
WHISPERS OF THE GODS
'Everything you want from an epic fantasy adventure'
CHARLIE HIGSON
author of the Young Bond
DARK BLADE
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Praise for

DARK BLADE

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DARK BLADE

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Maiden's Fingers


Küss
Faun Forest
Stodial
Fetlanger Farm
the Great Marsh
Nesh
Corlne
Bantusz
to the Southern Kingdoms
STROM
and the Surrounding Kingdoms

Prologue
A Gift

Lae Fetlanger awoke with a start. Sitting up, she looked around the room, trying to work out what had pulled her from the deep sleep she'd been in. The remaining embers in the fire still glowed enough to suggest there were a few hours until dawn. Even so, she could make out little in the darkness of her bedroom. Lae turned her head towards the shadowy shape of her husband lying beside her, wondering if his snoring had caused her sudden awakening, but Gord's breathing was shallow and even.

A noise outside – a cry – made her pulse quicken, the sound rekindling fragments of the dream she'd been having. Living on a remote cattle farm, Lae was used to the noises of wild animals beyond the safety of her wooden walls, and on any other occasion she might have dismissed this as just that: the screech of a mating fox or a winter owl perhaps. But not tonight.

She wrapped a blanket about herself, the rough wool itchy against her skin, and made her way through the farmhouse. The front door groaned in protest as she pushed it open into the darkness, and she caught her breath as the icy air rushed in.

She'd no sooner set foot outside when she heard the cry again. There was no doubt in her mind now that it was the plaintive call of a baby, and she hurried in the direction of the barn where the noise was coming from, ignoring the harsh bite of the cold ground beneath her bare feet.

Leaving the barn door open behind her, she looked about frantically until her eyes fell upon the little bundle laid on the straw pile inside one of the stalls. The baby was well wrapped up so that only its face was exposed to the night air, and she instinctively bent down and picked it up. There was colour in the child's cheeks and the skin was warm to the touch; he could not have been out here long. Lae pressed the tiny child close to her body, tucking the blanket around them both. As she did so, the baby stopped crying.

She hurried back to the house, crying out for Gord. As she re-entered the farmhouse, her husband was on his feet standing in the doorway to their room, hastily trying to pull on his boots. In his left hand was a long hunting knife. His eyes grew wide when he saw what it was his wife was clutching to her breast.

'It's a child, a little boy. We're keeping him,' she said.

'But—'

'He's a gift. From the gods.'

'Lae …'

The look she gave him stopped further protest. Gord had not seen that look often but he knew what it meant; there would be no changing his wife's mind. She had waited long enough for a child, and now it appeared one had been gifted to her.

'We're keeping him,' she repeated.

The Maiden's Fingers

1

The year Lannigon Fetlanger turned thirteen, almost a man in the eyes of his people, was an unhappy one. It was the year that Horst Rivengeld, their beloved king, was killed in battle. But it was also the year Lann was to experience personal tragedy of the worst kind, when his mother died trying to give birth to what would have been his brother or sister had the child survived.

Lae's death coincided with the night of the great storm, a storm that would be spoken of in the Six Kingdoms for many years to come. Even the witch Fleya, armed with her majik and her potions, was unable to save the mother or her unborn child.

Lann would never forget that night for the rest of his life. Banished from the bedroom, he had stood looking out of the kitchen window at the fields outside, doing his best not to get too upset by the sounds of his mother's cries.

Tiny fists of rain beat on the roof overhead, a persistent cacophony that did nothing to ease the tension inside the house, and he prayed to the gods, both the old and the new, that they might ease her suffering. His father, who had been pacing about the house, came into the kitchen demanding Lann close the shutters against the foul weather. It was as he reached through the opening to do so that a dazzling knife of light struck the big elm tree in the yard, forcing Lann to snap his eyes shut against the glare. When he opened them again he could see how a great fissure had opened up down the length of the trunk, as if the thing had been struck with the giant axe wielded by the first god, Og, himself.

It was a portent, he had little doubt about that, but what it symbolised was a mystery. Unlike the witch across the hall in his parents' room, he had no skill in interpreting such things.

