

The Road to Amber

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Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.
The Ancient Mariner
Samuel Coleridge

In all the endless road you tread
There's nothing but the night.
A.E. Housman

Across the margin of the world I fled,
And troubled the gold gateways of the stars.
Francis Thompson

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
The Hound of Heaven
Francis Thompson

Dedication

Peg Halpin for all that you do for me and for kicking me in the butt when I needed it. Which truth be told, is very often. For my brothers and sister, I love you guys. You're the greatest fans any author could wish for.

Chapter 1

My earliest memories were of my baby fat legs walking down a cobblestone road; cobblestones that were each individually different, unique and shimmering as if coated in crystal and gold, where the sky was a blue so perfect I could never imagine it so pure and consummate. Where the trees were the epitome of what a tree should be and were just not quite as perfect as what I now saw around me.

My hand was held in a woman's palm, soft, scented and trembling as the woman hurried down this enchanted roadway. My baby legs could not quite keep up so she hoisted me in her arms and tucked me against her silk covered breast. I smelled flower scented hair and a sharp tang of ozone yet no thunder or lightning accompanied us. I smelled fear and her skin was damp as sweat stained her clothing.

Fireflies winked around us, burst against my skin with tiny stings that made me cry out in distress that something so delicate could hurt so much.

Darkness swept in around us and something wrenched me from her hands. I heard her howl of anger and vile curses before my next memories coalesced to become the rocking sensation of side to side motion that made me nauseous. I was carried in arms that were decidedly odd, hairless, scaled but no less welcoming. Past skies that burned orange and jets of blue flame burst around us as the thing that carried me traveled down a road made of flaming black bricks. Day turned to night, night became twilight and days twisted until my memories fragmented and I could recall only wisps and traces of those early years.

A birthday one my caretaker called a sixth, in a place that resembled a hobbit's cave. A long journey after in a boat that sailed across an emerald sea where two moons vied for the surge of tides and great storms made me wonder if I would dwell below the breakers with the mer-folk I saw from the railings. The motion made me so sick, I couldn't remember much except the constant puking.

Years went by where survival was my only concern, my goal and mental focus. Each stay a bead in a chain that remained unbroken, each gem totally unlike the one before or after until I accepted each berth as normal in my crazy existence, the only facet remaining the same was the odd creature I took to be my caretaker. Sometimes, it was a man, sometimes a demon and sometimes an animal but always the same personality and character traits---a thing that kept me fed, clothed and safe until it was time to move on.

When I turned fifteen by its reckoning, we were in the City with a million occupants and it told me that this day was my birthday.

I looked around at the dirty streets, the corner where a score of us homeless were huddled around a metal drum housing a fire that glowed on our faces and turned us all into golden statues.

My companion was an older man with gray hair, gray skin and eerie gray eyes that no darkness could dim. He stood over me by a hands-breadth with broad shoulders and wide arms, a fierce man with enough danger in him to scare off most of the predators we might encounter on these mean streets.

He smiled at me, his teeth white, very sharp and strangely inhuman but I was unaffected by his outlandishness as I had been subject to it for many years. He held out a small cake covered in chocolate frosting with a tiny candle in its center. It burned without smoke.

“Happy Birthday, Corbin,” he whispered calling me by my old name. Raven. It meant Raven, dark of hair and yellow eyed like the famed Corbel of Ireland or so the legends stated. I knew my name was Raven, as I knew my birthplace was Ireland and my mother had brought me here to the city from the Emerald isle, dying in the process but not before placing me in the care of the thing now masquerading as the gray man.

We haunted the shadows, the street corners, the old abandoned and deserted places. We stole, begged or borrowed what we needed to survive and so far, had not been discovered by what purported to hunt us. Although, I had never seen what supposedly hunted us, only had his word for it that we were relentlessly pursued.

The thing I called the gray man called itself a morph, neither explaining or naming itself so I gave it a name years before as Murphy in mockery to its Irish beginnings. In truth, I didn't know what it was other than my mother, my nursemaid, my bodyguard and my mentor. Without its protection and care, I would be dead, raped, starved or insane. It was my jailer and my benediction, my survival and my prison.

I took the cake and pulled out the candle sucking the frosting off the wax end. Carefully, I peeled the cake into pieces and shared it around the fire with the rest of the street people who shared the warmth of the blazing oil drum.

Murphy knew all their names only minutes after meeting them whereas it took me longer to memorize people's names and faces. I was better at remembering places. Within a moment's glance at a scene or room, I could describe it down to the number of tiles on the floor or cabs parked on sidewalks, to the color of the sky and how far the clouds covered the horizon.

The cake was enough for everyone to have a bite and all of them sang Happy Birthday to me. Next, Murphy gave me a present wrapped in brown paper, a box the size of a paperback book and from its shape, I assumed it was one. I held it awkwardly and he gestured for me to open it.

It was a box, cardboard and inside was a hard piece of metal wrapped in leather. When I unrolled it, I held in my hands a dagger---eight inches long shaped like a leaf and made of a blue metal that gleamed in the firelight. The hilt was like that of a small sword, the grip made of gold wrapped ivory with a pigeon egg ruby on the end. It was beautiful and deadly, sharp as a shaving razor and balanced in my palm. I looked in his gray eyes. He nodded. “You will need a longer blade when you take to the road, Corbin.”

