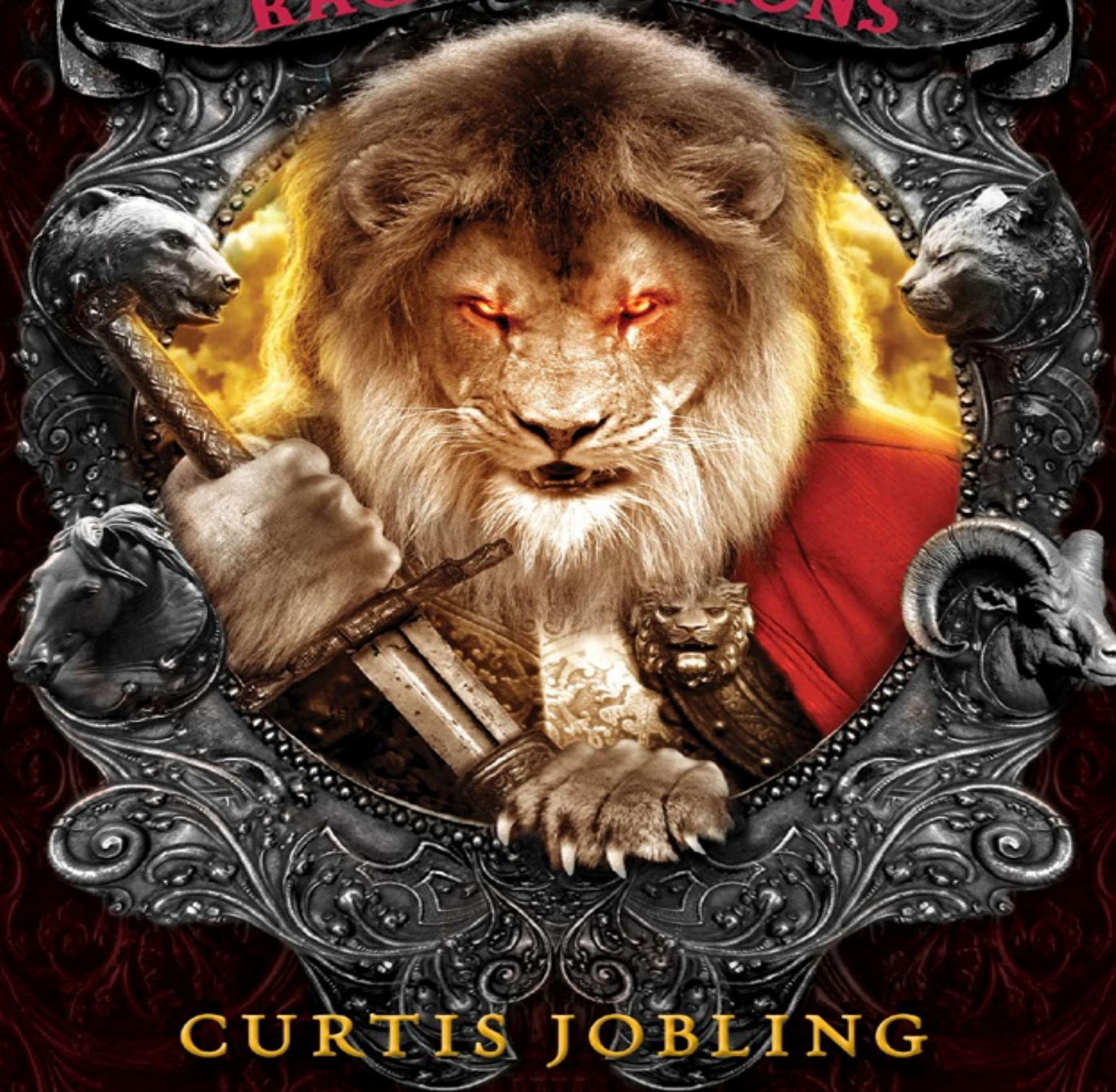


Wereworld

RAGE OF LIONS



CURTIS JOBLING

Wereworld



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BOOK 2

CURTIS JOBLING



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VIKING

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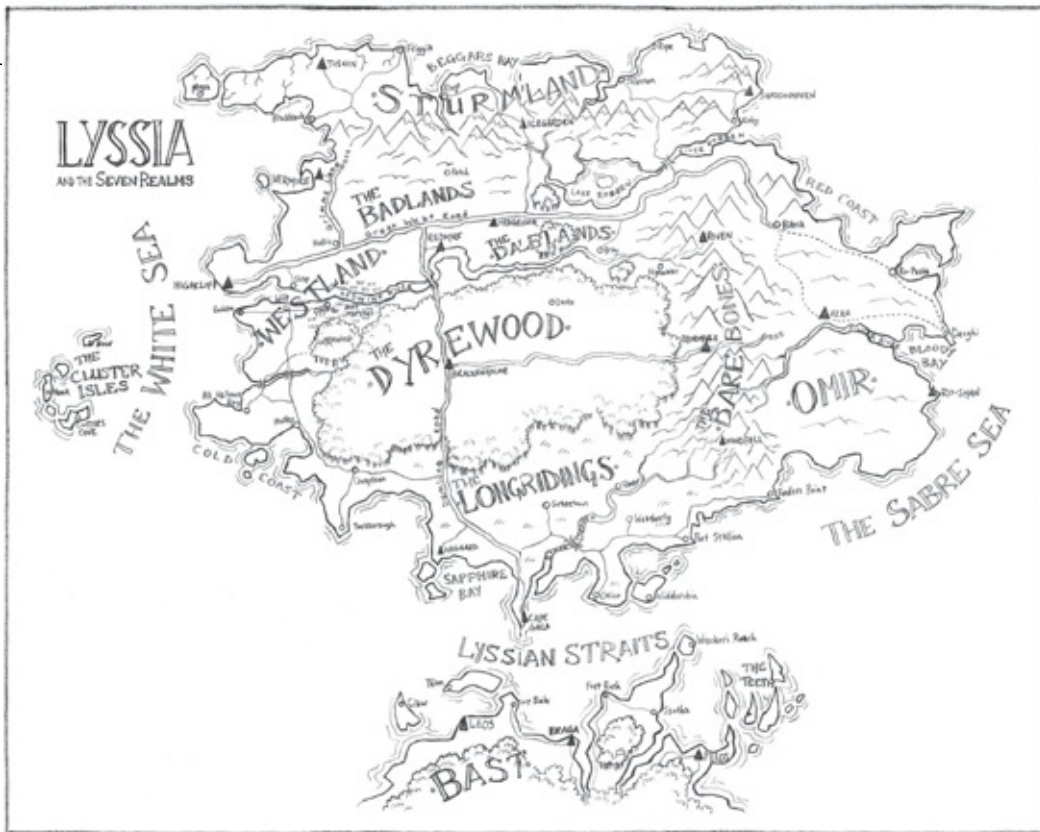
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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*For Mark and Karen, my brother and twin;
it's always about the siblings.*



