

# IN THE SHADOW OF THE WITCH

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# DEDICATION

To my Holy Trinity: Gabi, Skye and Trinity, always dreaming, always believing.

IN THE SHADOW OF  
THE WITCH

# CHAPTER 1

No sun could burn away the shadow of the witch. It darkened Trevor's heart, worming its way into the treasured deeps of his soul, stealing any hope of redemption. He could play spiritual chess in his head, trying to convince himself that when faced with insane circumstances in an insane world, the only available choices were insane and therefore his decisions could not be judged on a normal scale. But it was only a game, a lie he told himself when he felt the guilt and pain of his decisions. Life had placed him in check and he had chosen to foolishly try to play on instead of accepting that he had lost, every move bringing him closer to the end, pawns, knights and rooks sacrificed to his irrational belief in victory. But there was no winning in this game. His soul knew the truth of it; the dark epiphany he refused to acknowledge.

Trevor watched the boy, Kyle, from the safety of the woods, hiding behind a pine tree. He studied Kyle as he skipped rocks across the pond, an innocent toothy smile etched on his face, golden hair radiating in the glare of the sun. He was happy, enjoying the simple pleasure of skipping rocks on his way home from school. The boy was twelve, the same age as his son Jake. Trevor sighed, wondering how he would bring himself to do what needed to be done.

Jake's face superimposed itself on that of the boy. Jake was always smiling, even when he had learned of his imminent death. He had even tried to convince Trevor that everything would be alright. Trevor brushed a tear from his eyes, vision blurring as he rubbed. Kyle turned toward the forest, his back to the pond. The witch's head rose from the surface of the inky

water, shattering it like glass as dark storm clouds rolled in overhead, lightning reflected in the fractured surface. Her larger left eye bulged outward blackly from the ash-gray, wrinkled, dead skin of her face. Crooked and cracked yellow teeth were exposed as her lips pulled back in a wicked sneer, completing a picture of insanity that filled him with dread. She raised her arms up over her head; long black curved nails, like the talons of a bird of prey reached to clutch the boy's shoulders and drag him below into the dark abyss.

Trevor shut his eyes, rubbed them with trembling fingers, and prayed to be delivered from this craziness. He opened his eyes. The witch was gone, the sun shone, buzzing insects flitted over the pond's surface, grains of pollen caught the rays of the sun, twinkling like dancing fireflies. The boy ran through the meadow back in the direction of the town. Trevor could only stare, petrified, unable to move. How could he do this? What kind of monster could even contemplate what he was planning? What dark pit of hell was reserved for someone capable of doing such a thing?

The witch reared up into his memory. That sly grin etched in stone on her face, the bulging evil black eye staring at him blankly, reflecting nothing, only consuming. Her voice echoes through the hall of his memory. "I can save him I can. But then you have to do something for me."

He had not even asked what. All he heard was "save him." There was nothing else. And how could he have known what she would want in return. But he should have. One look at the dead leathery skin, the black bulging left eye, the perpetual crooked leer, wild hair writhing as if each clumped greasy bundle was a ball of worms, the crazed look in her bloodshot right eye, and he should have known. Nothing sane could live in that face. Nothing good could come from its possessor. There was always a price to pay and the payment must fit the service rendered. The price for saving a life ... taking another.

Trevor watched as Kyle crested the hill. He knew the boy's parents, Sam and Jenny Waltham. He saw them at church on Sunday, whenever his wife dragged him. They had a reputation for helping anyone who asked and were considered valuable members of the community. Kyle was their only child, and Trevor could tell by their smiles and the light in their eyes whenever he saw them together that Kyle was the pride and joy of their lives. The Walthams were ranchers who lived on the outskirts of town past the old sun-reflecting field. At one time the reflecting field may have supplied the ranch and the rest of the town with power. But such things were now a mystery, their magic lost when the ancients who had built them passed on. Now it was just a field of glass panels that would, at times, catch the beauty of a sunrise or sunset in its mirrored surface. It was a place of superstition, a place to remember the stories of the ancients and their sorcery, nothing more. Trevor mused that Kyle would pass it on his way home, seeing the sunset reflected in its panes for maybe the last time in his life. What would he contemplate as he gazed into the reflection? Would a boy as young as he contemplate death, wonder what life had in store for him, or would he enjoy the moment the same way he had enjoyed skipping rocks across the surface of the pond, a simple innocent pleasure.

"I don't know if I can do this," he said for the thousandth time since the witch had told him the price for her assistance. He bowed his head and prayed for some divine resolution, even though he had never fully believed in God. But if something like the witch could exist, then other things he had thought impossible might exist as well. What would the consequences be for cheating the witch? He then wondered what further deal he could make, greasing the rungs of the ladder to hell with layers of unfulfilled promises. He was a simple blacksmith, he was no prophet, preacher, doctor, or politician, but surely even the witch had reason and would see the worth of a valuable trade. But

what did he have to offer? He had been told the Coma Witch only dealt in evil, nothing else. Money and possessions were nothing to her. She bargained only in pain, insanity, and death.

Trevor headed in the opposite direct of his escaping prey, toward the setting sun, toward home and Jake. And as he walked he felt confident in believing the worst that the witch could do was kill him ... but he was wrong.

When he entered the house, supper was on the table. The heady aroma of chicken broth and pepper greeted him at the door, followed quickly by the familiar scent of fresh-baked corn bread, which was a dinner staple that would always remind him of home. Such a pleasant smell would usually arouse his appetite, but today olfactory nostalgia crashed against the guilt and dread surrounding what he had contemplated doing not long ago, filling his stomach with acid, causing it to contract nauseously.

His son Jake smiled at him from across the table, a bread crumb hanging from the edge of his lip, "Daddy!" He quickly pushed his chair back and ran around the table to hug Trevor. His head was buried in father's chest; he had gotten so much taller this last year, despite the sickness. Despite ... Trevor felt cold, as he absently tousled Jake's brown hair and gave him a loving squeeze, momentarily able to block the horror from his mind.

Mary, his loving wife, the woman of his dreams, was next to him already, kissing his cheek gently, sending sparks down his throat to his chilled heart, attempting to warm it, revive it. He fought back tears as feelings of anger, terror, and hatred clashed against those of love and forgiveness. As he gazed into Mary's golden-brown eyes, he saw her concern and knew she had sensed his fear, his anguish.

"Why don't you sit down and eat with us honey. You've had a long day."

He moved to the head of the table silently and sat down, not trusting himself to speak, feeling that as soon as he opened



his mouth the floodgates would open and he would be lost to sorrow.

Jake was too excited to notice anything was wrong, he spooned the chicken soup into his mouth while telling Trevor about his day at school, and recess, and his walk home, and his chores, and his homework, and ... The stream became just a jumble of words that meant nothing to Trevor, but he so wanted them to. He wanted and longed to be caught in the simple banality of it. Conscious of Mary's wary eye examining him, Trevor feigned interest, nodding his head when he thought it appropriate, taking a small spoonful of the soup, which was tasteless and cold to his senses, swallowing, trying to smile, trying to make it seem like everything was alright as his world tipped and the cold and darkness set in.

Then supper was done, and Jake was reading by the light of the fire, and Mary was busily cleaning the table and then washing the dishes, and he observed it all as though it were theater, a play he had no role in, a mere spectator. And then he was kissing his son goodnight and looking in on his daughter Lydia who had been taking a long nap since late afternoon. He just wanted to see her, it seemed ages since this morning when she had raised her large brown toddler eyes to him and screamed *Dadda!* as he walked out the door.

Back in the living room Mary was waiting. She snatched his hand and led him out the door, across the yard to his shop, closing the door behind them and lighting a candle on the workbench where many of his steel-working tools were scattered. She gazed at him, concerned, fear danced within the darkness of her pupils spinning pirouettes in the candle light. She whispered conspiratorially, "What's wrong? Is it done?"

He could not meet the smoldering glare she leveled at him, which added frost to his heart. Where he would often look into those brown pools for warmth and compassion, he saw only

accusation now. Everything had changed. One decision, one instant, and their lives would never be the same again.

"No," he whispered back, hearing the trembling in his voice in that one drawn-out syllable.

There was a fierceness to her gaze that he had never seen before and he wanted to look away. "This is for our son Trevor. It is for his safety. It was our bargain, our burden, the price we have to pay."

