

WOLFLAND

ONE

When the summons arrived from Anna the Matriarch, Lisel did not wish to obey. The twilit winter had already come, and the great snows were down, spreading their aprons of shining ice, turning the trees to crystal candelabra. Lisel wanted to stay in the city, skating fur-clad on the frozen river beneath the torches, dancing till four in the morning, a vivid blonde in the flame-bright ball-rooms, breaking hearts and not minding, lying late next day like a cat in her warm, soft bed. She did not want to go traveling several hours into the north to visit Anna the Matriarch.

Lisel's mother had been dead sixteen years, all Lisel's life. Her father had let her have her own way, in almost everything, for about the same length of time. But Anna the Matriarch, Lisel's maternal grandmother, was exceedingly rich. She lived thirty miles from the city, in a great wild château in the great wild forest.

A portrait of Anna as a young widow hung in the gallery of Lisel's father's house, a wicked-looking bone-pale person in a black dress, with rubies and diamonds at her throat, and in her ivory yellow hair. Even in her absence, Anna had always had a say in things. A recluse, she had still manipulated like a puppet-master from behind the curtain of the forest. Periodic instructions had been sent, pertaining to Lisel. The girl must be educated by this or that method. She must gain this or that accomplishment, read this or that book, favor this or that cologne or color or jewel. The latter orders were always uncannily apposite and were often complemented by applicable—and sumptuous—gifts. The summons came in company with such. A swirling cloak of scarlet velvet leapt like a fire from its box to Lisel's hands. It was lined with albino fur, all but the hood, which was lined with the finest and heaviest red brocade. A clasp of gold joined the garment at

the throat, the two portions, when closed, forming Anna's personal device, a many-petaled flower. Lisel had exclaimed with pleasure, embracing the cloak, picturing herself flying in it across the solid white river like a dangerous blood-red rose. Then the letter fell from its folds.

Lisel had never seen her grandmother, at least, not intelligently, for Anna had been in her proximity on one occasion only: the hour of her birth. Then, one glimpse had apparently sufficed. Anna had snatched it, and sped away from her son-in-law's house and the salubrious city in a demented black carriage. Now, as peremptory as then, she demanded that Lisel come to visit her before the week was out. Over thirty miles, into the uncivilized northern forest, to the strange mansion in the snow.

"Preposterous," said Lisel's father. "The woman is mad, as I've always suspected."

"I shan't go," said Lisel.

They both knew quite well that she would.

One day, every considerable thing her grandmother possessed would pass to Lisel, providing Lisel did not incur Anna's displeasure.

* * * *

Half a week later, Lisel, was on the northern road.

She sat amid cushions and rugs, in a high sled strung with silver bells, and drawn by a single black-satin horse. Before Lisel perched her driver, the whip in his hand, and a pistol at his belt, for the way north was not without its risks. There were, besides, three outriders, also equipped with whips, pistols and knives, and muffled to the brows in fur. No female companion was in evidence. Anna had stipulated that it would be unnecessary and superfluous for her grandchild to burden herself with a maid.

But the whips had cracked, the horses had started off. The runners of the sled had smoothly hissed, sending up lace-like sprays of ice. Once clear of the city, the north road opened like a perfect skating floor of milky glass, dim-lit by the fragile winter sun smoking low on the horizon. The silver bells sang, and the fierce still air through which the horses dashed broke on Lisel's cheeks like the coldest champagne. Ablaze in her scarlet cloak, she was exhilarated and began to forget she had not wanted to come.

After about an hour, the forest marched up out of the ground and swiftly enveloped the road on all sides.

There was presently an insidious, but generally perceptible change. Between the walls of the forest there gathered a new silence, a silence which was, if anything, *alive*, a personality which attended any humanly noisy passage with a cruel and resentful interest. Lisel stared up into the narrow lane of sky above. They might have been moving along the channel of a deep and partly frozen stream. When the drowned sun flashed through, splinters of light scattered and went out as if in water.