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PROLOGUE

OUTRIDER

AS THE BELLS of Brenn's temple rang out, the young man rose from his chair and looked out over the Tall Quarter of the city of Highcliff. From his lofty vantage point he might have seen all of Westland's capital sprawling out before him, but for the dark clouds that filled the night sky. The moon was obscured, just as they'd predicted. The third chime that marked the hour was his signal to go. Picking up his backpack from the foot of his bed, he checked it over once more. A thin bedroll was stowed in the bottom. Reaching a hand into the folds of material, he felt around, his fingertips searching until they connected with the hard edge of the scroll case. Content, he removed his hand, patted the bedroll down, and strapped the pack tightly shut.

He double-checked his weapon belt once more, tugging the buckle tight and shifting his scabbard around his left hip. The sword hilt and pommel, wrapped in dirty cloth, disappeared into the dark recesses of his cloak as he hefted the backpack over his shoulders. Stepping up to the window, he deftly lifted the latch before swinging it out. Cool night air rolled in, the smell of the sea riding on the wind up from the Low Quarter. The streets were empty, although those avenues closer to Highcliff Keep glittered with torchlight. The encampment of military tents surrounding the castle effectively cordoned it off from the rest of the city under the watchful eye of Lord Bergan and his allies. The man glanced down—two floors below, the creaking wooden sign of the Halfway House inn swung to and fro in the breeze. If he were to slip it would be a swift plummet to the cobbles four stories down and doubtless death.

The man reached up over his head and took a firm grip on the guttering. Turning his back to the street, he stood on the window ledge before hauling himself up to the roof. A dozen buildings separated him from the stables, with a handful of alleys and treacherous drops added for good measure. He set off, staying low and hugging the shadows, up one slope and skidding down the next, each of his steps threatening to dislodge a shingle and send it crashing to the cobbles. Guards had patrolled the streets every evening since the uprising, ensuring the curfew was maintained and nobody but the military was out after dark. As he approached a gap in the rooftops, he didn't slow to look down—if he had he might have had second thoughts. Instead he flung himself across the gap, landing with as much grace as his frantic heart allowed.

On only one occasion did he see any of the City Watch, but worse luck, it was on the street corner nearest the stable block. At such a late hour they were quite relaxed, chatting as they walked the quieter avenues of the Tall Quarter. According to the Lord Protector, the curfew was simply a precaution in case hostilities recommenced. It was a good way for the allies' men to keep their attention focused on the deposed King Leopold the Lion without the distractions that the daytime brought. There was nothing for them to fear at their backs, and consequently the farther one moved away from the center of the city, the slacker security became. Four weeks of relative inactivity since the uprising had led the Lord Protector's men to think that the battle was won. Nevertheless, the gate remained locked through the night, while by day they were heavily manned. Rumor had it that the guards had arrested at least thirty of the Lionguard who had tried to slip away from the city in the crowds, and they now languished in the cells of Traitors' House, awaiting trial.

The young man watched as the soldiers moved on. He counted thirty breaths before trusting his life to the rusty drainpipe that snaked its way down to the street below. Dropping the last few feet, he ducked back into the shadows, glancing up and down the street to make sure nobody was about. The stables backed onto Hammergate, one of the smallest entrances into Highcliff, traditionally used by the wealthier merchants who wanted to avoid the congested Mucklegate and Kingsgate. It cost a few bronze more to enter Highcliff via Hammergate, and consequently many of the townhouses in the Tailor Quarter were home to Westland's most successful citizens. The man looked at the stables, lips dry with anticipation. There was bound to be a good horse or two to choose from in there.

Having scouted Hammergate thoroughly over the past two days, he knew exactly what to expect here. Indeed, he'd chanced coming out over the rooftops the previous night to see what the numbers were like. Two soldiers manned the gate after dark, and they'd remained in their guardhouse for most of this time, stepping out only once, to speak with their colleagues as they passed on patrol. The stable block was right beside the gate, making a direct exit relatively simple. If the gate was open. If...

Scampering across the street, the man hit the shadows on the opposite side, on the corner of the stable block that was hidden from the guardhouse. He glanced around the corner. Low voices and laughter could be heard from behind the glowing window of the guardhouse. Bending low once more, he slipped round the corner and up to the gate. It was pitch black in the gate alcove, but he could just make out the wooden beam that held the gate shut. Taking hold of it he lifted it from its moorings and slid it back into the wall, until one of the gates was free. He held his breath all the while, heart thundering as he listened for the guards, but their easy banter continued unabated. He eased the left-hand gate forward and it swung smoothly on its hinges making a gap that was wide enough for him and a horse to get through.

Backing away, the young man disappeared into the stable block. Stalls lined the walls on either side, the gentle sounds of horses moving lightly in their sleep emanating from each of them. He looked quickly into the stalls as he passed, left and right, trying to find a likely candidate. Halfway down the corridor he did a double take—there was a chestnut brown thoroughbred, the kind favored by the cavalry. Stabled up here, it no doubt belonged to a merchant's courier. The decision was too easy.

Lifting the latch, he slipped inside. The horse started at the stranger's presence. He stepped up and smoothed his hands over the animal's neck and back, quickly putting it at ease.

"Good girl," he whispered, bringing his face around to hers and blowing on her nose. She seemed lively, which would be good. It had been so long since he'd worked with a horse that he found himself smiling. He reached in front and began to untether her from a stone ring that held her close to the wall. As he was distracted, he didn't notice the rising glow of lamplight behind him.

"Who are you?"