A mixture of pain and anger swirled within the cauldron of his emotions. She was accusing him of weakness, of being irresponsible, and worst of all, of not loving them enough to do what needed to be done. Her use of the word "our" fomented the anger seething below the surface, it had only been "ours" in the bargaining, when it came to the doing, to the paying up, it had been "yours," his. And now she was saying the failure, the cowardice, the guilt, was "his." Trevor wanted to know where the "ours" was in the woods as he was forced to watch the happy young boy skipping rocks, knowing all the while that he was scheming to kill him. Anger broke through the surface, pushing up against clenched teeth, but words began to leak out.

"We? Ours? And who has been saddled with the responsibility of payment, the task of taking another's life, an innocent boy's life. If you think it so easy, and me a cowardly fool, then by all means I will place the blade in your hands."

A tear shook from his eye, racking sobs quaking through his body, and he tried to pull back some control, the tempest of emotions swirling in and around him. "Why?" He put his hands over his face, shamed by his outburst, his tears. "Why Jake? Why her? Why us?" He was sobbing, but he forced himself to remove his hands and stare at her. His pain had broken through the icy layers she had been fortifying herself with, and he realized as he watched the transformation of her expression that she had been actively working on hardening her heart against feeling anything,

or even questioning it. It was what had to be done, and there was nothing else to say or think. It was where they were.

The lines of her forehead smoothed, smoldering eyes cooled to warm empathy. With measured care and concern, holding back her own fear and sorrow, she spoke, "Why? Because life is unfair, because it is cruel. For so many reasons we'll never understand. But most of all, because we have a son that we said we'd do anything to save and now we are being asked to prove it."

She took his hand tenderly. Trevor took her into his embrace hugging her fiercely.

"And if we do this, do we become as evil as her?"

Rubbing the back of his neck staring soulfully into his eyes she whispered, "If we were capable of that you could have done this easily. Your pain and conflict is proof that we don't have the seed of such evil in us. Do this and we can be whole again. Please."

He kissed her neck but made no reply. He thought she was wrong. Once you let that darkness in, there would be no means of pushing it out and it would transform them bit by bit, like the rust that transforms the very makeup of iron, changing its very nature until it is not iron anymore but rust, losing its form, changed beyond the ability to repair. That is what had happened to the ancients and to their world. Now it was happening to him.

That night he dreamed of the witch and the event that led to the bargain.

He had entered the house to find his wife sitting at the table. Jake looked up at him, eyes wide in horror and shock, his large pupils reflecting the leathery, creased face hovering in front of him, one eye bulging outward, eye reflecting eye in an infinite loop. In dream space the reflection multiplied to infinity, swirling and spiraling, that awful stare becoming a force of nature, a physical void that swallowed all of reality.

The house was hot, the fire burning fiercely in the hearth, beads of sweat standing out on Jake's forehead becoming crystallized, firelight danced and refracted in the larger droplets, becoming hundreds of eyes that glowed orange and red as they ran down his cheeks, staring in all directions. His face reddened, the skin stretching, falling downward off his skull, melting like wax in the heat.

They had learned a few months earlier that within Jake's body some dark anomaly had pumped poison into his blood and was killing him. The disease and its poison had no name. The village doctor, Doctor Talbot, had no cure or explanation only a prognosis based on previous experience; painful and certain death.

On some command mumbled by the witch, Jake opened his mouth wide, the tunnel of his throat opening to the horror of the world in a silent scream, the witch turned her enlarged left eye to stare into the cavern, mumbling softly as she studied the depths.

His wife, finally noticing Trevor's arrival, turned to him and got up. She leaned in and whispered conspiratorially in his ear, "I called on her. She is our last hope." They had talked of this. Where did one go when all logical options were exhausted? Legends and magic. Everyone in Devon knew of the witch and what she could do. There were only stories and speculation surrounding what the price for her talents was. At the time, a decision to call on her seemed harmless, but with her here, so close, her darkness sucking the light out of the room, he no longer thought her presence benign.

The witch turned and Trevor had to stifle a cry that rose in his throat. He did not think he kept the surprise from registering on his face. She looked like a corpse: ashen, cracked, leathery skin; thick veins pulsed within jaundiced sclera surrounding a transparent icy blue iris; cracked and twisted yellow teeth protruded from black gums; thin lips were drawn

back in a rictus of insanity. She was a hag with a large black left eye that projected out toward him as if pressure from within the gelatinous mass was telescoping its blackness toward him.

Suddenly this was not just a last-ditch effort. Trevor felt her dark power, knew that such a black force had the capability to control and command all the dark things in the world, Jake's dark passenger among them. It was wonderful. It was terrible. It was hope. It was everlasting despair. He was shivering in the heat of the room.

The Coma Witch trailed a long legend filled with the types of unbelievable stories he now knew were true. She was staring at him with that obsidian eye, his reflection trapped and morphed momentarily in its surface and then summarily annihilated till there was only the lifeless black.

"Aye, I cans take the poison in him away." Her voice was deep, reverberating in the air, drumming against his ears. The air shifted around her words, intensifying their meaning, their power. Had she read his thoughts? Answered a question he had not yet voiced aloud?

"But then you must do something for mees."

He could only nod. There was only the cold, only the dark. He felt nothing as he condemned his family to hell.

The nest of her hair danced in the firelight, snakes writhing, the mythic gorgon turning his heart to stone with a glance as she spoke. "You won'ts know what the thing will be nor whens it will come. But whens I ask, you must do ..." each word slithered over the previous, punctuated with a hiss. She paused, staring at him fixedly, pulling apart his soul as he stood their petrified by her gaze, "or else."

Else would be awful, torture, he had no need to ask, and knew she would not answer. Her terror lay in darkness and mystery, his mind supplying the dark imaginative scenarios she would put him through, each successive vision more terrible than the previous one. This was not a negotiation. The terms had been

set. Trevor could either agree and save his son or allow him to die knowing he could have saved him.

“What’ll it be, aye or nay? You needs speak it—a nod won’t do.”

Somewhere in the back of his mind there was the realization that saying *yes* meant annihilation, that it would set in motion a course of events far worse than the death of his son. But at the time he could contemplate no greater wrong than the death of his innocent son.

“Yes!” Trevor choked out before his mind could question it anymore. “Yes. I accept your offer.”

“Aye. Very well then.”

The witch turned back to Jake, “Stand in front of me boy and open your mouth a little. This wills feel strange but don’ts you struggle. Thats will only make it hurt.”

Jake nodded, obviously scared but trying to be brave.

The Coma Witch leaned in, her hair eclipsing Jake’s face as she placed her ashen, cracked lips on Jake’s. He could hear the sucking of air as she breathed in forcefully. She seemed to enlarge, becoming twice her size, skin turning to shadow, looming over her prey, ready to consume. In the slowness of dream time Trevor saw something he had previously missed. As she eclipsed Jake, obscuring Trevor’s vision of him, she had delicately pushed her hand against Jake’s shoulder, her hand twisted to conceal what she carried there. She squeezed at something and then let her hand drop to her side, her fist clenched, disappearing into her tattered robe. What had it been? Ancient medicine? Had the rest been nothing more than a show to conceal this simple act? And then it was over. A slow exhalation, shrinking, the air normalizing, the nightmare over.

Jake’s eyes were glassy, his head bobbed on his neck like a puppet. He sat down dizzily, clutching at the armrest of the chair to keep himself from falling. Mary ran to him and put her arm around his shoulder, cupping his head to her breast, stroking

his hair and face. The witch observed him thoughtfully, her eye roving up and down his body. She let out a loud burp and sniffed at the air thoughtfully, searching the scent for something.

“You be fine boy. Lay downs and rest. In the morning you feels good as a newborn babe.”

She stood up and approached Trevor, her icy shadow freezing him in place. His muscles quaked at her approach, stomach lurched in his throat, every fiber of his being tried to crawl away, and in that ever-expanding revulsion there was the clarity of thought that told him his soul had just been forfeited. She touched his cheek, one sharp nail of her finger trailing his jaw line. Skin crawled under the slug mucus touch that burned in the finger’s wake like acid. She did not speak with her mouth but directly into his mind, the neurons wired to hear dark miracles responded to the call of her black epiphany.

“Yous come whens I call. You do whats I ask. No exceptions.”

She seemed to pass through him. Suddenly just gone. His heart pounding as his mind replayed her words, “No exceptions.”

In the dream he heard laughter followed by silence and darkness.

The next day Jake was fine, healed. Running around, playing like he had not done in months. The fever, nausea, and cramps had kept him in bed most days. But on that day he could not be kept in bed or in the house. He ran to school, played with the other children, and reveled in the simplicity of being a child who no longer had a death sentence hanging over him. Trevor forced himself to smile, told himself to be happy, to be grateful, but there was a shadow cast upon everything now. It was on that day that Trevor’s soul sickness began, as he waited for her call, which arrived three months later.