The tall pines in their pelts of snow seemed poised to lurch across the road.

The sled had been driving through the forest for perhaps another hour, when a wolf wailed somewhere amid the trees. Rather than break the silence of the place, the cry seemed born of the silence, a natural expression of the landscape's cold solitude and immensity.

The outriders touched the pistols in their belts, almost religiously, and the nearest of the three leaned to Lisel.

"Madame Anna's house isn't so far from here. In any case we have our guns, and these horses could race the wind."

"I'm not afraid," Lisel said haughtily. She glanced at the trees. "I've never seen a wolf. I should be interested to see one."

Made sullen by Lisel's pert reply, the outrider switched tactics. From trying to reassure her, he now ominously said: "Pray you don't, m'mselle. One wolf generally means a pack, and once the snow comes, they're hungry."

"As my father's servant, I would expect you to sacrifice yourself for me, of course," said Lisel. "A fine strong man like you should keep a pack of wolves busy long enough for the rest of us to escape."

The man scowled and spurred away from her.

Lisel smiled to herself. She was not at all afraid, not of the problematical wolves, not even of the eccentric grandmother she had never before seen. In a way, Lisel was looking forward to the meeting, now her annoyance at vacating the city had left her. There had been so many bizarre tales, so much hearsay. Lisel had even caught gossip concerning Anna's husband. He had been a handsome princely man, whose inclinations had not matched his

appearance. Lisel's mother had been sent to the city to live with relations to avoid this monster's outbursts of perverse lust and savagery. He had allegedly died one night, mysteriously and luridly murdered on one of the forest tracks. This was not the history Lisel had got from her father, to be sure, but she had always partly credited the more extravagant version. After all, Anna the Matriarch was scarcely commonplace in her mode of life or her attitude to her granddaughter.

Yes, indeed, rather than apprehension, Lisel was beginning to entertain a faintly unholy glee in respect of the visit and the insights it might afford her.

A few minutes after the wolf had howled, the road took a sharp bend, and emerging around it, the party beheld an unexpected obstacle in the way. The driver of the sled cursed softly and drew hard on the reins, bringing the horse to a standstill. The outriders similarly halted. Each peered ahead to where, about twenty yards along the road, a great black carriage blotted the white snow.

A coachman sat immobile on the box of the black carriage, muffled in coal-black furs and almost indistinguishable from them. In forceful contrast, the carriage horses were blonds, and restless, tossing their necks, lifting their feet. A single creature stood on the track between the carriage and the sled. It was too small to be a man, too curiously proportioned to be simply a child.

"What's this?" demanded the third of Lisel's outriders, he who had spoken earlier of the wolves. It was an empty question, but had been a long time in finding a voice for all that.

"I think it is my grandmother's carriage come to meet me," declared Lisel brightly, though, for the first, she had felt a pang of apprehension.

This was not lessened, when the dwarf came loping toward them, like a small, misshapen, furry dog and, reaching the sled, spoke to her, ignoring the others.

"You may leave your escort here and come with us."

Lisel was struck at once by the musical quality of his voice, while out of the shadow of his hood emerged the face of a fair and melancholy angel. As she stared at him, the men about her raised their objections.

"We're to go with m'selle to her grandmother's house."

"You are not necessary," announced the beautiful dwarf, glancing at them with uninterest. "You are already on the Lady Anna's lands. The coachman and I are all the protection your mistress needs. The Lady Anna does not wish to receive you on her estate."

"What proof," snarled the third outrider, "that you're from Madame's château? Or that she told you to say such a thing. You could have come from any place, from hell itself most likely, and they crushed you in the door as you were coming out."

The riders and the driver laughed brutishly. The dwarf paid no attention to the insult. He drew from his glove one delicate, perfectly formed hand, and in it a folded letter. It was easy to recognize the Matriarch's sanguine wax and the imprint of the petaled flower. The riders brooded and the dwarf held the letter toward Lisel. She accepted it with an uncanny but pronounced reluctance.