“We're leaving again?” I asked. Not that I was attached to this oh so elegant neighborhood but I knew its every hidey-hole and nooks and crannies. I was comfortable here and knew how to stay safe and anonymous.

“They will find us sooner or later,” he warned.

“Who? Who will find us? For years we have hidden and skulked like rats in the shadows. Not once, have I seen anyone after us,” I complained. “Just once, I'd like to settle in one place. Rent a room, go to school, live a normal life. I know you have money, I've seen you spend it when we had to. Why can't we stay and live like normal people?”

His blue eyes flared like unholy demon fire and I swallowed. He could still incite fear in my stomach and wasn't above corporal punishment. Twice, we'd left towns and villages

for just that reason---the state didn't like to see children beaten. Funny, I'd never thought about running away from him---what followed us was far worse than anything he could do to or had done to me.

I shut up and pretended to look at my present, the ornate dagger. Dojo, the old man who was sharing the corner with us admired it and said, "looks like old Italian or maybe Spanish. Fine steel in the blade."

"It's Celtic," Pretty-boy added and Murphy shook his head to all three guesses.

"It's Krillian," he named and no one asked what that was. Even I didn't know its origins.

"The blade will never rust, break or dull," he told me. "It belonged to one of your ancestors."

That peaked my interest, he had never mentioned any of my family before. I'd asked if the woman I'd remembered had been my mother but his answer puzzled me, he'd said he had always been with me.

Subtly, he steered me away from the barrel and down the street towards the mission where we'd spent the last week sleeping among a hundred faces. Some I knew and others were always changing as new people moved in from other states or their circumstances worsened. Only last weekend, I'd met a woman and her three little kids kicked out of their apartment and forced to live in their beat up old car. Then, it had been towed leaving them homeless and with only the clothes on their backs.

I'd given her my last ten bucks and she'd nearly hugged me hard enough to break a rib. I'd offered to watch her kids so she could go spend it.

All three were quiet, watchful little ones, two girls and a boy all under the age of four. They huddled together at my feet while I told them fairy tales about a wondrous land of marble skies, deer-like creatures that shimmered in silver, had hands for hooves and antlers of gold.

Murphy said, "Chessaria. It's called Chessaria."

I snorted. "I made the place up, Murph, it's whatever I want to call it."

The little boy said, "Sezaria."

"Fine. Chessaria it is," I agreed and when Mom came back, she had bags of clothes and her little ones were asleep.

Lights went out at 10 pm. By then, I was tucked under the thin blanket and in my coat but I was wide awake. I never once saw Murphy sleep, his eyes were always open and glowed at night like my own personal night light which made it nearly impossible to sneak out from under his watchful eye.

Mostly, I waited until I was in the restroom before I sneaked out. I never went far, just a few blocks to explore a park or stare into a shop window. Once, I made it all the way inside a museum. I think it was in Dallas, there were horses, cowboys and bulls.

He'd whipped me for that and the promised treat of a week on the beach at Padre Island was taken back. We spent it in some little coal mining town in West Virginia instead. In a shack in the woods, no electricity, no running water and we ate only what I could trap or hunt.

"You're such a dick," I mumbled under my breath remembering the awful conditions.

"Go to sleep, Corbin," he said calmly. "Tomorrow, we leave for upstate."

I leaned up on one elbow "Upstate! What's upstate but more snow, more cold and smaller cities?"

“Albany. The Director of this place is too interested in you. I’ve seen her staring at you when she thinks no one is looking.”

“The really pretty lady with the blue eyes and long hair?”

“Flora. Her name is Flora.”

“She likes flowers,” I said drowsily, laying back down. In a few minutes, my eyes closed and I was lost in a place where the flowers had faces; I was in the center of a meadow dancing with her and all the flower faces followed us around. The grass was blue, the sky green and Flora wore a dress that floated around her changing colors from the deepest emerald to the most cerulean blue and her hair matched the colors of her dress. Her hand was ice cold in my own and I could not let go of hers.

“Beware the Trump, young Raven,” she warned and her grin became a Cheshire cat with saber teeth. I woke before the morning came. I woke to the presence of a warm scented hand on my mouth and another under my neck. To two lashed eyes beneath a flowered scarf framing a face as lovely as a flower. I wasn’t sure if I was still dreaming.

She brought my head and shoulders up, sliding me off the cot without disturbing my neighbors or my guardian. When I tried to turn my head to check on his whereabouts, she tugged me forward gliding like a soft shoe salesman through the quilted checkerboard of cots. Not until we were outside and aimed towards an open and waiting stretch limo did I voice a protest.

Once inside, she leaned over me to snap my seat-belt and the scent from her skin and hair made me dizzy. I swallowed the words I had wanted to utter and melted into the plush upholstery. Her long manicured nails stroked my face and she tapped the dimple in my chin. “Your name, boy. What is your name?”

“Corbin,” I whispered.

“Your surname?”

“Murphy-Sines.”

“Murphy-Sines. Surely not.” She laughed then, a high tinkle of a laugh. “Ah, a joke on the morph. Morph---Morphy, Murphy.” She leaned forward and told the driver to head for her home. I don’t remember where we went save that it was long enough for me to pass out with no recollection of any part of the journey.