He turned quickly, but it was too late to hide. An old man stood in the doorway, a hooded lantern held up so he could better see the intruder.

"I'm Goodman Wake's courier," he said, thinking quickly. He squinted into the light, unable to fully make out the old man's features. "Just come to check on my horse."

"Never heard of no Goodman Wake, and I'm sure as houses that ain't your mare." The stable hand stepped closer, moving the lantern forward. "You know there's a curfew on, don't you, boy?"

There was no time for games. He moved quickly, instinctively. Reaching into his cloak, he withdrew his sword, and the stable hand staggered backward. The old man swung the lantern defensively, and the metal casing caught on the sword's swaddled pommel, tearing free the material that covered it. As the cloth fluttered to the ground there was no mistaking the Lionshead that shone in the lantern light, golden and roaring. The old man opened his mouth to cry out and the attacker moved fast, swinging the sword around and bashing him across the temple with the pommel. A ragged gash appeared across his brow as he tumbled to the ground.

The young man had to work fast. He snatched down a saddle and threw it over the horse's back, hastily tightening the girth.

"Sorry," he said to the prone stable hand as he stepped over him, the horse following and doing likewise. Once out of the stall he hauled himself up into the saddle with ease.

"Stop him!" cried the old man, recovering his wits enough to see what was happening. "Thief!"

The young horseman needed no more prompting. He kicked the horse's flanks, causing it to rear up before charging for the stable doors. He burst out into the street to find the soldiers out of their guardhouse and standing in his way, fully at attention, their halberds raised before them.

"Halt!"

Beyond them he could see the open gate, freedom so tantalizingly close. To be stopped now, so near to escape—he grimaced, turning the horse and batting back the halberds with his Lionshead blade. He could hear the sound of more guards running now as they charged down the street to their comrades' aid.

"Halt, I said," repeated the soldier. "In the name of the Wolf!"

That was the spur the rider needed. With another hard kick he urged his mount forward, charging the guards, roaring, wild. They looked terrified, wavering momentarily as the madman rushed them. A moment was all he needed. He swung the sword furiously, slashing down on his right side and knocking the halberd from one guard's hands before kicking out to the left and connecting with the second soldier's head. In a flash he was between them, past them, and hurtling through Hammergate.

The guards didn't give chase. The man was just another coward who had served the Lion, desperate to get away from the Lord Protector's justice. They'd caught more than their fair share on the gates—so what if this one got away? They watched him disappear into the darkness, the sound of hoofbeats fading, before eventually closing the gate.

They would forever remain oblivious to the importance of his mission.

PART I

THE WOLF'S COUNCIL



THE LORD PROTECTOR

DUKE BERGAN POUNDED up the spiral steps of Traitors' House, eager to reach the top. He hated stairs, especially the stone variety. They always reminded him that he wasn't back in his beloved Brackenholme. Yes, there were steps there, but they were few and far between. The Bearlord's Hall stood high within the branches of one of the five Great Trees that marked the woodland city as one of the most marvelous throughout the Seven Realms. A series of strong wicker cages winched visitors skywards to bring them to the hall of the Werebear, three hundred feet high in the boughs of the Great Oak. It was said that these trees were the ancient mothers of all of Lyssia's trees, a legend that Bergan had no trouble believing.

Homesickness he could handle, but the daily drudge of climbing up and down the stairways of Traitors' House was taking it out of him. If the Lion hadn't locked himself away within Highcliff Keep he'd have no need to go through this ritual. With no courtroom, he and the Wolf's Council had been left with no option but to procure the old tower, with its unfortunate name. Traitors' House had started life as a garrison tower and jail many years ago and, though dwarfed by Highcliff Keep, was still imposing alongside any other structure in the city. In the past few decades its sole purpose had been a prison, home to thieves, pickpockets, and the brave but foolish idealists who dared speak up against the king's rule. While the cells beneath the old white stone tower still contained a great many miscreants, once Bergan had assumed the role of Lord Protector he'd quickly set about relieving as many political prisoners as he could, although the captured officers of the Lionguard remained behind bars. If they were enemies of the Lion they were usually friends of the Bear.

Lyssia had changed dramatically since the Werelion King Leopold had been overthrown. Many lesser Werelords had been present at the aborted wedding of Leopold's son, Prince Lucas, to the Werefox Lady Gretchen. They now supported Duke Bergan and his allies, Manfred and Mikkel, the Stags of the Barebones. All were united in their support of Drew Ferran, the boy who had arrived out of nowhere, having grown up as a human and knowing nothing of his heritage as last in the line of Werewolves and rightful king of Westland. The boy was still raw, looking like he might run at the first opportunity, and it was taking all the Wolf's Council's diplomacy and knowledge to ease him into his role as heir to the throne. He wasn't just coming to terms with being the future king; he'd only recently discovered he was a therianthrope, a werecreature like all the nobles of Lyssia. It was hard to tell what scared the boy more.

As Bergan finally reached the top, the staircase opened onto a stone landing before a heavy wooden door. A soldier stood on either side, loyal survivors of Wergar's old Wolfguard. They wore newly fashioned tabards that bore the Wolfshead, silver on a field of black, a reassuringly familiar sight to the old duke. He couldn't help but think back to the old campaigns he'd fought alongside Wergar, and the scrapes the two had got into. The boy, Drew, was a very different character from his father.

Wergar, driven and headstrong, had been predictable and stubborn, whereas Drew was more thoughtful and considerate, wiser than his years. If he'd been raised in the Court of Highcliff by his birth parents, Bergan had no doubt that he'd have been the double of his father. But Drew had been raised by a farming family on the Cold Coast. His adoptive father had been in the old Wolfguard, so

the boy had been schooled from an early age with a sword, something most peasants never experienced. The mother had been a maid to Queen Amelie, pouring love and kindness into the boy. Those very human values had forged him into a unique Werelord—one who could touch the hearts and minds of the common man as well as his fellow therianthropes. Bergan was confident that one day Drew would make a great king.

The guards opened the door for the Bearlord, holding it wide as he entered the Wolf's Council Chamber.