Chère, it said in its familiar, indeed its unmistakable, characters, why are you delaying the moment when I may look at you? Beautiful has already told you, I think, that your escort may go home. Anna is giving you her own escort, to guide you on the last laps of the journey. Come! Send the men away and step into the carriage.

Lisel, reaching the word, or rather the name, Beautiful, had glanced involuntarily at the dwarf, oddly frightened at its horrid contrariness and its peculiar truth. A foreboding had clenched around her young heart, and, for a second, inexplicable terror. It was certainly a dreadful dilemma. She could refuse, and refuse thereby the goodwill, the gifts, the ultimate fortune her grandmother could bestow. Or she could brush aside her silly childish fears and walk boldly from the sled to the carriage. Surely, she had always known Madame Anna was an eccentric. Had it not been a source of intrigued curiosity but a few moments ago?

Lisel made her decision.

"Go home," she said regally to her father's servants. "My grandmother is wise and would hardly put me in danger."

The men grumbled, glaring at her, and as they did so, she got out of the sled and moved along the road toward the stationary and funereal carriage. As she came closer, she made out the flower device stamped in gilt on the door. Then the dwarf had darted ahead of her, seized the door, and was holding it wide, bowing to his

knees, thus almost into the snow. A lock of pure golden hair spilled across his forehead.

Lisel entered the carriage and sat on the somber cushions. Courageous prudence (or greed) had triumphed.

The door was shut. She felt the slight tremor as Beautiful leapt on the box beside the driver.

Morose and indecisive, the men her father had sent with her were still lingering on the ice between the trees, as she was driven away.

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She must have slept, dazed by the continuous rocking of the carriage, but all at once she was wide awake, clutching in alarm at the upholstery. What had roused her was a unique and awful choir. The cries of wolves.

Quite irresistibly she pressed against the window and stared out, impelled to look for what she did not, after all, wish to see. And what she saw was unreassuring.

A horde of wolves were running, not merely in pursuit, but actually alongside the carriage. Pale they were, a pale almost luminous brownish shade, which made them seem phantasmal against the snow. Their small but jewel-like eyes glinted, glowed and burned. As they ran, their tongues lolling sideways from their mouths like those of huge hunting dogs, they seemed to smile up at her, and her heart turned over.

Why was it, she wondered, with panic-stricken anger, that the coach did not go faster and so outrun the pack? Why was it the brutes had been permitted to gain as much distance as they had? Could it be they had already plucked the coachman and the dwarf from the box and devoured them—she tried to recollect if, in her dozing, she had registered masculine shrieks of fear and agony—and that the horses plunged on. Imagination, grown detailed and pessimistic, soon dispensed with these images, replacing them with that of great pepper-colored paws scratching on the frame of the coach, the grisly talons ripping at the door, at last a wolf's savage mask thrust through it, and her own frantic and pointless screaming, in the instants before her throat was silenced by the meeting of narrow yellow fangs.

Having run the gamut of her own premonition, Lisel sank back on the seat and yearned for a pistol, or at least a knife. A malicious streak in her lent her the extraordinary bravery of desiring to inflict as many hurts on her killers as she was able before they finished her. She also took space to curse Anna the Matriarch. How the wretched old woman would grieve and complain when the story reached her. The clean-picked bones of her granddaughter had been found a mere mile or so from her château, in the rags of a blood-red cloak; by the body a golden clasp, rejected as inedible....

A heavy thud caused Lisel to leap to her feet, even in the galloping, bouncing carriage. There at the door, grinning in on her, the huge face of a wolf, which did not fall away. Dimly she realized it must impossibly be balancing itself on the running board of the carriage, its front paws raised and somehow keeping purchase on the door. With one sharp determined effort of its head, it might conceivably smash in the pane of the window. The glass would lacerate, and the scent of its own blood further inflame its starvation. The eyes of it, doused by the carriage's gloom, flared up in two sudden pupilless ovals of fire, like two little portholes into hell.