Chapter 2

Warm breath on my face woke me. I opened my eyes to see three unknown faces staring at me from a distance of inches making them a myopic jigsaw. I backed up and hit a wall not a bed. I wasn’t in bed but on the floor of a small room that looked like a closet. The walls were paneled with bead-board and had pegs above my head.

“Who the hell are you people? Where am I?” I shouted and pushed the faces away to be grabbed and hauled up off the floor as if I weighed nothing. All three of these men looked enough alike to be brothers or from the same tribe. They looked human but not quite human enough if you studied them close, their fingers were one too many, an extra joint between the arm and elbow, necks shorter than most so that their heads looked like they grew right out of their shoulders. Short, squat, built more like a hairless ape with dark brown eyes and

bald skulls. Six fingered and their tongues were forked like a reptile. All three flicked my face and swallowed. I shuddered and struggled, couldn't break their grip on me.

"Gross!" I yelled. "Get your...fucking tongue off me!" I saw her behind them and in a language I'd never heard before, she snapped at them and they dropped me. I landed on my feet but bounced into the wall denting the paneling.

"Where am I?" I demanded and she laughed at me.

"You're in my home, little boy. Be good and I might let you live."

"What do you want? You don't want to piss off Murphy, he's an...animal," I threatened.

"What is your lineage, Little Raven? Your mother's name? Your father? On what shadow were you born?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Her hand shot out and she grabbed my throat. Instantly, I couldn't breathe, her touch froze the air in my lungs, my entire body became a solid block of ice.

"Humph," she said slowly. "You are human. Disgustingly so. I thought she said he had the blood of the courts and would be easy to control. As he is, he is useless." She threw me to the floor and I bounced against the wall skinning my elbows and palms. I still couldn't breathe or move. She watched me for a moment and then left me, throwing words over her shoulder to the three...men or whatever they were. "Get rid of him. He's not who or what I thought."

"Alive or dead, Mistress?" they asked and she shrugged.

"Whatever. I don't care. You can play with him if you chose just don't leave the mess in the house. Take him to some shadow and leave the remains there. Preferably where his grand-mere can find him."

One of the three grabbed my cuffs and dragged me out of the closet and down the hallway. Dark, painted black and with bare wooden floors, I slid without any effort or resistance. Before we reached the end of the hall, I could see the door; a great, big thing of bronze with angels and demons moving across its panels as if it were a video screen. I was able to breathe but not scream, I wanted to yell for Murphy but couldn't form the syllables to call his name. My coat was still on me and as they dragged me, it billowed up under my armpits until I felt the hard lump of the dagger at my neckline.

I managed to fling my arms out and catch an open doorway making myself a cork in a bottle. The one holding my ankles pulled and I swear I stretched a few inches taller but didn't let go.

The other one tried to peel my fingers off as the third creature kicked me in the stomach. Once again, I struggled to take a breath, felt my body go limp as dark patches filled my vision and sound became a buzzing in my ears.

I woke as they tugged off my clothes. I was lying in a small copse surrounded by trees, on top of rounded black gravel that was curiously warm. Behind them was an altar carved of obsidian and piled around its base were white rocks and sticks. As my eyes focused, I saw that they were bones, skulls and thigh bones, arms and ribs. Rivulets of darker bronze coated the sides of the altar. In the dank sky overhead, the moon in its crescent stage made everything seem greenish, the air smelled like vomit and seaweed. I gagged and kicked but two of them held my ankles and wrists down while the third stripped me naked. I screamed for Murphy and my voice echoed, came back to me in mockery as they hoisted me into the air to smack me onto the flat stone and fasten chains to my wrists and ankles.

“Blood or meat?” the first one asked, exposing teeth that no human male ever wore in his mouth. I flopped around like a gaffed flounder and begged them not to hurt me.

“Oh God! Oh God! Murphy, help me!” I cried out and only heard the thunder of my own pounding heart.

I pissed myself, I was so terrified and didn’t care. Nor did it deter them. He flung out his hand and a claw the size of a dagger slid out from his thumb. Slowly, he stuck it into my belly and ripped down. Blood burst out in a fine spray as white hot agony exploded through my gut. The three of them sucked it out of the air and moaned, eyes closing in ecstasy.

“Royal blood,” he whispered. “More than human.”

The thunder of my heart became louder than the sound of them feasting on my blood, I could feel my guts pushing their way through the tear in my belly wall and it freaked me out enough to dampen the pain until he ripped into my stomach with all six talons at once. I shrieked, a dying wail and he went flying backwards as a giant shadow blocked the wan moonlight.

Something slashed at the chains on my wrists and ankles while a mounted beast leaped over me, altar and all.

Murphy scooped me under his arms and bolted for the tree line, I saw a massive black horse-like creature bearing a caped rider chasing the three into the woods wielding a saber the size of a broadsword before the branches slapped at my face and cut off my view.

Murphy ran for miles with me tucked into his chest. Surefooted, strong, he never faltered or took a misstep. The trees grew close with little underbrush, no loam or needles under foot just that rounded gravel so that I heard his feet pushing aside the stones as he ran.

My blood ran down my belly and into his clothes. I shivered as the cold reached into the deeply buried core of warmth that was my life. He smelled the blood and cursed, laying me down under the bole of a fallen tree while his hands tore at his shirt. He tucked his coat around my shoulders and probed the tear and holes in my guts. His murmured curses were soft and in a language I did not often hear him use except in dire straits and his tone made me all too aware of its interpretation.