The boy was still standing like that, wet from the rain being blown in at him and staring out at the tree, when a loud sobbing noise behind made him turn around. His father was standing in the bedroom doorway, his face streaked with tears. It was only then that he realised that his mother's cries had stopped. And just as the elm had been split by the lightning bolt, Lann knew his own world had also been torn in two.

* * *

Amidst all the grief and confusion of that night, one other memory was etched into Lann's memory. As the witch, Fleya, was leaving their farmhouse, she stopped in front of him. She was a tall woman with piercing blue eyes that shone with intelligence. Were she not a witch, Lann guessed that men would find her beautiful. She cast those eyes over him, taking in his face before giving a little smile.

'You've grown,' she said, her voice not unkind. 'How long until your sixteenth year?'

He hesitated before answering; he knew the Volken people around these parts were scared of the woman, even though her midwifery and healing skills had helped so many of them. Rumours about her were rife, and it was difficult to know which were fact and which were fiction. Despite this, Lann lifted his chin and met her blue eyes with his own. She was younger than his mother had been, he realised.

'A little under three years,' he answered, struggling to get the words out under her intense scrutiny.

She leaned in close to him and he caught a whiff of lavender and sage. When she spoke, her voice was little more than a whisper.

'Hear me, Lannigon Fetlanger, and mark my words well. One day, not too far from now, you will see a star with a serpent's tail. Beware that moment. Run when you see that heavenly sign. Run for all you are worth. And trust

your instincts on where to find safety, or those three years will never come to pass.' She held his gaze for an instant longer, then turned, pulling the hood of her cape up over her head and sweeping out of the house into the rain and wind before he had a chance to ask her what she had meant.

The boy watched her leave; she strode past the smoking elm tree without giving it so much as a second glance.

Gord Fetlanger never recovered from his wife's death; the following months saw him reduced to a shadow of his former self. He took to sitting about the farmhouse, staring into space and disregarding his work. Even when a wolf pack came on to his lands and killed some of his cattle, Gord could not be persuaded to set off in pursuit of the beasts. Instead, it was the young Fetlanger who joined Orlof, the head cattleman, and the others, camping out overnight in the cold and the rain in an effort to kill the predators.

Lann and his father had never been close, but now it seemed the boy could do no right in his father's eyes, and when the pair were together in the house, the older man would ignore him completely, even leaving the room when the youngster entered. He drank more and more, the alcohol causing wild mood swings. Silent apathy would give way to fury in which he would tear the farmhouse

apart, resisting Lann's efforts to calm him down. 'My wife and son are dead!' he would howl. The boy knew better than to answer back when he was like this. But the words stung, and Lann wanted nothing more than to point out that he was still alive, that he was missing his mother and that he was in need of a father, now more than ever.

Two months after Lae's death, things finally came to a head. His father, drunk on strong spirits, sat by the fire all day staring into the flames. Lann went about his chores as he did every evening, and when he'd finished, announced he was off to bed.

'Wait,' Gord muttered. He gestured for Lann to come over to him.

Lann did as he was bid and walked over to where his father sat, slumped by the fire. Gord said nothing, but there was an odd look in his eyes as he glowered back up at the boy.

'What is it, Father?' Lann asked.

'Don't call me that,' the man spat back, slurring his words. 'You have no right to call me that. Just as I have no wish to call you my "son".'

Lann stared down at the man, not sure if he had heard him correctly. His father's words made no sense, but the cruel expression on Gord's face caused a frisson of fear to snake its way through the boy.

'What do you mean?' Lann asked.

Gord waved the question away and returned his attention to the fire.

His heart thumping, Lann stepped between the man and the flames, forcing the farmer to look at him. 'Tell me.'

And Gord told him. Told him how Lann had been found that night, a little bundle wrapped in blankets, abandoned in the barn. How Lae had insisted on keeping him, even though Gord knew he would only bring the family heartbreak and bad luck.

'A foundling, that's what you are!' Gord finished, sneering back at the boy. 'A curse, left by evil spirits to bring us misery!'

Unable to bear any more, Lann ran from the house. The night was dark and he stumbled in the darkness, hot and angry tears falling from his eyes as Gord's words replayed in his head over and over again. Not wishing to return to the house, he spent a sleepless night in the same barn his mother had first discovered him in all those years ago.