"What kept you?" asked Earl Mikkell, Lord of Highwater and younger brother of Manfred. The Werestag was standing over a round table in the center of the council chamber, leafing through reams of documents. At his shoulder stood Hector, the young Boarlord and heir to the seat of Redmire. Hector held a slate, attached to which was a scroll. A quill scribbled away as he took notes on the business of the day. Hector was the youngest member of the Wolf's Council. His early years in the Lion's Court as an apprentice magister had equipped him with enough knowledge of the Seven Realms to make him invaluable as the Wolf's Council tried to rebuild old alliances within the scattered and fractured realms. Admittedly, he'd been under the tutelage of the vile Wererat Vankaskan, Leopold's inquisitor, whose own take on magistracy had included the practicing of the outlawed dark arts. It was a relief to Bergan that Hector had come through the other side of his apprenticeship having dodged the old magicks, concentrating instead on healing and medicine craft. Now a fully fledged magister in Drew's service, he was an integral part of the Wolf's Council.

"More pardons to hear," grumbled the Bearlord, striding up to the table and pouring himself a goblet of water. He gulped it down.

"Thirsty work, those stairs, aren't they?"

Bergan turned toward the voice, looking at an open window. Count Vega sat on the sill, back against the stone frame as he chomped on the remainder of an apple. Left with just the core in his hand, he smacked his lips before tossing it out the window. He smiled brightly, showing rows of pristine white teeth, a reminder of the Sharklord's bestial nature.

"Nice to see you've risen from your pit, Vega," said the Bearlord, turning back to the table. The count made no attempt to join the others, instead relaxing where he sat and looking out over Highcliff.

"If you've nothing for me to do, I see no reason to rise before noon, Bergan."

"Count Vega," said Mikkell, his tone polite but forced. "You've been invited to attend every meeting of the council since it was formed a month ago. I can count on one hand the number you've attended. Surely you can appreciate that some of us might be slightly irritated by that fact?"

"But as the Wolf's sea marshal—"

"*Acting* sea marshal," corrected Bergan gruffly.

"As the Wolf's sea marshal," continued Vega, pointedly, "I find that land problems are of little importance to my field of governance. Reviewing the arguments of bickering farmers and market stallholders would be a waste of my attention. No, I'm happy to delegate my vote—just add my name to yours, however you choose to go. You chaps seem to know what you're doing."

Bergan snarled and punched a fist into the table, causing them all to jump. Hector stared in shock at the growing fist, its knuckles crunching against one another as it began to transform into a paw. Bergan's shoulders expanded, the Bearlord's muscles swelling beneath his cloak. His face darkened, ruddy features shifting to a swarthier brown flesh, his teeth now shining from within his beard, sharp and white.

"You dare to mock me, Shark?"

Vega's transformation was swift and measured, the Sharklord welcoming the monster within. His torso rippled beneath his white shirt, chest ready to tear free, while his hands and fingers grayed over sharp and deadly. Vega's mouth widened, revealing his own set of terrible teeth, as he faced the

enraged Bearlord. His eyes blinked, black as the night.

“My lords,” gasped Hector as the two partly changed therians faced one another. Even the Staglord had begun to change, readying himself to leap between the two Werelords if need be. The atmosphere was broken when the door swung open and Lord Broghan burst into the room.

“Father?” he cried, his voice thick with concern at the sight of the two ready for battle. Bergan turned, distracted by his son. He breathed hard, panting, as he reined the beast in, Vega doing likewise. The two Werelords looked warily at one another as their features returned to normal.

“Is everything all right?” asked the young Bearlord. “Have I interrupted something?”

“Everything is fine,” said Bergan, drawing his glare away from Vega to embrace his son. The Sharklord sat down again on the windowsill.

“It’s good to see you, Father.”

“And you, son,” replied Bergan, clapping his back. “Happy hunting?”

Broghan quickly shook hands with Mikkell and Hector and threw a cursory nod toward Vega.

“Not exactly,” said the young Bearlord. “We caught a couple of the Lion’s men down at the harbor trying to hire a ship, but still no sign of the prince.”

Bergan ground his teeth. There had been a number of sightings of Prince Lucas since the siege began, too many to be mistaken identities. The council had given Broghan the task of tracking him down.

“Do you think he’s still here?” asked Mikkell.

“It’s a week since he was last sighted,” said Bergan. “Perhaps he’s out of the city by now?”

“He’s had any number of opportunities to leave,” said Broghan. “We can have guards on the gates and docks every day and night, but the occasional deserter, like the one the other week, will get through.”

“I only hope the occasional ones don’t include Leopold’s boy,” growled Bergan. “He’s worth too much to us. If he is out here and not hiding in the keep with his father, he could be just the bargaining tool we need to end this siege. I know Leopold adores his son more than anything else in the Seven Realms. He’s spoiled that child throughout his life, granting his every desire—if we could get our hands on him today, we’d have Leopold out of the keep and in our control by tonight.”

“Speaking of Lucas’s every desire,” said Mikkell. “What are we going to do about Gretchen?”

Duke Bergan sighed and scratched his beard. The Werefox was the most eligible young woman in Lyssia, months away from taking her family seat of Hedgemoor, one of the wealthiest of the old Werelord houses. While she awaited coronation on her fifteenth birthday, Hedgemoor remained under the stewardship of her father’s ministers. Earl Gaston, her late father, had traded widely across the Seven Realms, building a vast fortune that had funded many of the Wolf’s—and the Lion’s—campaigns. Gretchen stood to inherit this fortune, and there were many who suspected that Leopold had murdered Gaston in order to hasten Gretchen’s inheritance and his son’s subsequent marriage to the girl.

Gretchen was staying with Bergan in Traitors’ House, widely considered the safest place for her, but he wasn’t entirely happy about the situation, and for two very good reasons.

“You know my feelings, Mikkell. I’m fond of the girl—we all are—but Highcliff isn’t a safe place for her, not as long as this siege continues. I’d be happier knowing that she was far from the walls of this city. Furthermore, her presence still acts as a distraction to Drew.”

Broghan and Mikkell nodded in agreement, while Hector remained silent.

“For Sosha’s sake,” said Vega from the window. “Let them have their fun. They’re only young once.”

Bergan shook his head, dismissing him. “A feckless, misspent youth may not have done you much harm, Vega, but that’s no way to raise the future monarch. He should be listening to his tutors, myself

and Manfred. Instead he's mooning after the girl like a lovesick pup. No, we need to step in and end this now."

