an oversized sealskin coat with a hood big enough for her head and some extra luggage. She was marching towards him across the slimy deck, beckoning him repeatedly.

Merion prodded himself with his own finger. ‘Madam?’

‘Don’t worry about ma’am-ing me now. C’mon. We’re getting off.’

Merion shook his head. ‘Pardon me, it sounded as though you said you’re *getting off*?’

‘That we are. Captain Smout has ordered some boats be dropped, so we don’t have to wait for the ship to dock.’

‘But my luggage ...’

‘See this is why I travel light!’ she said, patting her huge coat. ‘Don’t worry, you can collect your things once the *Tamarassie*’s made port. Give her an hour or so. In the meantime, you’re free to roam the docks.’

Merion wasn’t sure that he wanted to ‘roam’ anything, never mind a foreign port, no doubt overrun with scoundrels and thieves. Witchazel’s instructions, which, incidentally, were crumpled up in a tight ball in the pocket of his overcoat, were to meet a gentleman by the curious name of Coltswolde Humbersnide. He would be waiting at the *Tamarassie*’s allotted berth, the Union Wharf, just south of where the Charles River met the Mystic River. What an odd name that was, Merion thought, not for the first time since turning his back on London. He wondered if it were Shohari-speak.

‘My apologies, madam, but I’m to meet a man at the Union Wharf, you see, and ...’

The old woman simply tutted. ‘And so you shall, young’un. Now c’mon!’

And with that she seized his wrist and towed him away, off towards the stern and a rickety boat bobbing up and down on the oil-slicked waters of the harbour. The scents that assailed his nose were quite astounding, and potent too. Merion felt that familiar bile rising in his throat again. But he had no time for puking. The woman practically lifted him onto the rungs of the rope ladder, and down he went.

‘Please don’t fall. I’m not a fan of drowning,’ muttered the faerie in his rucksack.

Merion’s heart leapt for a moment as his foot missed one of the slippery wooden rungs. ‘Neither am I, now keep your head down.’

‘Aye,’ Rhin said, as he melted into the shadows.

The boat lurched when he touched it. He felt a rough hand snatch at his flapping coat, and he was yanked down onto a wet bench. A family of three sat opposite him, eyes half-closed, silently enduring the drizzle.

‘Good morning.’

‘Нет, спасибо,’ replied the man, in a language that was utterly foreign.

‘Of course.’ Merion shook his head and stared at the floor awash with water. *Some inheritance this was turning out to be*, he thought, and instantly the red flush of guilt flooded his cheeks, making his neck itch.

He heard a shout and looked up to see that the old woman was now shimmying down the ladder, and with ease too. The boat rocked hideously as she climbed aboard, making the mother of the foreign family moan rather woefully. Merion could have sworn she was slowly turning green. The father gently patted her shoulder, whispering something in her ear while the son was busying himself with kicking his shoes together.

‘Here we all are, then,’ announced the woman with a clap. ‘Are we off, boys?’

‘Yes ma’am,’ replied one of the two sailors, as he and another put their hands to the thick oars.

Mercifully, the drizzle became bored and moved south with the same breeze that came to poke at the fog. A little sun pierced the murky morning haze, and Boston was allowed to sparkle for a time. Under the spring sun’s eager light, the docks took on a different feel. Colour spilled out of every nook and cranny. The cranes were not made of weathered, ashen wood, as Merion had judged, but of a wood that was a deep crimson mixed with coffee. The ships’ banners, which had hung so lifeless in the rain, now shone with bright reds and jolly yellows.

As they swung to and fro between the ships and the pillars of the tall wharfs, Merion caught glimpses of markets and inns and performers poking their heads above the crates and railings. A little something stirred in him then, a boyish lust for vivid colours and noise, and perhaps the slightest hint of danger. He rose slightly from his seat, but the old woman by his side dragged him back down. ‘You’ll tip the boat, young’un. Be careful now.’

‘Of course, madam.’ Merion sat back down, but kept his neck craned and his eyes peeled for wondrous things. ‘Is it far?’ he asked. All

thoughts of father and fate had momentarily been banished. Such is the fickle, blessed nature of a thirteen-year-old.

Wharf by mesmerising wharf, they crept north. The current was against them, but the sailors were thick-set like their oars, and they battled on, grunting to each other as they rowed. They could hear the cries from the merchants and shopkeepers over the roar and splash of the port.

‘Fish! The freshest fish this side of the Iron Ocean. Kippers, cod, pollock and shark!’

‘Glow-worms! Genuine glow-in-the-dark worms! Buy two and I’ll make them glow in the day too!’

‘Pickled crow eggs for sale!’

‘Genuine wolf-skin caps!’

‘Roll up, roll up, and feast your eyes on my special ...’

‘Meat! Every meat under the sun, and under the earth too! Loin of bat, in fresh!’

Merion let himself drown in the noise.

Before long, even the gaps between the big ships became crowded, and they were forced to cut their journey short. The boat’s nose was pointed wharfwards, and was soon nudging the cloth fender of a little pontoon. A skinny set of stairs led up to the main promenade.

Merion got to his feet first. As the sailors tied the boat off, he hopped ashore, swiftly followed by the old woman. He followed her up the steps.

‘Now, madam, how exactly do we, *I*, get to Union Wharf from ...’ His words were stolen by the roar as his head cleared the top stair. All too suddenly, he was drowning in a sea of humanity.

The promenade was flooded with people, all heading in seemingly opposite directions. It was a wonder there was no screaming, no injuries. It deafened and blinded him all at once, and it was all he could do to not get swept away in the current. He found the woman’s strong grip around his wrist again, hauling him through the river of people and out onto the quieter side of the promenade, where painfully colourful stalls lined the harbour’s squat brown buildings.

Merion took a moment to dust himself down, and to check his pack (and faerie) had not been ripped from his shoulders in the stampede. All was safe, and so he turned to his helper. ‘My thanks,

madam,' he began, but quickly stopped as he noticed she was walking away. 'Erm. Excuse me? Madam?'

Thankfully she stopped, though she only turned her head. 'What is it, young'un?'

'How do I get to Union Wharf, from here?'

'Go thataway,' she raised a hand to point down the promenade. 'And keep on going 'til you see the sign for it. North, understand?'

'Yes.'

'Then good. Fare well, young'un. You keep your skin on, in the wilds,' she said, waving.

And so Merion was left standing alone, sandwiched between the crowds and the merchants, in a foreign city and on the cusp of a strange land—and chilled to the bone by the woman's parting words.

'See?' He could hear Rhin chuckling. 'The bolts are loose.'

'What on earth did she mean by that?' Merion asked, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

'Not a clue, my friend.'

The young Hark scowled. 'Well then, north it is.'

After a few hundred yards of violent jostling, the promenade began to widen, and the crowd thankfully began to thin. The buildings grew taller too, with every step. On the surface, Boston shared a heart-aching number of similarities with faraway London. There were the proud men in their tails and their top hats. There were the high-society ladies, shrouded in servants and tittering between themselves. There were street performers, beggars, and wiry street children, covered in filth from head to toe. Not to mention the whores of course, whistling at every eligible male that passed. Merion couldn't help but stare. One girl, her shirt invitingly unbuttoned, caught his eye and winked. She waggled a finger at him, but Merion's nerve failed him, and he hurried on.

Sadly, no matter how hard Boston pretended to be London, Merion couldn't help but perceive the city's feral undercurrent. The doorway of America was tinged with something wild. Perhaps it was a glint in the eyes of the men who lingered in dark doorways, guns at their belts and hats pulled low over their faces. Perhaps it was the occasional gibbet hanging here and there, cradling a skeleton in an old uniform.

The edges were simply rougher, the polish not as bright. No matter where he looked, or how hard he pretended, there were no towering

arches and white pillars, no slender smoke-stacks or shining examples of industry, no scarlet soldiers on patrol, no copper-gold balloons swimming amongst the clouds. And there wasn't a single roast chestnut barrel anywhere to be seen. Merion's stomach growled in anguish.

'Are we close, do you think?' he asked of Rhin, distracting himself with conversation.

The faerie hummed. 'A little further, I think. What's that next sign say?'

Hanging above the arches of each major wharf were boards painted with curling letters. Merion mouthed each of their names as they passed: *Goldrock Wharf*, *Long Walk Wharf*, *Ebenezer Wharf*, *Lincoln Wharf*, *Union Wharf* ...

'We're here. Thank Almighty,' he said, slightly relieved.

'And the *Tamarassie* is almost here, look.' Merion felt Rhin move in the rucksack, and he turned to face south, where the battered old tub could be seen worming its way between cargo tugs and fishing skiffs.

Merion breathed an almost contented sigh, and began to look around. The wharf was almost empty, save for a rain-soaked blonde man with freckles adorning his cheeks. He was tightly wrapped up in a suit that was too small, even for him, and holding something in his hands.

'That man has a sign with my name on it,' Merion said.

'Better go see what Mr Sign wants, then.'

'I'd hazard a guess at me,' Merion muttered.

Gloved hands still buried deep in his pockets, he strode over to the young man, his chin tilted at just the right angle. 'Good morning, sir,' he called out.

The man beamed and then bowed not once, but twice, as if he hadn't performed it right the first time around.

'Welcome to America,' he said, striding forwards to thrust out a hand. 'Coltswolde Humbersnide, at your service. It's not every day we have a son of the Empire visit, I can tell you that,' he proclaimed, in a crumbling parody of the Empire's tongue. It was as though somebody had punched his accent in the face. Most of his words had the accent of America, yet every now and again one would slip, and the man squawked a word sounding suspiciously British. Perhaps he was stuck between the two.

Merion bowed in return. ‘Tonmerion Harlequin Hark, sir. A pleasure. Though I am quite confused: my father always said there was no love for the Empire in America.’

Humbersnide’s cheeks flushed with a smidgeon of red. ‘Oh, well. No, I suppose there isn’t. In any case, I think it’s a *downright*,’ and here the accent veritably fell over and died, ‘pleasure to have you here, in our fine city.’

Merion luckily remembered his manners. ‘Thank you, Mr Humbersnide.’

‘Please, call me Coltswolde. I work for the same firm as Mr Witchazel, you see, Boston branch. We have been here eleven years now. Our office was the first in the New Kingdom.’

‘Fascinating.’

Coltswolde bowed again. ‘Thank you, sir. Now, my instructions were to meet you here and put you on a locomotive going west, with these tickets,’ he informed the boy, brandishing a sealed envelope.

‘Wonderful,’ replied Merion, his voice flat.

‘Might I enquire where it is that you’re going?’

‘Wyoming.’

The young man almost dropped his sign. ‘Wyoming?’ he echoed.

‘Yes, that’s right. Why, is there a problem?’ Merion demanded.

Humbersnide gulped and then cracked an unsteady smile. ‘Not at all. I just hear it is rather hot, this time of year. Nice for a holiday, of course. Better than all that *bloody* rain, eh?’ He chuckled weakly, and fell silent with a cough.

‘I’m not on holiday,’ Merion muttered.

It was an uncomfortable hour that passed them by, spattered with polite and mumbled conversation here and there. All the while, the *Tamarassie* crept forwards until her rust-bucket sides were making the fenders moan. Ropes were thrown, planks laid out, and the slow process of unloading began.

As soon as the first few items of luggage hit the deck, an idea blossomed in Merion’s head. ‘Mr Humbersnide, I hope it’s not too bold of me to ask you such a favour, but it seems I have hurt my arm on the boat ride. Would you mind helping me with the luggage? The sailors should point them out.’

Coltswolde's polite smile wavered at the thought of manual labour. He had seen the size of the trunks being unloaded onto the bustling wharf, and he had just remembered he had forgotten to hire a cart. 'Er ...' he croaked. 'Of course.'

As Coltswolde stumbled off down the wharf, busy praying that Merion had travelled lightly, Rhin patted the boy on the back through the rucksack. 'Nice,' he said.

'I think I deserve a little bit of a break, after nine days at sea,' Merion explained with a sigh.

'Damn right,' Rhin replied.



'Five days!' Merion spluttered. 'Just how big *is* this country, Mr Humbersnide?'

While Merion gawped, Humbersnide read through the schedule and totted up the hours. 'New York, and from there to Philadelphia, then Pitt's Berg, Chicago, Cheyenne, and then finally, the brand new railroad to Fell Falls, the last stop. One thousand, two hundred miles ... divided by ... twenty ... Yes sir. five and a half days, it seems. Plus stops for water and coal, so perhaps six.'

'On a train? *This* train?' Merion's eyes switched again to the locomotive that had just sidled up to the platform. His boyish excitement had returned, inconvenient and inappropriate though it may have been.

The locomotive was heart-thumpingly fascinating, he could not deny it. It was a veritable monster straining at the bit, salivating on the gleaming tracks. Steam leaked from its bared teeth, and it dripped water onto the platform. The flanks of its long boilers bristled with wires and cogs and mechanical arms while thin slits cut like gills glowed in places, betraying the fire stoked in its belly.

This locomotive, like the city it seemed so eager to flee, was also feral. Not like the sleek engines of St Vanquish station at which Merion had spent long hours gazing, with their polished silver plates so clear you could see yourself in them. This engine was a wild beast in comparison. Still, there was a part of him that couldn't wait to feel it gallop.

‘No, Master Hark, four trains altogether,’ added Coltswolde, shrugging casually. ‘This is why they call America the Endless Land. Vast, she is. My my.’

‘I’m starting to realise that,’ Merion grouched.

Coltswolde’s face had taken on a distant look. ‘Vast and endless, that’s true, but this railroad will change all of that. Transcontinental, they’re calling it. It will forge a path straight across the desert and onto the shores of the Last Ocean, eventually. The Serped Railroad Company have spent years trying to conquer that desert. What with all the trouble from the Shohari and those rai—’ Coltswolde realised what he was saying and clamped his mouth shut.