The next day, Gord had given a brief, muttered apology. 'Just the drink talking,' he had said. But his eyes told a different story and they told Lann he'd been speaking the truth.

Everything changed for Lannigon from that night onwards. The farmhouse felt different, and Lann made a point of spending as little time there as possible, choosing instead to roam the lands that made up Gord Fetlanger's

considerable holding. He liked nothing more than to climb the craggy hills known as the Maiden's Fingers or ride his pony down to the river where his mother had come to wash their clothes when she was still alive. That was his favourite place. He would sit on the bank and relive memories of her singing to him as she rinsed the garments, her voice mingling with the river's own song as it tumbled across the stones and rocks.

He yearned to travel, to get away from this cold place and explore lands he'd heard whispers of. Places that could only be accessed by days afloat on vast bodies of water, or by crossing huge mountain ranges that made the Maiden's Fingers look like little more than the ancient burial mounds to the east of Gord's lands.

Little did Lann know that, all too soon, he would leave these lands; and that the far-flung places of his dreams would become reality.

Stromgard
2

Kelewulf stared at the king's dead body. Horst Rivengeld had been laid out in his finest armour: the studded black leather ensemble he had died in. The gaping hole where an enemy warrior had thrust a spear through it had been neatly repaired. The blood had been cleared up from his hair and beard, and, were it not for the ghastly grey colour of his skin, Kelewulf might have believed Horst Rivengeld were merely sleeping on the cold stone plinth.

The boy shifted his attention to his father's lifeless face. He felt no swell of emotion, no remorse at this man's passing.

I'm glad you're dead, old man, he thought. *My only regret is that I was not there to hear you cry out as the spear pierced your side. I would have liked to have seen the look on your face when you gazed into your killer's eyes.*

Kelewulf's relationship with his father had never been a happy one. They were too different. Horst Rivengeld, like so many of the Volken people, believed in the way of the warrior. So when it became clear to the king that his son had no interest in the art of war, the man had become desperate, trying everything in his power to change the boy's nature. When words and admonishments failed to have the desired effect, Horst had resorted to more physical methods. But the beatings, intended to 'toughen up' his son, had merely turned Kelewulf even further away from him. The simple truth was that the boy was too much like his mother.

Queen Elenor's marriage to the king had not been for love. Instead it had been a political match, intended to mend the historical rift between the Bantusz of the south and the Strom kingdom Horst ruled. As a foreigner, she had little regard for the ways of a people she considered to be barbaric and backward. Rather than aiding her husband in trying to mould Kelewulf into the type of son the king wanted, she turned her son's mind to books and the power contained in them. She told him about the majik her people had learned, and how they had used it to defeat barbarous invaders like the Stromgardians. She taught him about history and geography. She taught him that true power lies not just in the sword, but in knowledge.

As far as the king was concerned, Elenor's actions were not driven by a mother's love. Instead, he believed she was using the boy as a means to defy him. Whatever her true motives were, they had ultimately cost the queen her life.

It was when Kelewulf turned twelve that the madness took hold of his mother. Her sickness, Kelewulf was convinced, had been brought on by his father's mistreatment of them both. And the madness had robbed Kelewulf of the one person he'd ever loved when she'd taken her own life in Vissergott.

And now the man was dead.

Sensing someone entering the great hall behind him, Kelewulf was careful to wipe away the sneer on his lips, replacing it with a look more becoming of a grieving son.

His cousin Erik joined him, standing respectfully at Kelewulf's side as they stared down at the dead king. 'He died a good Volken warrior's death,' he said.

'Whatever that means.'

'In battle. With his axe in one hand and his shield in the other. He will enter the Great Halls and meet the gods as a hero.'

'And that is a *good death*, is it?' Kelewulf said, unable to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

'As good a one as any of us could hope for.'

'If that is the case, then I'm afraid my own death will not be considered "a good one".'

The silence that followed was uncomfortably long. Erik, like so many of the Volken people, felt uneasy around the pale-faced scholar. The Volken way was the warrior's way, and Kel was anything but a warrior.