With a shrill howl, scarcely knowing what she did, Lisel flung herself at the closed door and the wolf the far side of it. Her eyes also blazed, her teeth also were bared, and her nails raised as if to claw. Her horror was such that she appeared ready to attack the wolf in its own primeval mode, and as her hands struck the glass against its face, the wolf shied and dropped away.

In that moment, Lisel heard the musical voice of the dwarf call out from the box, some wordless whoop, and a tall gatepost sprang by.

Lisel understood they had entered the grounds of the Matriarch's château. And, a moment later, learned, though did not understand, that the wolves had not followed them beyond the gateway.

TWO

The Matriarch sat at the head of the long table. Her chair, like the table, was slender, carved and intensely polished. The rest of the chairs, though similarly high-backed and angular, were plain and dull, including the chair to which Lisel had been conducted.

Which increased Lisel's annoyance, the petty annoyance to which her more eloquent emotions of fright and rage had given way, on entering the domestic, if curious, atmosphere of the house. And Lisel must strive to conceal her ill-temper. It was difficult.

The château, ornate and swarthy under its pointings of snow, retained an air of decadent magnificence, which was increased within. Twin stairs flared from an immense great hall. A hearth, large as a room, and crow-hooded by its enormous mantel, roared with muffled firelight. There was scarcely a furnishing that was not at least two hundred years old, and many were much older. The very air seemed tinged by the somber wood, the treacle darkness of the draperies, the old-gold gleams of picture frames, gilding and tableware.

At the center of it all sat Madame Anna, in her eighty-first year, a weird apparition of improbable glamour. She appeared, from no more than a yard or so away, to be little over fifty. Her skin, though very dry, had scarcely any lines in it and none of the pleatings and collapses Lisel generally associated with the elderly. Anna's hair had remained blonde, a fact Lisel was inclined to attribute to some preparation out of a bottle, yet she was not sure. The lady wore black as she had done in the portrait of her youth, a black starred over with astonishing jewels. But her nails were very long and discolored, as were her teeth. These two incontrovertible proofs of old age gave Lisel a perverse satisfaction. Grandmother's eyes, on the other hand, were not so reassuring. Brilliant eyes, clear and very likely sharp-sighted, of a pallid silvery brown. Unnerving eyes, but Lisel did her best to stare them out, though when Anna spoke to her, Lisel now answered softly, ingratiatingly.

There had not, however, been much conversation, after the first clamor at the doorway:

"We were chased by wolves!" Lisel had cried. "Scores of them! Your coachman is a dolt who doesn't know enough to carry a pistol. I might have been killed."

"You were not," said Anna, imperiously standing in silhouette against the giant window of the hall, a stained glass of what appeared to be a hunting scene, done in murky reds and staring white.

"No thanks to your servants. You promised me an escort—the only reason I sent my father's men away."

"You had your escort."

Lisel had choked back another flood of sentences; she did not want to get on the wrong side of this strange relative. Nor had she liked the slight emphasis on the word "escort." The handsome ghastly dwarf had gone forward into the hall, lifted the hem of Anna's long mantle, and kissed it. Anna had smoothed off his hood and caressed the bright hair beneath.

"Beautiful wasn't afraid," said Anna decidedly. "But, then, my people know the wolves will not harm them."

An ancient tale came back to Lisel in that moment. It concerned certain human denizens of the forests, who had power over wild beasts. It occurred to Lisel that mad old Anna liked to fancy herself a sorceress, and Lisel said fawningly: "I should have known I'd be safe. I'm sorry for my outburst, but I don't know the forest as you do. I was afraid."