She had used the same dark magic to reach into his mind, speaking to those receptors now wired to her voice. The dark recesses of his mind conjured a phantom smoky image of her as

she spoke. She showed him a young boy, twelve or so, blue eyes, blonde hair, handsome, smiling, full of life.

“Sees this boy?”

“Yes.”

“You knows him don’t ye?”

“Yes. His name is Kyle.”

“He needs be dead. And you needs kill him.”

He was shaking his head.

“No exceptions, remember. No exceptions.”

Scenes of blood spattering a wall, a baby screaming. The sound of flesh hitting flesh, dead, lifeless, wet smacking. Bones cracking, the sounds worse than the blood, filling his head and whirling around like a tempest. “No exceptions.” She cackled as the images repeated, her black eye the theater for this repeating murder scene. Screaming now, “NO EXCEPTIONS!” Her evil laughter following him down the tunnel of unconsciousness.

His eyes flicked open, a scream caught in his throat, choking him, rancid sweat covering his body, “No exceptions,” he whispered into the darkness.



## Chapter 2

That afternoon, with the echoes of the nightmare tormenting and driving him, Trevor followed Kyle to the woods again. Trevor was not a graceful or stealthy man and knew he would be unable to sneak up effectively on the boy. He briefly wondered why Kyle came this way from school, since his home lay in the opposite direction. But it was nothing more than a curiosity; never becoming for him a mystery that begged an answer.

He had played the horrid scene through in his mind thousands of times.

“Kyle!”

The boy stopped in his tracks and turned. Something seemed wrong, Trevor could see the flash of recognition cross Kyle’s face, but there was still this look of surprise as if he had been caught doing something he was not supposed to be doing or was just about to do. His flesh flashed crimson, his voice quavered slightly, “Mr. Williams?”

Trevor walked slowly toward him trying to seem innocent, nonthreatening. The knife was clutched in his sweating palm, hidden behind his back. Practicing the scene in his mind he would step up to the boy and when it was time to kill he would slash with his right hand toward the boy’s throat, but in this phantom practice the blade never connected, the sequence stopping and fading to black before the moment of truth arrived. If he could not complete the task in a thought experiment, in

fantasy practice, how was he going to bring himself to do it now, in reality, where it counted?

The boy's eyes were huge as he gazed up at Trevor, lips quivering slightly. Why was he afraid? The boy knew him, knew Jake, his family. Did his evil intent scar the air, projecting his ugly purpose as he approached?

"Mr. Williams?" his voice quavered as he begged confirmation not of Trevor's identity, but of his intent.

The boy continued to stare at him, now looking terrified, his mouth agape, the unspoken questions hanging in the air: *Why? Why did you stop me? Why are you looking at me like that? What are you going to do Mr. Williams?*

There was only one answer, "I'm sorry, Kyle."

He meant to raise the knife, but he found his arm had turned to stone. Sweat poured from his forehead, he clenched his teeth with the effort of trying to will his arm to move, to obey his mind's simple command. Or maybe it was following a deeper intent far below the level of conscious direction, that mystical place that knew universal truth, right and wrong. He pictured Jake in his mind, pictured him with pale dead skin, pictured the witch hovering over him, putting her disgusting lips to his and removing her cure. "No exceptions."

But he could not move.

"Sorry, Kyle. I just saw you and yelled out impulsively. I didn't mean to frighten you. You can go. Say hello to your mom and pop for me please."

"Aye, I shall Mr. Williams." He still looked scared. Then, most likely out of habit, he added the local blessing, "And to you and yours, good fortune."

Trevor nodded and responded in kind, "And to you and yours, good fortune."

Everything about the scene felt odd. Forced. Two actors on a stage fidgeting uncomfortably, just trying to exit stage left with as much dignity as possible. Trevor nodded goodbye, and

Kyle turned and ran deeper into the forest, still going in the opposite direction from his home, but Trevor was too distraught to notice or question. He began to cry, wondering what he would tell his wife or Jake. There had to be a way to fix this and escape the witch with their lives intact.

His eyes were still red-rimmed from tears as he walked past his shop. He briefly thought how he would have to take care of some business soon or the witch would not be the only person coming after him to retrieve an owed debt. There were horseshoes and axles that needed to be worked on lying in an orderly pile on various workbenches. Knowing what he was going through with Jake, the villagers had been kind, but that could not last much longer. It also helped that he had been willed one of the ancient fire-cutting tools by his grandfather, which meant his work was often quicker, more precise, and longer lasting. He knew of no other blacksmiths with access to such a tool. But this advantage only added a week or so to his customer's patience, they relied on these things in their daily lives and would not be able to do without much longer. Their patience had been a form of empathy and kindness, and he appreciated it.

He paused to glance through the shop's open doors, the hearth cold, his tools hanging from hooks on a peg-board, the sound of hammer falling on steel and anvil ringing in his memory as he gazed at them lying before the hearth covered in dust. For a moment, worrying about work, making money, paying bills, normal life situations that others concerned themselves with, he felt a moment of peace. Maybe this would all work out and they could go back to their simple existence without the threat of death, contemplating murder, and escaping the witch. There was the shadow of a smile on his face when he opened the front door of the house.

He stood upon the threshold, his hand on the doorknob, his eyes gazing upon a scene that his mind refused to compute. It

was complete chaos, a patchwork of destruction, blood everywhere, flesh lying in torn pieces creating a shattered puzzle all around him. Everywhere he looked there was some horror to alight on. And the smell, it assaulted his senses, turning his stomach, bile rising in his throat. He retched and threw up. Eyes watering, he could not seem to breathe, his heart pounding in his ears, his vision folding in blackly around him.

The lifeless eyes of Jake, Mary, and baby Lydia stared at him, freezing him in place. Their heads lay on the dinner table turned to face the door so as to greet him with lifeless horror as he entered. Their dismembered bodies created the tapestry of flesh, organs, blood, and bile that littered the main room. Blood sizzled in the embers of the fire, pieces of fat, skin, and sinew smoking on the hearth creating the noxious air that threatened to tip him into unconsciousness.

They stared at him, pleading for redemption. The black tunnel of shock was squeezing his reality into a tight cylinder. It was just a nightmare, he told himself, it could not be real. Those three pairs of eyes became accusatory as the witch whispered in his mind, "No exceptions."

"Why couldn't you do this one thing for us?" His wife asked.

"You let me die, Daddy. I thought you loved me."

Lydia only whimpered softly, somehow so much worse than a verbal accusation. Her innocence in all this, just wanting to live, to be protected.

"Why Daddy? Why?"

"Was Kyle's life worth more than ours? Was your morality worth more than our lives?"

Sobbing uncontrollably, "I'm sorry. How could I have known what she'd do? How?"

"You're a coward. A self-righteous coward, Trevor!"

The blackness squeezed in, he screamed in pain, in agony, in the hope that the darkness would claim him completely

and it would all be over. He fainted, falling into a sea of blood, vomit, bile, and flesh.

The nightmare did not end there. No, that was just the beginning. It was merely the call of the witch.

## Chapter 3

It was Sam Neilson who had been the unfortunate friend to find this bloody tableau. He had been waiting two weeks for Trevor to fix his wheel and axle. Sam had decided he could not wait any longer and had come to call on Trevor only to find a scene that a lifetime could never erase. When Sam had first happened upon the scene, he had assumed the whole family was dead. Trevor had been rolling through the gore while being tortured by delirium nightmares. In those nightmares the witch had wormed her way into his mind, possessed Trevor, and forced him to kill his family and dismember them. In the repeating nightmare he had struggled against her invasion but she had won. As he was forced to watch the scene behind his own possessed eyes, he had no doubt that what he saw was what had actually happened, the disembowelment, the beheading, and then the witch's black magic keeping them alive until that instant when he had walked through the door so that they could accuse him of cowardice. This was the nightmare she used to poison his mind so that he would know exactly what had happened and see the scene as she had seen it, feel his loved ones' last painful thoughts as they gazed upon him, the hurt, the resentment, the sorrow at a life cut short, all the things they would never do, the confusion as they saw their father/husband enter the house, wondering why he was alive, why, if he had done as the witch had asked, they were not all sitting down to supper together? Why? All these emotions and questions rushed through him simultaneously, crushing him with the weight of their collective despair.

