

THE VAMPIRE SKELETON

SARA GENERAL

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SPIRIT & INTENT
OHSWEKEN, TURTLE ISLAND

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For Roronhiakehte, who tells a good story.
Gonohkwa.

The very substance of this weird legend seems unreal...

—J.J. CORNPLANTER

CHAPTER ONE

The Spirit of the Wind

Today was all about the wind. The wind could be called. It could be held. It could be a friend or an enemy. It was the most important spirit to conjure if one had the ability—and I did.

But after six years of training to be a healer, I'd come to the conclusion that having such abilities was far more trouble than they were worth.

“Concentrate, Rowen. Stop frowning.”

I closed my eyes and tried to clear my mind, colouring my thoughts with cool green light and letting the tension I'd been holding in my shoulders melt away. I felt the wind curl around my fingertips and lift my hair from my neck. I knew I was supposed to be able to see the Spirit of the Wind by now, but all I could see was the sun flicker between the leaves of the trees and dance across the back of my eyelids.

It'd been this way for the last hour—perhaps longer. Twenty feet in front of me sat a stack of driftwood that Marianne and Holden had brought from the river. My task was to knock it over using the power of the wind—a task I'd been failing at spectacularly.

I gave up trying to summon the wind and tried to visualize the pile of driftwood instead. It worked. Almost instantly, my target came into focus. I saw how Holden had placed the logs in just such a way that the barest brush in the right spot would be enough to topple the entire stack.

I pictured myself standing next to it, fingers outstretched, straining to reach the pile. I was almost there—

“Stop!” Marianne barked.

My eyes flew open, the vision in my mind falling apart at the seams. “What? What’s wrong?”

“You know very well what’s wrong,” Marianne admonished, shaking a wrinkled brown finger at me. “You’re to use the *wind* to topple the pile, not your mind tricks.”

“I wasn’t using mind tricks!” I said.

“You were, and you know you were.”

I smoothed the tangles out of my long black hair as I turned to Holden, who was lounging on a fallen tree trunk, his knife out as he sharpened the end of a spear. “Don’t look at me,” he said. “I don’t even know what you two are talking about.”

“Nice,” I snapped. He grinned in response. I rolled my eyes. Holden thought he could smile his way out of anything. More often than not—he was right. “Marianne, I wasn’t using mind tricks. I *felt* the wind—I just couldn’t see it. I thought if I just visualized what was supposed to be happening, the spirit might actually appear.”

“That’s exactly what a mind trick is, Rowen. If you’re doing the exercise properly, there’s no need to visualize the wind to be able to harness it. The Spirit of the Wind wants to help you—but you have to ask, clearly and without any alternative motive. Tell me the truth. What were you thinking about?”

For the briefest of moments, my eyes travelled to Holden and then back to Marianne again. I stared at her extra hard—hoping she hadn’t noticed.

She had.

“Oh never mind,” she grumbled. “Off you go. I’ll see you again tomorrow—and you’d better be ready this time.”

A smiled spread across my face. “I will be, Marianne. I promise.”

I picked up my bag and slung it over my shoulder, practically skipping over to where Holden was waiting for me.

“And Rowen?”

“Yes?” I said, turning back to look at her.

“Come *alone*, next time,” she said wryly.

“Yes, Marianne,” I said, taking Holden by the hand and pulling him away.

We stumbled along the pathway back to the village.

"You give her such a hard time," Holden said.

"What? No, I don't! Not on purpose at least."

"Not on purpose!" Holden laughed. "Are you kidding? You have the coolest apprenticeship in the entire village, and you act like it's some kind of punishment."

"I do not act like it's a punishment. And there's plenty of cool apprenticeships in the village. Just look at yours!"

Holden made a face. "Learning to hunt? Making bows and arrows? It's the same thing every guy gets to do. There's not a one of us who wouldn't kill for the chance to do what you're doing. Calling on the elements and summoning spirits? That's amazing."

"It's not as cool as it sounds," I said. "And anyway, I'd much rather be with everyone else."

"Doing what? Making clothes? Working in the kitchen?"

"I wish I were in the gardens," I said. My father said there was no higher calling than tending to the gardens. It was the one thing we both agreed on.

"You do spend time in the gardens."

"Only with the medicines," I pointed out. "I never work with the food."

"Food *is* a medicine."

"You know what I mean."

"And you know what I mean. You're training to be a healer! You have the ability to see and do things most other people can't. I don't know why you don't just embrace it."

I didn't have an answer—not one he'd understand. Heavens knew, I'd had more than enough time to get used to my abilities. My visions had started when I was still a little girl. I would talk to people no one else could see. At first, my parents thought I had imaginary play friends, the same as any other child did. But then those friends started to tell me things—when a storm was coming, that a drought was going to ruin the first string of crops, or that one of my cousins needed a certain kind of medicine to stop their bad dreams—and they realized something else was going on.

By the time I turned ten, I could see the auras of other people without even trying. They shimmered at me, as vibrant as the northern lights in a clear night sky. I saw them all the time, every day. When I turned thirteen, and the visions still didn't stop, the village healer came to my parents' house and asked if she could meet me. I'd been her apprentice ever since.

"I don't know how many times I have to tell you how lucky you are." Holden's voice pulled me from my memory. "You're the only apprentice whose mentor can send you beyond the wall, and once you've become a full-fledged healer, you can go there anytime you want."

"Yeah, I can cross the wall," I said. "But only to pick medicine."

"So? You can still take in the sights while you're there. See the city."

"Why would I want to do that? Why would *you* want to do that?"

Holden grinned and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Sometimes, I get sick of it around here. I do the same thing every day. If I had the chance to leave whenever I wanted, I’d probably do it all the time. At least it’d be something new.”

I felt my jaw tighten. This wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned how bored he was with our lives here. “Well, you had the choice. You didn’t have to return here after the Spring. You could have left.”

“Nah, I couldn’t have left.”

“Why not?” I snapped. “If it makes you so miserable.”

“I have my reasons.”

“I can’t imagine what could be important enough to keep the great Holden from his destiny beyond the wall.”

“Can’t you?” His tone was light, but this did not entirely mask the way his voice changed. I turned to face him and found him staring back at me, an intense questioning in his gaze. A shiver that had nothing to do with the weather needled down my spine. I was keenly aware of how little distance there was between us. What would happen if I closed it?

“No,” I replied, swallowing. “I can’t.”

There was a sudden rustling in the brush. I froze as a wild turkey flew across the path in front of us—its head bobbing as if the tip of its beak was hauling it along.

Holden laughed and grabbed my arm. He pulled me forward. “All I’m saying is it’d be nice to go there whenever we wanted, instead of having to promise we’ll

never go there again and trying to find a way of sneaking across.”

“Sneak across? Are you serious?”

“I might be.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Don’t be stupid, Holden. No one’s ever managed to sneak across the wall.”

“Well, I guess I’ll be the first then.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ll be caught like all the rest. And then you’ll be forced to leave.”

“I won’t get caught,” he said. “As for being forced to leave, don’t you think it’s a bit harsh to be exiled just for sneaking across a bit of old stone?”

“No.” I shrugged. “Wanting to sneak across the wall is like saying Harrowstone isn’t enough, and if it isn’t enough, then maybe the person sneaking away doesn’t belong here anyway.”

Holden tensed, and he drew his shoulders back.

Uh-oh. I’d made him upset.

“You only think that because that’s what you’ve been told to think,” he muttered.

“That’s not true!” I said.

“Yes, it is. It’s easy to think something’s fair when it hasn’t affected you.”

I bristled. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a child. I’ve lost people to the other side of the wall.”

“Pfft. No one close,” Holden scoffed.

“Kennedy was close,” I said.

“That was one friend. I’ve lost cousins, uncles, a sister.”

“Yeah. And you know what? They all left because they wanted to.”

“They left because they had no choice.” Holden was insistent.

“They had a choice.”

“No, they didn’t. The rules are written so strict that they had no other option left. That’s not the same as making a free choice.”