In her allotted bedroom, a silver ewer and basin stood on a table. The embroideries on the canopied bed were faded but priceless. Antique books stood in a case, catching the firelight, a vast yet random selection of the poetry and prose of many lands. From the bedchamber window, Lisel could look out across the clearing of the park, the white sweep of it occasionally broken by trees in their winter foliage of snow, or by the slash of the track which broke through the high wall. Beyond the wall, the forest pressed close under the heavy twilight of the sky. Lisel pondered with a grim irritation the open gateway. Wolves running, and the way to the chateau left wide at all times. She visualized mad Anna throwing chunks of raw meat to the wolves as another woman would toss bread to swans.

This unprepossessing notion returned to Lisel during the unusually early dinner, when she realized that Anna was receiving from her silent gliding servants various dishes of raw meats.

"I hope," said Anna, catching Lisel's eye, "my repast won't offend a delicate stomach. I have learned that the best way to keep my health is to eat the fruits of the earth in their intended state—so much goodness is wasted in cooking and garnishing."

Despite the reference to fruit, Anna touched none of the fruit or vegetables on the table. Nor did she drink any wine.

Lisel began again to be amused, if rather dubiously. Her own fare was excellent, and she ate it hungrily, admiring as she did so

the crystal goblets and gold-handled knives which one day would be hers.

Presently a celebrated liqueur was served—to Lisel alone—and Anna rose on the black wings of her dress, waving her granddaughter to the fire. Beautiful, meanwhile, had crawled onto the stool of the tall piano and begun to play wildly despairing romances there, his elegant fingers darting over discolored keys so like Anna's strong yet senile teeth.

"Well," said Anna, reseating herself in another carved throne before the cave of the hearth. "What do you think of us?"

"Think, Grandmère? Should I presume?"

"No. But you do."

"I think," said Lisel cautiously, "everything is very fine."

"And you are keenly aware, of course, the finery will eventually belong to you."

"Oh, Grandmère!" exclaimed Lisel, quite genuinely shocked by such frankness.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Anna. Her eyes caught the fire and became like the eyes of the wolf at the carriage window. "You expect to be my heiress. It's quite normal you should be making an inventory. I shan't last forever. Once I'm gone, presumably everything will be yours."

Despite herself, Lisel gave an involuntary shiver. A sudden plan of selling the château to be rid of it flitted through her thoughts, but she quickly put it aside, in case the Matriarch somehow read her mind.

"Don't speak like that, Grandmère. This is the first time I've met you, and you talk of dying."

"Did I? No, I did not. I spoke of *departure*. Nothing dies, it simply transmogrifies." Lisel watched politely this display of apparent piety. "As for my mansion," Anna went on, "you mustn't consider sale, you know." Lisel blanched—as she had feared, her mind had been read, or could it merely be that Anna found her predictable? "The château has stood on this land for many centuries. The old name for the spot, do you know that?"

"No, Grandmère."

"This, like the whole of the forest, was called the Wolfland. Because it was the wolves' country before ever men set foot on it with their piffing little roads and tracks, their carriages and foolish

frightened walls. Wolfland. Their country then, and when the winter comes, their country once more."

"As I saw, Grandmère," said Lisel tartly.

"As you saw. You'll see and hear more of them while you're in my house. Their voices come and go like the wind, as they do. When that little idiot of a sun slips away and the night rises, you may hear scratching on the lower floor windows. I needn't tell you to stay indoors, need I?"

"Why do you let animals run in your park?" demanded Lisel.

"Because," said Anna, "the land is theirs by right."

The dwarf began to strike a polonaise from the piano. Anna clapped her hands, and the music ended. Anna beckoned, and Beautiful slid off the stool like a precocious child caught sticky-ing the keys. He came to Anna, and she played with his hair. His face remained unreadable, yet his pellucid eyes swam dreamily to Lisel's face. She felt embarrassed by the scene, and at his glance was angered to find herself blushing.

"There was a time," said Anna, "when I did not rule this house. When a man ruled here."

"Grandpère," said Lisel, looking resolutely at the fire.