“I’m dying, Murphy?” I whispered.

“No, Corbin, master,” he said swiftly, wrapping the bundled shirt on my belly.

“Why, Murphy? Why did she do this to me? I don’t even know her.” I shuddered and felt him stiffen as the ground shook. He pulled at his coat and eased me down to stand in front of me holding a thin blade that glowed almost as bright as his eyes. I could see the dark shape of the horseman by the moon’s shade and the blade’s fire.

The creature stood at least 18 hands high, black as the inside of a well with feathered heels and cloven hooves. Its eyes were red in the moonlight, its head roman nosed and heavy, its forelock split by a horn nearly the length of Murphy’s blade. Spiraled and dark as obsidian, it tossed the point about so that I saw the blood tipped nearly to its halfway point.

The rider tossed its hood back and I saw the man’s face. High-brow, green-eyes and black haired, the face of a pirate; no humor in the flat eyes and grim lips. He barked a question to Murphy and Murph answered equally as terse. Both raised their blades and I saw murder there until Murphy spoke my name and named the rider.

“Julian,” he said. “This is Corbin, Raven. Your nephew. Grandson of Corwin, great grandson of Oberon but more importantly, he is the son of Merlin of the Courts of Chaos and a human woman. Harm the son of the King at your peril. I claim Sanctuary for him in

King Merlin's name."

The nearly seven foot tall Julian dropped to the ground, removed his gauntlets and peered under the wadded up shirt before his eyes devoured my face. His words faded into the background as my hold on consciousness slipped away.

Chapter 3

I opened my eyes slowly, truly astonished that I was still alive. The pain in my stomach seemed a distant monster that promised to make itself known and soon. I was in someone's bed in a tent with IVs hanging near my right side. Sunlight streamed in through netted screens and an open door flap. Quiet murmuring voices penetrated just outside beyond my vision. I swallowed past dry lips and an equally parched throat. There must have been a cool breeze, I saw the sides of the tent billowing yet I was hot, dripping with sweat and still shivering with chills.

I could hear birds and the crunching of a horse chewing on hay, its hooves rustling the bedding. I could smell horse, sawdust and blood, antiseptic and fever sweat. I tried to sit up and the effort left me faint-headed and gasping, brought people into the tent to hover over me. One was the giant I'd seen on the horse and another was Murphy, the third was a man between the two's height and must have been a doctor. He picked up my wrist and felt for my pulse, checked my eyes and at my waist. He had dark orange eyes, orange tinted skin and copper red hair set back like an Elizabethan hair line.

The giant rumbled deep in his throat clearly asking a question and Murphy answered before turning to me.

"Corbin, how do you feel?"

"Don't make him talk, sir," the orange man returned. "He needs to rest. I'm going to put you on oxygen so your lungs are under less stress."

"Murphy?" I managed. "What happened? Why did that chick do this to me? Who is she? Am I gonna die, Murphy?"

The doctor stuck a mask over my nose and mouth cutting me off. "No, you're not allowed to die under my care," he said. He looked off to the side and spoke to someone else. "His liver was pierced in two places, his intestines perforated, bowels ruptured, one kidney nicked. Blood loss of a significant amount which I've replaced in volume, stopped the bleeding and sutured the laceration in his stomach wall. He is on massive infusions of antibiotics to prevent infection but as you can see, he is running a high fever. His fractures have been reduced and pain medication administered. His survival rate depends on his mortal makeup and constitution. Is he one of yours, Sir Julian?"

"Morph?" the one called Julian asked Murphy and I saw his image waver as if I was looking through the rain's downpour. He changed to a creature more like a demon or gargoyle than a man. I heard him say the woman's name, Flora and then, my own. Julian turned and studied me, his eyes devouring my face.

"He looks like a young Corwin," he mused. "Has he any Chaos blood in him, morph?"

"He is a human child," Murphy denied. "I am bound to his service by a witch woman in Ireland. Bound by her shed blood and dying curse to protect him."

“Her name? What was her name?” Julian demanded again.

“Amber Murphy-Sines.”

“Was she human?”

“Completely human,” Murphy nodded.

“And you say Flora did this? Why? I know she had no love for Corwin but why take it out on a child?”

“Why did you intervene and save him?” Murphy asked instead. “Even if you suspected Royal blood, no familial feeling do you bear for Corwin or Corwin’s kin.”

“No one dare to spill the blood of Amber within my protection, my demesnes,” he retorted. “If he is not of Amber descent, why would you protect him?”

“He is a son of Amber,” Murphy agreed. “Whether he has enough of that blood to walk the Pattern, I do not know. He also has the blood of Merlin’s mother, Dara, Lady of the Courts of Chaos. Has he shown any sign of either Logus power? No, not that I have seen yet the woman Flora seemed to recognize him.”

“Does Merlin know about him?”

The doctor clucked in hissing annoyance. “Will you please take your conversation out so he can rest? He should be in a hospital under 24 hour care.”

“Who or what are after you?” Julian asked, his voice moving away from my hearing.

I lifted the plastic cup off my face and called out, “Murphy? Don’t leave me.”

