

### Chapter 3

"Petresky! Misha Petresky- slug-abed! Rise this instant! The lady requires a coachman! Misha! Misha!"

The pillow over his head, Petresky knew, was a feeble shield. He had seen the shrill bark of his wife split stone.

"Misha! Misha! The lady requires a coachman- up! Uu-u-u-p!"

The weary coachman groaned. Surely there was some mistake. Only a moment ago had he returned home to his bed. His beautiful bed. A mistake. Surely. Had to be. She was a bright woman. A moment more and she would realize her error, leave him to his peace.

"Petresky! Are you still abed? Olan needs to know where you have put the brasswork. And the lady requires a coachman! Misha!"

"...m-m-m-mistake..."

"Up, you!" his wife decreed.

Madame Petresky's hand flew, bird-like, down and under her husband's gray, rumpled pillow. The sharp beak of forefinger and thumb latched onto the coachman's ear. It was a most persuasive grip. In a trice Petresky's pincer-lobed ear was dragged into the light of day. The rest of his mortal remains were quick to follow. Roused from his burrow of blankets and sheets, Petresky stood shivering in the cold morning air, a jumble of bones in a tattered nightshirt.

"Olan is at the door and needs a word with you," Madame Petresky informed her husband, releasing his ear with a meaningful twist. "And get dressed, Misha- the lady requires a coachman!"

"...mistake..."

Bleary-eyed, the coachman shuffled across their one-room home. Quite by accident he found the door. A small lad stood upon the open threshold, a curly-haired sprite in short trousers and gray morning fog. The sleepy coachman began a greeting, only to stub his toe on a chair that had not been there a moment ago.

The little stablehand smiled. "Misha, I can no' find the brass work."

"Brasswork?"

"Yessup. From the coach."

Petresky blinked. "Coach...?"

"The master's carriage." The lad cleared his throat. "The brass is a' gone. You mussa removed it for me to polish. I'm ready to polish it, but I can no' find it. The brass work. Where did you put it?"

"Me?"

"Yessah, you! Who else would remove the brass work anna lamps?"

"Me?"

The lad became confused and a trifle short-tempered. "Well... well... somebody removed it-!"

"Not me."

"Well, who then? If not you- who?"

"Not me." Petresky blinked. This discourse seemed to be repeating itself without effect. "Good day."

Closing the door on the bewildered lad, Petresky dropped his weary bones into the closest chair. A low sound escaped him, an ominous something in the mid-range between groan and sigh, long and droning- the chorus of old age. He would have a bit to

eat. That was it! A small something. He scratched at his belly through the coarse fabric of his nightshirt. That would help. There, yes. Mmmm. Something to eat- mmmm-

"Get dressed, Misha! The lady is waiting for a coachman!"

Petresky raised his bent and sleep-befuddled head. He was more curious than alarmed to see a pair of fuzzy bears rummaging through his floor chest. Who has let these bears into my home? Talking bears no less. Talking bears after my britches and stockings? Of all the things...!

"Goodness! What is the master up to this time, I wonder? Keeping you out until nearly dawn- all your things, Misha, soaked through and through! You have nothing dry, Misha. Nothing! Where *were* you two?"

Petresky felt it best to humor the inquisitive bears. It had always worked in the past. Whenever they came to visit. The fuzzy bears.

"Master Malcolm, may the gods forgive me, must mind your age, Misha. Do you tell him that? Remind him you are an old man? An old man, Misha! Being out at all hours is not good to your health. Out all night- goodness knows where!"

Images of last night's cavort brought a smile to Petresky's lips. He confided in the bears, "Wonderful people- just charming. Simply!"

"Who, Misha? Who are you talking about? Get dressed- get dre-e-e-essed!"

"The Gypsies! Wonderful! Friendly-"

"Gypsies? Dear me! I should hope not! Liars, prostitutes, and thieves- every last one of them!"