'I'm glad I managed to find you on your own, cousin,' Erik eventually said.

'Oh?'

'I … I wanted to know how things sit with you … regarding my father's claim to the throne. While the decision was voted for by the high council, I suspect there might be some who disagree with it. I would like to know if you are one of them. After all, the throne could just as easily have gone to you.'

Kelewulf smiled inwardly. His uncle, Mirvar Rivengeld, had ascended the throne and this had all but ruled out Kelewulf's chance of ever taking that role. There had been rumours at court he was unhappy about this. What nobody in this or any of the neighbouring kingdoms could possibly know was that Kelewulf had never harboured any wish to rule over these … savages. No, let his cousin Erik and other oafish axe-swingers like him rule Stromgard; Kelewulf had other, grander ideas.

Seeing that Erik was watching him, Kelewulf forced his lips into a humble smile. 'It is the right of the council to

vote that the crown can pass from brother to brother if they think it is for the good of the people. The crown is in safe hands with your father. He is a just man and a great warrior, perhaps even greater than my father.' When Erik put a consoling arm across his shoulders, Kelewulf cringed. He hated to be touched and he wanted nothing more than to peel himself away from the unsolicited contact.

'Shall I go?' Erik asked. 'I came to pay my respects before the funeral, but I can come back …'

'No, stay. I was just going.' Kelewulf stepped to one side, relieved at having broken the physical connection between the two of them. 'I will be in my rooms if you need me. I have a particularly interesting book I'm reading at the moment, and I wish to get back to it.' He caught the disapproval in his cousin's face. 'I find that reading helps me forget my loss,' he quickly added, twisting his face into what he hoped was a reasonable semblance of grief.

'Of course. We must all find our own solace at a time like this. Perhaps we can talk again soon? When your pain is not so raw?'

'Yes, perhaps. Excuse me, cousin.'

Erik watched Kelewulf leave before turning to look down at his dead uncle again, his mind awhirl. He felt sorrow for his cousin's loss, and also relief that the throne

would pass unchallenged to his own father. As a warrior, his uncle was unsurpassed. He'd used his military might to bring the kingdoms together when they might have fallen into civil war. But his rule had been one largely of fear. Mirvar Rivengeld would be a good king to the Volken people, a people whom Erik secretly suspected Kelewulf held in low esteem. He frowned, silently reproaching himself for these unkind thoughts. He and Kel had grown up together. Back when they were little they played well together; friends as well as cousins. But when Kel's mother killed herself the younger boy changed. He had always refused to learn to wield a weapon. Instead, he found refuge in the hundreds of books he'd surrounded himself with. And while there was no harm in that, it had—

A movement to his left caused Erik to spin around, his hand already on the hilt of his sword.

'Calm down, brother.'

His younger sister, Astrid, stepped out from behind the pillar. She approached him but was looking off in the direction Kelewulf had just left in, an odd expression on her face.

'It's not nice to spy on people, Astrid.'

'I wasn't spying. I was in here on my own when Kelewulf came in. I didn't want to be seen by him, so I hid behind the pillar.'

'Why hide? You should have spoken to him. He is grieving.'

She gave him a sceptical look. Astrid had never been keen on Kel; he was arrogant, she said, and contemptuous of their ways. Erik on the other hand had always defended him.

'Did you buy all that guff?' she asked.

'Guff?'

'About our father, and how the crown was now in good hands.'

'He seemed genuine enough to me.' Astrid snorted, and Erik sighed. 'You are being unfair. Kel has never expressed any interest in ruling, you know that.'

His sister met his gaze and held it. 'On that we agree, brother. He has no wish to rule over the Volken people, and do you know why?'

'Enlighten me.'

'Because he sees us as … beneath him. He has no love of these lands or its people.'

'You don't know that, Astrid.'

'I do, brother. And I think you know it too.'

Erik shook his head. 'Regardless, he is family. We must do our duty by him.'

She gave him a crooked smile and set her head to one side. It was a mannerism their father Mirvar used whenever he thought someone was being foolish. 'I doubt our cousin

will ask me for any help, but if he does I'll be sure to give it to him. In return I ask that you do something for me.'

'And what might that be?'