"*Grandpère, yes. Grandpère.*" Her voice held the most awful scorn. "Grandpère believed it was a man's pleasure to beat his wife. You're young, but you should know, should be told. Every night, if I was not already sick from a beating, and sometimes when I was, I would hear his heavy drunken feet come stumbling to my door. At first I locked it, but I learned not to. What stood in his way he could always break. He was a strong man. A great legend of strength. I carry scars on my shoulders to this hour. One day I may show you."

Lisel gazed at Anna, caught between fascination and revulsion. "Why do I tell you?" Anna smiled. She had twisted Beautiful's gorgeous hair into a painful knot. Clearly it hurt him, but he made no sound, staring blindly at the ceiling. "I tell you, Lisel, because very soon your father will suggest to you that it is time you were wed. And however handsome or gracious the young man may seem to you that you choose, or that is chosen for you, however noble or marvelous or even docile he may seem, you have no way of being certain he will not turn out to be like your beloved grandpère. Do you know, he brought me peaches on our wedding night,

all the way from the hothouses of the city. Then he showed me the whip he had been hiding under the fruit. You see what it is to be a woman, Lisel. Is that what you want? The irrevocable marriage vow that binds you forever to a monster? And even if he is a good man, which is a rare beast indeed, you may die an agonizing death in childbed, just as your mother did." Lisel swallowed. A number of things went through her head now. A vague acknowledgement that, though she envisaged admiration, she had never wished to marry and therefore never considered it, and a starker awareness that she was being told improper things. She desired to learn more and dreaded to learn it. As she was struggling to find a rejoinder, Anna seemed to notice her own grip on the hair of the dwarf. "Ah," she said, "forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you." The words had an oddly sinister ring to them. Lisel suddenly guessed their origin, the brutish man rising from his act of depravity, of necessity still merely sketched by Lisel's innocence, whispering, gloatingly muttering: Forgive me. I did not mean to hurt.

"Beautiful," said Anna, "is the only man of any worth I've ever met. And my servants, of course, but I don't count them as men. Drink your liqueur."

"Yes, Grandmère," said Lisel, as she sipped, and slightly choked.

"Tomorrow," said Anna, "we must serve you something better. A vintage indigenous to the château, made from a flower which grows here in the spring. For now," again she rose on her raven's wings; a hundred gems caught the light and went out, "for now, we keep early hours here, in the country."

"But, Grandmère," said Lisel, astounded, "it's scarcely sunset."

"In my house," said Anna, gently, "you will do as you are told, m'nselle."

And for once, Lisel did as she was told.

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At first, of course, Lisel did not entertain a dream of sleep. She was used to staying awake till the early hours of the morning, rising at noon. She entered her bedroom, cast one scathing glance at the bed, and settled herself to read in a chair beside the bedroom fire. Luckily she had found a lurid novel amid the choice of books.

By skimming over all passages of meditation, description or philosophy, confining her attention to those portions which contained duels, rapes, black magic and the firing squad, she had soon made great inroads on the work. Occasionally, she would pause, and add another piece of wood to the fire. At such times she knew a medley of doubts concerning her grandmother. That the Matriarch could leave such a novel lying about openly where Lisel could get at it outraged the girl's propriety.

Eventually, two or three hours after the sun had gone and the windows blackened entirely behind the drapes, Lisel did fall asleep. The excitements of the journey and her medley of reactions to Madame Anna had worn her out.

She woke, as she had in the carriage, with a start of alarm. Her reason was the same one. Out in the winter forest of night sounded the awesome choir of the wolves. Their voices rose and fell, swelling, diminishing, resurging, like great icy waves of wind or water, breaking on the silence of the château.

Partly nude, a lovely maiden had been bound to a stake and the first torch applied, but Lisel no longer cared very much for her fate. Setting the book aside, she rose from the chair. The flames were low on the candles and the fire almost out. There was no clock, but it had the feel of midnight. Lisel went to the window and opened the drapes. Stepping through and pulling them fast closed again behind her, she gazed out into the glowing darkness of snow and night.