I didn’t say anything. As far as I was concerned, it was completely fair, but telling Holden that was only going to make him angrier. Every young member of our community had to leave it when we were sixteen years old to go and experience the outside world. We did this before deciding whether or not we wanted to remain in Harrowstone. His sister and cousins had all chosen to stay on the other side of the wall. I knew he didn’t like it, but I didn’t see the problem. If people didn’t want to live in our community—we didn’t force them to. We let them go. It was as simple as that. Holden didn’t see it that way, and he never had.

Deciding to stay here after the Spring wasn’t the only way to end up on the other side of the wall. From time to time, people were asked to leave either because they tried to sneak out or because they broke protocol and were sentenced to leave by the Elder’s Council. These days, the latter seemed to be happening more and more.

Talking about this with Holden never seemed to end well. He didn’t like what he called my “black and white” way of looking at it. I didn’t like the fact that he always

seemed to be on the fence about whether he really wanted to be here or not.

“Let’s not talk about this right now,” I suggested as we arrived at the lake. “Let’s enjoy the rest of the day. We still have time to practice before the wedding.”

He still looked upset, but he agreed. Half an hour later, the conversation lay behind us, forgotten.

CHAPTER TWO

The Betrothal

“How was your bout with Holden?” my father asked.

“It was good! Flopped him twice today.” I smiled to myself, recalling the sight of him on the ground, legs in the air after I’d hooked his foot with my staff.

“That’s my girl.” My dad ruffled my hair.

“Don’t encourage her!” My mom turned around and glared at my dad, a ribbon shirt hanging from her hands. She was laying out the clothes we were going to wear to the wedding. “She shouldn’t be fighting.”

“She needs to know how to defend herself.”

“She’s going to be the healer. Why would she need to learn a weapon? It makes no sense.”

A part of me agreed with her—I didn’t *need* to learn how to fight to do what I was being trained for, but I wasn’t going to give it up either. Besides—it kept me in

good physical condition. I needed that for the ceremonies we did. They could be exhausting.

“Is your dress finished yet?” my mother asked, drawing the conversation back to the wedding preparations.

I answered her between swallows of sweet black tea. “Almost. The ribbon around the cuffs is all I have left to work on. And I finished the belt last night.”

She sighed. “I told you to put the ribbon on first. Now it’ll be hard to match the ends up with one another.”

“It’ll work out. I’ll just be careful.”

She pursed her lips but didn’t comment further. “Holden’s parents must be very excited. It’s not every day your daughter gets married.”

“He hasn’t said anything about it,” I said. “Maybe it’s not such a big deal for them.”

“I’m sure it is. Did you remember to tell him we have a gift for Persia?”

“Of course.” I hadn’t told him any such thing, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Ellen.” My father made a just-drop-it-already face at my mother. She flashed him a sheepish sort of smile and shrugged innocently.

“I’m just asking a question, Derek.”

She certainly was. It didn’t take any great stretch of imagination to guess where these questions were leading. Betrothals were approved in advance and announced by the Elder’s Council at the end of every wedding. It was one of the reasons weddings had become such an anticipated event in our community. I had turned eighteen

last Spring and was now of age. She was wondering when it was going to be our turn.

“I’m going to go and finish my cuffs.”

I gathered up my dress and took it out to the front porch of our house. It was a small house, like all the others in Harrowstone. None of the buildings except the council house and the library had more than one story. There were two hundred homes in our community, but now that Holden’s sister Persia was getting married, another one would be added to the whole, as was our custom.

I had to admit, it would be amazing to have my own place and actual privacy for a change. To cook whatever I chose. To go to bed whenever I felt like it. Of course—I’d have to get married first.

I settled down with my dress on my lap, straightening out the ribbon I was going to sew onto the frayed edges of my cuff.

How bad could it be, having a wedding? For one thing, I’d have a new dress. That would be nice. I’d worn this one to the last five weddings we’d celebrated.

I’d also have a husband, which was funny, because I’d never even had a boyfriend.

A part of me knew Holden’s and my parents hoped for us to marry one another, and since the council worked hard to pair couples off within the first year of gaining their majority, we were an obvious choice. We were both eighteen. Our families liked each other. We got along.