'Don't trust him, Erik. He is not the person you think he is.'

The Maiden's Fingers
3

It was early in the evening and Lann was almost back at the farm, having been out all day tending to the cattle. The pony beneath him was tired and he needed to let her feed and drink soon. At the edge of the world, the sun was doing its best to cling on to remains of the day, and as Lann looked up to take in the changing colours of the sky, he witnessed the star streaking through the firmament. A gasp escaped him at the sight: a bright pinpoint of light trailing a white tail in its wake as it raced towards the sinking sun.

There were three days before his fourteenth birthday, and the witch's words from the previous year came back to him: O*ne day, not too far from now, you will see a star with a serpent's tale. Beware that moment*.

With difficulty he tore his eyes away from the heavenly sight and looked towards the farmhouse.

His father's horse was dead in the front yard, its flanks wet with blood where it had been clawed and bitten. The front door to his childhood home was open. The icy fingers of fear gripped him and he sat in the saddle staring at the poor creature, desperately trying to work out what he should do.

'*Run for all you are worth*,' the witch had told him, and he knew he should pull the pony about and set it off in the opposite direction as fast as he could. But his father was in the farmhouse …

Just then, a naked, blood-covered man emerged from the house and caught sight of the boy and his pony. What followed was the stuff of horror. The man let out a strangled cry and dropped down on to all fours, his entire body taut and rigid as if a terrible pain coursed through him. And right there, before Lann's eyes, the man transformed into a hellish wolf. The thing was far bigger than any wolf he'd ever seen before, and when it lifted its head, it stared back at him through black, hate-filled eyes. The creature had no place in this world. It was a thing of fable, from the days when the gods still walked across this world. The foul chimera opened its gore-covered jaws and let out a howl of rage. With that, it launched itself off the front porch towards Lann, taking great, leaping bounds on powerful legs and halving the distance separating them within a few heartbeats. For a

moment, both the boy and his mount froze, terror turning their bodies to stone. Then Lann pulled the pony's head around and set his heels into the beast's flanks, loudly urging it forward.

The pony was hardy and well suited to the rocky terrain at the bottom of the Maiden's Fingers. Spurred on by its own fear and that of its rider, it quickly opened up a gap again between them and the hellish wyre-creature. Even so, Lann knew they couldn't hope to keep their pursuer at bay for long. The pony was too tired to keep up her pace for much longer and the creature would then be upon them.

The witch's words came to him then: '*Trust your instincts on where to find safety.*'

An idea occurred to him, a crazy idea of where they could hide. Desperately he steered his mount in the direction of the Dark Wood at the western edge of his father's land.

Leaning forward over the animal's neck, Lann urged it to greater efforts. It was then that he caught a flash of something black at the edge of his vision. Allowing himself a brief sideways glance, he saw a crow perfectly matching his speed. The bird let out a caw and flew out ahead, arrowing in the direction of the forest as if leading the way for him.

The woods were as old as time itself. It was said a great battle had been fought there and each tree represented a

fallen warrior. It was also said that a curse hung over the place. Even during the brightest days light struggled to make it through the thick overhead canopy to the forest floor, and now, as he approached it in the gloom of the evening, the place appeared to Lann as a sea of blackness. The idea of entering that inky nothingness filled him with dread.

They were no more than fifty strides from the treeline when the pony's foot found a rabbit hole and the creature tumbled forward, its front leg breaking with a sickening snap. Thrown from the saddle, Lann hit the ground hard, the air knocked out of him. The pony had been given to him as a gift on his tenth birthday, and his heart sank to hear her stricken cries. Fighting the impulse to go to her aid and forcing himself to his feet, he turned his back on the poor injured beast and took off at a sprint in the direction of the murky gloom created by the forest's canopy.

He was close enough to smell the damp, musty rot of the forest floor when he glanced over his shoulder.

The wolf-thing was level with the stricken pony. But it paid no attention to the injured animal. Its eyes, black as the woods ahead, were fixed on Lann.

Plunging into the thicket, he ran, stumbling over rotting wood and living roots that grabbed as his feet and ankles. A sob of fear escaped him, the noise echoing back at him from the trees all around, as he imagined death at the jaws of the beast.