He came swiftly to my side and his hands were once again human, horny and callused as he stroked the side of my face. “I am here, my master. I will never leave you.”

“Am I dying, Murphy?” I felt such sadness overwhelm me, a hollow feeling deep in my gut and it made my breath quicken. I panted in shallow breaths, my chest barely lifting.

“No, Raven,” he returned swiftly.

“My guts feel like they’re burning, Murph. Like they’d fall out if I stood up.”

“Your guts are back where they belong, master. Sewed and tidy as this doctor could make them. There is a spark inside you. Do you feel it? A warm core that is the center of your life. Cradle it, feed it, blow on it as if you were to feed a tiny blaze into a bonfire. Do you see it?”

“I see it, Murphy,” I said drowsily, warm and tingly.

“Good. Feed it pieces of fuel, Raven. One by one until it blazes like a forest fire.”

“There’s no more firewood, Murph,” I protested.

“I will give you some. Here, Raven. A log from a Heart oak from the Silver Forest of Arden. Look, your Uncle Julian is giving you a splendid chunk of ironwood from his favorite copse in the wood. He is the Steward of Arden, Raven. Feel the flames brighten and leap as they consume the wood.”

“I feel it, Murph. I’m warming up now. Too bad we don’t have any marshmallows. We could make smores,” I mumbled.

“Can you sleep now, master?”

I snorted very near to that state of slumber. “You never called me master before, Murph. I must be worrying you.”

“I’ll beat you when you wake, Corbin. For leaving without telling me you were going. Go to sleep.”

I closed my eyes and obeyed him.

Chapter 4

The tent was blowing briskly when I opened my eyes and Murphy was seated on a stump carved into the likeness of a chair. He was curiously still, his eyes unblinking as he watched my face.

I felt less pain, cooler and definitely hungry. My IVs were still going but the blood had been removed from the pole. I felt lighter and fragile, as if one solid cough would send me spiraling away. When I lifted my arm off the cot, it felt as if I was moving an 80 lb. bag of cement.

My fingers rubbed at the covers over me, they were a soft fabric like wool but not itchy. The cot was wooden, the mattress crinkly as if stuffed with rushes. The tent walls were oiled canvas with a stove, metal chimney. Nowhere did I see anything that worked off electricity or was a synthetic. Except for the medical lines and bags. Those were plastic.

“Where are we?” It was an effort to breathe, my lungs were filled with water and gurgled. I hawked up a mouthful and spat green phlegm. It hurt, my ribs and belly protested.

“I can call the doctor, Corbin,” he said. “He will give you something for the pain.”

“Where are we, Murphy? This place is like...what I remember from the dreams. From years ago when I was a baby.”

“Arden. The Forest of Arden. Your uncle brought you here from a shadow world.”

“Shadow world? This isn't New York?”

“No, Corbin. This is a place near to your home, called Amber. The one true world.”

I stared at him, decided he was crazier than me. “I want to go home,” I said. “To New York.”

“She will be there, looking for you.”

“She? You mean that bitch, Flora?”

“The Lady Florabel and others. She will have contacted others and told them about you,” he said and his teeth grew into fangs. “A long time ago, a man named Dworkin found Chaos and learned how to harness its power. He used it to create a...loci of power using his blood and the jewel he called the Jewel of Judgment. He created the Pattern, called it the Primal Pattern and when any of his blood walk its entire length reaching the center, it bestows upon that individual, the power to go anywhere your heart desires---you make a...shadow world that becomes real. The further away from the Pattern you travel, the more changes you will see until they are truly bizarre.

“Strangest of all are the Courts of Chaos, the Realm where demons and creatures dwell with their masters and lords. Your father grew up in those Courts and mastered them. He is Merlin, son of Dara, and Corwin, Prince of Amber. He rules the Courts as King, he lived on Shadow Earth for many years.”

“Does he know about me?” I asked. Murphy shook his head.

“He does not. The woman who was your mother was only a fleeting episode in his younger years, he never knew she conceived and she never tried to find him to tell him so. She believed in fact, that he was a Fae spirit, not a mortal man at all. You were conceived on Midsummer's Day and born on the Feast of St. Michael's. She held you until you were three and died in a fall running from hunters who were after you. She died protecting you and conjured me with her dying curse.”

“What was her name?”

“Amber Murphy-Sines. She named you Raven because of your black hair and yellow eyes. She said the ravens sang when you were born.”

“I wish I could remember her,” I said and moved my hands along my belly. I felt a bulk of bandages and a drain coming from the left side. Tenderness and pain but it was manageable. “I’m hungry.”

“Truly? I will see if Doctor Ooly will allow it.” He rose, all angles and power contained in an ill-fitting suit akin to a medieval peasant costume.

“Murphy, what is your true form?” I asked and he grinned, sharp-toothed like a ferret.

“Picture a cross between a shark and a gargoyle,” he said and slipped from my sight. Moments later, he returned with the orange haired doctor who seemed pleased that I was awake and coherent. He checked my belly, heart, lungs and the pulse at my wrist before studying my face and the IV bags.

“How do you feel, young sir? No more fever or chills? Are you warm enough? Any pain?”

“It hurts but not too bad,” I muttered. I stared at his eyes, he was minus eyelashes and his hairline resembled the portraits of Queen Elizabeth the 1st. Smooth, rounded dome with no wrinkles.