"They may well be fond of one another," agreed Broghan. "But there's a time and place for courtship, and this is neither."

Bergan noticed Hector raise a hand tentatively.

"Say your piece, lad. There's no need to be shy—you're among equals now. What's on your mind?"

"I just wanted to say—" Hector cleared his throat with a cough. Bergan had noticed that the young Boarlord had a habit of gripping his left hand in his right when anxious, massaging the palm with his thumb. "It's worth mentioning that strictly speaking Lady Gretchen is still betrothed to Prince Lucas Working for Vankaskan for the last five years, I got to know the prince. I've seen his anger firsthand. He dropped his head, shame weighing heavy on him. "I've been on the receiving end of his beatings and witnessed his tantrums. I know what fires his passion. Gretchen fires it most of all."

The men all considered this silently for a moment. Finally Bergan clapped his hands together.

"Then it's decided. We'll send her away, somewhere safe. Perhaps Hedgemoor—get her used to taking her responsibilities to her people seriously. It'd be good for the girl. Plus she'd be surrounded by her own people there."

"Once this business with the Lion and his cronies is dealt with, we can think about the future," added Mikkel. "If Lady Gretchen and Drew are destined to be together, time will tell, but there's no call for haste in this matter."

"Wise words, Staglord," said Vega, getting down from the windowsill and stretching. "Now, if you've no more need of me today, there's a game of bones with my name on it in the Robber's Arms."

Vega bowed elaborately before the Wolf's Council and walked to the door, waving over his shoulder dismissively. "Happy hunting, as they say."

And with that, he was gone.

"Dear Brenn!" muttered Mikkel, shaking his head. "Remind me again why he's on this council? I've not seen him do an honest day's work since the siege began."

"He has his uses," sighed Bergan. "Can he be trusted? I don't know. But he was there when we needed him. He stood up against Leopold on the scaffold with us, so he's earned the right to call himself a member of the council. To the untrained eye his actions look suspiciously like those of a booze-ridden gambler. But what do I know?"

The others all burst into laughter. The atmosphere brightened, and they settled back to business.

"Has my daughter returned yet?" asked Bergan.

"No, and she's overdue," replied Broghan, lips drawn tight.

Bergan couldn't hold back a low growl. Lady Whitley was proving a handful. He'd tried sending her back to Brackenholme on numerous occasions since the siege had begun, but she'd dodged and sidestepped at every turn. Instead of following her father's requests to return home, she'd managed to go out with all sorts of military patrols as a scout, fully trained or not.

"Whose command is she under? Which patrol?"

"Father," said Broghan calmly, "try not to worry. She scouts for the army along Grimm's Lane to the north. Since the Lion was unseated there's been unrest in the rat city of Vermire. If any conflict occurs she'll be far from it, I assure you: our trusted Captain Harker is in command."

Bergan grumbled under his breath. "I worry. I cannot help it. She's my daughter for Brenn's sake. I couldn't forgive myself if anything were to happen to her."

Broghan nodded, keenly aware of how his father felt about Whitley.

"Hector," continued the Bearlord, "have we had any word back from our more distant lords and ladies?"

One of the first actions of the Wolf's Council had been to send word to every corner of Lyssia of the

Lion's overthrow. Tradition dictated that if a new monarch took the throne, each reigning Werelord was to be consulted. A majority decision was enough to ensure the next step: coronation.

"Not as many as we'd hoped, my lord," replied the young Boar. He unrolled a large map on the table, using the goblets and decanter of water to weigh down each corner. His stubby fingers pointed out each of the Seven Realms. "Nothing from Sturmland or the Longridings; the only approval from the Barebones is obviously that of Stormdale. And no word from Omir, but that could be expected."

"I can't speak for the other lords of the Barebones," added Mikkel. "But perhaps if I returned home I might be able to bring our neighbors into line. This could be just the business to thaw our relations with the Crows of Riven."

"That seems like a sound idea," said the Bearlord.

He'd known all along that they would have a struggle to persuade other Werelords to show their allegiance to a new king, especially one whose lineage could be thrown into question. Detractors were already saying that Drew was the illegitimate son of Wergar and shouldn't be allowed near the throne. Regardless of the support the young Wolf had experienced in Westland it was going to be tough to persuade those farther afield to bow to his blade. Bergan went on.

"Sturmland I hoped might have sent word by now. Perhaps my cousin Henrik fancies keeping his horde of gems to himself now the Lion is dethroned."

"The Longridings is curious; Duke Lorimer, the Horselord, used to be a staunch ally of Wergar's. And Omir? That's a different beast altogether. The Lion always wanted obedience from King Faisal but never got it. The Jackal wouldn't swear fealty to the Catlord, but perhaps he can find common ground with a fellow canine. If we could secure Omir then the rest of Lyssia would surely follow suit."

"It may not be as easy as that," said Mikkel. "Rumor has it that there is civil war in Omir. Lord Canan and his Doglords grow in strength and number north of the Silver River, and with Lady Hayfa holding the lands to the south, Faisal is surrounded by enemies who want his city, his throne, and his crown."

Bergan turned to his son. "We'll send more messengers: one each to Faisal in Azra, Lorimer in Cape Gala, and Henrik in Icegarden. I'll handwrite the scroll myself and remind them how close we are to a prosperous new future if we unite together behind Drew."

He smiled, confident. The Bearlord could be very persuasive when he put his mind to it, and his mind was set.

"Talking of our future king, where is he?" said Broghan.

"Still with my brother at Buck House, enjoying his morning drills," answered Mikkel.

"Working him hard?" said Bergan.

Earl Mikkel shrugged. "No harder than my father worked us. He has the makings of as great a warrior as Wergar, but he needs guidance. What did my father say? *Mastery of the blade and the beast.*"

"In which case, he's in very capable hands."

Affording Drew privacy while he was schooled, Buck House was the perfect home for the young Werewolf until they managed to oust the Lion from his stony bolt-hole. The lords of Stormdale traditionally trained many of Lyssia's Werelords. The Werestags were well known for their peaceful nature until enraged, but also for their wisdom and patience: ferocious in battle, considerate in court.

"Then there's just the unpleasant business of revealing our plans to Lady Gretchen," sighed Bergan. Despite her young age, Gretchen was formidable, quick to anger.