He now knew they had been tortured. Dying had been a welcome release that they had begged and screamed for in their pain-filled minds. He would never be able to lie to himself and believe that she had killed them quickly, only staging the rest of the scene to punish him. No, they had been able to feel it all, the agony intensified beyond human comprehension by the witch's magic, keeping them alive as she exposed every neuron to pain. Then she had directed that black magic at him, spilling the stored poison of her vision into the dark synapses of his mind to ensure he knew the truth in excruciating detail. The truth of what his morality and defiance had cost.

While in the throes of these nightmares he had crawled and rolled in the gore and blood of his family, camouflaged in death when Sam had arrived at his door to check on his wheels and axle. Sam had taken a single wide-eyed gawking glance and fled, vomiting, as he ran toward town to get the sheriff.

The sheriff, Peter Miller, could not understand anything that Sam blathered except that something had happened at the Williams's residence. Sam's skin was white, quivering blue lips tried to form words but were incapable of the task. But it was enough. It was Peter that found Trevor deliriously moaning and writhing on the floor covered in blood. He screamed as Peter pulled him from the house, "The witch killed them!"

The rest was a hazy blur to Trevor. His mind was swarmed and eclipsed by sorrow and death, and in their wake budding hatred for both himself and the witch. He could take revenge upon himself easily enough but not before he took justice on the witch and tortured her the way she had his family.

Three coffins lay side by side. The air was cold, damp, and gray. Jeff Halstead the undertaker had never seen such a death. But the family deserved his best. They deserved to be at peace. He had been sick many a times and doubted the images would ever be cleared from his mind, but he had done what he could with the bodies so that Trevor could be at peace with their final

resting and be assured that they had been treated with reverence and respect. Trevor had thanked him, but Jeff saw that the man would never be right again. How could he be? To get over something like that one would have to be more or less than human. He had known Trevor for a long time, a down-to-earth fellow, dependable and very human. He felt sorry for him. But cleaning up the remains, attempting to sort the parts into the correct caskets, trying to stitch them back into some semblance of humanity was most likely the best he would ever be able to do for Trevor. The man was beyond human hope and help.

The coffins were laid in their holes. The priest said words that Trevor heard but could not make sense of, something about the grace of God and never understanding his grand plan. There would be anger, hate, questioning, but these were of the devil and hell. Now was the time for faith. He reminded everyone that the ancients had sought a life free of pain and hardship and had attempted to build their own heaven. They had destroyed everything in the process while removing themselves from God's grace. Life was about learning from pain and seeking God when in the midst of turmoil and darkness.

At home sitting before the vacant fireplace he could still smell them, their blood stained the wood of the floor, of the walls, of his heart. Everywhere he looked their ghosts smiled at him. For a moment he could feel their love and kindness, replaced by hurt and accusation in the next instant. Their gossamer forms would reach out to him in despair and he would try to comfort them, to hold them one last time and reassure them he was going to make it all right again. But the phantoms disappeared at his touch only to reappear later and begin the cycle all over again.

It was only a few days after the funeral that he came to the realization that he could not stay in the house. He could not die yet, and staying here was killing him. The souls of his family could not rest until he took vengeance upon the witch, and he



could not contemplate how to accomplish that while haunted by their ghostly presence.

That night he started the fire in his shop for the first time since meeting the witch and making the deal. He then removed the fire cutter from its hiding place beneath a loose floor board. He had no idea what magic powered it. His grandfather, upon giving it to him, had told him that one day its energy would run out and he had no understanding of how to refill it, so he had told Trevor to use it sparingly. As he pulled the trigger at its base, a red cylinder of flame leaped from the tip. He was not here to mend horseshoes or repair broken axles. Instead, he began to make a series of blades, daggers, scimitars, saw-toothed, short, long, straight, bowed, a spear like a whale harpoon with a razor-sharp blade and barbs for extra damage. Carefully he ran the fine beam across steel, following the pattern he had etched in pencil to create the shape of his weapons. The point cut through the metal with ease, requiring no effort, and was exact, allowing him to create the intricate designs produced by his fevered brain.

The tears and sweat born of pain and rage were pounded into the metal, an alchemical transformation that turned his previously moderate skill and work into true works of art, their edges astounding, their points so fine as to be invisible, capable of splitting the molecules of darkness. Metal was folded, refolded, honed to perfection, the best work he had ever done. His rage and despair had focused him in a way pride and money never had, turning a mediocre blacksmith into an artist who created beautiful and deadly weapons.

He was in the shop for more than two weeks, leaving only to gather and split more wood for the forge. He slept beneath one of the workbenches close to the fire and would wake and begin work again. He took no food, only water. There was some process at work within him that he could feel but not understand, as if he were being molded and shaped in the same way the metal was being transformed by the heat of the flames and the

pounding of his hammer. The sweat was cleansing, fasting removed softness, the hardening of metal hardened his heart; the process of forging weapons paralleled the forging of his body and soul into a tool of destruction. He thought of his dead trinity less and less, and pictured the face of the witch more and more, focusing on becoming an instrument of darkness and hate capable of delivering justice to the witch.

His body hardened and strengthened under the constant stress of hammering on the anvil, cutting trees, splitting wood, carrying logs, or pulling a sled burdened with hundreds of pounds of split wood for the fire. When he slept, his mind filled with the techniques for molding the iron and steel, it showed him the shapes of the weapons, how they could be used and once he was done with the weapons his mind filled with magical symbols and alphabets and phrases he knew nothing about but was determined to etch into the steel.

Beyond the pain his mind would clear and he would remember lessons and stories his father and grandfather had told him about the ancients and their sorcery, which they had called "science and techknowledgey." Their brand of magic had scarred the world, giving birth to true darkness. They had talked of invisible dark and light forces controlled by mystics and witches armed with weapons crafted by their science. There were tales of mutants and ghosts, experiments gone wrong that had created wastelands in the far corners of the world, breeding demons. Father had pointed out the sun fields and the machines that lay rotting and lifeless in the woods and fields and there was always some cautionary tale associated with them. Father had told him he believed that man in his attempt to understand God had then decided he could become God and then proceeded to destroy the world with his unbridled egotism. They only wanted to explore what they could, never asking whether they should. In the wake of these memories, the sigils of this ancient science would fill his mind, and he would heat the metal to molten red

and carve the runes and symbols into the transformed metal. Just as he was finishing the etchings on his last weapon, the cutting tool stopped working, the beam of light winking out. No matter how many times he pulled the trigger, shook it, flicked the lever on and off, the beam never reappeared. It was done. He threw it aside. He was finished anyway. It was now just another ancient tool that had run down and run out. There were so few left.

After a few weeks he was done. He then spent a few more weeks training, running in the woods, slashing at branches with his new weapons, throwing the harpoon, carrying heavy stones uphill, his mind vacant, the strain and effort pushing his body beyond what he would have thought possible. Whenever he thought he could take no more, the witch's face would appear as she cackled, "No exceptions." And then she would decapitate one of the trinity. Lydia was always the worst to bear but he would continue to fight, his body now a machine under the control of a mind warped by the need for vengeance and fueled by the darkness of hate. Those images became black strokes of paint on a canvas that was now almost completely dark. He was becoming a void.

He filled a rucksack with some food and a canteen of water. He had killed a deer, a bear, and two wolves during his training. The wolves he had dispatched in close quarters with daggers and they had taken a few flesh-and-blood trophies of their own, skin from one calf and deep cuts on his bicep, before he had slit their throats. It was part of his transformation. He wanted everything he was to be new, to be transformed into this new engine of hate and redemption. The skins from these kills were his wardrobe, their blood his baptism. It was time to move on, entering a new dimensional sphere of reality.

He had crafted a sling for his weapons and scabbards that hung from various straps and clips concealed by the bearskin coat; short daggers dangled from his hip and were strapped to his

legs. When he moved nothing bounced, he was silent, floating swiftly through space, more shadow than man. He took a log that he had left smoldering in the fire of the forge and set his workbenches ablaze. He then moved out of the shop and stood in the open doorway of the house. The house where he had learned of love, love for a wife, the unconditional love of children, the contentment of home. Those memories were there, hanging before him in an ethereal cloud, replaying history in a schizophrenic puzzle sequences that could no longer form a cohesive picture.

A tear tried to remind him he was still human. It spilled from the corner of his eye and ran hotly down his cheek, etching a line of pain down his face. He did not wipe it away as he swore it would be the last tear he would shed until the witch was dead. At the time he believed there was nothing left to lose. He was wrong. It was a promise he would not be able to keep.