“I’m hungry. Thirsty, too.”

He handed me a glass half full of blue liquid that shimmered and moved like viscous oil. It smelled horrible and I wrinkled my nose. “I had more in mind a glass of chocolate milk and a burger.”

“This is a dye and will tell me if your viscera are leaking. I just cleaned up a nasty infection in your abdominal cavity. You can’t eat or drink until I’m sure your...guts are sealed.”

“Oh.” I grimaced and swallowed the contents as he held the cup to my lips. It actually didn’t taste too awful, sort of like mango and kiwi. It did warm up my insides as it went down, a nugget of heat in my belly and radiated slowly out to my arms and legs. It helped with my thirst, too. He held a flat metallic plate shaped like a cookie tray over my gut and moved it side to side, back and forth staring into its shiny surface. After some fifteen minutes, he grunted and pronounced me clean and safe. “Clear liquids to start,” he ordered and told someone just out of my sight what my new menu was supposed to be and any foods I should avoid. Which seemed to be most everything I liked.

I yawned, suddenly sleepy and he pulled the sheets up to my chin. Murphy made some noise and I barely heard the doctor’s reply.

“He’ll sleep. Part of the dye was a sedative to relax his muscles. We must move him soon. Julian fears we have been discovered.”

Murphy’s voice rumbled in a deep basso. “He cannot protect the boy here in Arden?”

“He will not. He has been fair and impartial because he detests Flora, not because he feels anything for Corwin or Merlin. I told Lord Julian it would be safe to transport him by plane-car in two days.”

“Where will we go?” Murph asked and it was almost a wail.

“Back to where you came from,” he paused. “If he is only mortal, how did you reach this shadow realm without power from the Pattern? Did someone trump you into Arden?”

Murphy shrugged. “I never said he was only mortal. He has the blood of Kings in his veins and the power of both the Logus and the Pattern.”

I went back to sleep wondering where this realm resided.

I grumbled, spit, growled and turned over to the amusement of both my entire retinue and the owner of this place. I grumbled because I was literally ravenous and would eat Murph if I thought I could digest him. There wasn't one of those nurse call buttons near to hand so I opted for yelling. My voice surprised me, it was barely a squeak. Murph must have been just outside the tent, he came in too quickly to have heard my feeble complaint unless he was just outside the flap. Best of all, he carried a tray from which steam and delicious smells emanated.

"Gimme," I said and attempted to sit up. My belly and ribs complained nastily and he set the tray down on a table and helped me sit up. Hands under my shoulder blades and he slowly inched me up, propping my back with pillows.

"Okay?" he asked anxiously. I raised my hand to my forehead and wiped at sweat.

"Holy Christmas," I mumbled. "I feel like a 90 year old man."

"Corbin, you nearly died," he said. "Your liver was punctured, your intestines slashed, ribs broke and your kidneys torn. If Julian hadn't gotten you a doctor, you would have died in my arms."

"Those things were going to...eat me," I shuddered. "Alive. With me watching." Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore.

"You should eat. Dr. Ooly has had you on liquid nutrition but you need real food for the injuries to heal." He coaxed me until I finished a bowl of clear meat soup, pudding that tasted like vegetables and hot tea. After a few bites, I was full and pushed the rest away. All I wanted was to sleep. He had other ideas, though. He swung my legs over, sat me up and dressed me in the same ridiculous costumes as he wore. I was grateful for the looseness of trousers and blouse against my bandages. I couldn't do much to help him, I was as useless as a retarded noodle.

"Where are we going, Murph? If you're getting me up, I have to go to the bathroom. Where is it? Oww, you're hurting me, take it easy."

My feet hit the floor, it was indoor/outdoor carpeting over forest dirt. I could feel lumps beneath my bare feet. Murphy didn't answer me but his serious and rapid urging to move was making me nervous.

"They're coming, aren't they? They've found us?" I pushed at his hands and yelled, "Alright! Just tell me what to do, Murphy and I'll hurry!"

"Raven, the whole bloody cavalry is after us. From Flora, from the Courts and from Amber. All headed right for this tent. So bloody move your arse!"

I pulled on my sneakers and pulled out the IV lines, wrapped the blanket around me like a cape and picked up my dagger. The back wall of the tent was easy to slit open and we exited there to stand facing the tree line. It was nearly dusk and shadows abounded. I didn't see any guards or any other tents set up nor was the big black horse in sight.

My first steps were tentative and I needed Murph's arm to hold me up. Once in the deep trees, he led the way leaving very little trace behind. I didn't have the breath to ask questions, I needed all my energy to keep up with him

Chapter 5

I didn't see any wildlife in this forest. Most of the trees were hardwoods and Dutch Elm disease had obviously never made it through these stands nor had the trees been forested. It was clearly an old growth forest with 90% of the trunks over six foot wide and a hundred feet high. The only time I'd ever seen anything that rivaled this forest were the giant redwoods in California.

"We have to hurry," Murph said. "Morgenstern can track us."

"Who or what is Morgenstern?" I panted trying to keep up. He hauled me onto my toes by my elbows as I started to fall.

"Julian's mount. It's not really any kind of horse but a demon. He breeds them."

We splashed across a creek and the water was icy numb on my ankles. I nearly slipped on mossy rocks and he complained, grumbling under his breath.