"Hector," he said, and the Boarlord jumped. Bergan laughed. "Don't worry, lad, I'm not going to land this on you. I'd like you to go to Drew at Buck House. If he's still training then Gretchen is likely close by. Can you ask her to make her way back to Traitors' House? Tell her it's urgent Wolf's Council business. I'll deliver the news to her when she arrives. Broghan, prepare some of your best

men—five branches should do it.”

~~“Thirty of Brackenholme’s best men,” agreed Broghan. The branch system of the Dyrewood created a brotherhood among the soldiers. These small teams—five men and one captain—were as close as family.~~

The Werelords shook hands as the Wolf’s Council was adjourned until the next day. Bergan followed Hector to the door, handing the Boarlord his red cloak, which bore the crest of Redmire.

“Your father would be proud of you, lad. Your actions, your aid, your wits—they’ve been invaluable since the Lion was defeated. I’m glad Drew can call you his friend. You’ve been good for each other.”

Hector smiled shyly as the warm words washed over him. “I know I was soft before I met Drew,” he said, keeping his voice low and out of earshot of the others. “But he’s toughened me up. I’ve discovered my backbone; I just need to make sure I don’t misplace it again!”

Bergan chortled. “Don’t underestimate the influence you’ve had on him, Hector,” he said, wagging a big forefinger. “Drew has entered a new world, and he’d have been lost without you by his side. You’re the compass that’s kept him going straight as an arrow.”

Hector bowed briefly before departing down the monstrous staircase. Duke Bergan watched him go.

THE BLADE AND THE BEAST

“BACK ON YOUR FEET,” barked Duke Manfred, towering over the fallen youth, cold steel in hand. Drew squinted up at him, sweat pooling in the corners of each eye. He wiped a forearm across his face, clearing his vision and catching his breath. The Staglord had the sun at his back, casting his whole frame into silhouette and making the already tall man even more imposing. Drew could see that the Werelord was breathing heavily, but he was far from spent. Unlike Drew. He spat on the ground, bloody spittle rolling in the dry dirt. His entire body ached, pushed to the point of exhaustion. The sword lay at the feet of the duke, just out of reach. Manfred kicked it across to him.

“I said on your feet.”

Drew picked up the blunt sword and used it as a crutch to haul himself upright once more. Days at Buck House were full for Drew—combat was just a small part of it. Therian races, Lyssian geography, etiquette; the Staglord’s lessons were all-encompassing. Manfred had taken special care to school Drew in controlling his lycanthropy, encouraging Drew to explore every facet of the Wolf.

Drew rose, weighing the training sword in his right hand as he gathered his senses. His left hand rested at his hip, clenched into a fist. The stump where his little finger used to be still ached, a constant reminder of his battle with Vanmorten, the Wererat, and that there were limits to the therianthropic healing unique to Werelords. The heat of the midmorning sun only compounded Drew’s weariness. He’d long ago ditched his shirt and now stood in nothing but his leather breeches. Manfred, in comparison, remained fully clothed, his long gray cloak thrown back off his shoulder. Drew was also painfully aware of the audience watching from the balcony of the mansion: Lady Gretchen and her ladies-in-waiting, keen to see the future king showing off his fencing talents. What they were actually seeing, to Drew’s dismay, was a healthy young man failing to measure up to a venerable old Werelord.

“One more round, Drew, and you may take water.”

Duke Manfred’s close aide and cousin, Magister Kohl, stood nearby under the shade of a fig tree, a jug of water at his feet. Drew glanced at the old man, who reached a hand down to pat the jug’s rim.

Drew readied himself, pumping life into his legs as he rocked on his heels. He watched Manfred intently, deciding whether his next move would provoke delight or dismay. He no longer cared—he’d spent the past two hours being knocked around the courtyard by the Stag; by fair means or foul he wanted to win at least one bout with the old duke.

He paced to his left, drawing Manfred into following. The Werestag’s steps seemed relaxed, but every move Manfred made was considered and deliberate. Drew kept moving, circling so that behind him stood the mansion and balcony. And the sun.

Manfred squinted. No amount of training allowed a man to stare wide-eyed into the sun. Drew flung his left hand forward.

The dirt in his clenched fist erupted from his hand, flying fast into the Staglord’s face. Manfred staggered back, blinded by the cloud of dust. It was Drew’s turn to grin now. He even allowed himself a quick glance over his shoulder at the onlookers. Gretchen was frowning in disapproval.

Drew brought his sword back and readied himself to lunge at the stricken Werelord. He stepped

forward, his foot landing in the dirt as he thrust the blunt blade forward. But Manfred instinctively moved left and the sword flew past him. Drew, unbalanced, stumbled and Manfred swept his right leg around in a fluid motion, connecting with Drew's shins and sending him flying. The young Wolf landed spread-eagle on the floor, his face full of dirt, the air escaping his lungs. He didn't have time to recover, feeling a hand clasp him by the shoulder and spin him onto his back. Manfred landed on him, his knees pinning the youth to the ground as he bucked beneath. The Werestag's hand shot out, grabbing Drew by the throat and holding him still. Drew stopped struggling, looking up at the Staglord as he straddled him. His eyes were still closed, blinded by the dirt flung into them.

"A most ungracious stunt to pull on his lordship," sputtered Kohl, rushing forward and shaking his head furiously. "There are rules, young man—rules to fencing, rules to dueling. That was... unlawful!"

Manfred raised a hand, laughing, waving Kohl away with a smile. "The boy was acting just as I did. Instinct. Survival. Two sides of the same coin. His instincts told him to improvise."

He released his grip on Drew's throat, allowing him to breathe in deeply. The duke rubbed the dirt from his eyes.

"Well done, Drew. Taught an old Stag a trick there. Just remember, though"—he pointed to his eye—"sight isn't the only sense one depends on in battle." He gripped the lobe of his ear and wagged it. "You hear me?"

Manfred got up and held his hand down to Drew. Face crimson with a mixture of shame and embarrassment, Drew took it, and Manfred hauled him to his feet.

"Let's see about having that drink now, eh?"

Magister Kohl, disgruntled but mindful of his liege's words, filled two wooden cups with water. Drew took one and gulped it down. Having polished off its contents, he held his cup out once again.