He touched the torch to the bedcovers and watched them flare up. A phantom of his wife rose from a restless sleep, staring at him confused. Turning away he set the curtains ablaze. He backed out the front door and threw the log into the middle of the floor beneath the table that had contained the decapitated heads of his family. Their ghosts stood on the far side of the table. They were smiling, tears in their eyes, relieved, released, waving goodbye. He backed up further as the rising flames erased them and the heat began to scorch and burn his skin.

He did not know how long he stood there. The house had burned to the ground, the timbers steaming in the morning cold. He took a handful of the ash and placed it in a tin box, closed the lid, and walked off into the forest heading west, following her. He and the witch had become connected in some way during his transformation, and Trevor could feel her energy pulling at him, guiding him to her. It felt to him like a form of gravity, a strange inexplicable force that was subtle but easily recognizable once he

became attuned to it. They were linked by this dark energy and he would never be free of it unless he severed it.

The witch visited him in his dreams, cackling, goading him on with visions and reminders of what she had done to his family. In the morning he would wake huddled within a cave or the hollow of a tree, the reek of pine and cedar smoke from the smoldering fire filling his nostrils. The tendrils of night hung in the air, swirling around him, and there would be her phantom face staring at him from a plume of thick smoke lit and formed by the first rays of a dawn sun, her evil eye pulling at him. He could feel that stare in the pit of his stomach. It was at times a purely physical reaction, a muscle or body memory that was not spurred by his emotional reaction to her appearance. She had awoken or stirred some ancestral, primordial genetic memory that rose through his entire being, a visceral awareness leading to awakening.

In the hills the air was cold and still, the morning dew turning to frost and as her diaphanous face floated away, torn apart by the rays of the sun and dispersed, he would look out upon pristine forest, ice crystals covering patches of moss as if magically floating just above the ground, stalactite icicles hanging from the low branches of the trees catching the first flickers of sun, twinkling like jewels, sweating spiderwebs icing in the cold, interlinking the larger formations to create a world of dazzling ice; a cathedral of cold beauty. There was a modicum of peace to be found in these brief moments of magnificence. At these times he would picture Jake smiling or laughing. He would remember the feel of Mary's body beneath him, the clean smell of her skin, the unblemished perfection of it, soft to the touch, sweet to his lips.

With the sun shining on his face, the ghost of a smile on his lips, for a fleeting second he would question what he was doing. Was this for them? Or was it for him? To free him of guilt, to fill his need for blood, an eye for an eye vengeance? Had the

witch awakened something deep and dark within him that suddenly wanted to indulge in this chase of violence and evil? That needed it the way he used to need the love of his wife and children?

In his youth he had been intrigued by philosophy and metaphysics. His father had always been one to pose existential questions: *Why are we here? Is there a God? Did the two primary and elementary particles of darkta and illukta have a soul or purpose? Was the darkta under the influence of a dark god and the illukta the tool of a god of light, or were they the opposed yet balancing aspects of one God?* They would bandy these questions about, enjoying the mental gymnastics that in the end were nothing more than a pleasant dance. There was no utility to be found in it. Their joy was only in the questioning, in the searching and seeking. His father was a learned, loving man, and would talk philosophy with anyone who would listen. He was a terrible carpenter, but his customers hired him just so they could talk and listen to what he had to say or to solicit advice. They knew he could not cut a straight line or hang a door that would not be crooked and creaking, but they loved him and knew that if they did not pay him he would be forced to move on and they did not want that. Funny as it seemed, his father had really been a traveling monk who went from house to house to give his knowledge and advice. Trevor loved him and always looked up to him. He had died of a failed heart ten years earlier and the village had never been the same since.

But even years before his death Trevor had ceased enjoying knowledge for knowledge sake. At some point he had become a man of utility and ceased to see the joy or purpose of such questions. He had taken up the trade of blacksmithing, taught to him by his grandfather, who died only three years prior to his father. His grandfather was more the dreamer, reveling in myths and stories of the ancients. At the time Trevor had no

more use for these than he had for his father's philosophy, but they helped pass the time as they worked or took breaks. He now found himself contemplating how pertinent these conversations and stories had become to his life. The questions posed by his father, the morals of the tales told by his grandfather suddenly seemed grave, more important. Finding the answers to them could impact his existence, his next actions. If he had a soul, if his family had souls, could they still be saved? Was there redemption for any of them? Did the witch control darkta or did it control her? If it controlled her was she to blame for her actions? And then what controlled her? God? To find vengeance, to bring peace to his soul, would he have to kill God? Was that possible?

All of this would occur to him in a flash during these quiet moments, and then the sun would move, and that miraculous moment would be over, and the questions would pass unanswered; he would toss dirt on the remaining embers of the fire and put his few belongings back in his rucksack and head west on his continued pilgrimage. Upon reflection, the why of it did not even matter, because he did not know what else he would do if he failed to follow this path. He had no other purpose, no other direction. He chased the witch's shadow without thought as to what his true goal was or whether he was following fate or challenging it.

The first village he encountered came a week after he had left the ruins of his smoldering house. Krull was not much more than a few weathered buildings—saloon, general store, blacksmith, granary, bank—all leaning over the dirt track of Main Street as if the tops of the structure were being pulled toward that centerline, keeping it in perpetual shadow. At the road's terminus stood a white church, black shutters hanging askew like broken teeth in a crooked grin. Behind the church was a ghost-talk tower, its twisted steel rising into the air, the rectangular

boxes circling its apex pointed toward the ground. His father had informed him that the boxes created signals that were vibrated into the air, where they could be received and turned into voices by little boxes people had once carried with them or stuck in their ears. The thought gave him a chill as he imagined what it would be like to hear disembodied voices whispering into his head. The tower loomed as a monument to chaos, darkness, and fear. His grandfather had always told him that when things went bad for the ancients and their inventions turned against them a strange paradox occurred, what they had called “ghost towns” had become the habitat for the survivors of the technocalypse and the techno cities had become the halls of the dead. In most villages that people ran to, far away from the techno cities and dark magic that was poisoning the world, only the ghost-talk towers or the sun fields existed. They stood as monuments and reminders of what could happen when man began to think too much of himself. At least that was how grandfather had always spun it.

At the general store he got some jerky, bread, and salted bacon. The store owner had watched him as he had selected his purchases. Not warily, just curiously. He probably did not encounter many outsiders, as Krull was a way station to nowhere, further west there were only forest and the mountains and beyond those the mythic wasteland. He placed his items on the counter. “I’ve been chasing a woman I think passed through here.”

The store owner now took him in, looking him up and down without pretense or shyness. “Trevor, I presume?”

Trevor tried not to look dismayed, but hearing his name from the mouth of someone he had never met had a way of unsettling him, and he coiled for attack, believing that was what would follow. Confusion washed across his face, his eyes staring, his body going into instant alarm.



“She was here alright. Said she had a message for you.” He paused as if waiting for something. Trevor had rarely left his small hamlet of Devon. He had led a quiet life free of adventure. His definition of a long journey was a two-day wagon ride to Hashen for steel or other supplies. The social mores and code of ethics of such silence was lost on him. The air was charged with expectation but what it expected he could not discern.

“The message?”

Being more direct, seeing his silence was not understood, the owner put out his hand, “Information costs, just like all else here in Krull. Everything has a price.”

This surprised Trevor more than the fact that the witch had left him a message. At first he was tempted just to pay and be done with it. But suddenly he felt anger rise up in him, followed immediately by defiance.

“If she gave you a message then she also put a condition upon its delivery. So if you don’t deliver it the cost will be on you to pay.”

The man swallowed hard, seeing the steely look in Trevor’s eyes. His words were delivered behind clenched teeth, barely contained rage vibrated just below the surface of his skin. The owner withdrew his open hand and rubbed his balding head. His head turned from left to right, his eyes scanning the interior as if he expected the witch to suddenly appear. Trevor had been correct. There was a curse waiting in the wings if this opportunistic weakling did not do as he had been told.

“She says ...” he paused. “Sorry,” he apologized, now visibly nervous, his hands shaking, voice quavering, sweat beading on his brow. “She said this must be delivered word for word. She made me memorize it and repeat it for her before she would leave, so I’ll say it slow.” Trevor nodded, willing him to just get it out. He disliked this weasel of a man but showing contempt, frightening him, or displaying annoyance would only hinder the delivery.