"Can't change too much too quickly this close to Amber," he muttered. "We should go back to New York." He looked up at the sky and said, "more green in the sky and a haze." Through the patches in the crown of trees I saw the sky shift slightly towards green.

We climbed the muddy bank and the stones changed from quartz to a whitish gray and the soil to a sandy loam. Next, the trees shifted to oaks and maples, smaller second growth with underbrush. I detoured around poison ivy and squirrels chattered noisily at our running feet. The air smelled different and the sky lightened even more so that it looked vaguely familiar. Murphy grunted and stopped. "Are you doing that?" he demanded.

"What?" I said defensively.

"Changing the sky. It looks like this is Chessaria." He set me down on a stump and ran forward a few feet into the underbrush to disappear into a thicket. I could see bright sunlight through the trunks but nothing of him and realized the end of the forest was ahead.

It took an effort but I managed to get to my feet and bull my way through the dense brush and emerge onto the banks of a road bumping into Murphy. We stared down a cobblestone lane that was being used by men that resembled farmers the world over only these men were driving carts pulled by a goat-like creature. Goats with huge horns and spotted, solid colored and dappled. They bleated as they passed us and stared with those eerie devilish eyes that freaked me out. And I hated those beards, these things pissed on them too from the smell.

One little man in red leather apron and blue denim stopped and asked if we wanted a ride into town. He looked so much like Gollum I almost glanced around for Gandulf and the rest of the gang.

Murphy nodded and literally threw me into the back of the cart telling the driver he'd pay him triple if he made the goat run. Before I could say anything, we were galloping down the lane at a good clip, bypassing the other drivers with a shout of 'ware!' I held on for dear life, this thing had no springs or roll bar and the only padding under me was my own fat. I had been told before I had no 'ass-it-all.'

After a few yards, I was ready to get out and walk, complaining bitterly but was ignored by both Murphy and our Kamikaze driver.

"What village is it ahead?" Murphy asked.

Gollum snorted. "Village? Pence is more of a spit hole on the road. Nearest city is Inac, two days down the highway. My name is Znc."

“Bless you,” I said to the sneezing sound and Murphy slapped me.

“His name is Zinc, spelled Znnc. I am a morph.”

The sneezer stared at us. Turning his head in a move that more closely resembled an owl than a human. “I can see that,” he sneered. “We’re not provincials, we’ve seen your kind before. Him, that’s another tale. What is he?” He pointed to me with his whip, made of what looked like stiff pig tail bristles.

“What does he look like?” Murphy asked curious.

“Amberite. Or...something more.”

“Does that concern you?”

“Their last war spilled over here. We don’t need or want any of your messes. We lost enough of our youngsters to your King Eric,” Zinc snapped.

“We are returning home,” Murphy said. “As fast and as straight as the Road can take us. Not to Amber but his shadow world.” He gestured to me.

“Fork up ahead. Take the right and it’ll cut off a hundred leagues and the changes are simpler.”

“To where?”

“You’re looking for blue skies and green grass, oak and maples, blue lakes and silver birds that fly among the clouds?”

“Yes,” my guardian said.

“Go that way, there are no safeguards on that route.”

“But what are the dangers we may find there?” Murphy snarled.

“No dangers for a morph,” the gnome snapped and dumped us both out the back before galloping off. Murphy changed into a hairy beast before my eyes and attacked the ground with claws and horns leaving parallel gouges in the dirt. He turned his gargoye shaped head towards me and his eyes were blazing red.

“Way cool, dude,” I admired.

“Climb on my back, master,” he growled in a deep basso. Hesitantly, I slid my leg around his waist and felt cold stone, hard muscles that I couldn’t dent with any force. From his shoulder blades, wings emerged and those felt wiry, tough as leather hide with pulsing veins between the membranes, more like the wings of a bat than a bird.

“This doesn’t mean we’re dating,” I said nervously as I gripped his waist with both thighs.

He leaped into the air and tucked his clawed hands around my calves as his wings beat in slow, measured thrusts. We were airborne, within seconds high above the road and I saw the little weasel galloping away from us.

“You breathe fire or anything?” I asked, thinking it would serve the righteous goat herder if we toasted his buns. Murphy didn’t reply but flapped on. Back down the road where we’d exited the woods, a squad of soldiers burst out. I didn’t recognize the uniforms but they weren’t the same species as the hobbit. They saw us and pointed, I tried to tell Murphy we’d been spotted in a panic as they leveled weapons on us. Murphy’s answer to the barrage of arrows was to bank and spiral higher, well out of their range.

His style of flight was more like that of a condor, soaring on thermals and not actively beating wing strokes like that of a hawk.

“Now would be a good time to leave this shade, Raven,” he growled and the sky burned yellow, the ground under us turned sere and dusty. I found it hard to breathe as smoke from active volcanoes puffed bilious smoke below us. “Where is this, Raven?” he

shouted and ducked a fireball of ash and steam.

I concentrated and changed the sand below to black, fine grained and shiny. Added a beach and green palm trees and red leilani flowers to the side of the mountain. Turquoise seas with white breakers and dolphins leaping below our shadows. Fat goats climbing the slopes---enough with the goats already! I shouted and thought of long-tailed birds of Paradise, parrots and monkeys. Murphy landed on one of a set of islands in the Hawaiian chain and dumped me on my ass in warm black sand inches from the surf line. I whacked a crab away from me and dug my fingers deep until water tickled my palms.

