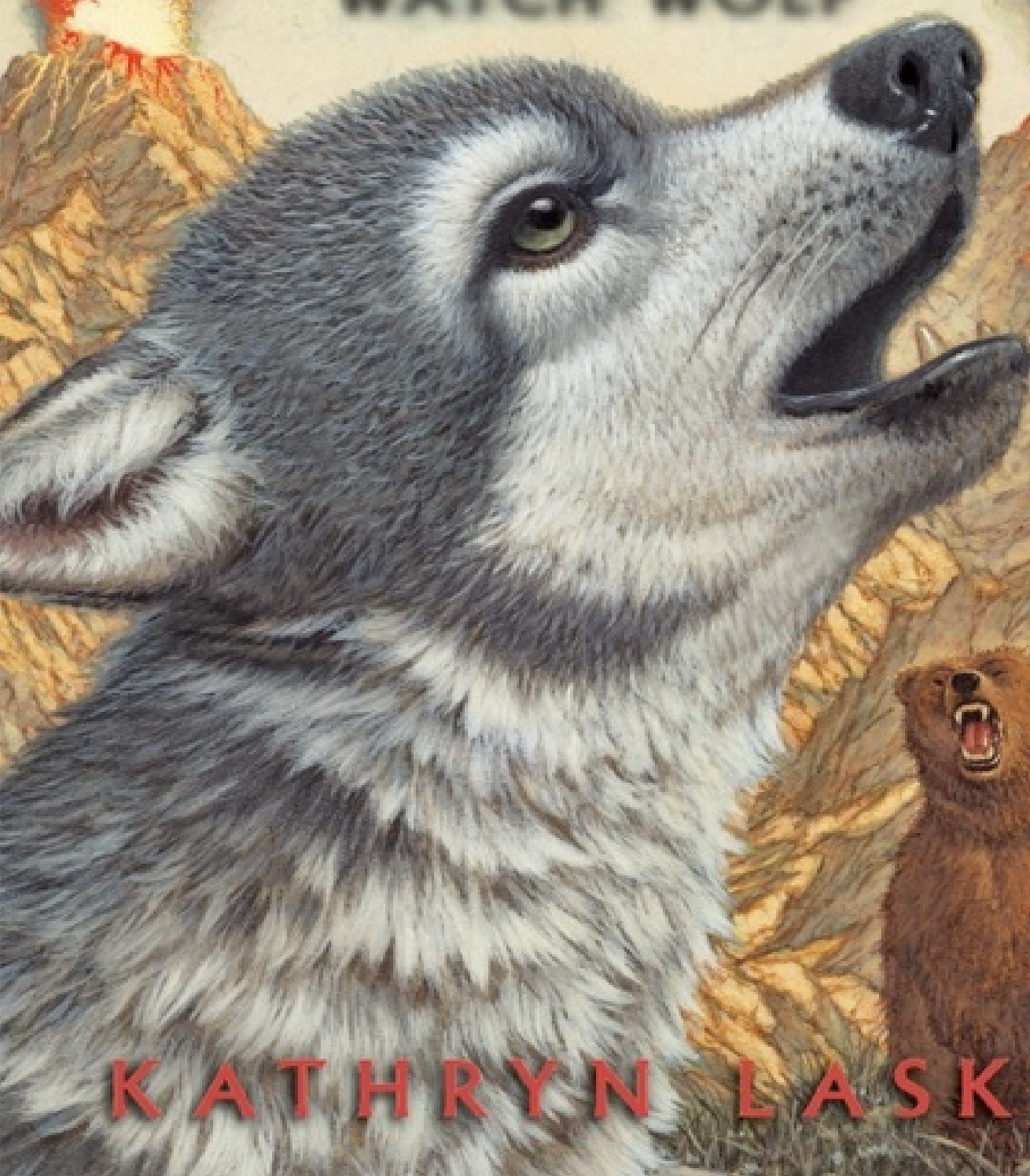


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WOLVES OF THE BEYOND

WATCH WOLF

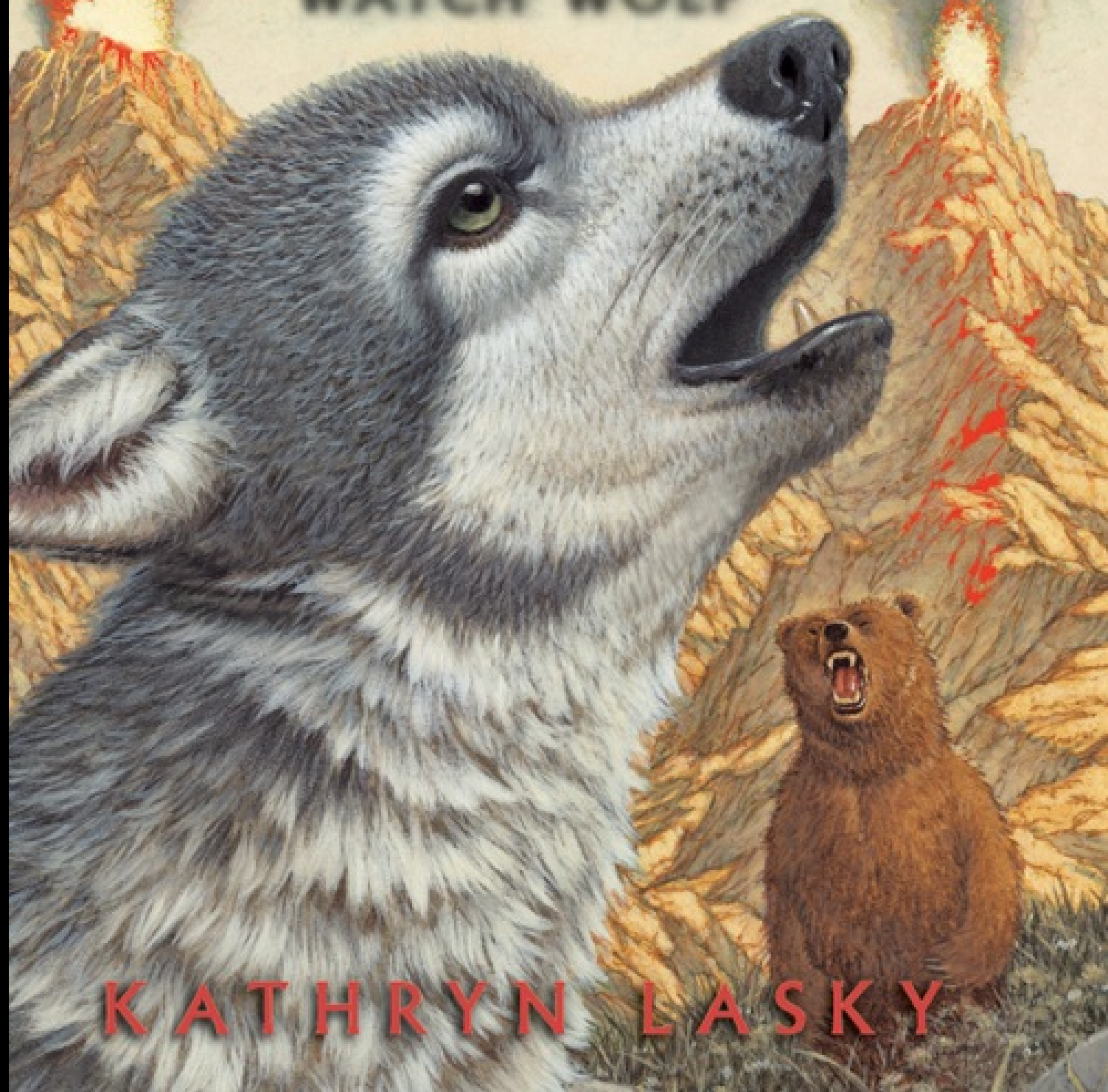


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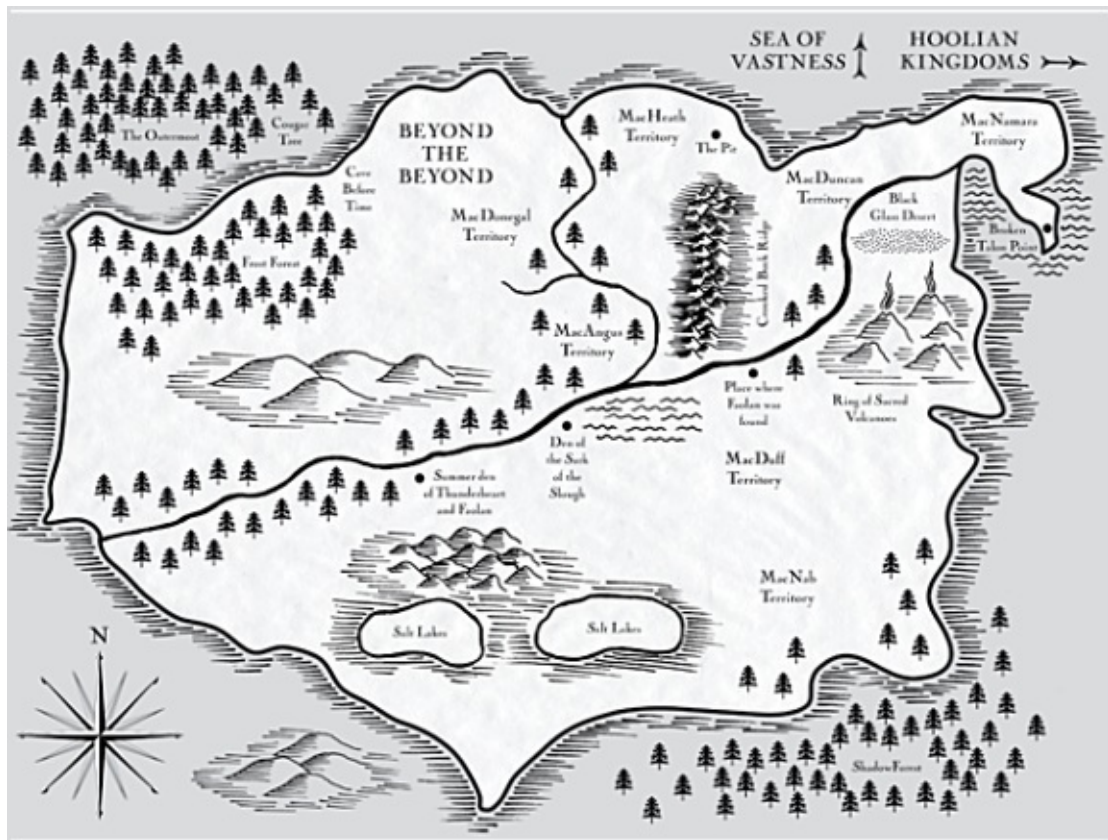
KATHRYN LASKY

**WOLVES OF THE
BEYOND**

WATCH WOLF



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PART ONE
THE JOURNEY



THUS SAYETH THE FENGO

TWO WOLVES STOOD ON A WINDSWEPT bluff overlooking an encampment where, two days before, a contest had been concluded. Faolan, the larger wolf, had a silver pelt and a malformed paw. The second wolf, Edme, was a dusty, rather pathetic-looking creature with only one eye. But against the odds, they had won the contest and would now become members of the most elite wolf group in the Beyond — the wolves of the Watch at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes.

At last, after years of abuse as gnaw wolves, the lowest-ranked wolves of all, they were able to stand tall, their ears shoved forward and their tails stretched high into the wind. Before they traveled to the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes to begin their new lives, there was one last journey to be made. The *Slaan Leat* — the journey of farewell, the journey to make peace. It was a journey toward truth and understanding, toward reconciliation with their fate to be born malformed, a *malcadh*, a cursed one.

All *malcadhs* were cast out of the wolf clans at birth, left to die in the wilderness. Only if they made it back on their own could they win a place with their clan. And they only won honor if they gained a seat on the Watch at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes. But from the time the first wolves arrived in the Beyond, it was decreed that all gnaw wolves must seek out their *tummfraw* where they were abandoned, before traveling to the Watch. By confronting the place where they were abandoned as pups, they would know that their days of humiliation and desolation as gnaw wolves were finished. Faolan and Edme had each been told the place of their *tummfraw*. Faolan had been abandoned on the banks of the big river that sliced the Beyond in two. For Edme, it was the northernmost peak of Crooked Back Ridge.

A bitter wind cut through the two wolves' pelts. The weather was unseasonably cold for a spring moon, the Moon of the Shedding Antlers. Both wolves looked up. The sky was sealed with roiling storm clouds, as if a blizzard was about to be unleashed. But weather did not concern them as much as this last journey. Through each wolf's mind coursed the same questions. *Will my desolation dissolve? Will I truly find peace? Will I finally belong?*

Their Fengo's words still rang in their ears. *Go forth, find your tummfraws, and know that you are cursed no more. You are malcadhs no more. You are wolves of the Watch and ready to serve. Thus sayeth the first Fengo who led us out of the country of the Long Cold and into the Beyond over one thousand years ago.*

CHAPTER ONE

UNDER THE STARS

“FAOLAN, DID YOU HAVE A SENSE of where your *tummfraw* was before the Fengo took you?” Edme asked.

“Well, I knew it had been on the banks of the river. Thunderheart told me so, but I was never sure where exactly.”

“But now that you know, does it seem right?” Edme peered at him intently with her single eye. They had set out together for the first part of their journey since their *tummfraws* were in vaguely the same direction. When the sun rose tomorrow, they would each go separate ways, and then after they had found their *tummfraws*, they would meet up again and travel together to the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes.

“Why do you ask if it seems right, Edme? The Fengo must know.”

“I suppose so, but I can’t explain it. That peak on Crooked Back Ridge just doesn’t seem to fit. I’ve heard that every gnaw wolf carries a sense of the place they were left to die. That the gnaw wolf has a hunch.”

“And you don’t?”

“I’m not sure.” She paused. “But if I had, it wouldn’t be the north peak on the ridge. That just seems entirely wrong to me.” She shook her head, as if she was trying to figure out something disturbing.

Faolan looked at her. Their acceptance into the Watch was supposed to mark the end of their desolation and despair, but Edme seemed more hopeless than ever.

Edme was a small wolf. Of all the gnaw wolves, her outward appearance was the most wretched. Yet her bold spirit dispelled pity. She possessed a natural optimism, a good cheer that was all the more remarkable because her clan, the MacHeaths, was known for their brutality. Even now, she tried to muster some of that good cheer, which made Faolan feel sorrier for her.

“Look, Faolan — look at the stars. There’s the Great Wolf pointing to the Cave of Souls. Now, what did you say Thunderheart called it?” The question was so like Edme — full of curiosity, so ready to be interested in someone else and not absorbed in her own worries.

“She said the bears call their Cave of Souls Ursulana.”

“What a lovely word — Ursulana.” Edme repeated the word as if to savor every syllable.

“I wonder sometimes if all heavens are really one, if there are no borders in the sky.”

“Splendid!” Edme exclaimed and began a baying song that she made up as she howled.

Long resonant howls curled into the night as constellations rose in the east, and the blackness of the night tingled with stars. Faolan listened. He hoped — oh, how he hoped — that he was right, that what Edme howled was true, that all those heavens were one. Then someday he would be united with Thunderheart, the grizzly bear who took him in when the wolf clan abandoned him and raised him as her own.

They had camped for the night near a small marsh sprigged with tiny bright yellow blossoms of beewort. The two wolves had found a place to sleep under an outcropping of rock. Across the top of the rock, a spider had woven a web, and its silk threads trembled in the night breeze. Faolan was taken by its delicate beauty. “I’ve heard that the silk of a spider’s web is much stronger than you could ever imagine.”

“Really?” Edme’s eye sparkled with interest. “Wherever did you hear that, Faolan?”

“The Sark. The Sark of the Slough. She told me. She uses it to stop bleeding and bind wounds.”

“You’re close to the Sark, aren’t you?” Edme asked in a taut voice. Faolan knew that the mere mention of the strange old wolf, whom many regarded as a witch, often provoked the response.

“Yes, she understands me in ways others don’t.”

“Do you suppose your mother visited her — you know, after ...” Edme didn’t finish the thought, but Faolan knew what she was asking.

After giving birth to a *malcadh* and being cast out of their clans, many she-wolves went to the Sark to recover. She had them drink potions that she brewed to help with what was called the Forgetting, so the she-wolves could move on, find a new clan, a new mate, and birth healthy pups.

“My mother, whoever she was or is, did not visit the Sark. The Sark told me so. Do you think your mother went to her?”

Edme hesitated before answering. “I have no idea, just as I have no inkling about the *tummfraw*.” Faolan noted that Edme did not say “my *tummfraw*.” The peak on the ridge had no more meaning for her than the most distant star.

Shortly after the two wolves set off, they picked up a trail of elk headed back north with their young calves. Caribou shed their antlers during the frost moons, but elk shed theirs during the spring moons. Thus this time was called the Moon of the Shedding Antlers or sometimes the Moon of New Antlers.

Mice populations made short work of the antlers, which were rich in nutrients. But Faolan and Edme had found a few still intact and had begun to gnaw them, inscribing them with designs that told the story of their *Slaan Leat*. This desire to gnaw designs was instinctual for Watch wolves. It was not required that they bring a *Slaan Leat* bone back to the Ring. But there was a compulsion that urged them to record their journey. It did not matter if the antler was ever seen or read; they needed to mark this milestone in their journey from gnawing wolf toward a life of service at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes.

And so they gnawed designs of the constellations floating above them and tried to describe the haunting scent of the beewort that drifted across the marsh, the quivering beauty of the

spiderweb sparkling with night dew, and the low, gentle song of the grass as the wind stirred
it on this late spring night.

CHAPTER TWO

WINTER DREAMS ON A SUMMER NIGHT

WHEN THE MOON SLIPPED AWAY, the wolves fell asleep and huddled against each other as the night became colder. Faolan dreamed of fire — a particular fire in the meeting cave of the MacDuncan clan when he had been brought before the *raghnaid*, the wolf jury, for having violated hunting law. It was not the warmth of that bright fire of which he dreamed — a fire that had been extinguished by the cold stares of the jury. It was a pattern of sorts that flared into his mind, a swirl of bright orange and yellow buried deep in the base of the flames. The spiraling flame echoed a mark on Faolan's splayed paw. In his dream, the spiral became larger and larger and seemed to devour him in a spinning madness as the late chief Duncan MacDuncan's face loomed immense behind the flames.

"He knew! He knew!"

"Faolan! Wake up!"

Faolan leaped instantly to his feet, towering over Edme. She looked up, concern filling her eyes. "Who knew what?" she asked.

"Did I say something in my sleep?"

"In your dream more likely — a bad dream at that."

"No! No! Not really bad. At least I don't think so. I dreamed of fire, of warmth," Faolan said.

"I dreamed, too, of warmth, a winter dream," Edme replied.

"For a summer vanished. Look!" Faolan peered out from their shelter.

A thin coat of ice skimmed the shallow water of the marsh. To the east, the rising sun splintered on jagged points of grass now stiff with frost.

"What in the world is going on?" Edme said. "Look, the spiderweb is still here, all frost-free, and the wind blew hard last night — but there isn't a tear in it! You said it was strong."

"Yes, and you can see that the frost must have doubled its weight. But it's all in one piece."

Edme's teeth were chattering as she stepped close to Faolan. "It's almost the summer moons, the Moon of the Flies. It makes no sense for it to be this cold!"

"Those elk and caribou, all the migrating animals, are going to turn right around and head south if this keeps up," Faolan said.

"If this keeps up, it's going to be the hunger moons of winter all year round."

The two wolves, both carrying antlers carved with their *Slaan Leat* stories tucked beneath their chins, parted ways at the edge of the marsh. Faolan was heading farther south toward the river, Edme heading north toward Crooked Back Ridge. They would meet at the beginning of the Moon of the Flies, the first of the true summer moons.

“Let’s hope the flies don’t become snowflakes,” Edme said with a touch of her old familiar cheer, which relieved Faolan. Perhaps she was not as downcast about this *tummfraw* business as he had thought. Surely she would feel something when she arrived at her peak.

The sudden frost of the previous night had melted away, and the sun shone bright in the blue bowl of the sky. Edme had expected the ridge to be capped in snow but was surprised at how low the snow line fell. Nevertheless, there was an abundance of tiny flowers flecking the slopes. The flowers that grew at this time of year were called Beyond Blossoms and were known for their toughness and ability to thrive in a harsh land with more rocks than soil and with abrasive winds that scoured away anything that could not cling fiercely. Their blossoming time was short, but a night of frost had not discouraged them. Edme paused and set down her antler to study the tiny face of an ice violet. They were the first of the Beyond Blossoms popping up at the end of the Moon of the Cracking Ice. As she peered into the purple cup with tiny little branching filaments at its center, she marveled at how the flower survived. It was no higher than half the length of one of her claws, and appeared to be growing straight out of the rock. *It’s so fragile and yet so strong, like the spiderweb after the frost.*

I must be strong, too, Edme thought as she plodded on toward the crest of the ridge. But with each step forward, she felt an increasing sense of unease. She was anxious, anxious to be done with what she felt was a travesty of some sort regarding this *tummfraw*.

By the time she reached the crest and headed toward the northern peak, it was high noon. *Get it over with,* she told herself. *Just get it over with.* The peak, of course, was not a point or mountaintop. She knew it wouldn’t be. From a distance, all peaks appeared sharp and seemed to prick the sky. But it was just a distortion of perspective. The greater the distance, the sharper the profile of a peak, but when approached, the land flattened. The *tummfraw* loomed up before her now, a flat table rock. She felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. *I was never here - never, ever here. This is not my tummfraw!*

CHAPTER THREE

THE SCENT OF THE RIVER

THE SCENT OF THE RIVER DOESN'T change much, no matter the season. Even when the ice is thick upon it, somehow the river's tang seeps through. After the Moon of the Cracking Ice in spring, the river unlocks; the deep ooze of the bottom mud mingles with the wood fragrance of tree roots that grow on the banks and are scrubbed by the coursing water. Faolan felt a quickening in his marrow as he passed the summer den and then the spring den where he had spent his infancy tucked in the embrace of his second Milk Giver, the great grizzly Thunderheart.

He knew the den as soon as he saw it. There was a steep embankment and just above it a large cave, where Thunderheart's last cub had been murdered by a pair of cougars. Faolan stopped. After all this time, there were still signs of a skid path down from the higher ground of the cave to the water. Stumps from broken trees stood witness to the grizzly's rage as, with grief, she had hurled herself toward the roaring river, only to find that it was too shallow for her to drown. There she had sat for hours, keening into the wind, begging Great Ursus to take her life, until something snagged on her foot. At first she thought it was a clump of river debris torn from the bank in the river's spring tumult. But it was not. It was a tiny wolf pup.