The wolf cries went on and on, thrilling her with a horrible disquiet, so she wondered how even mad Anna could ever have grown accustomed to them. Was this what had driven grandfather to brutishness and beatings? And, colder thought, the mysterious violent death he was supposed to have suffered—what more violent than to be torn apart by long pointed teeth under the pine trees?

Lisel quartered the night scene with her eyes, looking for shapes to fit the noises, and, as before, hoping not to find them.

There was decidedly something about wolves. Something beyond their reputation and the stories of the half-eaten bodies of little children with which nurses regularly scared their charges. Something to do with actual appearance, movement: the lean shadow manifesting from between the trunks of trees—the stuff of nightmare. And their howlings—! Yet, as it went on and on, Lisel

became aware of a bizarre exhilaration, an almost-pleasure in the awful sounds which made the hair lift on her scalp and gooseflesh creep along her arms—the same sort of sensation as biting into a slice of lemon—

And then she saw it, a great pale wolf. It loped by directly beneath the window, and suddenly, to Lisel's horror, it raised its long head, and two fireworks flashed, which were its eyes meeting with hers. A primordial fear, worse even than in the carriage, turned Lisel's bones to liquid. She sank on her knees, and as she knelt there foolishly, as if in prayer, her chin on the sill, she beheld the wolf moving away across the park, seeming to dissolve into the gloom.

Gradually, then, the voices of the other wolves began to dull, eventually falling quiet.

Lisel got up, came back into the room, threw more wood on the fire and crouched there. It seemed odd to her that the wolf had run *away* from the château, but she was not sure why. Presumably it had ventured near in hopes of food, then, disappointed, withdrawn. That it had come from the spot directly by the hall's doors did not, could not, mean anything in particular. Then Lisel realized what had been so strange. She had seen the wolf in a faint radiance of light—but from where? The moon was almost full, but obscured behind the house. The drapes had been drawn across behind her, the light could not have fallen down from her own window. She was turning back unhappily to the window to investigate when she heard the unmistakable soft thud of a large door being carefully shut below her, in the château.

The wolf had been in the house. Anna's guest.

Lisel was petrified for a few moments, then a sort of fury came to her rescue. How dared the old woman be so mad as all this and expect her civilized granddaughter to endure it? Brought to the wilds, told improper tales, left improper literature to read, made unwilling party to the entertainment of savage beasts. Perhaps as a result of the reading matter, Lisel saw her only course abruptly, and it was escape. (She had already assumed Anna would not allow her grandchild to depart until whatever lunatic game the old beldame was playing was completed.) But if escape, then how? Though there were carriage, horses, even coachman, all were Anna's. Lisel did not have to ponder long, however. Her father's

cynicism on the lower classes had convinced her that anyone had his price. She would bribe the coachman—her gold bracelets and her ruby eardrops—both previous gifts of Anna's, in fact. She could assure the man of her father's protection and further valuables when they reached the city. A vile thought came to her at that, that her father might, after all, prove unsympathetic. Was she being stupid? Should she turn a blind eye to Anna's wolfish foibles? If Anna should disinherit her, as surely she would on Lisel's flight—

Assailed by doubts, Lisel paced the room. Soon she had added to them. The coachman might snatch her bribe and still refuse to help her. Or worse, drive her into the forest and violate her. Or—

The night slowed and flowed into the black valleys of early morning. The moon crested the château and sank into the forest. Lisel sat on the edge of the canopied bed, pleating and repleating the folds of the scarlet cloak between her fingers. Her face was pale, her blonde hair untidy and her eyes enlarged. She looked every bit as crazy as her grandmother.

Her decision was sudden, made with an awareness that she had wasted much time. She flung the cloak round herself and started up. She hurried to the bedroom door and softly, softly, opened it a tiny crack.

All was black in the house, neither lamp nor candle visible anywhere. The sight, or rather lack of it, caused Lisel's heart to sink. At the same instant, it indicated that the whole house was abed. