

1

Parting Words

DREW KNEW THAT there was a predator out there.

He looked out over the barley field, mottled shadows racing across it, and the crops swaying rhythmically as storm clouds flew by overhead. Behind him his father and twin brother continued to load the wagon, backs bent as they hauled sacks of grain onto the wooden boards. A heavy gray shire horse stood harnessed to the front, tugging with its teeth at tufts of grass it found at the base of the tethering post. Drew stood on the roof of the rickety old toolshed, scouring the golden meadow for a telltale sign, of what he wasn't entirely sure.

"Get your idle bones down off that shed and come and help your brother," shouted his father. "We need to get this loaded before the rain hits."

"But Pa, there's something out there," Drew called back.

"Either you get yourself down from that thing or I come over and knock you down," Pa warned, pausing momentarily to glare at his son.

Begrudgingly, Drew searched the barley field with narrowed eyes one last time before jumping down onto the muddy, rutted surface of the farm's yard.

"I swear you'd rather do anything than a bit of hard work," muttered his father, hefting a sack up to Trent.

Drew snatched up his own load, struggling for purchase against the rough hemp as he hoisted it up to his brother. Their father returned to the barn to haul out the remaining grain destined for the neighboring market town of Tuckborough.

Tall, broad, blond-haired, and blue-eyed, Trent was the very image of Mack Ferran. Shorter and slighter in build than his brother, with a shock of black hair that tumbled over his finer features, Drew was an exact opposite in all aspects. Though the twins were now on the verge of manhood, Drew knew it would be clear to the most casual observer which of the two had eaten the bigger portions of porridge at the Ferran breakfast table. But, different as they were, they were as close as any brothers could be.

“Don’t mind him,” said Trent, taking the weight of the sack and dragging it across the wooden boards. “He just wants to be off so he can get to market on time.” He slammed the bag down as Drew pulled forward another to the foot of the wagon. Trent rarely had any trouble believing Drew—if his brother said something was amiss when they were in the wild, nine times out of ten he’d be correct. “What do you reckon it is?” he asked.

Drew paused to glance back at the fields surrounding the Ferran farm. “Can’t say. A wildcat? Dogs maybe? Possibly a wolf?” he guessed.

“At this time of day, so close to the farm? You’re mad, Drew. I’ll grant you it might be wild dogs, but not a wolf.”

Drew knew he wasn’t mad. Trent might have been strong, athletic, and a natural horseman, but he knew little about the wilderness. Drew, on the other hand, was a born outdoorsman and with this came the gift of an innate understanding of the countryside and the creatures within it. Since his first trip out into the fields as a boy with his father, he’d taken to shepherding with an uncanny ease. He found he was completely in tune with the animals, his senses seeming to match theirs. From the smallest field mouse to the largest (and, thankfully, very uncommon) bear, Drew could usually recognize their presence readily, be it from the reaction of the other animals or the tracks and signs they left behind.

But today’s feeling vexed him. Something was out there, watching them, stalking them, but it was unfamiliar. He knew it sounded crazy, but he could pick up the scent of a predator when the air was clear. This had proved invaluable on many an occasion, saving several of the family’s sheep and cattle. Although today was blustery, there was still the faint hint of a creature that was out of place, foreign to these parts. A large animal was out there, looking in, and it irked Drew that he couldn’t figure out what it was, much less spy it.

“You think it’s the thing from last night?” asked Trent.

That was exactly what Drew had been wondering. For the last few nights Drew’s shepherd watch had been unusual. The sheep had not been themselves, and all the while Drew had been consumed by an awful sense of foreboding. Ordinarily the sheep would be very receptive to his commands and calls but, bit by bit, they had become more erratic. This had coincided with the waxing of the moon, which often spooked the animals and had even caused Drew to grow ill with worry. It wasn’t a pleasant sensation, the feeling of being stalked by a predator in your own backyard.

Toward the end of last night's watch he'd gathered and penned the majority of the flock and picked up the stragglers that had wandered farther afield. Only one had remained—the ram, naturally—and it had managed to find its way up onto the bluffs that towered over the coast below. The Ferran farm was situated on a rocky promontory of land that reached out from the Cold Coast into the White Sea, cut off on almost every side by the rock walls that surrounded it. He'd found the ram in a state of panic.

It had bucked and started, throwing its head back in fear. Drew raised his hands, which should have calmed it down, but it had the opposite effect. Shaking its head from side to side, mouth open and gulping at the salty air, the ram had backed up a step. Then another. Pebbles had tumbled over the cliff edge, dislodged by frantic hooves, as it struggled for purchase. One moment it was there, an eye fixed on him in stricken terror, the next it was gone, disappearing off the cliff.

Drew had scrambled the remaining distance to the edge, white-knuckled fingers clutching the earth as he peered over. A hundred feet below, heaped in a broken mass, the sheep lay unmoving, its life dashed away on the sharp rocks.

As the moon shone down Drew had looked about, convinced he wasn't alone, sure beyond reason that whatever had startled the animal was still nearby. He'd raced home through the sickly moonlight, heart thundering, not stopping until he'd hit the farm's front door with an almighty crash. Now, on this stormy morning, Drew had the same familiar feeling. He'd be keeping the sheep penned in tonight, close to the farm where he could keep an eye on them.

"Drew!" His father pointed in the direction of the remaining sacks that were lined up outside the heavy timber doors of the barn. "Get a move on. I want to get to Tuckborough while there's still daylight, lad." Drew trudged to the barn, speeding up when he caught sight of his father's glower.

His mother, Tilly, stood on the doorstep of the farmhouse, drying her hands on her apron.

"Try not to be hard on him, Mack," she said as her husband approached, reaching out and brushing the sweat-soaked hair from his brow. "He's probably still raw from what happened to that ram."

"He's still raw?" said Mack incredulously. "It's not him who has to fork out for another animal. If I don't get there before noon, the best on show will be gone to some other bidder." He saw his son dragging the last two sacks across the farmyard to the wagon. "If you tear those sacks, then it'll come out of your

wages, lad!" he shouted.

Tilly had to bite her lip, mother's instinct telling her to jump in and defend the boy, but she thought better of it. Mack's mood was bad enough without one of their rows darkening it further.

Drew stopped to throw one of the sacks over his shoulder, looking back to his parents, who stood talking beneath the farmhouse porch. His father was pointing his way, his hooked thumb gesturing, while his mother shook her head. A few choice words to her husband and she walked indoors in annoyance. The boys' father looked back toward them, shaking his head wearily before following his wife indoors. Drew trudged over to the wagon.

"Are they arguing again?" asked Trent, positioning the final sack and binding them to the timber hoardings with a heavy length of rope.

Drew nodded, aware that the words his parents had exchanged were probably about him. It always seemed to be about him. It felt as though they were keeping something from him, but he didn't know what.

Times were undoubtedly changing at the farm, and Trent was biding his time before he finally left home to join the military. Under duress, their parents had agreed to their son's constant badgering to allow him to become a soldier, something he'd wanted to do since childhood. As a matter of routine, their father had trained both his sons in skill at arms from an early age, teaching them things he'd picked up himself a long time ago. Mack was a member of the old king's Wolfguard, and there were very few places across the continent of Lyssia that he hadn't visited. With Leopold the Lion on the throne, it was a very different monarch Trent would serve if he pursued his dream. This part of the Seven Realms was a changed place from days gone by. Leopold ruled with an iron paw, and it was rumored that many of Lyssia's people had fallen on hard times. Their father would mutter that the Lionguard were now little more than glorified tax collectors, a shadow of their former selves. He had done his parental duty in basic self-defense, with both boys now proficient with a sword, but there was only so much he was prepared to teach.

Regardless of his own skills, Drew had no desire to travel to Highcliff with his brother and join the Lionguard. His home was on the farm, and he felt no need to see the world. He knew his mother found his homebird nature heartwarming and loved the fact that her young boy would always be around. Drew suspected that his father found his lack of ambition disappointing, but the old man never spoke of it if he did. It seemed that his father had written him off

at a young age, and if he were to stay around here for the rest of his life then so be it. After all, as Mack Ferran often said, another pair of hands was always needed on the farm, so the boy was good for a few things. It was as close to a compliment as he was likely to get.

Straining against his harness, the great gray shire horse kicked his hooves into the earth, keen to be on his way. He threw his head back and took a couple of forceful steps, almost causing Trent to fall off the back of the wagon.

“Whoa there, Amos,” called Drew, slapping his hand against the wooden side. The horse relented, stepping back gingerly and dipping his head by way of an apology. “He wants to set off,” said Drew, looking up at the gathering storm clouds. “Can’t say I blame him.”

Trent jumped down, and Drew followed him indoors to say farewell. They found their parents standing in the kitchen, embracing.

“Right, then,” said their father. “I guess we’re ready. Trent, get that basket off the table, lad. It’s our lunch in there.”

Trent picked up the basket and sidled past, back to the front door and the waiting wagon. They always took it in turns to accompany their father on the road to market. Tuckborough was some ten or so miles away from them, the nearest spot of civilization. By horse it was a brisk gallop, the coast road skirting the edge of the Dyrewood, weaving one way and the other along the cliff top past bays. By wagon it was a far slower affair. With a number of shops, watering holes, and other more diverting interests, it was usually a welcome break from mundane life on the farm. Come autumn, however, it was decidedly less enjoyable. Cold winds and sleeting rain seemed to instinctively appear on market days. Even the prospects of a sly sip of ale with their father or a flirtation with a pretty girl proved lean enticements.

Their mother cleared up the breakfast pots from the kitchen table. Drew reached up and unhooked his father’s heavy hooded cloak from its peg, handing it to him as he made for the door.

“We should be back around nightfall, depending on the road and weather,” Mack said as he fastened the brass clasp of his cloak under his chin. “You may want to see about keeping the flock a little closer to the homestead today. After yesterday and all, yes?”

Drew nodded his agreement as his mother squeezed by, looking to say her good-byes to her other son. Beyond the doorway, a light rain had started to fall.

“Try not to lose any more of them. And look after your ma,” his father added

as she passed.

The old man patted his hip, checking his hunting knife was at home in its sheath. Drew handed his father's longbow to him before picking up the quiver of arrows that lay at the foot of the stairs. He'd rarely had to use any of these weapons on the road, certainly not in recent years anyway. There had been a time, when the boys were toddlers, that bandits had stalked the coast road, and bows and blades were a necessity for travelers. Eventually the local farmers and road traders had come together to form a makeshift posse that dispatched the brigands. Those who weren't slain or hanged in Tuckborough had fled to pastures less feisty. Now the most dangerous encounter they might face would be a boar, big cat, or wolf. Still, old habits died hard for the ex-soldier. Trent followed his father out into the drizzle, wrapping his scarf tightly about his face and pulling up the hood of his cloak.

They both climbed into the cart, and Drew followed them to pass up the quiver of arrows. Amos gave a whinny of excitement, feet stepping in anticipation, aware that they were about to be off. Drew stepped up to pat the horse's nose with an open hand, but the beast pulled back, uncharacteristically arching his neck with a nery snort. Clearly the horse was also on edge, and Drew guessed he was picking up on the same unsettled atmosphere.

"Gee up," called Mack Ferran, snapping the reins in his hands and spurring the old shire horse on. With ponderous footsteps the horse stepped out, pulling the great long wagon behind him. Drew stood clear of the vehicle, the huge wheels cutting up the mud as it went. As the drizzle slowly turned to a downpour and a storm rumbled overhead, the wagon disappeared into the rain.

2

The Gathering Storm

THE AX HOVERED briefly in the air, poised for the drop, its blade glinting in the lantern light. With a thunderclap and a simultaneous flash of lightning, it flew down, cracking the log in two. Drew returned the ax to its bracket on the barn wall, picked up all the firewood from the floor, and set off back to the farmhouse through the sleeting rain.

Once his father and Trent had left, the day had been one of the most miserable Drew had ever experienced. The storm had been relentless, windowpanes rattling and shutters clapping as rain and wind battered the farm. The yard was a quagmire of mud and water, great dirty pools clogging the ground underfoot. He could hear sheep bleating from their shelter beyond the barn, where he'd moved the flock earlier in the day.

Hoping his bad luck with the animals was behind him, Drew had been disappointed to find the hex still firmly over his head. The sheep had proved skittish and unpredictable, almost impossible to herd when he took them to the field. A week earlier the flock had come to him when he called, happily gathering around him. Now they were different animals, the arrival of this invisible predator leaving them edgy and out of sorts. After trying to coax and cajole them for an hour, he had eventually turned to shouting to scare them into obeying his commands, something he'd never needed to do before. All the while he'd watched over his shoulder for any clues as to what was out there. By now there was no doubt in his mind that, whatever it was, it was something to be afraid of.

A day alone with his thoughts had not been the best remedy for Drew's mood, which was darker than ever. Whatever had upset the sheep had also played havoc with Drew, leaving him sick and fevered, and unable to eat his supper earlier. Elbowing open the front door, he stumbled into the hall, shaking

the wet cloak from his shoulders and hopping about on one foot then the other, kicking off his boots. Barefoot and shivering, he trotted into the living room, where his mother sat knitting in the armchair by the dying embers of the fire. He tipped his armful of kindling and wood into the scuttle on the hearth with a noisy clatter, placing a couple of pieces on the coals of the fire. Crouched on his haunches, Drew remained at his mother's feet, hands held out toward the fire.

"How are you feeling, son?" asked his mother, putting down the needles and wool. She leaned forward, stroking his damp hair affectionately. She laid the back of her hand against his forehead, checking his temperature. He knew it was up.

"Not too bad, Ma," he lied, fighting back the cramps that rolled and shot through his belly. He looked up at the mantelpiece. Below his father's Wolfshead blade was a brass carriage clock. It was almost half past ten in the evening, well beyond the time that his father and Trent would normally be home. He had to assume that they had fallen foul of the weather.

Standing, he managed to smile to his mother. "Do you fancy a brew, Ma?" he asked, making for the kitchen. A hot drink seemed to be the only thing he could keep down at the moment.

"That would be lovely," she called after him. Filling the kettle with water he placed it over the big old stove. Whereas his brother clearly followed in his father's footsteps, Drew took after his mother, sharing her peaceful demeanor and easygoing nature. He always figured his mother must have been wasted in her youth as a scullery maid in Highcliff serving the king; her sharp mind and quick wit could have made her a great scholar if the opportunity had been there for her.

Leaving the kettle on the stove, Drew wandered back into the sitting room, settling cross-legged on the rug by the fire.

"Still not hungry?" his mother asked, concerned again.

"No, can't eat anything, Ma. Sorry," he replied, aware that his mother had spent hours preparing the evening meal earlier. Unable to eat, he had lain in his bunk in his bedroom, leaving his mother downstairs to eat her meal alone. The table still remained set, the cutlery for Pa and Trent laid out, plus his own.

"There's no need to apologize, my dear," said his mother. "I know how it is when you feel ill." She looked intently at him, as if reading his thoughts. "And I hope nothing else is troubling you." She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I know you didn't mean to lose that sheep."

Drew nodded. It was true he'd been worried about that, but now something else was disturbing him. He'd attempted during the day to unravel what had been going on with his parents' heated arguments, but his mother had proved adept at dodging his subtle lines of questioning. Although she'd provided no answers she had, however, revealed some clues.

To his relief, it didn't appear to be his fault. He knew his father was annoyed at the loss of a prize-winning ram, but his mother had just made it clear that he had done nothing wrong, and he believed her. She would sooner stay silent than tell a lie to either of her boys. Nor was it something that stemmed from a disagreement between his parents. Whatever it was, the clues suggested that it had something to do with the flock's strange behavior, but that was all he could work out. With his father dismissing his theories earlier, Drew was surprised to find out that he also thought something was wrong.

Drew was pulled back from his thoughts by the rapid rat-tat-tat of the rain on the windowpanes, making it seem as though the glass might shatter at any moment. Picking up another log, he threw it into the fireplace. The flames leapt high, the fire burning hungrily now, spitting, hissing, and popping. Drew walked across to the huge bay window. Over the storm he could hear his sheep bleating, wailing with worry. Should he go outdoors to check on them? Surely they'd be safe in the paddock? The moon, full and bloated in the night sky, broke through the storm clouds, casting an eerie light over the farmyard.

Drew suddenly felt the fever take him anew, as never before. A wave of dizziness washed over him as the blood rushed from his head. He grasped the heavy curtain with a trembling hand to stop himself from falling. His breathing rasped in his chest, labored and shallow, as rivulets of sweat rolled down his face and into his eyes. Drew wiped his forearm across his face and his sleeve came away sodden, clinging to his flesh. What kind of illness could have this effect on him?

He fixed his eyes on the moon, trying to focus, trying to clear his head of the painful sensations that now assaulted his body. His skin crawled, a fevered itch spreading its way over every inch of his flesh like wildfire. Nausea assailed him, his chest heaving, his lunchtime meal threatening to make a break from his stomach. The world turned around Drew, spinning on the bright white axis of the moon. Focus on the moon.

Focus on the moon.

His body seemed to calm, the pains passing as quickly as they had come.

His flesh cooled; the sickness passed. Outside the rain was subsiding, gentle now and almost tranquil. The sheep had quieted, suddenly calmed. Drew released his grip from the curtains, putting his hand to his clammy throat and massaging it softly. The peace he felt was unnatural, unnerving.

His mother rushed over. "Are you all right, Drew?"

"Not really," he replied. "I feel ill. I think it's the sheep being in distress. I'm picking up on it, and there's nothing I can do."

His mother chewed her lip, her brow creased as she stroked his cheek.

"Ma," asked Drew, taking a deep ragged breath. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing, my love. Nothing at all."

Her face looked so sad, Drew thought, her frown aging her before his very eyes.

He smiled.

"I know there's something you're not telling me, Ma," he said, then, as she started to protest, "Please don't deny it. I've seen you and Pa. There's something you're keeping from me. I know I'm right, but hear me out. I need to say this. I just want you to know that I trust you. Whatever it is, whatever you and Pa are worried about, I know you'll do the right thing. I just hope, whatever it is, there's something I can do to fix it."

He was surprised to see tears stream down his mother's cheeks at his words, rolling freely as she smiled and sobbed.

"Oh, Drew," she said, her voice breathless. "Always so thoughtful, so understanding. Please believe me when I tell you that no parents ever loved their child as much as we love you."

Drew was slightly taken aback, and with a sadness in his heart doubted she genuinely spoke on behalf of his father.

"I wish I could be strong like Trent, and let Pa see that I'm worth something more. Are there two twins more different in all of Lyssia?" He smiled weakly. "But I never meant to upset you, Ma," he said. "Really, I didn't!"

His mother laughed at his words, hugging him. "I know you didn't, you silly boy, I know you didn't." She squeezed him tight. The storm outside seemed to stop, fading away for the moment. The rumbling of thunder had gone; even the rain had subsided. The world seemed silent.

"Don't try to be like Trent," she added quietly. "There will come a time when your pa and I need to tell you more. But you do need to know . . . that you're not like your brother."

Drew's eyes queried the strange statement, although the full understanding of her words was totally beyond his reach and comprehension. Just then the kettle began to whistle on the stove in the kitchen, low and slow at first before building toward a crescendo. The hairs on the back of Drew's neck stood on end. His mother wasn't finished.

"You are different."

He wanted to know more, to ask her what she meant, but as he opened his mouth the small panes that made up the bay window suddenly shattered in a hail of flying glass as the frame buckled and exploded into the room.

3

The Visitor

THE STORM RAGED with a renewed fury, bellowing in the sky over the tiny farmhouse. As the curtains whipped about, caught and torn on crooked shards of broken glass, wind roared in through the gaping chasm of the demolished window.

Turning his back into the glass while dropping to the ground, Drew had sheltered his mother from the explosion as best as he could.

"Are you all right?" he called over the din.

His mother nodded quickly, eyes shooting toward the window. She looked shaken and scared, but beyond some scratches on her face, seemed unharmed. Drew slowly helped her to her feet, surveying the situation.

The great bay window now blanketed the floor with hundreds of tiny pieces of splintered wood and shattered glass. The odd piece of timber swung from its brackets attached to the window frame, broken and ruined. The bookcases that had flanked the window lay on their side, empty and smashed, their far-flung books flapping as the wind clutched at their pages. Rain continued to drive into the room, harsh cold spittle that spattered Drew's face.

Helping his mother back in her chair he began to step over the damaged furniture, making his way toward the window. The fallen bookcases would be best put to use as a temporary hoarding over the hole until the morning came. He'd have to dig out his pa's toolbox from the cellar, but once his father and brother returned they could all set about putting things back to normal. Still, the situation unnerved him.

His eyes searched the room, an important piece of the puzzle missing. The hairs on the back of his neck trembled, a shiver still coursing down his body and making his whole frame tremble. Something wasn't right. Squinting into the darkness, Drew couldn't see what had caused the impact. He had expected to find a great tree branch jutting into the house, but the lack of any obvious cause both surprised and worried him. Surely the wind alone couldn't cause such damage? He took another step toward the window, still searching for evidence. The fire roared against the storm before suddenly giving up the ghost, chased from the room.

Then it appeared.

The shadow seemed to build from the floor upward, a low murky shape that stood out from the darkness with a definition all of its own. Drew staggered back. As it rose, first to the height of Drew's waist and then taller, it seemed to grow outward at the same time, filling the gaping hole that had once been the bay window. Drew stumbled, the strength in his legs failing him, almost losing his footing as he backed up. Wood and glass clattered to the floor around the creature as the remains of the window fell from its frame.

Outside, the lightning flashed, adding a brief glimpse of illumination to the scene. Upon seeing the beast, Drew's first thought was that it was a bear of some kind, but who had ever heard of a bear being bold enough to walk up to a farmhouse, let alone leap through its windows? It quickly became clear that the

creature was far removed from anything that he'd ever seen, sharing little in common with the animals that inhabited the Cold Coast.

A thick coat of oily black hair covered its heavy frame, a foul-stinking pelt that bristled with muddy rainwater. Heavy forelimbs swung down from its hunched shoulders, viciously clawed hands scraping the splintered floorboards around it. Smaller legs were bent double below, supporting the body, threatening to spring the great mass forward at any moment in a mighty bound. What appeared to be a long, fleshy tail wound out from the base of its torso, snaking back through the rubble toward the window. It stood some eight feet tall in all, dominating the darkness of the room.

Whatever horror the body of the beast had created in Drew and his mother paled in comparison when the fearsome head rose slowly from the black nest of fur on its chest. The long snout came into view, tapering toward the end where a cluster of long, sharp teeth jutted out from curling blood-red lips. Its breath rolled into the room before it, making Drew gag at the stench. The foul air carried the scent of rotting flesh and disease, the stink of death and decay, sweet and sickening. Its ears were small and pinned back to its head, almost hidden in the glistening dark coat. Two pale red eyes flashed from pitch-black sockets, narrowing with wicked glee as it stared back at its prey.

It opened its mouth wide, throwing its head back as it bared its teeth, a long black tongue lolling and snaking from its maw as saliva splattered down to pool with the rainwater.

Drew's stomach was in turmoil as he stared at the monster. His heart raced, the burn of the fever still gripping his body but now fueling something, feeding his will. Spurred into activity he leapt to the fireplace between the beast and his mother, reaching up and unclipping his father's Wolfshead blade from the chimney breast. It felt heavy and awkward in his hands, but he held it wavering before him, palms gripping the hilt of the sword. He felt his mother's trembling hand on his shoulder, her fear passing over him as she stood up to shelter behind him.

The creature seemed to chortle, loud, low, and guttural, as it clambered over the overturned furniture and farther into the room.

"Get out!" cried Drew over the wail of the wind, swinging the sword before him to try to ward it off. The beast raised a hand, batting the sword aside, stepping ever closer. Drew's bones and muscles burned, a sudden sharp pain racing wildly through his body to clench his heart. Losing control he lashed out

with the sword, lunging toward the monster blade-point first. The sword disappeared beneath its arm, hitting home somewhere in the monster's midriff. It recoiled, staggering. Lowering a clawed hand to its bloodied side, it examined the dark black liquid with no small degree of concern, before glaring back at its attacker. A huge hairy arm scythed out, quick as a flash, arcing across the room to tear Drew's chest. Blood flew from a trio of razor-sharp cuts as Drew collapsed against his mother, the sword tumbling from his grasp with a clatter onto the floorboards.

"Drew!" called his mother, but the cry was in vain.

His body shook violently, picking an unfortunate moment to seemingly give up its battle against the fever that had haunted him. Tilly Ferran let out a scream of despair as her son tumbled from her arms to the hearth, his poor body convulsing. She snatched up the blade.

"You've killed my boy!" she cried, waves of a mother's grief exploding from her.

The monster raised a thick black claw, wagging it in a show of disagreement, before pointing it at her. Its voice gurgled, a malevolent laugh that belonged to the dark places of the world.

"For you. Came. For you . . ."

Tilly's eyes widened. She staggered forward, sword flailing wildly, but the creature powerfully swung out its arm, claws meeting her as she ran, the sword tumbling from her grasp. The impact sent her flying through the air toward the kitchen. She landed on the table with a sickening crunch, sending crockery tumbling to shatter on the tiled floor.

Twitching and shuddering, Drew could only watch as the monster sent his mother crashing into the kitchen. As it followed her, all he wanted was the strength to rise and attack the beast, bring it down, tear its throat from its body. But he was paralyzed by an unfathomable weakness that had now consumed him.

The creature slowly advanced into the kitchen, drawing out the inevitable. It stepped through the chaos, wind cloaking it with rainwater as it shambled up to the table. A huge clawed hand trailed playfully along the wood, blood dripping onto the surface.

Tilly Ferran whispered the word "no" over and over, again and again, but she

knew this was her end, knew there was nothing she could do to stop the monster. The beast shook its head, stinking drool falling onto the table beside her head.

"I thought . . . I thought I was safe from you," she mouthed, though the words found no volume. "I thought you'd never find us."

The animal snarled a grin, leaning in toward her and mouthing a single word as it opened its mouth.

"Never."

Then it closed its jaws around her throat.

Indescribable anger and fear raged through Drew's body as he watched the nightmare scene unfold. He closed his eyes, willing his limbs to move but was instead assailed by a feverish spasm.

It started in his guts, as before, but worse. Much worse. He felt his insides tearing now, not fighting to pull free from his body but twisting about and finding fresh homes. His bowels seemed to rise from the pit of his belly and shift farther back, while his lungs grew threefold, great gasps of air racing into his chest. As the lungs grew, so did the rib cage, straining at first before cracking and popping. His chest expanded as his ribs took a new shape. The pain was unbearable. He wanted to yell out loud against it, but nothing came other than a silent scream.

He gritted his teeth as he felt a pressure grip his skull like a vise. The strain increased; Drew thought his eyes might burst from his sockets. He felt his gums beginning to tear as his teeth seemed to work themselves free. His arms came up before him, but he could only stare in horror as his hands distorted, stretched, and elongated, with his nails tearing from his fingers into great long claws. Hair shot from his flesh, up his arms, from his chest, and he felt his mind threatening to slip away. His skull cracked under the pressure, and his jaw dislocated when a muzzle broke out.

His eyes hazed over, yellow and baleful, as he looked up from where he crouched. A semblance of Drew's mind remained, locked away inside, unable to fathom this horrifying transformation. He was looking on, a witness to what unfolded, as if suspended from the ceiling above. Fur bristled along his spine as, hackles raised, he watched his enemy, the intruder's back turned.

He let out a low growl, almost inaudible over the sound of the storm, but the monster heard him. It turned, slowly, blood staining its muzzle as it looked back into the sitting room. Disbelief appeared on the monster's face. It faced

the boy, or what had been the boy, warily.

Before the creature could move Drew instinctively leapt forward. He cleared the distance between them in one bound, crashing into the beast's chest, and the two tumbled to the floor in a ball of flailing claw, tooth, and fur. The monster tried to defend itself from Drew, but the beast-boy was taken by a furious hunger, a rage that was unstoppable. The monster, though clearly stronger and a seasoned killer and fighter, let slip its guard in the panic, and Drew's jaws snapped over its skull. He yanked the beast's head back in a sharp savage motion, and with a ragged tear the flesh came with it. Letting loose a screech of pain, the monster struck back, a clawed fist hitting Drew hard in the chest. The force of the blow sent the boy tumbling back, crashing into a dresser in an avalanche of crockery. His strength escaped him when he tried to get up, the jangling pain of broken ribs adding to the shock of being winded.

Looking up from where he lay in a heap, Drew saw the creature rise from the floor, towering over him again. Ragged breaths escaped from its mouth as moonlight streamed in through the kitchen window, illuminating the damage Drew had dealt it. The right-hand side of its face was missing, revealing torn sinew and cartilage slick with black blood. Bare skull caught the light, a crescent of bone that arched around the eye socket like a bright white sickle. Flesh hung in tatters from the side of its mouth, the teeth in all their glory vanishing into the shadows of its jaws.

Snarling, the monster let the remainder of its lips peel back, emitting a gurgling growl. Raising its hands, it let its claws play against one another, long black talons that clicked and clacked with anticipation. It hunched its shoulders as it took a step closer, its legs crouching, muscles flexing, as it prepared to pounce on the boy. A noise from the front of the house made the beast stop, its head twitching up, bobbing, as it listened intently. It looked back at the strange helpless creature at its feet, spitting blood at him in anger before turning and diving through the kitchen window. Sheet glass fell from the frame as the beast vanished into the stormy night.

Struggling to regain his composure, Drew fought to get to his feet, grasping a leg of the kitchen table with one clawed hand over the other until he stood tall. While he climbed he could feel his body shifting, twisting again, as his human self returned. The hairs that covered his body receded, disappearing beneath his skin, and his bones and muscles reverted back to their natural state. Last to crack back into position was his muzzle, and he felt his face slowly

return to normal as he looked down on his lifeless mother.

Laid out as if on a mortician's slab, Tilly Ferran stared up at the ceiling through dead eyes, blood spread from her throat over her chest. Unable to hold back the tears, Drew bent low, taking his mother in his arms and lifting her head until they were cheek to cheek. Tears streamed down his face as he sobbed in silence.

When Mack Ferran stepped through his house a short time later, it took him only a moment to register what had happened. Turning the corner of the upturned living room he looked through the archway into the kitchen. His wife of twenty years, the only true love he had ever known, lay sprawled on the table. His son stood hunched over her, her head in his hands, limp as a rag doll. She was dead, her throat torn ragged. The boy's jaws and hands were slick with blood, and when he looked up to face his father he had a wild, animal look that cried of madness and murder.

Mack's eyes glanced to the Wolfshead blade on the floor. Crouching slowly he let his right hand slip around the hilt, his fingers feeling their way before clenching into an all too familiar grip. All the while he fought back his fury, keeping his composure. He straightened as Trent dashed into the house, skidding to a halt behind his back.

"Put her down," said the old soldier, raising the sword out before him, the blade motionless as the wind and rain still whipped through the ransacked house.

Drew trembled, his head shaking, uncomprehending. Why was his father holding the sword to him?

"Father . . ." he gasped. His voice came out low and bestial, struggling to escape through his still-twisted throat. His face twitched and spasmed as his dislocated jaw grated back into place.

"Put. Her. Down." His father stepped closer, two, three steps.

Drew looked from his father to his mother, trying to comprehend his father's actions. Surely he couldn't think that Drew was responsible for this? Tears streaked down his face. His eyes darted toward Trent, his brother's face a mixture of fear and confusion at the scene before him. "But Father . . ." Drew said, bloodstained lips trembling.

"Stop saying that," the older man screamed, his sword beginning to quiver in

his hand now as he struggled with his rage.

Drew wanted to be sick, wanted to collapse. What should he do? He tenderly released his grip and laid his mother's head back on to the table from the cradle of his arms. "An animal . . ." he started to say, but could not complete the sentence.

His father leapt forward, covering the distance in a swift bound, sword scything through the air with deadly accuracy. The sword tore into Drew's shoulder blade, cutting deep and fast. Wailing, the boy stumbled back, scrabbling barefoot over broken glass as his father now stood before him and his mother. Trent watched the drama unfold from the archway into the living room, jaw slack as the horror played out.

"You're no son of mine," his father spat, eyes red with tears as he snarled and choked on his words. "Monster!" he screamed as he lunged forward once more.

Drew raised his hands in a vain attempt at defense, but the sword flew straight to his belly, sliding in and through his stomach, right up to the hilt. Father and son were face to face, eyeball to eyeball. Drew's eyes blinked in disbelief as his father's eyes narrowed, his grisly job done. He released his hand from the sword hilt and let his son stumble backward into the cold shadows of the kitchen.

Drew's fingers reached for the handle that sat flush to his stomach, stained dark with blood. He felt the tip of the blade scrape the brickwork behind him from where it extended almost three feet from his back. His fingertips played over the decorative pommel, a steel Wolfshead glaring up at him in an emotionless stare.

Mack stepped back to his wife, taking her still-warm hand in his own before dropping to his knees. It had come to this. This boy whom he had raised, this monster, taking the life of the most precious thing in his world. In his worst nightmares he'd never dreamed of this moment. The boy was an aberration, a monstrosity. Justice had been swift, but he could never forgive himself for allowing this to happen. He looked at his wife, her ivory skin coated crimson with her own blood. They had known, and still they had been unable to stop it.

Trent stepped forward and patted his father's shoulder, just once initially and then repeatedly, more insistent. At first Mack thought they were pats of consolation, of shared grief, but he quickly realized as the pats became frantic tugs that the boy wanted his attention. He looked up.

Trent stared wide-eyed across the kitchen, his hand stretched out and a trembling finger pointing toward his brother, who stood silhouetted by the shattered kitchen window. Still stood. The wind whipped around him as he teetered, bloodied, blade firmly lodged through his midriff.

Mack rose, knowing what had to be done. How could he have forgotten? All those years in the king's service and his mind had slipped. He turned to his son as Drew looked on, speechless and stunned.

"Boy, go fetch me the poker," he said. Trent simply stared at his brother, who by all rights should have been dead but stood wobbling on his legs like a newborn lamb. His father grabbed him by the coat, shaking him. "The poker from the fire, boy. Fetch it. And be quick about it!"

Drew watched his brother dart into the living room. The whole thing was surreal, all of the night's events escaping explanation, a twisted dream. The beast, his mother, the transformation that had taken him. His own father had run him through with a sword. Surprisingly the pain from the sword seemed diminished somewhat, dull compared to the bone-breaking injuries the monster had dealt him. He should have been lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood. Yet somehow he still lived, the Wolfshead blade slicing him like a stuck pig, and now his father wanted the old poker from the fireplace. Drew used to play with that poker as a boy, fascinated by the fancy metalwork that ran the length of it up to the now-banned silver handle.

But this wasn't a dream. Drew fought the nausea that welled up inside him. His father had attempted to kill him once already tonight and looked determined to try again. The next time he was bound to succeed. Drew's decision was made.

He clambered up onto the window frame before looking back just the once. His father stood there, obscuring his mother from his view.

"Hurry, boy!" yelled Mack Ferran as Trent snatched up the poker from the cluttered chaos of the living room.

Drew hovered on the glass-peppered windowsill, half-naked in tattered clothing that flapped in the wind. His eyes glinted as his father stared at him with an unflinching gaze.

"Give it to me," Mack called as Trent stumbled through the broken furniture and thrust the poker toward him. He grabbed it by the pointed end, raising the silver pommel over his head before turning back to the boy who used to be his son. Drew had killed now, would kill again no doubt. He had a taste for blood.

But it was too late. The window was empty, now simply framing the rain that lashed in. Mack Ferran slowly lowered the poker and shoved it through a loop of leather on his belt. His other hand settled onto the hunting horn on his hip, palm closing over the cool ivory as he crossed over to the window. He peered through the rain that flooded the muddy yard outside. Beyond, in the black night sky, the moon stared down, full and white.

The boy was gone.