So often Thunderheart had told this story to Faolan. Her words came back to him now as he stood on the spot where Thunderheart had found him, half a league from the *tummfraw* where the Obea Shibaan had left him. He would go to his *tummfraw* soon, but he needed to stop here for a spell and think. *I sought death*, he remembered Thunderheart saying, *and you sought life. You were a gift from the river.* There were no more stories now, for Thunderheart was dead. There were only bones left to gnaw to her memory.

Faolan made his way toward his *tummfraw*. It wasn't as difficult to find as he had thought. He looked down at the bank gouged out now by three winters of rampaging ice and water. His pulse seemed to quiver deep in his marrow, and his hackles rose. This was indeed the place. There was a weathered rut that could have been the very one made when the fragment of ice on which the Obea placed him had torn from the bank. So this was his *tummfraw*, this little spot of bank was where, as a mewling pup, he had been left to die.

He circled it three times. There was a familiarity to the spot that stirred the scent glands between the toes of his paws, and he found himself marking the ground. Then he settled on his haunches and looked out at the river flowing gently by. A mist began rising as the river water, still cool from winter, mingled with the warmer air. The mist became thicker, furling and unfurling into undulating patterns that were almost hypnotic. The roar of the river

torrential rampage during the night he was abandoned came back to him. He gripped the banks now as once as a tiny pup he had gripped the ice raft. All of the sensations of those moments came back to him — the dizzying nausea as the ice shelf bounced in the turbulence, the terrible cold when icy water dashed over him, and the roar that grew louder and louder. His claws still digging into the bank, he looked deeply into the mist and saw a familiar pattern. The same design that had swirled through the fire in his dream the previous night now swirled in the mist before him.

In that moment, Faolan knew what he would do. He would bring some of Thunderheart's bones back to the cave high up on the riverbank and build a *drumlyn*, a small mound, to honor her. It had bothered him that he had never seen the *lochín* of Thunderheart climb the star ladders to Ursulana, the bear heaven. If he made this *drumlyn*, it might be a perch from which her spirit could leap. He would build Thunderheart's *drumlyn* not on the place of his abandonment but on the place where he had been found. This was the meaning of the *Slá* *Leat* for him. The mist had cleared and the river ran on smooth and dark, like an amber ribbon. As Faolan trotted at a brisk pace toward the secret place where he had buried the bones of his second Milk Giver, another thought began to seep into his mind as if out of nowhere. *My first Milk Giver! Who was she? What did she think of me? Did she feel cursed to give birth to such a pup? Were there others? Do I have sisters or brothers still in the clan?*

CHAPTER FOUR

A TRUE GNAW WOLF?

AS EDMER MADE HER WAY DOWN from the northern peak of Crooked Back Ridge, she could not help but wonder what Faolan had felt when he found his *tummfraw*. She was certain that he would not have experienced the same emptiness she had when she stepped onto the table rock at the peak. Whenever she thought about it, she wanted to blame herself, but she knew this made no sense. She was not to blame — if anything, it was the *tummfraw* that was wrong, or the Fengo who had made a mistake. She was almost tempted to go to the Obea of the MacHeath clan and ask her point-blank if this was the right *tummfraw*. But Edme had to be honest with herself. She loathed the entire clan and had no desire to go back into MacHeath territory.

The MacHeath Obea was a white wolf named Airmead. This was a cruel name, for in the Old Wolf language, it meant “barren.” Of course all Obeas were barren, but only the MacHeaths would choose to take away whatever the Obea’s real name was to call her after her pathetic condition. The MacHeaths had a malevolent instinct that flowed through the blood like a treacherous current. They fed off it like vampire bats drink blood from animals, leaving just enough to ensure that the animals live and the bat can come back for more. MacHeaths who did not feed off cruelty either grew weak and died or left for one of two places — west to the Outermost to live with the savage outclanners, or far to the northeast to the MacNamara clan. No, Edme had no desire to see any of the MacHeaths. She was already too close to their territory for comfort.

As she wound her way down and across the steep slopes of the ridge, Edme tried to imagine how a little one-eyed pup could have made her way down the precipitous slope and back to her clan. They said that all *malcadhs* who survived had an instinct that led them back to their clan’s territory. But Edme found it hard to believe. Her urge had always been to put as much distance as possible between herself and her clan.

She was still occupied with these thoughts when she reached the bottom of the ridge, and a pair of yearlings, Ingliss and Kyran, from the chieftain’s pack of the MacHeath clan appeared. She felt a twitch deep in her marrow. These two young females had particularly enjoyed abusing her when she was a gnaw wolf. They knew exactly where to attack to cause her the most fear as well as the most pain, and took pleasure in biting her as close as they could to her one good eye. She instinctively lowered her tail and began to sink into a submissive posture, but suddenly stopped. *I don’t need to do this anymore. I am not a gnaw wolf. I am a member of the Watch. If anything, they should submit to me.* Edme’s hackles raised, she shoved her ears forward, and her single eye glinted bright green.

“Well, you’ve certainly learned quickly!” Ingliss, the larger of the two, said.

“Yes, but doesn’t a one-eyed wolf look funny with her hackles up?” Kyran added nastily. Kyran always took her cues from Ingliss. They worked as a tag team of abuse.

“You know, of course, you don’t deserve to go to the Ring,” Ingliss said. Edme tilted her head. She wouldn’t deign to answer them and walked on. But they followed her, one on either side, pressing close.

“Get away!” Edme yipped. “You can’t do this to me anymore, either with words or bites.”

“Oh, yes, that’s true,” Ingliss said brightly. “Indeed we should never have abused you. Seeing as you were never a true gnaw wolf.”

This stopped Edme. “Are you *cag mag*? What are you talking about?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Ingliss teased. She turned to Kyran. “Should we tell her?”

“I suppose so,” Kyran replied casually, as if she had better things on her mind.

“Dear Edme, we have come to apologize for our behavior,” Ingliss said. Edme’s head swiveled between the two wolves.

Edme tried desperately to maintain a cool, disinterested demeanor. “An apology is not necessary, really. Now on your way. I must get to the Ring and the Watch.”

“I wouldn’t rush if I were you,” Kyran said.

“No, no, definitely not. For what will they say when they discover you were not born *malcadh*, but made one!”

“What are you talking about?” Edme said, and she bared her teeth. Never had such a small wolf seemed so fierce.

The two yearlings cowered. “He did it to you, the chieftain Dunbar MacHeath!” Kyran blurted.

“Did what?”

“Tore out your eye!” Ingliss said.

“You mean ... you mean ...” Edme’s jaw dropped open. It was as if she was searching for the actual words. “I wasn’t born this way?”

“Not at all,” the two wolves said at once, regaining their composure. A smirk crawled across Ingliss’s face. “We heard it whispered in the *gadderheal*. So you see, you are not a true gnaw wolf,” Ingliss said.

“You’re a fake,” Kyran offered. “They’ll reject you when they find out.”

“They sense these things,” Ingliss said.

“What if I tell them?” Edme said, turning around and heading straight into the heart of MacHeath territory.

“Tell them? Tell who? Where are you going, Edme?”

“To your chieftain.”

“What?” the two wolves shrieked.

“You’re telling him what we told you? We’ll get in big trouble!” Ingliss was running beside

Edme now, pleading with her.

“You should have thought of that before.”

“But what’s the use of telling Dunbar MacHeath? What will you tell him exactly?”

“Exactly?” Edme stopped short, and the beam from her single eye seemed to pierce Inglis right to her marrow. “I shall tell him that I will serve at the Ring not as a member of the MacHeath clan, but as a free runner!”

The two yearlings collapsed and began crawling after Edme on their bellies, begging her not to go to the chieftain. But Edme closed her ears and trotted on toward the Carreg Gaer of the MacHeath clan. Now it all made sense. She felt nothing when she arrived at her *tummfra* because she had no connection with it whatsoever. Had they gone through the rituals of kicking out her birth mother and sire from the clan? What did it matter? It was all a charade and nothing more.

But she had not endured this life of violent abuse for nothing, nor had the *gaddergraw* which she had competed been for nothing. She had won that contest fair and square. She might not have been born a *malcadh*, but she was a true member of the Watch. She would serve honestly, although her origins were not honest. She would serve courageously, although for most of her life she had cowered in the shadows of intimidation. Deep, deep within her marrow, Edme knew that she was meant to be a wolf of the Watch.

While Edme was heading for the MacHeath clan, Faolan was dragging Thunderheart’s immense femur from where she had died to the place where she had first found Faolan and become his second Milk Giver.

Thunderheart had been killed in an earthquake when Faolan was barely a year old. A gigantic boulder had rolled down on her, knocking her senseless. There she must have lain, bleeding to death. When he had first come upon her huge skull a few moons after her death, it loomed immense and pure white in the moonlight. But now, after two years, new life had taken root in it. Mosses and lichen crept over the cranium and down her long muzzle. An out of one eye popped a small constellation of starflowers. There was no way that Faolan could move her skull, nor did he want to. The skull itself had become a memorial to life. But he did transport as many of the smaller bones as he could. The *drumlyn* he would make would not stand simply as a tribute to life but to Thunderheart’s afterlife in Ursulana.

Faolan wondered if Thunderheart had traveled to Ursulana. He knew she had died, but her spirit seemed to linger on earth. Did she have unfinished business? His friend Gwynneth, Masked Owl, had told him it was that way with the scrooms of dead owls. They would not seek Glaumora in earnest until their business on earth was complete. By building the *drumlyn*, Faolan hoped to give Thunderheart’s spirit, or what wolves called her *lochín*, a sign. The *drumlyn* would declare that he, Faolan, was fine, that Thunderheart could cease his watch on earth. He had already carved the story of their life together on a paw bone he had retrieved soon after he had found her skeleton. He didn’t need to carve any more. The moment he placed Thunderheart’s femur on top of the paw bone he had incised so beautifully, it was as if a weight had shifted somewhere within Faolan’s chest. He looked up as the stars broke out, and began to howl:

Thunderheart

Go away

Shut your eyes on this earth

The time has come

Leave your bones behind

Climb high, then higher

On the star rungs

Claw your way to Ursulana

That's where you should go

How I do long to look to the sky

And see your deep glow

Among the stars that rise in the night

Go now, go now, join that constellation so bright

There is nothing left for you here

And know that your son has nothing to fear

Though the pangs of your death

Leave me forever stunned

The taste of your milk is still sweet on my tongue

The huge paws that cradled me

Never betrayed me

But held me so close to your breast

That the beat of your massive heart

Still echoes within my own chest

Oh, Thunderheart, Thunderheart,

Time to go away.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLOOD AND THORNS

ON THE CUSP OF SUMMER, WHEN the earth begins to tilt more steeply toward the sun there is a day when the sun and the moon hang side by side in the sky. It is on this single day and night when the Litha blossoms in the Beyond. The tiny red roses tip their faces toward the radiant sun and her softly glowing sister, the moon, from which they gather their nourishment.

The Litha blossoms are the deepest red and their thorns are as sharp as wolf fangs. The leaves of the Litha are succulent, with a juice strong enough to make a wolf tipsy. However, to get past the thorns to the spirited grog of the leaves is an uncomfortable task at best. Although the appearance of the roses marks the longest day of the year, it also signals the turn of the earth toward winter, for in the warm days after, the sun will slip below the horizon a bit earlier and a sliver of daylight will disappear as the shadows of evening advance more quickly. The night the Litha appears is called the eve of Blood and Thorns and there are rowdy celebrations in all the packs of all the clans in the Beyond. None celebrate Litha Eve more exuberantly than the MacHeath clan, often with disastrous conclusions as some wolf gets killed in what was supposed to be a “friendly” wrestling match.

As a gnaw wolf in the MacHeath chieftain’s pack, Edme had made herself scarce on Litha Eve, but now as she entered the encampment, the howls and baying that had scored the air had dwindled, and she felt a silence fall in behind her. The wolves of the pack stared in utter dismay as Edme returned with her tail lifted high and her ears shoved forward. A grimace of aggression scored her face as she moved toward the *gadderheal*, the ceremonial cave of the chieftain’s pack. She heard low growling whispers as she drew near.

“What’s she doing, going to the *gadderheal*?”

“On Litha Eve?”

“Look at her tail and ears. She certainly learned the dominance postures quickly.”

“Well, by my marrow, I’ll not scrape to her!”

Edme heard the last remark and could only laugh to herself. *By tomorrow or sooner, you’ll come begging. But I’ll be gone, gone to the Ring as a free runner.*

“Free runner” was the term for a gnaw wolf who was born clanless in the wild and left to die by its mother. Free runners were permitted to compete in the *gaddergnaw*, and if they proved themselves, they could be selected for the Watch at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes. Edme had always felt that Faolan was essentially a free runner because he had not found his way back to the MacDuncan clan until well past his first year. She fully intended to declare

herself first to the MacHeath clan as a free runner and then to the Fengo. The *Slaan Leat* was a journey toward truth, a journey toward peace. Well, she had found her truth and her peace and so had completed her task.

As Edme drew toward the entrance of the *gadderheal*, she saw the chieftain Dunbar MacHeath staggering to his feet with the aid of one of his sublieutenants. A scar ran diagonally down his face from the edge of one eye all the way to his neck, where no fur grew. The exposed skin of the scar was puckered and raw, giving him an especially savage look. Although now, swaying unsteadily and mostly supported by his sublieutenant, the chieftain simply looked ridiculous. His muzzle was thick with his own blood, from his attempts to get at the Litha leaves. He had apparently succeeded, for he was quite drunk. Edme guessed that he would sober up quickly when she announced the reason for her visit.

“What in the name of the dim world are you doing here, cursed one?” he snarled. “Did they reject you already?”

“It’s not a question of their rejection, but mine.”

“What’s she saying?” The chieftain turned to his lieutenant and then vomited on the ground.

Edme’s hackles rose so high, they made her look larger than she had ever seemed. The beam of green light from her one eye grew more intense, and Dunbar MacHeath and his lieutenant averted their gazes as one might shift one’s eyes during a solar eclipse when the pinpoint needle of the sun becomes blinding.

“Step into the *gadderheal* and call your *raghnaid*, if you please.”

Dunbar MacHeath suddenly stood erect, but his tail drooped in a half-submissive posture. His lieutenant went around to his hindquarters and flicked his tail as a reminder to Dunbar not to cower. Edme led the way into the *gadderheal*.

I can’t quite believe this, she thought. It was as if the whole world had tilted on its axis. She was leading the chieftain into his own ceremonial cave. She was commanding him, or so she seemed, on this Litha Eve.

Fewer than a dozen wolves in varying states of inebriation entered the *gadderheal*. They glanced first at Edme, for she suddenly seemed transformed. Yes, it was the same small wolf with the same mangled face, missing one eye. But with her hackles up and her tail raised, she appeared larger. And when they glanced at their chieftain, he seemed somehow slighter. His pelt, prickly with thorns and streaked in his own blood from his assaults on the Litha roses, appeared to have shrunk and to cling to his bones. He had assumed all the postures of dominance, but it seemed a bit of a joke, as if he were a little pup trying them for the first time. Airmead the Obea slipped into the *gadderheal*. With her pure white pelt unstained by Litha grog, she seemed no more than a scrap of fog blown in on a breeze.

Trying to muster all the dignity he could, Dunbar MacHeath stepped toward Edme. “Why have you returned if the Fengo of the Watch has not rejected you?”

“Why do you jump to the conclusion that the Fengo has rejected me? Is there reason that he should?” Edme let the question hang in the air, which had become quite chilly for Litha Eve.

“No! No, of course not!”

The chieftain does protest too vigorously, Edme thought. She nodded with just a hint of submission. “I was born a poor *malcadh*, was I not?” She turned to the Obea, whom no one had yet noticed.

Dunbar spoke up now. “Yes, come forth, Airmead. You were the one who took this *malcadh* to the *tummfraw*. Will you not testify to that?”

“I would prefer not to, my lord.”

“It’s not a matter of preference!” Dunbar MacHeath growled and walked up to the Obea, stiff-legged, grabbing her by the ruff of her neck and flinging her to the ground.

“No need to abuse the Obea!” Edme rammed the chieftain with her head, throwing him off balance though he was twice her size. “I know my story. I was not born a *malcadh* but *malcadh* made! Who was it who tore out my eye? You, Dunbar?”

There was a gasp. Never had a wolf challenged a chieftain so blatantly. Edme had head-butted Dunbar MacHeath and, almost worse, addressed him without title, by his first name.

“Who told you this?” Dunbar MacHeath said through clenched teeth. “Who told you?”

“Who told me doesn’t matter. But listen carefully.” The tension in the cave thickened. Edme sensed that she was teetering on a dangerous edge as more wolves, many very drunk, made their way into the *gadderheal*. Some of these wolves were members of the *raghnaid*, the clan court that interpreted the complex laws of the wolves of the Beyond. All of them bore a dusting of snow that mixed with the streaks of blood on their muzzles. *How strange the weather is. Snowing on Litha Eve — unheard of!* thought Edme. It gave her an idea. She would play on the deep superstition that all the wolves harbored, but in particular the wolves of the MacHeath and the MacDuff clans.