Thieves? Bears are one to point the paw! Filching from an old man's dresser-

"I should hope the master need not deal with their like!"

"Wonderful people- simply charming!"

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In due course, Petresky emerged from his humble servant home at a feeble trot. His morning meal, a stale crust of bread, jutted from his mouth like a turned-up tusk. Shirt tails flapping, the coachman struggled to don both his greatcoat and cloak at once. The two became entwined and a great clog of cloak bunched beneath the shoulders of his coat. He was forced to a halt, bending over like a demented hunchback to yank at the gargoyle perched upon his back. Amid the violence of his efforts, the crust of bread sprang free from cursing lips.

"Fie!" he scowled. "Ill-begotten luck!"

His simple peasant mind ruminated: soiled breakfast, or no breakfast. Picking up the crust, he wiped it upon his sleeve. "Of course! Of course!" he grumbled, sullen as a child. "Crumbs rub off, lo! But the grit stays! I'll rub and rub and rub and end up with nothing before long. Nothing but a handful of dirt!" In a rage, he swallowed it down, dirt specks and all. "Good 'nuff for the worms, then good 'nuff for old Petresky!"

He set off for the carriage house at a breakneck pace.

Arriving out of breath, Petresky climbed to the driver's box of the waiting carriage and spurred the team forward without further delay. The stablemaster's rebuke for tardiness and slovenly appearance was almost drowned out by the clatter of hooves and the jingle of tack. Almost.

"And a good day to you, too!" Petresky cried, feeling this would somehow put the stablemaster in his place.

With the wind in his thin hair and the rumble of the coach in his belly, Petresky recalled groggily the task at hand: the lady required a coach. And a coachman. He breathed a deep, settling breath. A day of social calls. Perhaps a dress fitting? Child's

sport compared to last night's harrowing drive. Child's sport! There might even be opportunity for a nap or two between destinations. The prospect of an altogether relaxing day began to blossom.

Bringing the carriage to a halt (more or less in front of the great steps fronting the mansion house) Petresky meant to swing down from his post and signal the hall porter that the lady's coach had arrived. Only too late did he discover the brass eagle ornament utilized for this maneuver was missing. Someone had removed it. (Olan!) Instead of swinging deftly from his post, the old coachman effectively threw himself to the ground. He tumbled keel over end across the gravel drive.

"That boy!" he scowled, rubbing bits of stone from his abraded palms. "No need to polish the brass work! 'Twas done just last week- if that! No need! *Simply* no need...!"

Shambling through his duties in a surly mood, Petresky fetched the step stool from the rear of the coach, situated it before the carriage door proper, and climbed the great steps to the front portals of Copperswuerth Manor. He rang for the hall porter. Instantly the heavy doors of chased iron and wood inlay swung open and a flood of humanity spilled forth. In the center of the outrush was the lady of the house herself. Her hair was intricately piled in that climbing style so popular to the social elite. Her face was powdered to perfection, offsetting her chestnut eyes so large and warm. In passing, she greeted the startled coachman with a smile, saying:

"Good Morningtide, Petresky!"

It was a peculiar smile, Petresky felt. Peculiar because the lady's good cheer seemed forced. Even to his impaired cognizance, the coachman felt her anxiety. She was worried. Worried, and striving desperately not to betray the fact.

"Milady!" he managed in reply as the wave of servants and attendants washed over him. "Bringing the little master for a jaunt then-?" he began, noticing one of the maids carried her young son. But before Petresky could inquire further, a number of bundles were thrust upon him and he was caught up in the impetus of the entourage. As a fluid body of bobbing heads and shuffling feet, they cascaded down the steps: a tidal wave intent upon the broadside of the waiting carriage. Petresky huffed and puffed under his burdens, straining to match the determined pace.

"Indeed!" the lady replied to his question some moments later. "A jaunt it is. Frightfully foggy day for a ride," she added, as if trying to steer the conversation to more mundane observations. "Frightfully foggy, I see."