Merion folded his arms. ‘Please, don’t stop on my account,’ he challenged him, but Coltswolde just coughed loudly and busied himself with the luggage instead, manhandling it awkwardly down the platform. Merion would get no more out of him on the matter.

That old lump had returned to stick in his craw, one more worry to add to the pile. During the cold, rumbling nights he had spent on the ship, he had let his mind wander to dark places, spinning fears out of the shadows: *his father’s murderer, going unpunished; Harker Sheer being overrun by looters; his father’s businesses, taken; Witchazel stealing his inheritance*. Now he had a new grim thread to tug at: the thought of not returning home at all, of succumbing to the dangerous wilds of America. Fear tickled the skin of his back, and laid a cold hand upon his neck.

‘Don’t listen to him,’ Rhin reassured him, whispering as loudly as he dared from the rucksack. ‘So far, we’ve only met two people on this voyage, and both of them have been stark raving mad.’

Merion wasn’t convinced. ‘I’m starting to think they’re all bloody mad.’

‘Look, if this land’s as wide and as endless as they say, it’s probably just all rumour and wives’ tales, warped whispers. Wyoming’s probably harmless, just too wild for these city boys.’ There was more hope than fact in that last sentence, but Rhin didn’t let it show. ‘Besides, we want to toughen you up, don’t we?’

‘Even if Coltswolde is right about Wyoming, it isn’t as though I have a choice.’

‘Maybe not, but even if he is, America’s going to have to get through me first.’

Merion felt the warmth of Rhin's friendship quell the cold for a moment. The young Hark stuck out that stiff upper lip of his. 'Well, they say a gentleman never shrinks from his duty,' he mumbled, just loud enough for Rhin to hear. 'It's too late to run away now.'

'That's the spirit. Anyway, we can always get you a gun when we get to Fell Falls.'

'No guns,' Merion snapped abruptly, then softened. 'No guns.'

'A knife then,' Rhin offered.

'Maybe.'

'It won't be Fae steel, but we'll find you some good old fashioned human steel instead,' mused the faerie.

'One knife against the wilds of the Endless Land. Hardly seems fair.'

Rhin chuckled. It was good to see some mirth in the boy. He had heard him tossing and turning in the night, muttering worrisome things. Tonmerion was hurting, that was obvious enough, but the simple fact that he was putting on a brave face was all that mattered for now. There was hope there. Rhin just had to get him to Fell Falls, to that last stop. It would be different there, Merion would see.

'Come on,' said the faerie. 'Let's get moving.'

'Right you are,' Merion cleared his throat and nodded affirmatively. 'Mr Humbersnide, sir!' he shouted.

Coltswolde came shuffling back along the platform. Merion showed him his best smile. 'Yes, Master Hark?'

'I trust I can leave my luggage in your capable hands?'

Humbersnide's face underwent a series of twitches as he deciphered the boy's meaning. 'Er ... of course, young sir, in my capable hands.' He even had to look at his hands to check that yes, they were indeed capable.

'Good! My thanks to you, Mr Humbersnide. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a train to catch,' Merion replied, and before Humbersnide could make any comment, or twitch any further, the boy departed, quickly striding across the wooden boards towards his carriage.

'If only we could take him with us,' said a voice from the rucksack.

‘True, though I’m sure we’ll manage to find another willing helper. My father always said that if a man wasn’t a lord, or above a lord, then he must be a servant.’

Rhin winced. ‘I’m not too sure the Americans will take kindly to that logic, especially after all the wars and such.’

Merion shrugged again. ‘This Kingdom is indebted to us, Rhin. They may not pay their taxes any more, but we built them. And a son should always do what his father asks of him,’ he intoned.

Rhin snorted. ‘What, like keeping secret faeries in the garden?’

‘You found me, not the other way around, friend.’

No answer came from the rucksack.

When he found his allotted carriage, he paused just outside the door for a moment, his hand hovering above the twisted iron railing that sprouted from the rain-spattered wood of the carriage. From there he could lay his eyes along the tracks. Straight as a spear they were, glinting in the sparse light of day. They carved an almost perfect path through the city, and if he looked hard enough, he could just about make out hills, forests, and green fields beyond. *Endless Land, indeed*, he snorted. Everything had to end at some point.

CHAPTER IV

THE BULLDOG'S BOY

'Leg's gone. Fought a cat in the last house. Claw caught me right above the knee, so I've had to wrap it up tight for the night. I'm starting to wonder whether I'll ever see a tree again. This city is all stone and iron. Cold to the bone. Sift still searches. She's got the Day Watch on my trail. Coil Guards too. It's got to be further east, where the big houses are, the rich houses.'

5th May, 1867

The city was soaked to the bone. A constant pattering of drips filled the air as the drainpipes, arches, lampposts, and even the bricks wept. The day was filled with fog. Interminably thick, it swirled about the streets without a care for the day, filling nooks and crannies until the air was choked and thick. In just the right places, you could stand and watch your limbs turn ghostly, stolen momentarily by the fog. It was an ethereal day. A day to stoke fires, rub hands, and leave the streets to the jealous weather. It was a fine spring day, by any Empire standards.

It was a Sunday, and a lone black carriage rattled through the streets of central London. Pulled by four enormous horses, the carriage was ornate to say the least. Its wheels and axles were gold-trimmed, and a colourful coat of arms adorned each door. If you looked closely, you would have seen an eagle lifting a tiger into a blood-red sky. And if

you'd looked any closer, you might have seen the name *Dizali* written in flowing letters. A powerful name indeed, amongst the Emerald Benches.

It wasn't long before the Palace of Ravens loomed out of the thick fog. The two drivers slowed the horses to a gentle trot and aimed their carriage at a pair of giant black gates. The Palace of Ravens was a marvel of architecture—a terrifying one to the average tourist, but a marvel nonetheless. Four giant spires marked its boundaries, and between them thick walls and towering pillars formed the palace proper. It was a humongous box, to put it plainly—a blotch on the face of London. Yet as its detail crystallised out of the fog, it was easy to see that it was grand beyond belief. Each side was a chaotic tumble of glass, turret, balcony and ironwork. The palace glittered in the murk, and through the glowing orange windows, a passerby could glimpse golden chandeliers and vast dining and dancing halls. Ravens cawed in its sharp reaches, watching any passing subjects like worms writhing in the dust.

As the carriage came face to face with the black gates that guarded the entrance to the palace, soldiers poured from the twin guardhouses and surrounded the coach. They had short swords at the hip, shields, and of course, the golden rifles for which they were famous were slung over their backs.

'Papers, if you please,' ordered an officer, the medals pinned to his tall black hat chiming softly as he bobbed his head.

The blackened window of the carriage cracked open an inch, and a thin slice of paper was poked through the gap. The officer stepped up to the coach to grab it. He peered at the scribbled name.

'Your ring, my lord?'

There was a tap of metal on glass as an eagle and tiger-crested ring tasted the misty air, wrapped around a pudgy finger. The officer nodded and clicked his fingers. The soldiers jogged to the gates and began to push. The window was rolled up once more.

A man was waiting for the carriage at the main entrance, hands folded neatly behind his back and eyes low. He wore no hat, only a long coat that bulged in a way that indicated he was carrying a sword. As soon as the carriage had squeaked to a halt on the marble flagstones, the man stepped forwards and opened the door.

High Lord Bremar Dizali practically jumped from the couch to the cold ground. He seemed flustered. Puzzled, and perhaps a touch nervous.

He was right to be so. *Nobody was summoned by Victorius*. Save for Prime Lord Karrigan Hark, that was. But he was dead as a doornail.

Dizali was a broad and tall man, with a sharp face, and ever sharper goatee, dark, like the combed-back hair on his head. There was something rather eagle-like about him, something deep and clever in those narrowed green eyes.

Lord Dizali didn't spare the man a single glance. Not yet. 'Did she say anything, anything at all?'

'Nothing other than to bring you straight here, Milord, nothing at all,' the man smiled, watching Dizali adjust his wide-brimmed hat and grey gloves. He combed his short beard with his fingers and then tucked the stray strands of hair behind his ear. He caught the man's eyes at last, and then his smile soon after.

'You seem to be relishing this, Gavisham.'

'Why ever not, Milord? It's not every day one gets summoned to the Palace of Ravens.'

'No, it is not.'

And with that, Dizali was off, striding up the steps as if they were those of his own home. He would not have admitted it to Gavisham, but he had been waiting for this, waiting for two long weeks. He only prayed he was right.

Floor after floor went by, until he was at the very top of the north wing. Gavisham trailed behind him silently, seeming somewhat deadlier than usual tonight. Dizali could hear his slow, deliberate footsteps several paces behind.

As Dizali's foot found the very topmost step, he took a breath. He turned to his man and pointed a finger at the floor. 'You will wait here, you understand?'

Gavisham bowed low. 'As you wish, Milord.'

After straightening his hat once more, Dizali let his legs lead him to the great door at the end of the hall, the one that shone with gold filigree and jewels. It was etched with scenes of the Lost, from a time before Victorious had risen as their Queen, before she had built herself an empire with wild men and their coin, their blood, and their bodies.

But Dizali was not given time to stare at the beasts and battle-scenes. The soldiers clicked their steel heels and put their shoulders to the magnificent door. It swung inwards into a cavernous hall, one that

filled the entire north-eastern spire. Dizali had heard rumours of this room, but now they crumbled to dust in his head.

The room could have accommodated four tall ships piled atop one another, keel to mast, and the topmost pennant would still not have tickled the roof. Dizali felt his ageing bones click as he craned his neck to see the paintings high on the distant plaster, but they were all just one glorious blur at that range. He looked left, then right, and judged it would have taken him almost a minute to run from one side of the room to the other, even without that aching knee of his.

It was the great crimson curtain that impressed him the most. The giant thing cut the room precisely in half, creating a velvet wall over a dozen feet high. Two enormous chains ran across the room and held it aloft and perfectly straight. Its velvet fingers barely brushed the marble floor.

Dizali coughed politely and stepped up to the very centre of the curtain, as he had been instructed to by the messenger earlier that morning. He waited, enduring the silence until it physically ached. When he could take it no more, he bowed low to the marble.

‘Your Illustrious Majesty.’ His voice sounded minuscule in that giant gold cavern.

Something moved behind the curtain, and Dizali could not help but flinch. There was a distinct rustling, as of papers or leaves, and then a deep thud that echoed about the hall. A voice answered him then, a voice that he had not heard in years, a voice that slithered and rumbled at the same time, a voice from another age.

‘What of Hark, High Lord Dizali?’ the voice asked him. He could hear the rustling again, and it chilled him.

‘He lies dead and buried, my Queen. Buried in Harker Sheer, according to his wishes.’ Here, Dizali bowed his head, just in case she was somehow watching. Light spilled from under the curtain as something was moved, and a shadow was thrown flat against the marble. Dizali tried to keep his eyes from following it along the floor. ‘A great shame,’ he added.

‘A good and powerful man.’

‘Yes your Majesty,’ Dizali bowed his head again. He paused for a moment, and then, ‘How may I be of service to my Queen?’

More rustling. More thumping. He swore he could hear a clicking noise, like a clock, or an impatient drumming of nails, or tapping of toes.

‘His murderer. Has he been found?’

‘No, your Majesty.’

‘And his boy,’ Victorious rumbled.

‘I believe his name is Tonmerion, Majesty.’

‘I want him brought to me.’

Dizali bit the inside of his lip, and bit hard. He forced a sad frown, just in case. ‘I am afraid, Majesty, that I cannot do that.’ There was an angry gurgling from the other side of the curtain, so Dizali just kept on talking. ‘It seems that Prime Lord Hark’s last will and testament was very specific indeed. He had a relative, it seemed, in the Kingdom of America, and his wishes were for the boy to be sent to live with her.’ *Until the age of eighteen, when he may inherit*, or so the lawyer had said. It was amazing what facts can be learnt in the dark corners of taverns.

‘Where?’

Dizali made a show of scratching his head. ‘I am not sure of the details,’ he said, when in fact he knew them back to front, ‘but it seems that the young Hark has been sent to the frontier.’

‘And what of his estate in the meantime, Dizali?’ The way Victorious hissed his name, dragging its vowels out with her serpentine tongue, made him shiver. What made him shiver even more was the thread she was teasing out, the very same thread that he had been trying to wrap around his finger for the last fortnight.

‘Sealed by law, your Majesty. Untouchable.’

Victorious took a moment to shuffle around.

‘You say that, Dizali,’ she said, ‘as if you had it in mind to touch it.’

The lord held up a finger. ‘Your Majesty, if I may. There was one item of business I was hoping to discuss with you, if I may. It is regarding the Benches, my Queen.’

There was a pause, during which Dizali wondered whether she had turned to stone, or turned into ash, or vanished, or any number of things his queen was rumoured to be capable of. So when she spoke, it almost made him jump out of his suit.

‘Speak.’

Dizali took a quick breath to steady himself, and launched into the speech he had been practising in the carriage. ‘The lords are talking, my Queen, about Prime Lord Hark. They speak not just of his death, and its suspicious nature, but of his seat and of his own empire. It seems that several members of the opposition feel that now is the time to seize power. Now, as the Second Lord of the Benches, the party falls into my hands. We are united, Majesty, but the opposition talks, and far too loudly for their words to be considered mere disgruntlement. They have become unsteady in the wake of the Bulldog’s death. Bold. I believe that there must be direction, and soon, before the opposition begins to get ideas.’

‘What ideas are these?’

He took another breath, quick and sharp. ‘Ideas such as splitting his estate between the lords, my Queen, or calling for an election, in the middle of Hark’s term.’

‘Havoc.’

Dizali tried to hide a smile. ‘Havoc, my Queen?’

‘I do not take kindly to repeating myself in my own chambers, Lord Dizali,’ thundered Victorious. ‘If Lord Hark is dead, then another must replace him. An election will cause havoc so deep into his term. An Empire with so many wars to fight does not need such distraction at its heart. Yet there is no precedent.’

Politics was a game Dizali had learnt to play very well indeed. ‘The party is as much elected as its Prime Lord. There are some who say the power should pass down the party line, to keep the peace.’

More shuffling ensued. Something loomed close against the curtain. Dizali heard the queen breathing. ‘And what do you say, High Lord?’

The hidden smile was allowed to flourish, ever so slightly. ‘I say, as Second Lord, that such a solution is in the best interests of the party. And as there is no precedent, the royal word is law in this instance.’

‘As it has been since the first dawn,’ rumbled the queen.

‘If I may make bolder, my Queen, such royal words might also deal with the Bulldog’s vast estate. I take it your Majesty would prefer to keep it out of the reach of prying hands. Hands that are not as loyal as others,’ Dizali said.

Victorious paused to breathe and rattle some more. ‘The opposition needs no further fuel for ambition or argument. The Bulldog’s boy is to be brought under our wing. I shall leave it in your capable hands.’

Dizali bowed as low as his spine would allow. ‘My eternal praise, Queen Victorious.’

A part of the shadow moved then, and though Dizali knew not what part it was, or if it even had a name, he got its meaning. He made a hasty, yet respectful retreat, and hurried back to meet Gavisham at the summit of the stairs. His smile had slipped the moment he had stepped through the doors. Now a firm, tight line had replaced it, accompanied by a hard glint in the man’s eye.

‘How’d it go, Milord?’

‘Well,’ hissed Dizali, as he clattered down the steps, Gavisham in tow.

‘What’s the plan, then?’

Dizali stabbed at the air as he reeled off each command. ‘It’s time to set the wheels in motion. Prepare the papers. I want the Hark boy, Tonmerion, watched like a hawk. I want reports too, every week. If he sneezes, I want to know of it. Send a wiregram to our good friend and ally. He will know what to do. Understand?’

‘Clear as a bell.’

‘Then get to it,’ Dizali growled. ‘I have work of my own to do.’

CHAPTER V

LILAIN

These creatures are strange. I've never come so close before, not to these ones, with their castles and their slaves and their money. They exude it, flaunt it. The ladies are draped in it. The lords drink it down by the glass, or roll it up and smoke it. It's as if their status depends on how fast they can spend their money.

If I weren't running for my life I would stick around a while longer, and teach them a lesson in frugality.'

6th May, 1867

Steel and iron, that was all that could be heard. Not the chuffing of the colossal engine, not the grating crunch of black shovels on coal, not even the chuckling, or the whispering, or the heated debates of the other passengers. Just iron. Just steel. They battled one another continuously—each creak and bang and thud trying to outdo the next. The clear winner were the wheels, of course, and the sturdy tracks they rolled against continuously.

Merion felt every rivet, every scratch, every little crunch and squeak. It was an incessant clattering that had been hammered into the very bones of his body. He prayed for water and coal stops. He prayed for towns and stray cows. Hell, he even prayed for women tied to the tracks, as he had seen in penny dreadfuls. Anything to quieten the wheels for just a moment, and let him hear the wind, or the trees, or the piercing

whistle of the engine, to know there was something else beyond the cacophony.

Days had become knitted together and formed a week. Merion had spent the sunlight hours with his face pressed up against the window, watching every mile roll past. He took in every inch of his new home. No matter how sure he was that he had seen every sight the Kingdom of America had to offer, there was always something new, something different. He felt as though he had seen several kingdoms, not just the one.

In New York, he had seen towering spires the like of which even London could not boast, overlooking a bay of mud and old warships. In Pittsburgh, he had seen wild forests, darker than the woods of home. So dark they appeared, he couldn't fathom how far they must have stretched. In Chicago, he had heard an ocean called a lake, and seen a city so sprawling and stubborn, he wondered whether it would ever end. On the way to Cheyenne, he had rumbled across prairies and grasslands, fenced only by the distant shadows of rolling mountains and the first fingers of desert. Yet still, he hadn't seen it all.

At first, Wyoming didn't seem all that bad. Chugging through the dawn-lit hills outside Cheyenne, Merion had been pleasantly surprised by the amount of green. Sure, there were no forests or trees, nor very many rivers, for that matter, but there were shrubs on the ground, and that's all that mattered. He had heard no more talk of danger or of keeping his skin on above the thundering of the wheels. He even went as far as to enjoy the hot morning sun coming through the dusty window, far hotter than anything he had ever experienced at home. His skin prickled under its rays.

It was then it all started to change—the moment he reached Cheyenne.

It was a small city, compared to Chicago and New York. In fact, it was actually more of a town. But Merion kept that to himself, in case he accidentally offended anyone. He alone stayed on the platform as the locomotive was pulled away to make room for the next. For a while, he wondered if he would have the carriage to himself, but as he stood there sweating in the hot sun, his fellow passengers began to arrive, one by one.

The first didn't give Merion any real cause for concern. Neither did the second. However, by the third, Merion was starting to notice a pattern, and it was a pattern that began to make him rather nervous indeed.

No women. He noticed that first. The passengers lining up alongside him were all men. And, to Merion's delight, they were the sort of men that looked very fond of dark doorways and sharp implements. That much was evident from the things attached or hanging from their bullet-studded belts. Guns and knives and other such tools built for bodily harm.

Their hats were dark and low, and their clothes dusty and ragged. Some wore dungarees, others riding gear. All of them wore heavy, thudding boots. It made Merion cast a self-conscious eye over his own choice of footwear. Comfortable leather shoes with their laces tied in almost-perfect bows. They even had a velvet lining. Merion wiggled his feet to remind himself.

I am either going to be the height of fashion, or the court jester, Merion told himself. Only time would tell which.

Merion kept his eyes low and his mouth shut. Instead he bathed in the rough grumblings of the men around him. He could not hear much, but what he heard both confused and swiftly demolished that slight shred of hope he and Rhin had savoured before Cheyenne. In truth, their words terrified him.

'Sullyvan's got all the men sleeping together at night ...'

'Well, what in Maker's name is that gonna do, huh?'

'Just makes us a bigger target, is all.'

'Makes us a buffet.'

'Digger's right. Ain't nothing to be done, 'cept build us somethin' solid. Quarters. Barracks. Anything.'

'Pah! Only guards get quarters. They're the ones watching over our hides all the live-long day.'

'And we're the ones bending our backs all day, putting iron in the ground.'

'Heard Yule got bit last week?'

'*Bit?* Man got ripped in half!'

'Down the middle.'

'Wife only knew him 'cause of a mole he had on his right cheek.'

And so their hushed conversations went. Some of them must have noticed him, after a spell, but it did not make them speak any quieter.

‘No good pretendin’ it ain’t happened,’ as one of the workers so eloquently put it.

Truth hurts, and the frontier was full of it. *Welcome to the wild west*, he thought. *Last stop before Hell*.



The locomotive that came to fetch them was considerably less impressive than the one he had first seen in Boston, and the other two that had come after it.

If those three had been princes, here was the pauper.

Merion scowled as it pulled into the station, belching oily steam. This locomotive was smaller, for one thing, and covered by at least an inch of dust. There were six carriages, but only two were for passengers. These carriages had large portholes instead of windows, no doubt pilfered from some downed air balloon. In fact, the whole train looked stolen, borrowed, or otherwise improvised.

The men on the platform didn’t seem to mind. They stepped right up to the lip of the platform and waited for the doors to stop in front of them. Some even made quick bets as to where the doors were going to stop, and who would be closer. Gold and copper glinted in the sunlight.

Merion was the last to board. He shuffled on in the wake of the workers, guards, and other riffraff, his legs like molten lead. His luggage was thankfully being loaded for him, alongside barrels and boxes of tools and supplies, headed for Fell Falls.

‘Maybe we should get you a gun after all,’ whispered Rhin.

Merion did not dignify that with a response. The men would have heard him, in any case.

He found a seat near the door and put the rucksack on his lap. He could feel Rhin moving around so that he could peer out at the carriage interior. The men sprawled about, as though they had already done their day’s worth of hard work.

As soon as all the luggage and supplies had been transferred from the other train by the station workers, the locomotive released its breaks, and the whole carriage shuddered.

The men chatted idly, this time of women, gambling, and stories of the war. Rumour had it some were still fighting in the misty swamps of the deep south. Renegades, Merion heard them called. One man said they were all doomed, once the steam warships of Washington got there, with Red King Lincoln standing on the bow of the *Black Rosa*.

‘With his trusty axe,’ another added, and the men thumped the seats patriotically until dust filled the carriage.

Soon the talk turned to the wild Shohari, and Merion couldn’t help but lend an ear. He closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep, and let his body rock with the rickety train.

‘Shohari are gettin’ braver.’

‘Coming further south every summer.’

‘I heard they already overrun some of the northern towns. Landsing was razed to the ground not this winter gone. Heard they took some of the women too. Men’ve gone looking now the snows have thawed. Damn shame, ain’t that right.’

More thumping of seats.

‘I heard they own the nor-western mountains to rights. Ain’t nobody that’ll venture into them woods.’

‘Nor the canyons neither.’

‘Lord Serped will ‘ave somethin’ to say if they come near Fell Falls. With his lordsguards and gatlings.’

Merion’s ears pricked up at the sound of the word ‘lord’. *What was a lord doing all the way out here?*

‘What’re you talking about ‘bout, Hummage? You know they been seen already. On the ridges.’

‘Shit. Scouts is all.’

‘Ain’t just scouts from what I hear. Got war parties roaming as far south as Shamrok Hills.’

‘Can’t the patrols from Kaspar pick ‘em off?’

‘They are, sure as hell. But they’re too many.’

A deep voice echoed in the far corner of the carriage, one Merion hadn’t heard yet. ‘I heard they brought their shamans too,’ it said, and there was a silence. ‘You ever seen a shaman in real life? Any of you?’

More silence. ‘Those Shohari are somethin’ else. They got proper magic running through their veins, mark my words. I heard men say they can peel the flesh right off your bones at a hundred paces. Turn the steel of your rifle hot as hell, ’til it burns your hands or explodes. Take your soul, too, if they lay hands on you. A little chanting, a little blood, and you’re theirs.

Merion’s own voice surprised him, so much so he could not help but squeak halfway through his last sentence, so that it came out as more of a question than a fact. ‘My father said that magic is only what science can’t yet explain. That it’s all a trick.’ He heard Rhin muttering something derogatory in the pack, and immediately wished he had kept his mouth shut. Perhaps it was his nerves, or the need to be noticed that had made him squawk. He did not even agree with his father. He had a faerie for a best friend, after all.

The laughter started slowly at first. A few chuckles here and there to get the ball rolling. One man started wheezing, and slowly but surely the carriage erupted into uproar. Merion looked at the floor and wished he would melt. He wished he had Rhin’s powers.

As the laughter finally died away, one of the nearest men slapped his hand on his thigh. ‘Shit, son, your father’s got some balls. All a trick, hah!’

Merion was not sure what the ownership of a pair of testicles had to do with the matter, but he nodded anyway.

‘Just wait until he meets his first railwraith!’ somebody else cackled.

‘Or sandstrike!’

And the laughter began afresh.

In the pack, Rhin winced as the men yelled out each individual peril of the wilds. He swore he could feel Merion trembling with fear through the cloth walls of his little sanctuary. The faerie racked his brains for something useful to say, but he couldn’t think of a single word. He only had words for himself.

‘Poor lad,’ he mumbled.



One by one, the green shrubs that had brightened Merion's morning died away until there was barely anything but rock, sand, and brown scrub. Merion sighed. Even the terrain wanted him to feel unwelcome.

As the train reverberated around him and made his teeth jiggle, Merion's mind once again turned to its dark corners. He wondered what he had done to his father to deserve this. He wondered whether he should start cursing his name, whether it would make any difference.

Merion had left London in a muggy cloud of confusion and disbelief, almost as if he were still dreaming. But with every mile west he'd crawled, that disbelief had melted away and left something very solid in its place. His father had been murdered, and he had been banished to live with his aunt, the undertaker. His whole life hung in suspended animation, ripe for greedy claws to pick at. That disbelief had become a very chilling reality.

The young Hark may have been trembling, but he had no tears to shed. Along with the fear there came a burning, indignant anger. And as we all know, anger must have an escape route, otherwise it boils up into something a little more dangerous. So it was that Merion's anger gave him an idea, a purpose to shield him from this awful new reality of his. He swirled it around inside his head, and let it keep him warm.

As they steered a course north and west, the scenery swapped between the unbearably flat and the worryingly steep and craggy. Merion had one thing to say for the cobbled-together locomotive: it was as strong as the sea. During the ten hours between Cheyenne and Fell Falls, it never broke pace once, not even on the hills. It was an unstoppable force that dragged him ever-onwards.

The sun was just setting when they crested a hill only a handful of miles from Fell Falls. For a moment, Merion couldn't bring himself to look, before he remembered some more of his father's cold words: *We must always stare our opponents square in the face, whether in the street, the ring, or amongst the Benches.*

'So be it,' Merion spat, and turned, daring Fell Falls to inch closer. And so it did.

Close up, the town looked like a monster, sprawling and leaking charcoal smoke from its pores. Its veins were dusty streets scarred with the pockmarks of hooves and wheel-ruts. Its tentacles were wandering, misshapen buildings and ambling paths. Its skin was made of wooden

slats, jagged and tortured like every true monster's skin, and like every true monster, it was being harried and attacked.

The freshly beaten railroad from the east pierced the monster's side like a silver spear and ran it clean through. Roads snaked in from the north and south, looking for all the world like ropes lassoing the creature's wooden limbs. As the light faded and the shadows grew long, Merion could almost imagine the town thrashing and flailing as sunset made the sky ripple. With every twist of the track they came closer. The locomotive aimed its nose right for the heart of the town and chugged towards it. The men in his carriage had grown silent. Merion just pressed his face harder against the glass.