No more than twenty strides into the forest and the darkness was complete for Lann. The wolf would not think so. Its eyes were perfectly adapted to hunting in the dark. He could hear it, crashing through the undergrowth behind him.

In choosing this desolate place to hide, he had chosen death.

He was running with his arms out in front of him, a long wailing moan coming from his mouth as terror took complete control of him. He would die here, alone in the darkness. And he would not be found. What was left of his body would remain here among the mud and mildew of the forest floor until even his bones were swallowed up. Without a Volken funeral where his physical body would be burned, his soul would be trapped here on earth as a rordnuk – a shade cursed to forever roam the shadow worlds. He offered up desperate prayers to the old gods, asking each and any of them for their help.

In his mind he could almost feel the wolf's teeth sink into his flesh from behind. He would fall and …

The caw of a crow made him turn his head. There, ahead of him, was an oasis of silvery light. A hole in the canopy of leaves allowed the moonlight through, illuminating the one thing that might save him: a tree much smaller than the giants surrounding it, with branches low enough

to climb – if only he could reach it in time. He sprinted, forcing his legs forward as he gasped for breath. The wolf was almost upon him; he leaped up towards the lowest branch just as the creature's teeth raked the flesh of his foot, wrenching the shoe from it.

Lann scrambled up into the arms of the tree, pulling himself up out of the way of the predator. Belly down on a branch, the boy looked back down into the black, dead eyes of the creature. The wolf seemed to be contemplating its options as it prowled back and forth. Stopping directly below him, the beast sunk down as low as it could, and, as Lann watched in horrified disbelief, leaped high into the air.

Lann jerked backwards. The wolf's teeth snapped shut inches away from his face, close enough for him to smell the fetid stink of its breath. The enormity of the leap, coupled with the near-success of the attack caused Lann to pull away too quickly. His bare foot slipped on the mossy branch he was on, and, with his hands desperately clawing at nothing, he fell backwards out of the tree.

When the back of his head connected with an old tree stump jutting out of the ground, the world went black. He was not unconscious, but the silvery moonlight and shadowy half-light of the forest were replaced by an inky void.

Getting to his hands and knees he tried to stand, but the swirling in his head and his blindness made it impossible, and he collapsed back down again.

Lann sensed the beast moving in for the kill. Consumed with fear, he let out a despairing moan, knowing that death at the jaws of the creature was inevitable.

It was then that he heard the harsh caw of the crow again, followed by the fluttering noise of its wings as it landed close to his side. There was a moment's pause, and the boy had the distinct impression that the bird was no longer a bird. A thing much larger was standing over him now. There was a snarl, followed by the sound of leaves moving as the wolf pounced, and then an intense feeling of heat, so hot it made the boy cry out.

Something large fell to the floor a short distance away and the air was filled with the rank smell of burnt flesh and fur.

The leafy carpet close to his head stirred again and Lann threw out an arm in the direction of the sound, his fingers grasping hold of the hem of a heavy woollen cloak. 'Help me,' he managed.

The sounds of the forest changed then. What had been the brushing of leaves and wind in the branches overhead was replaced with whispering noises. Words in a tongue so alien it made him shiver to hear them come from all directions at once. They were angry, those

whispers, angry that death had been allowed to come to this forest again.

'Please … help me,' he croaked.

The last thing he remembered was a woman's voice. The voice was strained, as if it were only with immense effort that the stranger was able to talk.

'I must go,' the voice said. 'You will be safe here now. The Spirits of the Forest have spoken to me. They will ensure you are not harmed, but I am not welcome in this place.'

'No,' gasped the boy. 'Don't leave me. My eyes! I'm … I'm blind!'

There was a flapping of wings and he was alone.

Unable to fight it any longer, Lann slipped into unconsciousness.

When he woke again, the smell of the meadows and the distant sound of birdsong told him it was daytime, but to his eyes it was still featureless night. Fighting the panic that threatened to engulf him again, he cocked his head and listened. If the leaves up there were stirred by the wind, the sound never made it down as far as the forest floor.