"Frightfully foggy- frightfully so!" Petresky agreed with some measure of relief. He squinted into the fog. Bah! So much for the wife and her prophecies of drink and blindness! Merely the weather! "To where are we driving today, milady? Tristan's park? The Malaguay?" Juggling his burdens, the coachman opened the carriage door for his mistress.

"Oh Matthew, don't fuss," admonished the lady of the house, taking her son from the arms of her maid. "My, he's getting too big for me- almost! Anna, you lead and I shall hand him to you- Matthew! Mathew don't grab Mummie's pearls! Really!" Waiting for the maid to situate herself inside the stately carriage, the child changed hands again and she, the lady of the house, hitched up her skirts and climbed aboard. They were a company of three, mother, child, and maid.

"Stuart-?" she called to the crowd of servants thronging the carriage. Her butler came forward and supplied, one by one, several folded quilts. The lady began arranging them across her lap to fight the chill. To Petresky she answered suddenly, "Off to who

knows where my brother has run, leaving me alone in Copperswuerth! A single note and nothing else he has left me!"

Petresky blinked. "Well, milady, the master of the house is off on another of his escapades, no doubt." He shuffled to keep his burdens in hand. They were fast becoming too heavy for him.

"Off he has gone, he has!" the lady of the house nodded, fussing with her son's fidgety spirit. The lad refused to have a quilt tucked about his legs. "Off he has gone- no, Emily, leave that basket upon the floor. On the seat it may fall. Gone he has- and Marya from the kitchen says he had a Gypsie cripple with him! Some frightfully evil-looking woman- a Gypsie! The thought!"

Petresky tried to picture this mysterious Gypsie woman. Had there been a woman in the coach the night before? He could not recall with any clarity. "Gone off with her...? Well... I'm sure the master will return a spot wealthier than when he left. As he always does!"

"He does not seem to think so!" she said, instantly clamping her mouth shut. Preoccupied, she had let slip a piece of information not intended for servant ears. Clearing her throat at her own carelessness, she muttered, "Malcolm's note did not sound optimistic. But perhaps I have misread his words..."

"Perhaps, milady," the coachman agreed, seeing no other recourse.

"Petresky, you must bring me to my brother's home- Adrian. Take me to Adrian. He will know how to interpret this note. Adrian will know!"

The coachman flinched. "Milady-!"

"Yes, to my brother. I must speak with Adrian. You know the way- you were just there last night. Were you not?"

"And how, milady!" he groaned. The thought of traveling such a torturous road in his present condition turned the old man's bones to sand. *I shall die on the road for sure.* "And how! Believe me when I say, mistress, it is not a trip for the delicate nature of a mother and her child! 'Tis a devil of a ride! May the gods forgive an old man for saying so."

"Petresky, I *must* see my brother."

"A messenger," the coachman suggested, confident his head was about to explode. The mere thought! "A single horseman will make better time-"

"Petresky! I must see my brother and see him I shall! Please do not upset me more than I already am. Take me to him! Drive on!"

Bowing his apologies, Petresky closed the cab, stowed his bundles in the boot, and assumed his post atop the carriage. As the staff waved their well-wishes to their mistress, the coachman drove off, resigning himself to the unthinkable fate which lay ahead.

Reaching the solace of his flask, he groaned, realizing in his haste he had forgotten to tuck it into his belt that morning.

\* \* \*

"Blessed gods be, we've arrived."

Petresky's whisper was immediately absorbed by the gray, misty wilds. The secluded cottage stood before him, dark, silent, as much a part of the forest as the towering trees. Their ride had been another frightful nightmare. But they had arrived, intact, though later than the most pessimistic of estimates. It was nearly noon.

Petresky remained in his box for a few heartbeats longer, breathing deeply of the moist, convalescent air. How different from the city! With the throb of his pulse calmed,

he eased himself to the ground and attended his mistress's call. The oval of her face was peering curiously from the carriage window. She had never seen her brother's hermitage. The sketchy details supplied by Malcolm left much to stoke her imagination.

"Petresky," she instructed her man, "inform my brother we have arrived."

Nodding, Petresky left to do her bidding. In passing he noticed the ride had been exactly the monster he had forewarned. Anna, the maid, was busy on the floor of the carriage repackaging the baskets and panniers that had toppled and come undone during their ordeal.

Returning from the cottage a few moments later Petresky reported, "Milady, there is no answer from within. I fear Master Adrian is off elsewhere." He opened the carriage door and offered his hand.

Accepting the coachman's assistance, the lady emerged with her child balanced carefully upon her hip. Setting her dainty foot upon the damp forest grass, she winced. Not so much as a gravel pathway to save the delicate dye of her shoes from dewy ruin! And the hem of her gown? Fated to suffer irrevocable water-marks to be sure!

An instant later all wardrobe fears were forgotten. The sight of her brother's spare cottage stole away her tongue. Malcolm's description of the place had been most... understated. Her eyes went wide as if witnessing a crime. The windows were devoid of decoration. The unpainted shutters had a severely functional demeanor. The stucco exterior was old and cracked, crumbling away to expose the supporting structure beneath. Gray-green mildew tainted the entire northmost wall like some cancer. The damp forest air settled upon the house in glassy beads, dripping monotonously from the eaves. The must of old thatch was overwhelming. A painful sensation squeezed her as she realized a Coleby lived in this shambling hut of a home. Servants lived better.

"Milady...?"

"Well..." she said at last, trying to break the grip of the spell. "He must be here somewhere. It is nearly noon and even he must eat sometime! Help Anna with the luncheon baskets. Bring them into the... the..." Words failed her. "...into the... the..." She waved a hand at the cottage and Petresky nodded his understanding. "Be sure to stoke a fire to take off the chill. There is a chimney at least. Gods grant that it is functional. I shall find my brother myself."

"Very good, mistress!"

Carrying her son, the lady moved closer to the cottage. Instinctively she circled to the rear, hesitant to approach the front door. Would crossing the threshold of a beggar's home leave its mark upon her? She shivered. Perhaps... perhaps this was the wrong home?

At the rear of the cottage the ground became too treacherous for her to continue, overburdened as she was with the weight of her son. Carefully she set Mathew to walk beside her in the damp grass. Taking his hand in her own, the two, mother and child, meandered their way to a small garden plot immediately off the rear of the cottage. It was a pumpkin patch at the height of fruition. The child's attention was immediately caught. Disengaging himself from his mother's grip, Mathew waddled on uncertain steps to the largest specimen and placed both pudgy hands upon its swollen, bright orange hide. The pumpkin rose nearly to his chest. With one hand Mathew braced himself and with the other he slapped the rippled surface in delight.

"Pup... pu-p, pu-p!" he squealed, marveling at the hollow echoes made by his attacks.

Mother hovered protectively, but otherwise let the boy have his way. She was

preoccupied with the absence of her brother. The fog was thick, blinding her on all sides in sheets of white and gray. Faint animal sounds reached her ears and a brief panic of wolves made her heart flutter. These were the wilds, after all, a strange and dangerous forest, hours and hours from civilization- untamed, deadly. But her fears were momentary, assuaged as she recognized the mundane clamor of chickens and cows. Somewhere off to the left, hidden in the fog, she pictured a pitiful barn housing her brother's modest livestock. Tentatively she called into the gloom:

"Adrian! Adrian Coleby! Adrian...?"

"Pup, p-pup!" Mathew piped, trying to compete with his mother's voice. A thick leaf from the pumpkin vine caught his attention and he grabbed it. The prickly underside, a strange and new sensation to his pampered hands, made him wince thoughtfully. He grabbed the leaf again, receiving the same shock.