"Please, magister," he said, bowing his head respectfully, "another drink?"

Kohl refilled the vessel, winking at Drew. The old sage couldn't stay angry for long. Drew smiled. He'd probably pull the same trick again given half the chance. Next time, though, he wouldn't let his opponent hear him coming. As Kohl left them beneath the tree, Manfred spoke quietly.

"This morning was *not* the heat of battle. Know this, Drew—there's a time and a place for underhandedness. Let that be an end to it."

Drew knew he wasn't the farm boy from the Cold Coast anymore, picking fights and scuffling at Tuckborough market. He and Trent had learned to fight dirty there, the two brothers pitched against gangs of local boys. Drew often found himself thinking about Trent, the boy who'd grown up as his twin, wondering what had become of him. He hoped he was safe.

"I feel such pressure," sighed Drew, rubbing the back of his neck. "From the council, my friends—even the people of Highcliff." They were out there, beyond the gates. Expectations were still high, a month after the uprising. They knew he was here, behind the walls of Buck House. Each day a crowd gathered; many wanted to meet the future king, while most just wanted a glimpse of him.

"Don't be downhearted, Drew. You've made fantastic progress!"

Their conversation was interrupted when a guard appeared at the edge of the courtyard.

"Your Grace, Lord Hector is here and seeks word with you urgently."

Drew instantly brightened at the news.

"You'd better not keep him waiting, then," said Manfred.

Drew smiled. The shy Boarlord had taken a shine to Queen Amelie's lady-in-waiting Bethwyn, but had yet to pluck up the courage to say a single word to her, and Drew suspected half of Hector's visit revolved around his wanting to bump into the poor girl. Clearly, though, this one did not. While Hector's magisterial duties primarily concerned the matters of healing and history, magicks and mythology, he had a part to play in the Wolf's Council. He was at Buck House on official business.

As Manfred strode away, Drew stepped out of the shade and walked toward the edge of the courtyard. ~~The estate had been built upon the hillside, meaning the house and gardens sat on terraces.~~ From this vantage point Drew could see the harbor and the various ships that made up the merchant and military fleet of Westland.

He felt hands clasp around his face suddenly from behind, covering his eyes. He was about to struggle free when a familiar voice sounded in his ear.

“My king?” she whispered. The tension he’d felt at the possible ambush gave way to a new but familiar feeling of anxiety.

“Don’t call me that,” he said, grinning awkwardly. “I’m far from ready to claim that title.”

Gretchen removed her hands, giving him a playful shove in his back. “It won’t be long now. You’d better get used to it,” she teased.

A mischievous smile darted across her face, red hair tumbling around her perfect features. She wore a pale cream dress, embroidered with tiny crimson flowers around the sleeves and throat. Drew could feel his mouth drying and his stomach knotting. He could talk to most people readily. But not Gretchen, at least not lately. Gretchen, whom he’d got to know so well on their travels from Redmire and during their adventures in the Wyrwood. Gretchen, in whose presence he should have been relaxed.

Behind, Gretchen’s ladies-in-waiting stood in a huddle, giggling. Drew wondered what she saw in the girls; they seemed juvenile to him, children who swooned and tittered at the slightest drama.

“There’s no hurry,” Drew finally replied, resting his eyes on the city again. “Bergan can remain Lord Protector for as long as he likes. The people are happy with the Wolf’s Council, and they don’t need some farm boy from the Cold Coast messing things up.”

“You’re doing yourself a great disservice, Drew. The people of Westland love you; they want you lead them.”

The idea that the Werefox knew what the people of Lyssia wanted made Drew smile. She was a great many things—feisty, strong willed, and short tempered—but the voice of the people? He shook his head.

“How can you say that, Gretchen? Do you honestly know what the people want?”

“You think I’m the same spoiled girl you met in Redmire? People change. Just take a look at yourself.”

“I’m still just a simple country boy.”

Gretchen laughed. “There is *nothing* simple about you. You’re the future, Drew. You’re their king.”

He couldn’t get away from it, try as he might. Everywhere he turned, his destiny awaited him. All roads led to the throne. He still harbored hopes of returning to the Cold Coast, but who was he fooling?

Gretchen linked her arm through Drew’s, grasping his left hand between both of hers. He felt a shiver, his nerves jangling. Where was Kohl’s jug of water when he needed it?

Thankfully, the arrival of Hector from across the courtyard allowed them to change the subject.

“Hector,” Drew called, running over to slap him on the back. Gretchen followed.

“What brings you out of Traitors’ House, councilor?” asked Gretchen, changing the target of her teasing words. “It’s so good of you to grace us with your presence.”

Hector looked every inch the Werelord. He wore a smart brown cloak over his well-tailored city clothes, a brass clasp in the form of a charging boar fastening it round his shoulders. Against his chest Drew recognized the steel gray medallion that every member of his council wore, bearing the profile of a wolf’s head.

The Wereboar laughed, blushing at the same time. “It’s hard work, this governing. We’re left with the task of keeping people happy while some fool who is supposed to be king puts his feet up.”

Suddenly Gretchen pulled a face, looking at Drew's back, tracing a finger over a series of scars. He shivered at her touch.

"What?"

"Your wounds—I thought they'd all healed."

"I'm stuck with those ones, it appears."

Hector took a look also, and nodded. "The whip? It was studded with silver, wasn't it?"

Drew blanched, thinking about the sting of the deadly metal against his skin. He'd taken beatings and broken limbs, had even recovered from his father Mack Ferran wrongly running him through with the Wolfshead Blade, but nothing burned the flesh of a Werelord like the touch of silver. The precious metal could harm a therianthrope like nothing else: whereas the damage dealt by other weapons could heal at an accelerated rate, the injuries caused by silver were permanent ones. A clean thrust to the heart by a normal weapon might kill a Werelord, or the tooth and claw of another therian could prove fatal, but silver could make even the weakest human deadly to a Werelord. It had been outlawed for many years throughout Lyssia, but King Leopold had seen no problem in arming his men with the forbidden metal. The swords of the Lionguard were laced with the precious poison, and Drew had encountered it in his duel with the Wererat Vanmorten.

Sensing his friend's discomfort, the Boarlord changed the subject. "How is the Queen Mother?" he asked.