We weren't all just logistics and history either. Things were *changing* between us. I could feel it when we were alone together—that fluttering feeling I got when our hands lingered next to one another, a growing curiosity about what it would be like to kiss him. Every day, these impulses grew stronger.

What would my reaction be if the announcement tonight had our names attached to it?

My thoughts drifted to our walk earlier, about how our hands had closed around one another's, our fingers entwined. The answer was obvious—I would be happy.

“Oh! Wasn't the wedding beautiful?” My mother was still beaming from the ceremony. “I've never seen Persia look so lovely.”

It was true—Persia was absolutely radiant.

The ceremony had taken place in the woods beneath two billowing birch trees, their leaves in full blossom, white flowers fluttering overhead as a gentle breeze moved through the forest. All of Harrowstone sat in a semi-circle around them, witnesses to their union. One of the elders, Demas Elm, had been asked by their family to speak to them. He spoke about their responsibilities to one another, the great honour they had to become a family and have children, and their duty to uphold the values of our community. After he was finished, we made our way back to the longhouse to eat and celebrate.

I had a clear view of the head table from where we were sitting, so I could see Persia and her husband throughout the feast. Every so often, he leaned over to whisper in her ear and a peal of girlish laughter rang out across the other tables. Her eyes were filled with such deep contentment, I found myself marvelling at the magic of marriage.

If this is the kind of happiness it could bring to people, then truly—everyone should get married.

Probably that's what the council was aiming for when they first wrote the protocol. Eventually, if those born in Harrowstone chose to stay, they all wound up with a partner—with someone to love and care for them when it was time to leave their parents.

My parents sat to my left, their arms wrapped around one other—a perfect match. As much as I loved them, I had this feeling that my time with them was coming to an end.

“What is it, sweetheart?” my mother asked me.

“Nothing. I was just thinking how good you two look together.”

She smiled and was about to reply when someone made a loud bird-like call, and Marcus, one of the council members, moved in front of the table where the bride and groom sat facing us.

Silence fell, replaced by an excited humming that rippled through the crowd. This was it. A new couple was about to be announced.

“Nya:weh swagwe:goh,” he began. “For being here to celebrate the union of this fine couple.”

A smattering of applause trickled through the audience. I saw two other recently married couples huddle closer together, remembering their own special day.

“When we first chose this couple, we knew they had a history together, a special bond that would make any other match preposterous. These two chose one another long before the council ever put their heads together to find them a match. Over the past few years, we’ve watched them excel in their apprenticeships, become leaders to their peers, and it was obvious that it was time for them to start their life together. Persia and Cyprus,” he said, turning to look at them. “We offer you our congratulations.”

A burst of applause broke out across the entire room. I caught Holden’s eye as he turned around to say something to his parents. His eyes were shining, and his face was alight with happiness.

“Now then.” Marcus held up his hand. A hush fell over the crowd, and he grinned at how excited we all were for what came next. “It gives me great pleasure to announce the next match in our community, for the wedding that will be held this fall. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in offering our congratulations to Holden Martin—”

At the sound of Holden’s name, my heart started to beat faster. This was it. They were choosing us.

“And Angel Adams.”

My chest was tight. I couldn't draw a full breath. I clutched my stomach, trying to keep everything down, but it was like my dinner was fighting to get out. The words kept repeating themselves over and over again in my head.

Holden and Angel. Holden and Angel.

My hands clenched the railing of the porch outside the hall. I had no recollection of coming outside.

This can't be happening. There must have been a mistake.

I heard footsteps behind me and blinked. I'd have recognized them anywhere. Marianne.

"Oh, sweetheart. Are you okay?"

My throat was about to burst open, and my heart was heavier than a boulder. "I'm fine."

"You can tell me the truth."

"I am telling you the truth. I'm fine."

Why does this hurt so much?

"Rowen—"

"Stop! Fine. You want to know how I'm feeling? Miserable. I'm feeling miserable. Which is exactly what you wanted all along, isn't it?" I spun around to face her.

"Of course it isn't!" Her mouth fell open as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"You said you wanted me to come alone tomorrow. You didn't want Holden around me anymore. Well, there you go. You got your wish!"

"That's not fair, Rowen," she said, her shoulders slumping.

With a pang of guilt, I turned away from her. Sadness made Marianne appear so young—so frail. I couldn't attack her when she was vulnerable, no matter how upset I was. I let out a deep breath and shook my head. "I'm sorry. It's just...I can't believe what just happened in there."

"I know," she said. "I can't believe it either. If there was something we could do, someone we could talk to. But the protocol..."

"Of course." The protocol. The protocol that stated there was no appealing decisions of the council with respect to arranged marriages. The protocol I'd defended with every ounce of conviction I had. The protocol that was taking my best friend away from me.

I was such an idiot.

More people were coming outside now. I couldn't face them. I had to get out of here. I had to get away from the hundreds of whispering voices that had just witnessed my heart breaking.

"Look, Marianne, I just need to be alone right now."

"Of course. Go on. I'll let your parents know you need your space."

I waited until I reached the path leading from the village to the lake, where I could be certain no one would see me—and then I ran.

I ran until I reached the beach, stopping short of running straight into the waves. It was okay, I told myself over and over again as I paced back and forth. Everything was okay.

So Holden would marry another girl. What difference did it make to me? I trusted our leaders, didn't I? Trusted the council to make this decision, to chart my path and his without either of our consent.

No. They had no right...

I scrunched my hands up in fists and crouched down, holding my forehead to the back of my wrists.

I had to stop this. My thoughts were being twisted up so hard, it hurt.

"Breathe," I whispered to myself, inhaling deeply. The air tasted like bits of sand and water. I opened my eyes and stared out at the lake. It looked almost black beneath the night sky. Maybe a swim would help me. I needed to wash away these feelings of anger before their roots took an even greater hold.

There was a snapping noise behind me, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I wasn't alone.

I felt along the wet, sandy ground until my hand grazed a rock. Closing my fingers around it, I stayed crouched, waiting.

"Who's there?" I called out. "Hello?"

I could sense someone moving through the brush. My mind cleared slightly as instinct took over, alerting me to danger and urging me to be on my guard.

"Show yourself!" I commanded, using the voice that Marianne taught me to compel a response from the spirits.

Silence.

Then the rustling of branches as a figure slowly emerged from the path, stepping into moonlight that lit the entire beach. It was the last person in the world I wanted to see.

“Hello, Rowen,” Angel said. She twisted her hands together nervously in front of her.

You have got to be kidding me.

I stood up, my hand still clutched tightly around the stone. “Did you follow me here?” I demanded.

“I did. I...I wanted to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Because of what just happened.”

“Nothing happened.” The rock was biting into my skin now.

“Yes, it did.” Her voice was firm and calm—filled with a kind of certainty about her future. I could have laughed. Until an hour ago, that certainty had been mine. It was hers now. I couldn’t blame her. Who wouldn’t feel calm and at peace, with Holden as a husband?

“I’m sorry, Rowen,” she said.

I glared at her. It didn’t help that she did look sorry. She wore her hair in a long black braid that hung down her back, pressing against the material of her pink ribbon dress.

Ugh. She even looked like an angel.

“Angel? I appreciate your coming here, but I really need to be alone. So if it’s all the same to you, I’ll—I’ll see you around.”

“Rowen!”

I had already started walking in the other direction when she called out my name. The fear in her voice stopped me in my tracks. I spun around and saw its cause, my mouth dropping in horror as the creature flew across the sand toward us.

He was dressed all in black, his skin so white it looked like bone under the moonlight. A trace of borrowed life clung to him like a perfume.

Vampire!

Angel screamed. I didn't think—I threw out my hand and cried out, "Owade!"

A gust of wind burst forth from my hand and knocked the vampire over just as he was reaching for me.

"Ow!" I clutched at my chest as a spike of pain drove through it. I cursed as I hunched over, forcing a breath. What was happening?

And then my thoughts drifted to my afternoon sessions with Marianne. She had told me there were consequences for using my own energy to call the elements. This time, it had been my lungs. Who knew what it would be if I kept going? But I didn't have a choice. I wasn't strong enough to defeat a vampire in a fight, even with my abilities. And if I couldn't do it—Angel didn't stand a chance.

"Run, Angel!" I choked. "While you can!"

"What is that thing?"

"It's a vampire." She would never have learned about vampires from her apprenticeship in the gardens—not as anything more than a story to scare small children.

Well, she looked plenty scared now. “Don’t just stand there. Run! Get help. I’ll hold it off.”

She nodded, then turned and dashed back down the path.

The creature was back on his feet. I called him a creature, but, of course—he looked just like a man, a man with unnatural strength. His eyes bored into me. I hurriedly scanned the ground around me.

“Come on, come on, come on—there!” I spotted a large stick and knelt down to grab it. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do. “All right then,” I whispered with false bravado. “Let’s see what you’re made of.”

The vampire bared his teeth, then lunged at me, moving faster than I could have believed. I raised my stick in the air and swung, stepping into the blow with all my weight.

The vampire held up one hand and caught hold of the stick, jerking it toward him so that my body went flying. I hit the ground hard and kept going. A sharp pain stabbed my shoulder as I rolled onto my stomach.

He was on my back before I could get to my feet, forcing my face down into the sand. I screamed. The gritty taste of dirt crunched between my teeth. With one hand entwined in my hair, he yanked my head up, and I felt his teeth graze my neck.

I reached up, clawing at his face with my hands.

NO!

Heat exploded from my body as flames flew out of my palms, scalding the vampire’s face. He let go of me,

screaming in agony. As his cry pierced the air, I rolled onto my back and scrambled away from him. He was clutching at his face with both hands.

I took a breath, shivering uncontrollably as cold swept through my body. With great effort, I pushed myself onto one knee. The ground swam before me. No way would I be able to stand. I had used too much energy too quickly—my body was going into shock.

I could barely hold my head up, but the vampire had almost recovered from my attack. He swayed slightly on his feet, his face still black from the fire that had scorched his skin, his eyes black with murderous rage. He took a step toward me...

“Rowen!”

I looked toward the path. My vision was blurred, but I could still make out lights flickering through the trees. The voice that called out my name was not one I wanted to hear.

“Holden, no!” My voice was so weak even someone standing next to me would have had trouble hearing it. That wouldn’t do—I had to stop him. I forced myself to concentrate and shouted once more. “Holden!”

He came charging out of the forest, a large spear clutched in one hand. But spear or not—he was no match for the vampire.

“Just wait! Wait for the others!” I called. And he might have—if the vampire hadn’t come at me once more.

Holden didn’t miss a beat. He flew at the vampire, his spear pointed carefully in front of him the entire time.

He was a good fighter—agile and quick. If he'd been fighting another man, he would surely have taken a life that night. But this was no mortal he was facing, and vampires are renowned for their speed and strength.

I watched helplessly as the vampire caught Holden's spear in mid-air. He snapped it in half before tossing it away, grinning. He reached around Holden's shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. One hand yanked Holden's chin to the side, and then he sank his teeth into Holden's neck, tearing at his flesh.

Blood spurted out from Holden's neck. He made a horrible choking noise, and his entire body went limp, his head flopping sideways, his eyes unseeing.

Holden! No!

Rage shook my entire body. I shot to my feet and screamed again—so hard the vibration scraped the back of my throat on its way out. Power surged in my veins, forcing its way out of my body and light—orange, yellow and red—screeched through the air between us like a jet of flames. It was too much—I collapsed onto my knees, spent.

I heard someone moaning and voices hollering, calling out our names. I tried to move, but I couldn't feel anything. Not my legs, not my arms. There was nothing but the smell of weeds and the lake, the crackling of burning wood. I lay there on my back, desperate to see Holden, fighting to stay awake.

Stars swam in the sky above, twinkling down at me, reaching out as if they were going to pluck me from the sandy shore upon which I lay.

“Rowen?” I heard, as if from a great distance.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m fine.”

Everything went dark.

CHAPTER THREE

The Vampire Skeleton

The second I woke up, I wished I hadn't. My entire body felt stiff. Muscles I didn't even know I had were strained and aching.

"Ow." I touched my fingers to my collarbone. It felt like there were pins and needles all across my chest.

"Spirits alive. You're awake!" Marianne sighed in relief.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"You're at my house."

"Where's Holden?" The last thing I remembered was seeing him coming out of the forest.

"You shouldn't have used your powers like that," she said, as if she hadn't heard me.

I tried to sit up, lifting my head off my pillow. A searing bolt of pain flashed across my temples and I fell back again, groaning. "Ugh. What's happening to me?"

“Your body’s trying to recover from the trauma you just put it through. Wind? Fire? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I ought to defend myself.”

“Pfft. Defend yourself!” Marianne scoffed. “You almost got yourself killed.”

“You never answered me. Where’s Holden? Is he all rig—” My voice died in my throat. Through a crack in the door, I saw people rushing back and forth, tending to another patient. His face was so pale, it appeared grey. A small pile of bloody cloth lay at the foot of his bed.

“Holden!” I shot up from my cot. Marianne rushed to my side, grabbed my shoulders and pushed me back onto the bed.

“Close that door, you idiots!”

“Let go of me! I need to see him. Please, Marianne.”

“Lie back. You’re in no condition to be on your feet. He’s fine, Rowen. I promise. He looks much worse than he is.”

I flopped back onto my pillow, eyes burning with tears. She was right. That one brief effort had zapped my energy. As much as I wanted to get up, my body simply wouldn’t allow it.

Holden looked terrible—like he was going to die terribly. Guilt gnawed at my insides. Damn it. If only I hadn’t gone off and sulked, this would never have happened!

“Tell me everything,” I demanded.

“A vampire attacked you.”

“And then what?”

“You don’t remember what happened?”

“Not really.”

Marianne stood and walked away from me. At first I thought she was leaving but after she dimmed the light in the oil lantern on the table, she returned to the side of the bed with a medium sized basin. She dropped a white cloth into it, swished it around and pulled it back out. I sniffed at it. Fresh cedar. She used it to wash down my face and my arms. As she worked, I felt the pains in my muscles ebb away, and my thoughts grew clearer. As they did, my memory of the evening came back into focus

“I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt.” Including myself.

“I know,” she said.

“But I didn’t know what I was doing,” I said. “Everything happened so fast. I told Angel to run to get help, and then Holden was there.”

“She did as you asked,” Marianne said. “The Rivermen went out the moment she came back to the longhouse. Holden had already been on his way to the lake.”

Had he now? I hadn’t known that. Was it to find me or to find her? I shook my head. It didn’t matter now. Nothing mattered as long as he was okay.

“Did they get the vampire?”

She shook her head. “It was too fast. If I had been there, I could have helped them. Slowed it down, at least. But it’s been a long time since I could run anywhere.”

“It’s not your fault. At least it didn’t bite anyone.” Though it had been ages since anyone had seen a vampire, everyone knew that once you’d been bitten—you were done for. There was no cure for a vampire bite, only a slow, torturous death.

Marianne opened her mouth and then closed it, a stricken expression on her face. And then I remembered.

“Oh my God!” I sat up in my bed again, and this time Marianne couldn’t keep me from climbing to my feet. “He bit Holden. The vampire! He bit Holden!”

“Rowen, stop! Calm down.”

“No!” I pushed her away from me. “I need to see him. Now.”

He’d lost a lot of blood, and he was pale—paler than I’d ever seen anyone. A purplish tint coloured the skin around his eyes, which were closed in sleep.

Eyes watering, I took a deep breath and reached out to touch his forehead. His skin was cold and clammy. It was almost like I was touching the illness itself and my friend was buried somewhere underneath it.

“Oh Holden,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry. It should have been me.”

I knew I shouldn’t say things like that. I knew they sounded like I wasn’t grateful for what he’d done, but I couldn’t help myself. It no longer mattered that they’d called another name tonight. It no longer matter that he’d start a life with Angel—that she would be his wife.

He was my best friend. I loved him. I couldn't bear to let him die.

"She's a nice girl, Holden." I stroked his hair away from his face. "Kind and brave. You deserve that. And you're going to have it, I promise you. No matter what I have to do."

"Rowen?"

I turned to find Marianne standing in the doorway. "What are you doing to help him? What's your plan?" I asked.

"Rowen. You know there isn't—"

"We can't let him die. We have to save him. Tell me how. Tell me what I have to do."

With a sigh, Marianne's hand dropped from the door-frame and she came to stand at my side. She reached out and brushed the top of Holden's forehead, the same way I had, tracing a line to the base of his neck where two ragged-looking puncture wounds stared out at us.

"There's only one way to save him. And it's a long shot."

"Whatever it is, I'll do it."

Marianne bristled with impatience. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know I can't let him die for my foolishness."

"Love isn't foolish, Rowen. Don't you ever think it."

"Tell me what I have to do."

Marianne rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. "Sit down."

I took the seat next to Holden's bed. Marianne remained standing, hovering over him. Her shoulders were slightly hunched, and her chin was tucked toward her chest. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. It was the saddest I'd ever seen her.

"They say when our ancestors first heard of the vampire, we pitied them. Soulless. Ravenous. Cursed to live forever and watch everyone they loved die. It was not a pleasant existence. But there was one man who did not pity them. He envied the creatures. This man was a talented sorcerer who'd been living alone in the woods for a long time, and he dabbled in the dark arts. It twisted his spirit. They say he experimented with animals and blood in ways that are forbidden."

I'd heard this story before, but I didn't interrupt her.

"While travelling from one village to the next, a young man, his wife and child stumbled across the sorcerer's place in the woods. The sorcerer invited them to stay with him, as it was getting dark, and the woods were perilous at night. The family thought he was just a kind old man and accepted his invitation. The next morning, the woman woke and found her husband missing.

"The old man claimed the man had run off on them in the middle of the night, but the wife knew this was not true. Still, she didn't know what to do, and thinking perhaps her husband might return, she spent another night with the sorcerer. That night, her husband appeared to her in a dream. He told her the old man was a sorcerer who was trying to become a vampire and that he'd bitten

and killed him while they slept. He told her she had to run away during the day when the sorcerer was in the middle of his transformation and would be no more powerful than a human. He told her not to let the vampire bite her under any circumstances, for the only way to fully recover from a bite was to kill the vampire who gave it, and vampires were very strong.

“The next morning, the young wife made her escape, taking her baby with her. The sorcerer discovered she was missing and tried to chase her, but the sun slowed him down, and she made it to the safety of a nearby village. The village sent out a hunting party, and it chased the sorcerer back to his home. They caught up with him just as he was disappearing inside the house. But when they went to confront him, all they found was a jackrabbit amid a pile of old sheets and bones. They tried to grab the rabbit, but they were too late—it disappeared into the woods, and the old sorcerer was never seen again.

“More vampires came after that. All descended from the same old man. If he were to be killed, his magic would disperse and then the other vampires would die along with him. The same principles apply for the bite of any vampire, at least as it concerns our people. So you see, Rowen. There is only one way to save Holden.”

“The vampire who bit him has to be killed,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Council is already meeting to decide what is to be done. The attack was unexpected. Unprovoked. It’s scared a lot of people, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“Have you spoken to Council? Did you tell them what you told me?”

“I did.”

“What did they say?”

“As far as I know, they haven’t made any decisions yet.”

“How can they not have made a decision? Isn’t it obvious what needs to be done?”

Marianne didn’t answer me. I knew she was thinking I was young and didn’t understand how things worked. Well, from the sounds of it, neither did Council. One of our own was attacked. We couldn’t let it go unanswered. I looked her square in the eye.

“I want to be a part of that meeting.”

Marianne smiled weakly. “I thought you might say that. But honestly, dear, I don’t see what you can do.”

“I already told you what I’m going to do. I’m going to kill the vampire who attacked our community. Whether the council approves of it or not.”