With no reply answering from the gloom, the lady thought to press deeper into the fog. Again the prospect of wild animals made her hesitate. It was silly, she knew, to think of wolves and such. Her brother had lived here undisturbed for years. Just the same, she was a stranger to these woodlands, be they wild, tame, or otherwise. Wandering aimlessly in the fog could leave her irrevocably lost. At her back the cottage was an indistinct blur. It was her only landmark and she dared not let it out of sight.

"Adrian!" she called again to the imagined barn. It was a little shack of a thing, she envisioned, dilapidated, leaning drastically on the verge of collapse. "Adrian Coleby! Adri- oh!"

A grim shadow approached from the right- contrary to her expectations. On unhurried, heavy feet a figure emerged. Vague details quickly became clear: a thin man in a loose cloak, a vicious scythe held lengthwise at the waist.

"Adrian...!" She breathed a sigh of relief, recognizing her brother after a moment of fright. Laughing to cover her own silly fears, she said quickly, "I thought you would be with the animals..." As her brother drew closer she made out the lines in his face. He had changed! "Adrian... are you well? Have you been ill? You're so thin- and flushed!"

"Fine, Lyn," he said sheepishly, his face turning a deeper crimson. He planted the butt of his scythe and accepted a quick hug from his sister. "I have been reaping the rye, that is all. Hearty work! You look well. And oh, who is this here? Mathew?" He squatted on his haunches, leaning on the scythe for balance. "Hallo there young man!"

"Pup p-pup!" the boy piped, swatting the pumpkin to punctuate his words. "Pup!"

"Getting big, you are," Adrian commented with approval. "Soon you will be giving your Uncle Malcolm a time or two, I trust!" He laughed and looked up at his sister. "This is a surprise! All this way you have come to see me. I am blessed. You have never seen my home before. Not the best day for seeing sights, though, with all this fog in the air! But we can make the best of what we can. The house is there, you have seen. The barn over a way. A lake is not far from here. It is worth the walk to see-Lyn?" Looking up into his sister's face he saw only sorrow. She had not come all this way for sight-seeing. "Carolyn, what is it?"

"Terrible..." she confessed. Now that she was finally with family, away from the servants and society, her facade could be abandoned. A cloudburst of tears erupted. All the worries she had forced down, all the anxieties she had so ineptly masked behind trembling smiles and broken laughter, all of it, everything, came to the surface in a torrent of emotion. She could not control herself. Unable to speak with the dignity that befitted a lady, she fumbled beneath her overcoat and retrieved a folded scrap of parchment.

"This...!"

Rising, Adrian accepted the note. A brief message scrawled in Malcolm's blunt, coarse hand read:

*Adrian no help  
had to seek alternate  
prospect not good  
pray for success  
-M*

"What does it mean?" she begged him to explain. "I can't imagine! What trouble could Malcolm be in where you cannot help? Is it so terrible that even *you* are unable to undo it?" Her lips quivered.

Adrian placed a reassuring hand upon her wrist. With his wry smile he said, "You speak as if I am a god who can perform miracles. I am only a man, your brother. As for this," he waved the note, "a misunderstanding, that is all. Malcolm meant one thing and wrote another. It is not that I *cannot* help, it is that I *choose* not to help. That is all he meant to say. Or should have said."

"But-" She took the note to reread its contents- as if each word was not already burned into her brain, every syllable memorized. "This here- prospect not good? Pray for success? Oh, A! He left this morning before I was up! He's never done that before, leaving on one of his adventures without saying good-bye! And the staff says he left with some Gypsy woman. Is that what he meant by an alternate? How could a Gypsy woman replace you, Adrian? I don't understand-"

Adrian interrupted. He had to stop this landslide of worries before it grew into an avalanche. "Did Malcolm tell you anything? Anything at all concerning this latest

venture of his?"