On all fours, he groped around until his hand brushed against the corpse of the wolf that had pursued him. He jerked his fingers back from the charred flesh in horror. Despite his fears, Lann couldn't help but wonder what

powerful majik might have been unleashed on the beast and by whom.

Terror still gripped him, but he knew he couldn't stay here beneath the ancient trees. Managing to get to his feet, he stood as still as he could. Without the ability to see, he was forced to trust his other senses to provide him with a sense of where he was and which way he should go. A slight breeze brushed his face from the right, and as he turned in that direction he fancied he caught the distant call of a redthroat warning other birds away from its territory. 'Redthroats are meadow birds,' he mumbled to himself. He couldn't recall ever seeing one in a forest. Hands held out before him, he slowly made his way in the direction of the birdsong.

It was hours later that Orlof, the head cattleman from Gord's farm, spotted the boy, his face and hands cut and bruised from the many falls he'd taken, stumbling among the foothills. When he called out to the boy, Lann's head swung round in the direction of the sound, and the older man fancied he caught a faint groan of relief. He called out again, and as he did so, it was as if all the strength and fight suddenly fled the youngster's body and he crumpled to the floor, where he lay, unmoving.

With the help of some of the other workers, Orlof got the boy safely inside the farmhouse. The men were already in a fearful state. They had found Gord Fetlanger's mangled

body earlier in the day, and now here was his son in a condition that suggested he'd almost come to the same end. There was talk among the men of leaving the place before whatever it was that had killed their former employer returned, but Orlof quickly put a stop to that, pointing out that the young boy, not their own safety, had to be their main concern right now. But the cattlemen were more used to caring for calves than boys, and they exchanged worried looks, wondering what would be the best thing to do for the lad. Their concern increased when the boy stirred, crying out that he had seen a man-wolf with death in its eyes that chased him into the Dark Wood, where a crow that was a fire-wielding woman had killed it.

'He's delirious,' reasoned Orlof, noting the rising panic in the men. Eventually, with no other recourse open to him, he sent one of the men to fetch Fleya the witch.

'You did well to come across him when you did,' Fleya said to the rancher after he'd recounted his side of the tale. She stood in the doorway of the bedroom, looking down at the figure of the boy lying on the pallet.

'I was looking for a lost calf.'

'And you found one,' she replied.

At the sound of their voices, the boy stirred from his sleep. They watched as he opened his eyes, a tear falling

from them when he realised the world was still hidden from him.

'Will his sight come back? Can you heal him?' Orlof asked, his voice low so as not to upset the boy too much. The woman was silent for a long moment. When she asked to be alone with the boy, the cattlehand left, but not before reassuring Lann that he would only be in the next room and that he should call out if he needed him.

The witch sat unspeaking beside Lann. When the silence was finally broken it was the boy, not the witch, who spoke, his voice little more than a whisper.

'He's dead, isn't he?'

'Gord? Yes, child. He is dead.'

'I knew it. I should have—'

'Hush now,' Fleya said, placing a hand on his. 'You could not have saved him.'

'How can you know?'

'I have the gift of future sight, Lannigon Fetlanger. Do you think it beyond me to peek into the past too?'

'What was it, that terrible creature? Not man or wolf, but something of both.' He sensed her stand up and move across the room to where the window was.

'Do you believe in the monsters of old? The creatures from the Void that roamed this world when the gods did?'

'I … I thought they were just stories.' He remembered the moment when the blood-covered man had transformed into the wolf-creature before his eyes. 'But now … I don't know.'

'There are very few, it's true. Most were banished back to the place they truly belong when Trogir vanquished the dark god, Lorgukk. But some of those terrible creatures still exist. It was one of these you saw today.' She placed a hand on his arm. 'We will talk more of these things in good time, Lann. You are safe and I will do all I can to keep you that way. That is all that should concern you right now.' She sighed. 'The cattleman in the next room, Orlof – he's a good man, no?'

'He's been part of this farm for as long as I can remember.' He waited for her to say something, then added: 'Yes, he's a good man. He's my friend.'

'Could a friend like that be trusted to run this place if you were not here?'

'Why would I not be here?'

'Because you are coming to live with me.' The smell of lavender and sage filled his head again. 'That is, if you would like to, of course.'