It had been a curious month for Drew as he'd got to know Queen Amelie, his birth mother. Her moods swung from celebration at having Drew in her life to sorrow at the loss of her other son, his half-brother Lucas. She'd spent fifteen years mourning the death of Wergar and all her children in a fire. She'd discovered that her youngest child, Willem, had survived, but she'd also had to come to terms with the fact that the man she had taken as her next husband, Leopold, was behind their deaths. Willem was the name Drew had been born to, but it felt alien to him when she said it. Which name would he be expected to use when he took the throne?

"She rests," said Drew. "I expect we'll see her this afternoon. Mornings aren't good for her."

Each evening since the joint armies of Brackenholme and Stormdale had taken the city, Leopold had appeared upon the battlements of Highcliff Keep, roaring his fury into the sky; "the rage of the Lion," Bergan called it. The sound was bloodcurdling, this nightly ritual reminding everyone for miles around who still held the crown of Westland. Those soldiers in the encampments that circled the ancient castle had witnessed the screaming rants and curses that accompanied these roars. Leopold roared for vengeance against those who had stolen his throne. Bergan and Manfred had to calm their troops' nerves and boost morale every night. After each roaring bout, Amelie inevitably had a fitful night's sleep. Mornings were when she could finally rest.

Duke Manfred and Magister Kohl appeared once more.

"Are you refreshed?" Drew asked Manfred. "I'm ready for the next round, Your Grace. This time I'll keep it clean, you have my word."

Manfred shook his head. "As it happens, Drew, our lesson will have to be curtailed. Kohl and I are to escort Lady Gretchen to Traitors' House. Apparently there is some news regarding Hedgemoor that needs relaying to her, and Duke Bergan requests her presence at the earliest opportunity. My lady?"

"Oh," said Gretchen with surprise. "A moment, while I get my cloak." She went over to her ladies-in-waiting, one of whom carried her long red hooded cloak. As they fastened it round her shoulders, the four men spoke quietly.

"This was the message you brought here from Bergan?" Drew asked Hector.

"Indeed," he replied. "There's some concern about Gretchen's safety in the city."

"A simple precaution, Hector, no?" whispered Manfred.

The Boarlord nodded. "Indeed. We think the safest place for her is back in Hedgemoor."

“Has this got something to do with the agents of Leopold still loose in the city?” asked Drew, eyeing Gretchen as she finished readying herself for the brief walk to Traitors’ House.

“That’s the bones of it,” said Kohl. “Duke Manfred and I shall take her. Hector, we all know how fiery the lady can be. Let us old fools face her wrath on your behalf.” He winked. Hector breathed a sigh of relief, nodding as Gretchen rejoined them.

“Gentlemen.” She smiled and, taking the Staglord’s arm, turned to leave.

“Until later,” Drew called before bending down to pick up the blunt steels from the floor. He handed one to Hector.

“Now then, Hector,” he said as the Boarlord handled the length of steel, “on my word, come at me.”

Drew struck a heroic pose, ready for combat. Hector laughed.

As the gates to Buck House opened, the guards pushed the onlookers back. Gretchen counted at least thirty there, all waiting to catch sight of the Wolf. Ordinarily the appearance of Gretchen might have driven a crowd into wild excitement, and she couldn’t help but feel a little jealous of the love these people had for Drew. She’d lived her whole life in the public eye, yet they clamored for the youth who was new to this life of royalty. Leopold had never known this kind of adulation. A great deal of goodwill was Drew’s for the taking.

Manfred and Kohl held people back as they led Gretchen through the throng. Within moments they were walking up the cobbled Lofty Lane, a quiet backstreet that would take them directly to Traitors’ House. She was intrigued to hear what news awaited her from Hedgemoor. It had been too long since she’d been home, and she missed it. But her place was here now, in Highcliff. Gretchen had been groomed to take her place in the king’s court as queen. Though she’d once had her heart set on Lucas, Drew had won her affections in the short time she’d known him, not that she’d admit such a thing to him.

Buildings reached across the street from either side, threatening to touch one another in places. Washing lines hung over the road, creating a fluttering canvas of sheets and garments. It was quiet, peaceful.

“Do you know what the news is from Hedgemoor?” she asked Manfred, who kept pace at her side.

The duke shook his head. “I’m afraid not, my dear. I’m sure your Uncle Bergan will be fully informed. He asks that we don’t tarry.”

The Bearlord was indeed considered an uncle by Gretchen. Her distant cousin, Lady Rainier, had married into the Bear clan many years ago, and was mother to both Whitley and Broghan. Such marriages between Werelords were not unusual, with the male usually dictating which therianthrope would rise from the union. Gretchen was fully aware she was the last in the line of the Werefoxes of Hedgemoor, although some Foxes lived in the eastern Dalelands.

A noise ahead made them look up as a handcart trundled out of an alleyway. The old man who pulled it was bent double, stooped, a dirty hooded cloak fastened about his shoulders. They stopped as he tried to maneuver it into the street, but he was having trouble steering it out of the alley. Manfred stepped forward to aid him.

“Let me assist you,” he said, taking hold of one of the guide poles as the old man stepped back. Gretchen could make out the black ringlets of oily hair that hung down from within his hood. There was something familiar about that hair....

A noise behind her made her turn, but too late. Another man, dressed in similar garb, stepped out of a shadowed doorway immediately behind Kohl. Swiftly and smoothly the man whipped out a short but sharp blade, drawing it across Kohl’s throat and slicing it in a fluid motion. Kohl tumbled to the cobbles, his lifeblood gushing from his open neck.

Gretchen screamed.

Duke Manfred turned, his hand immediately reaching for the longsword at his hip. The sword was only half out of its scabbard when he froze, a look of agony flashing over his face. His mouth contorted into a deathly grimace, a cry failing to escape his lips. He slowly slumped forward to his knees in the street, the old man behind standing over him. In his hand the beggar held a wicked serrated blade, stained dark with the Staglord's blood. His hood fell back. The Ratlord Vankaskan grinned at her with demonic delight.

Her scream was cut short when the man who had murdered Kohl threw a gloved hand over her mouth. His hot breath whispered in her ear as he dragged her into the alleyway, the Ratlord close to heel.

"I have missed you, my bride," snarled Prince Lucas.

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