"N- no," she stammered. "He never does. Says a woman's mind will worry over the littlest of nothings." She made a sour expression. "But he's never slipped off into the night like this- without my well-wishes! And this note- it sounds so bleak!"

Setting his scythe aside, Adrian took both her hands to calm her. "Time was imperative. That is all. Malcolm came to me last night. He bore every intention of spiriting me away then and there without the least little of delay. I suspect the moment he returned home he was off again. Time, his schedule, motivates him, not-"

"And this Gypsie woman?"

Adrian shrugged. "I suspect she is a mystic of some sort."

"Oh! Malcolm is involved with- *magic!*" She gasped. "He mentioned he was coming to see you. I had wondered why. For magic. But you would not help him. He should have known you would refuse anything to do with... He should have known." She paused. The pieces of Malcolm's puzzling behavior were beginning to form a mosaic. "This Gypsie woman, can she serve his purpose? Malcolm must have told you the details. You would know. Can she play the role Malcolm meant for you to act? Is he in danger if she cannot perform?"

Adrian reflected carefully. With the intent of keeping his sister's imagination, her worries, at bay, he said in an offhand manner, "I cannot see his life being endangered. He needs a magician to... open a magic lock of sorts. Nothing more." He smiled in good humor. "Nothing terrible will befall him if this Gypsie fails. He is not off hunting dragons!" His joke did not cheer her, and she flashed him a grave look of disapproval. Adrian shrugged, concluding, "If the mystic fails, the lock will remain sealed. Malcolm will return home empty-handed. That is all."

Adrian saw the worry in her eyes melt. With the reassurance of their brother's safety, Carolyn was able to bury the concerns that had plagued her all morning. But there were more worries, more fears, which quickly rose to fill the void. When she spoke again there was a tremble in her words. "And if the lock does open?"

Adrian smiled. "Like all of Malcolm's ventures, he will be a wealthy man yet another time over!"

She shook her head, turning away. Drawing a lace handkerchief from her bodice, she dabbed at her eyes. "He has no choice, A. If this mystic Gypsie cannot open the lock- if she cannot, if she fails..."

"There is no penalty," he insisted. "None. The worst danger I can foresee are the trolls they may encounter that far north. But Malcolm has dealt with them before. He knows how to prepare for them. Such things are his specialty!"

"No A-", she said, tears brimming anew. "You don't understand. He cannot fail. He cannot come back empty-handed. He can't!"

"I do not understand. One foiled venture will make no difference to him-"

"Yes- yes, it makes all the difference!"

"Lyn, do not cry. It is a silly thing he has gone off to do. Once he realizes the lock will not break, he will come back-"

"Empty-handed!" she stammered, tears flowing freely. "It can't happen that way. He won't let it- He's desperate- terribly so! Oh, A! Malcolm is- *bankrupt!*" She threw a hand to cover her mouth as if the word was obscene.

"Mmm?"

She nodded. Speaking through her fingers she added, "His last venture was costly- costly! Too late he discovered it was a lie- a hoax! The map he purchased was a

forgery. There was nothing to be gained. It was all a lie! A small fortune for that slip of parchment- a costly, costly lie! Debtors have been hounding him for months." She looked around suddenly, frightened the servants might be within earshot. "You mustn't tell anyone, A! You mustn't!"

"Some misunderstanding," he responded, shaking his head. "If Malcolm were truly in financial straits, he could not afford this present adventure. He need supplies and men and traveling exspen-"

"He *can't* afford it, Adrian! Malcolm..." Carolyn lowered her voice. "Malcolm went to Father for the cost! Father's gold!"

"Father?" Adrian was verily surprised. "And Father believed in his prospects of success, knowing... I was involved?" Adrian frowned. "No. Father would never... Never. Malcolm must have told the old man he had another spell-worker already in the fold. Or made no mention of the magic lock."

"With the gold from Father," Carolyn continued, "Malcolm paid off his debtors partly- enough to keep them away for now. With the rest he is financing this escapade. Oh, A!" She began to shake. "He has become a desperate man! If this Gypsie woman cannot open the lock, he will not give up! He will try anything to get it open, even if it means-" She gasped, not wanting to finish the thought. "He won't return home with nothing to show for his efforts. He won't! He knows another failure will land him in debtor's prison! He'd rather die than suffer such a disgrace!"

Adrian understood. Financial defeat was not in the Coleby vocabulary. Coleby! Death before poverty! Quietly Adrian admitted, "There is nothing I can do, gods know. If I had the gold, I would gladly hand it over. But Malcolm's situation stems from his own doing..."

"But you must help!" she implored.

"I do not see how I can, dear sister. I have no wealth. No riches."

"Go to him, Adrian! Go to him!"

"No!" he said, involuntarily bristling. "I will not work magic! Not for anyone!"

"I'm not asking you to. Just go to him, A. Stand by his side, offer him your wisdom. He respects your opinion. On the surface he'll bluster and fume, but inside he does listen to your advice. Watch over him! Keep him from doing anything rash! He is desperate. Be sure he doesn't become reckless. Above all, A, be sure he comes home! If he doesn't, I am lost. Lost!" She hesitated, reluctant to admit, "I depend upon him entirely. If he should die in the wilds, Copperswuerth Manor will go to the block and be auctioned to pay his creditors! Where shall I go if that happens? I depend upon him utterly. Entirely! If he comes back, even empty-handed, at least he can serve his time in debtor's prison. His holdings will slowly earn back what he owes. A year, not much more is all he will have to serve. His ego may suffer, but better he should serve a year in shame than I be cast out into the cold!"

"I..." Adrian muttered uncertainly. He did not enjoy his predicament. As any loving brother, he did not wish to see his family suffer. Yet they were victims of their own shortsightedness, their own choices, choices willingly made, freely made. No. They were at the mercy of their convictions and desires, and the consequences thereof. No, he could not- would not- be drawn into the fray out of guilt or pity. Malcolm's greed for more was to blame. More, more, more... insatiable. Another Coleby trait. "No, I cannot leave, Lyn. I have many chores to attend here. The rest of my harvest, repairs upon my cottage before the snows come. I must finish these things, and more, or I will not survive the winter."

"But Adrian!"

He reaffirmed his grip upon her hands. "If the worst does befall you, dear sister, and you find yourself in the cold, you may stay here."

She laughed, and the tears continued to run. "Here? No, Adrian, not here. Not I. I cannot stay- here. Not here..." She glanced at the humble cottage lurking in the gloom. Her silks and furs, pearls and emeralds- here? "No- the very thought! Not here...!"

"Father then?" he suggested. "He has dozens of rooms in his manor. Plenty of room-"

She broke their grip to wipe at her eyes. She laughed again, this time with a bitter irony that held the edge of a razor. "Father! Father and Mathew?" she sniffed, glancing down at her little boy. "Adrian, a bastard child is a bastard child- whether it is starving or otherwise. Father will no more take us in than beggars off the street!" Wiping her tears she assumed a low tone, imitating their father's voice and facial expression. "Such a disgrace to the Coleby name! Not in my house! Begone slut and take your little bastard with you! Out!"

"Lyn..." he began but suddenly found he had nothing to say beyond her pet name. "O, Lyn..."

"Adrian, go to Malcolm! Go! If not for him, if not for me, then for Mathew! Should Malcolm die, *I won't be able to feed my own child!*"

Adrian's eyes fell automatically upon the lad's bright, upturned face. It was at that moment he realized why his sister had made this trip, why she had abandoned the city to journey into the countryside she so detested. And why, above all else, she had brought her son along. She knew him well, he as her younger brother, and knew he could not sit idle if it meant his inaction would put this child- any child- at risk. He could not

deny the needs of the young, the innocent, the virtuous.