The black skeleton of a church lay on Fell Falls' eastern outskirts, as though it had somehow escaped the tentacled clutches of the sprawling monster yet had paid the price with fire and flame. In the scorched soil of its graveyard, stood a congregation of sun-bleached crosses, creaking in the desert breeze. Some were dressed in dusty hats with holes, others adorned with pickaxes and tools, still others with garlands of wild flowers, either fresh or dried and crumbling. Some crosses bore no gifts at all. Merion tried to count them as they rumbled past.

On the locomotive's other side, to what Merion assumed was the north, a great barn stood alone in the desert. Flags flapped from several poles on its roof, each bearing colours and shapes, but at that distance Merion couldn't make out their specifics. To his squinting eyes, it almost looked like a coat of arms of some sort.

No matter where Merion looked, how far he craned his neck, or how much he squinted, he could not spot a single drop of water. Unless they were to be found in the surrounding low hills, it seemed that Fell Falls actually had no falls at all; the name was a lame joke at the town's expense.

As the locomotive pulled into the station (if a jumble of wooden decking, a glorified shed, and a small outhouse can be considered a station), the sun was just about to set. The vast sky had turned a deep, furnace-orange, and it made Fell Falls glow.

There was barely a brick building in sight. The whole of the town seemed to be constructed of a grim grey wood. Thankfully, its citizens had gone to some effort with their paintbrushes, and there were plenty of

colours on the insides of the monster. There were plenty of citizens too. The dusty streets were abuzz with men and women. Workers, guards, farmers, shop girls, stableboys, the lot. Merion watched them as they wandered to and fro, some drinking, others laughing. Some even sang. He wondered how there could be so much merriment in a place as dangerous as this. *Why weren't these people in their homes, behind locked doors?* He wondered.

What Merion did not know, and would soon find out, is that it took a special type of person to exist out here, on the edge of the world: the sort of person that knows, as we all do, that copious amounts of alcohol and laughter are brilliant methods of keeping the heavy weight of mortality and an occasional disembowelling off your back.

Once the train had come lurching to a halt, the men filed off one by one, rubbing their hands at the thought of whiskey and women. So eager were they, in fact, that Merion was soon left alone. He had a grim look on his face.

Rhin's head poked out from beneath the flap of the rucksack. 'Are you ready?' he asked slowly, as if it were a dangerous question to be asking.

'I am. But trust me, Rhin, we won't be here long,' growled the boy.

Rhin narrowed his eyes. 'What are you on about?'

Merion shook his head. 'I'll tell you later.'

'Right you are, but don't do anything stupid in the meantime, like running into the desert. I don't feel too good about deserts.'

'Stop worrying,' Merion replied, and with that he got to his feet, and forced himself out onto the platform.

Merion was carrying Rhin and the rucksack in his arms now, rather than on his shoulders. After checking that his luggage was being unloaded, he wandered down a short set of steps and onto the dusty earth of the town.

Both boy and faerie peered around. The light was fading fast and not all the street-lamps had been lit. Aside from the station workers, the platform was empty. All the passengers had disappeared, already barging their way into the first tavern they could find.

'Your aunt should be meeting us, am I right?' Rhin asked.

'Yes. Aunt Lilain.'

‘Aunt Lilain. Sounds so plain next to “Karrigan”.’

Merion had to admit the faerie was right. ‘Well, she’s a Hark nonetheless.’

Rhin sighed. ‘Hark or not, it looks like she didn’t get the wiregram about picking you up.’

Merion stared back at the sign hanging above the platform. ‘Fell Falls’, it said, in bright blue lettering. Merion found a nearby barrel and perched on top of it. ‘Nice place,’ he muttered.

Rhin shuffled out of the pack so he could see Merion’s face. The boy’s face was expressionless now, deadpan. ‘Could be worse, from what the men were saying.’

All Merion had to do was look left, to the west, where a few rugged hills stood stark against the red of the dying sun. ‘This is the frontier, Rhin. All of those things that the men talked about, they’re just out there. Barely a stone’s throw away.’

Rhin unsheathed his knife and waved it around, slicing at the air. ‘Well, they can come try their luck. They’re not the only ones that are magic,’ he hissed to the darkness. Nothing replied. Nothing moved and, secretly, they were both very glad.

‘See?’ Rhin sheathed his knife.

A moment passed, and Merion huffed sharply. ‘Where on earth is that aunt of mine?’

Rhin looked about. He pointed towards the milling crowds of the town. ‘I don’t suppose it could be that crazy woman sprinting towards us, could it?’

‘I think I’ve had my fill of crazy,’ Merion sighed as he turned.

There was indeed a woman coming towards them, and she was indeed sprinting. If you have ever had a stranger run as fast as they can towards you, with little or no explanation, then you will know how nervous Merion suddenly felt. Rhin even went as far as to unsheathe his knife again, poised inside the rucksack.

‘Thank the Maker!’ cried the woman, as she skidded to a halt barely a foot from Merion. He coughed as her dust cloud enveloped his face.

The woman patted him on the shoulder and smiled broadly. His aunt was all wire and tanned skin, quite obviously as strong as a mule, and not nearly so old as Merion had expected. In fact, there was barely a

wrinkle on her face, just a smattering of well-used laughter and frown lines. Her hair, the trademark Hark blonde, was scraped and tied back into a long ponytail that ended somewhere above her hips. She had a brown mole beneath her left eye, almost like a lost teardrop.

It was her clothing that gave Merion the most cause for concern. Instead of the graceful frocks and dresses in which he was used to seeing women, his aunt dressed somewhat like a man. She wore dark jeans held up by a thick buckled belt, and a checked shirt rolled up to the elbows—very informal indeed.

‘Sorry about that. I thought I’d missed you! Don’t want you wandering off on your first day here. Somebody could have shot you!’ she looked about furtively, as if checking for snipers.

The look on Merion’s face told her that he did not get the joke, if it could even be called one. She patted him on the shoulder again and smiled even wider. Merion was just grateful she still had all her teeth.

‘I’m joking, nephew. One good thing about Fell Falls is that we’re too busy shooting other things to be shooting ourselves. In a way, it’s the friendliest place on earth,’ Lilain said.

Merion looked around and decided that his aunt was a liar. In the street ahead, tucked into an alleyway, he could see a man urinating on his own boots. ‘Doesn’t look too friendly to me,’ he muttered.

‘You’ll see,’ Lilain winked. The gesture reminded him of the old woman on the barge, and he wondered if his aunt was just as crazy as she had been. ‘Now, where are my manners?’ she asked herself, and all of a sudden she was transformed into a different person. She stood straighter, taller, and her hands came to rest gently in front of her. She clasped her fingers and curtsied, looking for all the world as though she had just entered the dining hall of Humming Tower. ‘My nephew,’ she said. ‘It is a pleasure to see you again.’

Merion was desperately thankful for the touch of refinement. Perhaps his aunt had been joking all along. ‘Tonmerion Harlequin Hark of Harker Sheer, at your service,’ Merion replied, bowing low. *Always lower for family, no matter how distant.*

His aunt curtsied again, and introduced herself. ‘Lady Lilain Hark of Fell Falls, formerly Lilain Rennevie, socialite, citizen, crack-shot, and town undertak— Oh, hah! I can’t do it! Can’t stand all that pomp and ceremony, dearie me. Left all that behind long ago. Still got it

though, eh?’ she snorted, her veneer crumbling to ash in front of Merion’s eyes. As she chuckled away, he began to boil.