Fleya ordered the men to put the boy's things on to her wagon. When she told them that she was taking the boy away to live with her too, they mumbled something under their breaths, but nobody dared question the decision.

Only Orlof summoned up the courage, though he still would not look the witch in the eye as he did so. In response, Fleya took the man to one side and spoke quietly with him, and when they came back, whatever it was she'd said seemed to have satisfied his fears.

With everything on board, the witch set the ponies into a walk, taking Lann away from the Fetlanger farmstead for the last time.

Faun Forest
4

Fleya proved to be precisely what Lannigon needed during the first months of his blindness. Kind when she needed to be, severe during the times when he began to wallow in self-pity and doubt, she made him understand that his new life without sight didn't have to be as terrifying as he'd first believed it would. He found himself inspired by her enthusiasm, and threw himself into the things she suggested, learning to develop a greater sense of the world about him through smell and touch and sound.

While Fleya was a positive presence in Lann's life, it was the garden that was the saving of him. One day, Fleya asked him to help her plant some seeds at the start of the growing season. Reluctant and grumbling to start with, she noticed that he soon began to enjoy the task; feeling the earth beneath his fingers and putting the small grains into the soil sparked something in him, something she'd

thought had almost been lost for good. Later the same day, when she suggested he take over the running of the plot of land, the enthusiasm he'd shown for the idea had filled both of them with hope.

Over the next few days and weeks, he suggested plants they might cultivate, pressing her for information and greedy for the knowledge she possessed. She passed on as much of her considerable botanical expertise as she could, and what she didn't know she looked up for him in one of the many books she had on the subject.

They had a bumper crop of fruits and vegetables at the end of the growing year, not to mention the herbs and plants Fleya needed to make her medicines and treatments, a process which now fascinated Lann.

One evening, after a busy day in the garden, the pair found themselves sitting across from each other at the table in the kitchen. More than nine months had passed since Lann had discovered his love of gardening.

'I'm glad you have found something that interests you so much, Lann. It makes me happy to see you among your plants.' She paused and reached over to collect his plate. 'Tell me, what is it about the growing you like?'

He sat, considering his response for a moment.

'The plants and the cycles they go through,' he said. 'I guess … in a strange way, they remind me of myself.'

'Go on,' she said.

He hesitated, trying to put his feeling into words. 'The seeds are taken from plants that have spent their lives in the light, stretching up to Mother Sun for her life-giving energy. Then we put them into the darkness of the earth where they sit until it's time to become that thing in the daylight again. I was taken from a world of light and plunged into darkness too.'

'You wish a similar rebirth for yourself.'

'I do.' He shrugged. 'But if I cannot have it, I like the idea that I can give it to other things, even if they're just plants.'

She sat looking at him. He no longer appeared to be consumed by the sadness that had so blighted him during the first few months of his blindness, but she knew it would not take much to plunge him into unhappiness again. She tried to imagine what it must be like to have seen the world in all its splendour, only to have that ability taken away.

'What … what will I do when you're gone?' he asked. The question took her a little by surprise.

'Why do you ask that?'

'Without you, I would not have made it through this difficult time. But …' He paused, trying to find the right words. 'You're not going to be around forever, Fleya.'

'And exactly how old do you think I am, Lannigon Fetlanger?'

'I didn't mean to be rude.' She gave a little snort of amusement and he relaxed, knowing that she was merely teasing him. 'But you told me you were born during a time of terror, when the necromancer Yirgan was at the height of his powers as an agent of the dark god Lorgukk. Later that week, when you were teaching me history, you mentioned that Yirgan was killed by the gods over a hundred years ago.' He paused, not quite knowing how to go on. 'So, what I'm trying to say is … you've lived a long time.' He could feel her gaze on him and he squirmed a little, wishing he'd never brought the question up.

'Well, if that is indeed the case, and I'm not saying it is, how can you possibly know how much longer I might still be around for, hmm? Come on,' she said, standing up and offering him a hand by resting it on his sleeve. 'Time for bed. This old lady needs her rest.'

Lann didn't know it, but his speculations were pretty close and the witch had already lived for more than a hundred and twenty years, despite looking exactly as she did now for most of that time.