“Catching me will be more than just catching up to me. This is an ancient and perilous ritual you embark upon and the man that starts the journey won’t be the same man that finishes it. Be sure this is what you want.” He paused for a moment going through the lines as he bobbed his head and used his index finger as though he were viewing the words in the air before him. Then he gazed up at the cracked ceiling for inspiration. “There is a mountain directly west named Blood Mountain by my kind and kin. Once you cross its summit, if you do cross its summit, I will consider you on the quest and then there is no turning back. This interaction of ours will then be grave and only one of us shall survive. So it is. So it has been. Be warned. Be prepared.”

The words offered a cryptic warning and named his next destination, Blood Mountain, but offered little else that he could understand.

“Is that it?”

The man shook his head, gulped and took a cautionary step back, wanting to be out of Trevor’s immediate reach, “And go fuck yourself and your family! She’d always laugh after that part but I can’t reproduce it thankfully.”

“No need I know its sound well enough. Had you seen her before that?”

“No but the priest saw her leaving and said he knew of her.”

Trevor turned to leave. He wanted to be away from the man, he found himself suppressing a desire to reach across the counter, grab him, and then punch his sniveling face to pulp. Over his shoulder he muttered, “Pray you never see the witch or I again.”

Father Roberts wore the dress of a priest—black pants, black shirt, black jacket, and a scapula around his neck—but other than these there was nothing in his look that defined him as a holy man. Roberts had long salt-and-pepper hair leaning more

toward salt. It hung past his shoulders in unkempt strands. One side of his face was obscured by greasy strands of hair that hung down in front of it. He had hooked the hair behind his left ear so that he could see his drink, Trevor guessed. He had seen the man hobble into the saloon, and since it was on the way to the church, he thought he would follow the priest inside and save himself an unnecessary trip.

"You the priest in this town?" Trevor asked as he sat down next to Roberts at the bar.

Robert's eyes turned to glance sideways but he was not interested enough to turn his head, "Aye, that's what they call me. The only service people seem to attend around here are funerals and even then you're only guaranteed one attendee who ain't even listening." He gave a wry smile, and Trevor found himself liking the man. At least he did not seem like the snake the store owner had been.

The bartender walked over to the men, "Drink?"

Trevor tried to wave him away but the man stared at him, digging in. Again Trevor had missed the subtext. It was not a question of whether he would have a drink, it was what he would have to drink. With a stern look, the bartender clarified, "This ain't no sitting parlor. You drink or you walk."

"I'll have what he's having."

The bartender rolled his eyes, which seemed odd to Trevor until he put the amber liquid in front of him and Trevor took a sip and smiled, "Apple juice?"

The priest smiled crookedly at him, "I'm not here to lose myself. I'm here to find myself."

"Then this is to finding ourselves," Trevor lifted his glass, and the priest tapped it with his own, and they both drank.

It had been some time since Trevor had spent time with another person and for a moment he felt human again, something he had not felt since the witch had come into his life.

“So. What brings the likes of you to a saloon, looking for a priest, drinking apple juice in search of himself.”

Trevor tried to return a grin but it felt wrong on his face. “I’m in pursuit of someone who passed through here and the general store owner said you may know something of her.”

The priest rolled his eyes. “Cyrus, that rat-faced liar. He try to hustle you?”

“Aye.”

“Sorry.”

Trevor shrugged “No harm done. You don’t know of her then?”

“The witch?” Trevor nodded. “Aye, I do. I was just commenting that Cyrus is a rat-faced liar in general but he told you true regarding the witch. I know of her. I know something of the lives she’s ruined with her curses and deals. She is darkness, a black destructive annihilating force of nature.”

“Do you know anything more? What she really is? What she’s done to others?”

“Why?”

“She made a deal with me and I couldn’t hold up my end. So she murdered my family.” He delivered his story in a factual fashion. He did not want to feel it and told himself he would not. Not one more tear would he shed in her name, he had sworn.

The priest was shaking his head, eyes moist. “Much like the stories I’ve heard from others. It ends bad either way, mister. You do what she wants and then you can’t live with it or that causes some other event that creates a catastrophe. That one there is a catastrophizer. And as difficult as it may be to hear, the truth is that one way or the other your family was most likely going to die.”

He paused and took a sip of his juice. Trevor waited.

“I’ve heard her called the Coma Witch. Folks say that after she’s been in your life you go through the rest of it as if you are in a coma. It’s not real living. Don’t matter what she gives,

what she takes, or what you do, life just won't be what it was once she been in your life and in your head."

Trevor nodded his agreement.

The priest looked at him with slate-gray eyes. Eyes that had seen awful things and were still trying to make sense of them, hoping maybe this would be the day that the man with all the answers would walk through those doors. "You fixing for revenge, I guess."

Trevor only returned the stare not wavering. It was enough.

"Dangerous game with a dangerous adversary. I've heard stories. I hope most of them lies or at least embellishments. Stories that will make you question reality, God, the devil, humanity and its capacity for depravity. To catch one like that, to take revenge on one as black as that, one has to do more than touch the darkness, one has to know it, become it. You won't ever be able to come back from that. You willing to become that?"

"She left a message for me saying something similar with the man you called Cyrus."

"Well then?"

"I'm here talking to you."

The priest grunted. "I won't pretend to understand what you went through. What you're going through. I've heard the tales enough times from people I knew, people I called friends and I saw how they changed. Saw that light leave their eyes."

"What I always wondered was if one were willing to go to any lengths to take their revenge on her, to kill her and end her reign of terror, would they be any better. Would any of us be? Would we suddenly wake from our comas and see the true light?"

Trevor shrugged, "Once you've seen what I've seen and felt what I've felt those questions become irrelevant. In fact, they never even crossed my mind."

The priest measured him with his eyes, he sensed the coldness, could feel that feral instinct that called for blood, that had become instinctual. Trevor was becoming a mechanism of hate, a force of destiny or maybe its tool. There was no reason to get in his way. Truth was, it was the only way to answer the question he had posed, someone needed to kill her if they were to see what happened at the end.

“There is a mutie that lives at the base of Blood Mountain. Some call him a shaman or a mystic warrior, whatever you want to call him, he’s been given many titles that come with even more legends. He may know more.”

Trevor wondered if this was part of the witch’s trap. If she was sending him to the mountain, surely she would know of the existence of such a shaman. He had only heard of muties but never encountered one, at least as far as he knew. Some said they were deformed from the experiments that were run on them by the ancients, or they had been created by techno sorcery. Some said they looked very human but had longer life spans and could manipulate the darkta and illukta. He did not know the truth of any of these legends.

“He knows the ways and arts of the witch and mayhap can help you on your quest,” the priest finished.

Trevor nodded, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. There’s a three-day walk between here and there. I’d take that time to think about what you are doing, ask if those you mourn would want this.” He swallowed hard, “She is darkness my friend. She is a force of nature, the shadow to nature’s light. Sublime and terrifying by turns. She will suck the light and life out of you no matter what the outcome and someday a man will walk through those doors,” he paused to turn and point at the saloon doors with a crooked index finger, “and sit there much like you do now, angry, sad, full of hate, and say he’s looking for a man, an evil dark soul that ruined his life, a man that looks exactly like you.”

The silence between them stretched out, neither wanting to break the quiet. The bartender cleared his throat, made uncomfortable by the conversation and then this heavy silence that had settled on the air. Trevor raised his glass, the priest his. They clinked glasses and drained them. There were no parting words, what needed to be said had been said.

## Chapter 4

The air was cold, his breath clouding in front of him, a thin layer of frost covering the thick blanket of dead leaves that crunched below his feet. The forest, dense with white birch trees, was menacing at night, offering a maze of thin white columns to navigate through and around. A bright full moon burned in a cloudless sky, the labyrinth of birches casting deep distinct shadows upon the frozen ground, forming a grid pattern of dark shadows. Eager to get to the base of Blood Mountain, he had chosen to continue his trek during the night, since the moon offered ample light to navigate by, but now he questioned the logic of that decision.

Growing up he had hunted with his father and spent many a night in the woods, and there was nothing unfamiliar about it. Even in adulthood he had spent many nights in the woods hiking to Hashen, Gilead, or other nearby towns for his blacksmithing supplies. But this was different. There was something alien here, an ominous, malicious presence hiding in the shadows, camouflaging itself in the maze of white striated bark, black earth, twisting roots, fallen leaves, and stirring shadows. He could sense it as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, galvanized by the energy of whatever lurked in the deeper shadows.