She continued speaking. “Hear what I have to say. This weather is strange, is it not? Perhaps not since the Ice March have wolves been seen with snow on them in this moon. She nodded toward the wolves who had just entered the cave.

“Very strange,” said a wolf named Blyden. “Weather’s gone a bit *cag mag*, I’d say!”

“Shut up,” barked the chieftain.

Edme nodded at Blyden as if he were the most intelligent wolf in the cave, which he definitely was not. The slender ash-colored wolf was very strong and had savage fangs, always good for a fight or one of the kill squads known as *slink melfs*. These squads were specifically formed to bring down any animal who endangered the clan.

Edme began to speak again and affected a grave but considered air, as if she were turning something over in her mind. “You don’t suppose the *cag maggish* turn is because of your deceit? I ask you, distinguished members of the *raghnaid*, to ponder how the laws pertaining to *malcadhs* have been broken. Ripping out a pup’s eye so that she might become a member of the Watch! Could you have offended the spirit of that first Fengo who led us out of the Long Cold on the Ice March? Perhaps that explains this turn of weather.”

There were gasps and strangled little mewlings, as if a milk pup had been deprived of teat. For though violence streamed through the MacHeaths’ blood, cowardice was lodged deep in their marrow. Edme stepped closer to the *raghnaid* members. What a joke they were

compared to the *raghnuids* of clans such as the MacDuncans, the MacNabs, or the MacAnguses

“I will go to the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes, but I shall go not as a member of the MacHeath clan — no, I shall go as a free runner. I reject you. I deny you, I refuse and repudiate you and my clan.”

Confusion swam in Dunbar MacHeath’s eyes, his jaw hung open in disbelief, and threads of saliva, stained deep magenta from the Litha grog, fell to the floor of the *gadderheal*. Edme turned and left before the MacHeath wolves could grasp what she had said. By the time her words sunk in, Edme was gone.

The world swirled with snow. A blizzard! A blizzard on Litha Eve and the beginning of the summer moons!

A clamor broke out in the *gadderheal*.

“Kill her!” someone howled.

“Tear out her other eye!” said another.

“No, rip out her tongue so she can’t speak!”

Dunbar MacHeath barked the command for silence. He had regained his wits and now assumed a baleful and terrifying demeanor. Every hair in his pelt bristled until he looked twice his normal size.

“Listen to me, wolves of the MacHeath clan. Listen to your chieftain. There will be no killing” — Dunbar paused dramatically and eyed his sublieutenants — “until I say so.” Again he paused. “But when the time comes, there is going to be something worse than death for the traitorous wolf Edme. Far worse than mere murder!”

“What’s worse than murder?”

“We shall watch her carefully.”

The lieutenants exchanged uncertain glances, as if to say, *Watching her? That’s worse than killing?* For in their small minds, pinched by violence, it was hard to imagine alternatives that did not involve bloodletting.

The chieftain continued, “We shall watch her and find her weakness, and when we do, the punishment will begin.”

The chieftain shook with fury. He had waited too long for the MacHeaths to have a member of the clan on the Sacred Watch. *But why stop there?* A new idea began to brew in Dunbar’s quickly sobering brain. The chieftain felt a shiver of excitement pass through the assembled wolves. He waited and let several seconds pass. If there was one talent that Dunbar MacHeath possessed, it was the gift of manipulation. He spoke his next words so quietly that every wolf had to strain to hear them.

“My friends, you might just be looking at the next Fengo.”

There was a collective gasp followed by a long hush.

CHAPTER SIX

THE OBEA SPEAKS

WITHIN THE WHITENESS OF THE swirling blizzard was an even brighter patch at the center of the spinning frenzy of snow. The Obea had followed Edme into the storm. She now began to howl, “Stop, Edme. Stop! It’s me, Airmead!”

The very name split the fury of the storm. Seldom was an Obea’s name spoken out loud and it was unthinkable that an Obea would refer to herself by her given name. If gnawing wolves were the lowest-ranked wolves in a clan and the objects of physical and verbal abuse, Obeas were wolves of no rank at all. They were barren, and existed in a social purgatory that was beneath the contempt of any wolf in the clan, almost as if the Obeas were invisible. Airmead had heard that in other clans this purgatory was not as harsh, although she-wolves who were pregnant shied away from them as if Obeas could hex their unborn pups.

The time had come for Airmead to explain the dark, dirty secret of the MacHeath clan, which she whispered about for so many years. Airmead felt as if something deep inside herself had cracked open. And oddly enough, it felt good.

When Edme heard the Obea’s name ring out, she stopped short, spreading her toes wide so she would not sink into the snow, which was piling up fast. Airmead was soon beside her.

“Follow me,” Airmead said. “We’ll dig a snow pit, though I think the blizzard is stopping.”

Dig a snow pit — with the Obea? Edme thought. When in the history of the Beyond had a *malcadh* and an Obea ever spoken to each other? Share a snow pit with the very wolf whose task was to take *malcadhs* to their *tummfraws* to die? It was beyond astonishing to Edme. “What is it?” Edme demanded. “What do you want from me?”

“You need to hear the truth.”

“I know the truth. I know what they did to me. I know that you never took me to the *tummfraw*.”

“In all the time that I have been the MacHeath Obea, I have never taken any wolf pup to the *tummfraw*.”

“What? Never?” Edme was astounded.

“Never!”

Almost as soon as they had settled into the snow pit, the blizzard ceased and the sun began to shine. By the time Airmead finished her story, large patches of bare ground had appeared from under the melting snow. “So you see, it’s a paradox that the most depraved of all the clans has never produced an actual *malcadh*. It’s as if their spirits have been deformed rather

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