“Will they follow us?” I asked, digging at my belly which felt wet. I peeked under the bandage and blanched. What I thought was wet from ocean was red and sticky. Blood. Seeing my own blood was almost as bad as seeing my insides come out. Nausea assailed me.

“Murph--.”

“I know, Raven,” he said morphing back into the gray man I thought I knew so well. “I can smell you.”

“That’s kinda gross. Is it bad?” He squatted next to me and inspected the holes in my gut.

“Not too bad. You tore a stitch or two open. Couple of band-aids and you’ll be good as new. Where are we?”

I looked around, recognized the beach, the shape of the coastline and the volcano spewing lava. “Hawaii. Island of Oahu. We’re on Koanaloa Beach, smack dab between two active moving rivers of lava. I always wanted to surf here.”

“Any homes nearby we can reach for help?”

“Not that we can walk to.” I pointed straight ahead. “Out there is nothing but the Pacific ocean, back up is the Volcano crater. To the right is a half mile wide stream of lava, to the left a quarter mile river. We’re stuck between a rock and a hot plate.”

He didn’t laugh at my lame pun nor ask if I could tread water. Swimming out to sea and around the exiting lava flows wasn’t an option either. Since neither of us carried a cell phone, we couldn’t call for a helicopter extraction, either. “Why don’t you just fly me out of here, Murph? You can just change back to the gargoyle thing, right?”

“No,” he said. “It requires energy to morph and I used much carrying you and shifting through shadows so they cannot track us. Also, if I morph again here, they can home in on the energy signature and find me.”

“Well, then. I’ll just change the scenery to somewhere else on the island,” I said. As I attempted to alter the ground under my butt to sandy loam, it rose up and smacked me in the face. I vaguely heard Murphy’s cry of surprise and then nothing.

Chapter 6

I woke in the dirt. Flat on my back in dirt and leaves, in filthy clothes. Not on a sandy beach nor a hospital bed or surrounded by beautiful nurses administering to my every whim.

It was dark so I couldn’t even tell where I was, all I knew was that it smelled different

and that Murphy wasn't near me. Nor did he come when I whispered for him. In my head, it was a shout.

I rolled over onto my side and immediately, my belly hurt. Raw, blinding pain like when that thing had stuck his claws in it and tore. My hand explored and found both my shirt and bandage sodden with more blood and fluid. I curled my legs into my stomach and rested, taking shallow breaths that didn't raise or move my lower half much. While I did that, the sky gradually lightened to let me know that the sun was coming up. It shadowed a forest of trees manicured like a parkland and a stairwell descending from a cliff over my head. Atop the cliff was a genuine castle with five towers from which pennants of a white unicorn were flying.

Somehow, I had managed to climb down that stairwell in the dark, unconscious and wounded. I know I did it by the bloodied drag marks I had left on the white marble treads.

I heard a rustling in the wood and looked up at an image I had dreamed of but never imagined I would ever really see. A white unicorn stood before me, a creature too beautiful to be called anything but a force of magic. Snow white with a spiraled golden horn, silver fetlocks with cloven hooves and a tail like a lion, not a horse. It was clearly not a horse with a horn. A wisp of a beard hung from the delicate jaw and her eyes were the gas blue of a flame. She was too awe-inspiring to stare at so I lowered my gaze in respect and missed it when she floated close to touch that horn to my flesh. In a flash, she knelt beside me and using her horn, rolled me over until I was astride her. Only then, did she climb to her feet with me as a passenger.

Weaving her way through the forest, she forged her own path to emerge on a flat plain guarded by soldiers in blue and gold who made no attempt to stop us as she walked out upon a pattern carved in the solid stones of the earth. I knew this place. Deep in my bones and my blood, I knew this place.

She dropped to her knees and I slid off to stand on wobbly legs at the very beginning of the Pattern. Without her body holding me up, I would have fallen face first onto the first step. I could just see the First Veil and knew that once stepping foot on it, I must follow it through to the end or die trying. To leave the Pattern in any place other than the end was to suffer annihilation. Or, I might die anyway if my blood was not strong enough to proclaim me a son of Amber.

I took that first step and she hit me in the chest with her horn, barring me from moving ahead. My blood dripped between my clenched hands down to my feet and hissed as the drops hit the ground, fog rising up around us until I was lost in the thick of it. When it slowly dissipated, I was leaning against the postern of a tavern on a street corner in a pretty little town straight out of Old England. In front of me was the open door to the tavern called The Blue Pig and it bustled with customers. Next door was a farmer's market selling all kinds of goods.

The people were dressed in comfortable blouses, trousers and capes, the women in old fashioned dresses and aprons. Horses, mules stood at hitching posts alongside buggies and wagons. I saw no cars, neon or electric lights.

Above the town on a cliff sat the castle with flags flying from its turrets.

Two men approached and walked up to the bar, standing out because both of them were in business suits yet seemed perfectly at ease amongst all the other less formally dressed clientele. One of the pair was tall, dark haired and blue eyed, the other short with brown hair and brown eyes. He carried a briefcase in his right hand that he laid on the bar.

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