The landscape was transformed into a chiaroscuro, the blue white light of the moon falling unevenly through the branches of the birch trees, creating a surreal landscape composed of stark contrasts. The oddness of the environment



and the evil energy that clutched at his heart and whispered to him on the wind were harbingers of some apocalyptic or revelatory event. Every step echoed and reverberated in his ears, leaves crackled beneath his feet, the skins he wore scratched together as he walked, his breath ragged and rumbling. He was a blazing target of sound and shape in the forest. Mouth dry with fear, he reached out with his senses, attuned to every fleck of light, every pattern of shadow that appeared out of place.

There was motion to his left and he swung his head around, nothing. The trees sighed, creaking, shadows of branches lengthened and writhed like desperate grasping fingers clutching for purchase. There was a face protruding from the trunk of the tree in front of him, he jumped back and it disappeared. He leaned forward and he saw an eye protrude from the smooth white bark of the tree's trunk, the remaining features of the face cascading to the other trees, a patchwork face created from the maze of the multitude, mouths woven of rough bark, eyes flashing black, and white glinting blue in the reflected light of the moon. He could not breathe. A screech owl screamed in the darkness, startling him, forcing him to breath, as his vision began to collapse into a tunnel of unconsciousness. A mist began to roll in toward him from the west, swallowing the face by degrees, feature by feature, brows, eyes, nose, and mouth. Gone.

The mist came at him like a malevolent force, attacking him with a wall of cold and damp, icing his face, chilling his fevered flesh. He shivered as invisible cold daggers raked across his skin and icicle fingers enveloped him in a frigid embrace. Visibility was cut to an arm's length, the moon blazing in a haloed haze above as if seen from deep below the ocean, a hazy light of promise that he craved to ascend to so that he could breathe air again. He stopped moving, leaning over his knees, gasping for breath. He could not spend the night in this forest, he would die of fright, but he did not know how he was going to safely navigate his way out either. The screech owl screamed again, much closer

this time, forcing another startled breath into his lungs. The owl's huge head appeared through the mist before him. It was the size of man's head, forming in fragments from the mist, its hooked beak emerging first, followed by golden eyes with dark pupils reflecting the blue of the moon. The head and neck were perched upon the downy, feathered body of a man—a barrel chest, a long torso, and an erection that poked toward him, large enough to be a horse's. It spread its wings out above him, the tips of its feathers touching above its head, a halo of plumage. It let out a blood-curdling screech, raising its head to the moon, and then immediately began to melt like a wax figure exposed to extreme heat, its beak and eyes running down its body, staring fixedly at him as they streamed down the midline of its torso. The upraised wings folded in, collapsing and melting into the body, legs shortened as they melted like wax candles to the ground and formed a gray pool that the creature began to sink into. Its erection poked from the ash-colored pool, standing upright like a marble monument, before going flaccid, the tip bending to join the pool in a waxy rainbow that shimmered in the moonlight before disappearing completely.

He dared not step in the pool that was blocking his path west, so he tried to move and sidestep around it. His plan was to run. Run west, out of the forest, out of the night as fast as he could regardless of what he encountered. Just keep moving, just keep running.

"Aye, you must be of stouter heart than this to play at this game." The words came from everywhere, he glanced all around him, head swiveling, eyes roving in their sockets, looking for a target but the mist was impenetrable.

"You said it would begin once I crossed the mountain!" Trevor screamed

She laughed, "This is not the beginning. This is mere taunt, an old witch's folly. From what I sees, you best turn back. Heart such as yours only good for breaking."

“Fuck you!”

“No steel in those words. Nothing but fear. And I eat fear. Go home and grieve your loss, grieve your fear, your incompetence. And die lying in your bed, a sad lonely nothing who lived a life of nothing,” she jeered.

A naked form stepped from behind the closest tree. It broke his paralysis. He pulled his dagger from the scabbard on his hip, raised the blade to his shoulder, and struck at the form’s chest with a powerful thrust. He felt the blade pierce flesh then hit bone. He was staring down at white milky skin that was all too familiar, a cluster of freckles creating a constellation he had gazed at many times. He raised his eyes to the collarbone that he had delighted in kissing, then to the hollow of her throat, and upward to gaze into the warm brown eyes of his wife. Her pale lips moved, “You don’t have to do this Trevor. There is no guilt in letting it go, no shame in it. A true man, an honest man could go home and honor us in kindness and love.”

He kissed her lips as she breathed her last, becoming smoke with a sigh, part of the infernal impenetrable mist.

“Damn you,” he yelled as he whirled around searching for another target to use his dagger upon.

“Now there is some grit,” she goaded.

The mist parted and before him was a path of rough flat stones, weaving slightly for about thirty feet to the bloodred door of a small hut. The building was made of various hues of stone covered in moss, thick milky windows stood to either side of the door, but he could not pierce their opacity and see what was beyond. There were no shadows, no flickers of motion.

This is where the witch came from. It was her dwelling. He could feel the weight of its dark magic and knew that although he could see it, it did not completely exist in the place he defined as reality. The dwelling was an island that existed between dimensions, existed in and between the dark spaces of the world, constructed of night and darkta energy. He moved closer, drawn

by its power, his legs shuffling forward without any conscious direction, a force pulling at him. The various stones were finely etched with darkta spells and symbols. Black moss grew on the stones but would not grow over the etchings, making them more distinct. Symbols glowed in the blue-white light of the moon. Some of the stones were made of a material that looked like smoky onyx and amber-colored glass; they glowed with a dull light, forms swimming behind their surfaces, worms, snakes, and monster abortions floating lifelessly within the smoky glass. He was captivated by their glow and what skittered behind the surface, mesmerized. There were stones of silver and other metal and still others that reflected like a mirror, his face swimming and distorting in their surfaces. The wall was a patchwork of various materials, some natural, some maybe created by the ancients, and still others that were otherworldly, created by magic or stitched together from strands of the darkta.

The doorknob was cold as ice, his hand freezing to its metallic surface as he turned it. Darkta symbols swam across the door's liquid crimson surface like a school of fish, spiraling outward in one direction and then quickly turning and spiraling in the other direction, the spiral collapsing to a point before expanding outward again in a spellbinding pattern. He felt his mind tipping toward some new form of consciousness, a buzz filling his head, eyes blurring out of focus, yet the air had an edge that he could feel in the tingling of his skin and the twitching of his muscles, as if sensing the vibrations of subtle forces unseen.

He heard a deafening click as he turned the knob another degree and then pushed the door inward. Musty air filled with the smell of ancient things rushed outward, the seal of a crypt broken, spilling its hermetic secrets with the escaping air. A cacophony of ghostly voices whispered in his ear in a stream of language he could not interpret but which had the effect of turning his heart to stone.

As the whispers died on the air, he gazed into the room beyond. There was a small empty straw bed in one corner with a stained and threadbare sheet covering it. Everywhere else there were books, papyrus rolls, and magical bric-a-brac. A globe spun in its stand, detailing countries he had never seen the likes of on any of the maps he had studied in geography class when he was in school. There was a shelf with bottles containing powders and potions, and other larger vats that contained dead trophies, eyeballs, ears, penises, floating in yellow fluid; his nose detected a hint of formaldehyde. On one portion of the table he saw clear bottles filled with a transparent colorless liquid. Lying in front of them were syringes similar to those Trevor had seen at Doctor Talbot's house. But the doctor had kept them as antiques, the liquid sorcery they had delivered into skin and muscle long since gone with the ancients. Had the witch existed in the time of the ancients? Had she stored their magics in this hut to aid in her campaign of spreading sorrow? Is that what she had used to heal Jake, one of these needles filled with a liquid that would kill the dark poison in his body?

Trevor's eyes roved the interior, trying to take it all in, a dizzying array of objects heaped in piles or scattered over surfaces with no discernible order or purpose. And then a motion caught his eye, drawing his attention to the cold hearth directly across from him. It was so large and deep that its back wall was hidden in shadow, and as he stared he could have sworn he saw another doorway open. He started to pull the door shut, wanting to be away, feeling an immediate sense of dread, but there was also something pulling at him telling him he had to see. His body hidden halfway behind the closing front door, he watched in horror as a huge, dark, menacing form stepped halfway onto the hearth. He could hear its ragged breathing, its body seemed to expand with each breath, dark hair covering its body, yellow eyes glowed from the darkness, and he heard the wet smacking sound of a thick tongue running across sharp teeth. Trevor was

sweating. The monster leaned forward slightly, the elongated nose of a wolf pushed past the darkness, sharp teeth gleamed from snarled lips.

He wanted to scream. His body felt frozen in place and he focused all of his energy on breaking the hypnotic spell and escaping. He fought to close the door; with each inch he regained more of his faculties, the hex beginning to break. With a final burst of willpower, he slammed the door and took a step back, expecting the creature to burst through and give chase. A heartbeat, a breath, nothing.

The sound of footsteps running up behind him forced him to turn his attention from the door to the woods. He searched the mist and turned three hundred and sixty degrees looking for their origin. The hut was gone, retreating back into the dark dimension that he had briefly glimpsed. The sound of a snapping branch rang through the forest and he turned again.

She stood there in a long robe woven of earth, root, and leaves, emerging from the trees as if birthed from the forest and mist, left eye bulging, pulling him, enchanting him. The air seemed to warp around her, folding and forming a tunnel that originated from her eye and ended at the base of his nose directly between his eyes. It forced his eyes to cross, the trees dipped toward the swirling cyclone, perfectly straight trunks suddenly bending in the middle as this dimensional warp pulled them down, bowing to the dark force of the witch. Shadows danced around the tree trunks, pulled into the gravitational spin, forming a black tornado. The pain in his skull increased, he felt exhausted, an icicle tip forced its way into his head, and he screamed.

His head leaned against a birch trunk, the tip of his knife buried in its bark. He could feel the heat of the sun at his back. He pulled his forehead away and touched the place where the icicle had probed him, expecting to find a hole, blood, but there was nothing. The mist had receded, tendrils hovered low at his ankles

as the ground began to thaw. He put the knife back in its sheath and began to run away from the sun, heading west again. He did not, could not, spend another night in the forest. He would run all day if that was what it took to get away.

Muscles burning with acid, mouth and throat dry, he ran. Pain wracked every sense as his heart drummed, pumping blood through muscles that burned with every contraction. He had begun to cramp, his every breath seemed too shallow, his head swam, as he struggled for more oxygen. His world was pain, but the ghost of the witch chased him, spurring him on. To quit, to walk, would be to give in to her, would be to give in to pain and abandon his will to her. Whenever he glanced behind him, he saw her in that earthen, rotting robe standing next to her hut, waiting, one arm outstretched, palm up, talon-tipped index finger curling in a “come here” command. His heart would cramp and he would turn from the illusion, stare west, and run.

Beyond the pain he found a quiet place where everything was clear, the beauty beyond the torture. In this dimension his lungs inhaled air tinged with the smell of pine and cedar, his feet floated above a soft carpet of leaves, his eyes gazed upon a forest sparkling with light. His wife and son playfully hid behind trees giggling, his son took up the pace beside him, a look of pure joy on his face as the wind tossed his light brown hair behind him, brushing his cheeks with its cool fingers. They gazed at each other for a moment, a miraculous second that expanded to eternity. A tear fell from the corner of Trevor’s eye, one born of joy, and it felt warm on his cheek. As he reached the end of the forest, his son’s magic faded, as did the euphoria. As he entered the tall grasses of a valley meadow, he slowed his pace, feeling pain everywhere, his leg muscles burning and then locking up in a spasm.

Across the expanse of grass, maybe a mile or more to the west, was what he assumed was the base of Blood Mountain. His eyes moved upward over razor-sharp rocks to a dense line of

pinetrees that gradually diminished to rock again before turning to glacier and reaching the snow-capped summit. A stream ran from the glacier down the face of the mountain; its water was the color of blood. The sun blazed down upon the peak, suspended for a moment at its zenith, its rays transforming snow and ice to sparkling crystals, before it slowly ticked toward descent.

The mountain was huge, easily the highest peak he had ever seen let alone climbed. For some reason he had thought of the crossing as symbolic, he had not thought the ascent to be a challenge in itself. There were two things he now knew he needed to remember if he were to fight this fight: "Don't assume anything" and "Don't believe the witch. The witch lies."

He stood still, struggling to catch his breath, hoping the burning pain would drain from his muscles and the cramping would stop. He did not want to sit down, fearful he would be unable to get up again. The cold ground would not be a good bed. As he waited for the cramping to subside and his breath to return to normal, he scanned the valley and the woods at the base of the mountain. To the north there was a small hut made of stacked timber sealed with pitch, the front door faced east, smoke rising from the chimney at the west end of a severely pitched roof made to slough off the deep snows that would pile up and collapse beams with its winter weight. Although he had sworn off assumptions, he nevertheless had to assume this to be the dwelling of the shaman the priest had told him about, for there was no other human habitation in sight.

Further north and south were mountains stretching to the horizon in each direction. None as tall as Blood Mountain but none a mere hill to traverse either. Even if he were not to take the witch's bait, his only options would be to turn back east or follow the chain to the sea. To go west he would have to cross one mountain or another. But that was for later.

Using his long spear as a walking stick, he hobbled toward the hut, continuing to scan all directions for potential attack, for



the previous night's fiasco had taught him a valuable lesson. Until this was over there would be no rest. He had to maintain discipline and could take nothing for granted. Not even what his eyes told him. He was open to pitfalls in every direction; every object, even his own thoughts, could become a means of attack.

Even with this new attitude and stretching his awareness to its limits, he did not detect the shaman. Slowly he made his way through the meadow, using his spear as a crutch, and then hobbled up the front steps to the narrow porch. He was about to knock on the door when he felt the muzzle of a gun pressed up against the base of his skull. He felt the cold steel pushing at his skull, a frigid circle that outlined the hollow bore that could spit lead death into his brain. There were a series of clicks as the hammer was pulled back, the cylinder turned, and then a final click as it lined a bullet up with hammer and bore, ready to fire. The sound was deafening in the silence, filling his entire awareness, there was nothing else but this circle of steel caressing his head and the death it prophesized. A shiver rattled down his spine and sent a frozen spike through the back of his brain, projecting the bullet's course. A deep voice rolled in like distant thunder.

"And who might you be?"

For a moment he could not speak. He tried to take a deep breath and was interrupted by the barrel being shoved more forcefully into his skull. "Well?"

"Nobody you'd know. Name's Trevor."

"And what brings you to my door, Trevor."

"The Coma Witch."

"She sent you?"

Trevor could hear the anger in the man's voice, the words spit from his mouth, teeth grinding.

"No! No. I'm chasing her. She killed my family."

"If you've met the witch, then you know there is no way I can believe you based purely on what you say. This could all be a

lie meant to make me trust you and bring my guard down so that you can attack. Happened before. So what are we to do?"

Trevor had not considered this. He had been contemplating traps but had never considered the fact that he might be considered a snare for others sent from the witch. He had taken for granted that he would be believed. His pain and sadness had made him blind. He chided himself yet again, which depressed him all the more. The priest had been right, the man he was could not win this battle. He would have to become something else. But how? Defeated, frustrated, exasperated, he spoke, "I've come here to ask you to teach me how to find her and kill her. If you won't help me and don't believe me, then please just kill me."

It was not the words but their delivery and the pain that emanated from Trevor that convinced the man. He removed the gun. Trevor turned to face him. The shaman had high, jutting cheekbones, a long, narrow, jagged nose that had obviously been broken a few times, and long, straight, jet-black hair. A deep scar ran from the corner of his right eye down to his jaw line, a deep river of pain cut by some sharp blade. Above gray eyes was a brow that had the deep creases of worry and contemplation. Those stormy gray irises haloed the black sun of unwavering pupils that studied and examined him.

He seemed to come to a decision, blinked, placed the revolver back in the holster at his hip, and then cleared his throat softly.

"I'll help you with a few conditions. One, you do what I ask without question. No matter how foolish or unbelievable it may seem."

"I shall."

"Two. You never give up. You kill her or she kills you. Those are the only two outcomes."

"Never quit till one of us is dead. Promise."

"Name is Rakesh." He held out his large calloused hand.

Trevor took it and shook.

Trevor looked down at the gun, somewhat in awe of it. His grandfather had had one, but only a handful of bullets. They had used it a few times to hunt deer, and then grandfather had told him he was saving the rest for a special occasion that, to Trevor's knowledge, never came. That was the only gun he had ever seen, and when his grandfather died he had not found the gun among the old man's belongings. As a blacksmith, Trevor believed he would have been capable of creating a gun but he had never found a reason for doing so. In Devon, there was no law against the use of ancient techknowledge but there was a social more in place that said once an object of techknowledge ran out or stopped working it was not to be repaired or recreated. Doing so could lead down the same slippery slope the ancients had found themselves sliding down.

"You seen one before haven't you?"

Trevor nodded.

"I only have a few bullets. Save them for the people that walk up to a door in the middle of nowhere and come knocking." He grinned and then gave Trevor a wink.

"Come in. One night's sleep and then we will begin your training tomorrow."

Trevor nodded.

End of Sample