‘Anyway, Tonmerion, that reminds me. Before we get you settled in and talk about anything else, I need your help. I’ve got a body that came in just this afternoon. The workers have already gone to the saloons, so it’s just me. And dear me if he isn’t a big fella. You look like a strong young lad—fancy giving your aunt a hand?’ Lilain asked, cheerful as could be, as though she had just asked him to help pick strawberries.

Merion’s voice was flat, but nowhere near calm. ‘You want *me* to help *you* move a dead body.’ It wasn’t even a question, the way he said it. ‘A *dead* body.’

‘Yes, just over to the Runnels, back to the north.’ Lilain jabbed a thumb in the air and smiled again. ‘Fancy it?’

Before he could answer she had already turned and begun to walk away. ‘It’s this way,’ she chimed, in that eroded Brit accent of hers.

It was then that Merion chose to explode, with no warning or apology.

‘Now, just wait one ... bloody ... SECOND!’ He had not really meant to yell, but he had, and now it was too late to take it back. He dumped his rucksack in the dust and squared up to his aunt. He brandished a finger as if he meant to poke her with it, but he could not quite summon the tenacity. Instead he just vented, as he had wanted to since getting on that blasted locomotive in Boston.

‘In case Mr Witchazel has proven thoroughly incompetent, and you are not aware of what I have been through, the last three weeks of my life have been utter torture. My father—*your* brother—has been murdered. My home has been taken away from me. My life has been torn apart at the seams. I spent two weeks in a tiny cabin on a ship more rust than metal. I have thrown up more times than I can bear to count, and several of those times through my nose, which until then I hadn’t even thought possible. I have seen icebergs decorated with dead soldiers. I was battered senseless by the crowds of Boston and nearly bored to death by a lawyer’s assistant. And to top it all off, I have just spent the last week on a variety of trains travelling across this godforsaken country of yours, only to be made aware that my final destination, my last hope for refuge, is a meagre scratch in the middle of a desert, surrounded by

creatures that want to tear me in half, and shamans who want to peel the skin off my bones at a hundred yards. So in summary, Aunt Lilain, please *do* excuse me if I don't currently have the stomach for carrying dead bodies around in the dark! I would have thought my own aunt, my father's sister, would be a little more sympathetic to my plight! I half-expected this nightmare to end in Fell Falls, not begin anew!

Merion suddenly realised he had not taken a breath in quite a while. He decided to remedy that before he passed out. His head swam. Aunt Lilain had crossed her arms about halfway through his tirade, and now she just stood there, staring, a nothing expression on her tanned face. Merion decided to throw caution to the wind and just carry on. 'Now, if you will point me in the right direction, I would like to find whatever bed you've prepared for me, and go to sleep in it. I will be leaving in the morning.'

Lilain answered so quickly she nearly snipped off the end of his sentence. 'Is that so?' she retorted.

'Yes, it is.'

The two stared at each other for a moment, until Merion realised that his aunt was the sort of person who needed to be asked twice. 'If you could show me which way to go, please, it would be very much appreciated.'

Lilain's only reply was to brush past him and reach for his abandoned rucksack, which was leaning against the side of the barrel. Merion chased after her, but she had a head start. The sack was on her shoulder by the time he could interfere.

'That's my rucksack ...' he said as he reached out to grab it.

'Oh, no problem. You've had a hard couple of weeks. I've got it,' she replied, striding towards the centre of town. Merion had no choice but to hurry along in the wake of her long, loping strides. Rhin winked from under the lip of the rucksack. Merion could see his purple eyes glowing softly.

'Are you taking me to the body, or your house?' Merion enquired, hoping it was the latter.

'The house,' his aunt replied. He sighed in relief. 'Via the body.'

'Did you not hear what ...'

This time, Lilain did cut him off. 'Oh, I heard just fine, thank you. It's a left here.' Lilain swung into a short alleyway, and then out along a

hip-high fence that guarded patches of vegetables. A goat bleated somewhere in the shadows.

‘Do you live out on the edges of town?’

‘Last house in the Runnels. It’s where they always put people like me.’

‘People like you?’

‘Undertakers. They like our business, but don’t want to see it on their doorstep ... especially not in a town like this.’

Merion wasn’t quite sure he got her meaning, but he mumbled an ‘I see’ all the same. She was leading him up a very gentle rise now. The houses, or shacks in some cases, were thinning out. The road became less defined and more rugged. Soon enough, they came to a long cart, its handles propped up on the arm of a fence so it lay almost flat. On it lay a macabre object covered by a sack. Merion gulped.

‘Come on out, Eugin. Boy’s not interested in games,’ Lilain called to the darkness.

Merion’s heart stopped for a brief moment as the sack moved. A pair of arms groped for air. Lilain grabbed the corner of the sacking and yanked it free, revealing a portly man with a pair of spectacles hanging on his grime-smeared nose. He looked at the boy, then at Lilain.

‘What? Why?’

‘Tired.’

‘Oh. Well, Boston is almost two thousand miles away, as the crow flies. Boy has come a long way.’

‘At least somebody realises that,’ Merion said. He had not really meant to say that out loud. *Why did that keep happening?*

‘Don’t encourage him, Eugin. Go home. I want to see you working on that cooler bright and early. No slacking, you hear?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eugin sloped off, waving a hand at Merion as he scuttled away.

Lilain snapped her fingers and shouted over her shoulder, ‘Oh, and Eugin?’

‘Yes, ma’am?’

‘Is the body on the table?’

‘Both halves, ma’am,’ came the reply.

Merion’s stomach churned. He looked around him, peering into the darkness, as if he were trying to root out this offensive table. In truth,

he was considering whether he could make a break for it, as if running might solve all his problems, but this desert all looked the same: dark, empty, and dangerous. Lilain called to him, and he froze.

‘You coming or not?’

Merion bit the inside of his lip again, nursing the perpetual scab that had formed there thanks to his new habit. ‘Do I have to sleep near the body?’

‘Well that depends on where you’re sleepin’, doesn’t it?’

Lilain’s house was slightly larger than the other houses, and a little more ornate. It definitely was not a shack, as Merion had feared. It looked like there might have been some money under its pillows and floorboards once, but no longer. It appeared young and yet old. Even in the dark, Merion could see the flaking paint, the little crack in the window to the left of the door, the missing roof-tiles. Lilain thrust her key into a lock, and waved. She still had the bag over her shoulders. ‘Come on, do you want to see your options?’

Merion shrugged then. It was a tiny movement, but it spoke volumes. It was a shrug for the world and everything in it, for fate and destiny too, for all the blasted things that had brought him here, and for his father’s murderer. It told them that tonight, they had won, but tomorrow might be different. *One night couldn’t hurt*, he told himself, as he stepped over the threshold into his new, if not temporary, life.

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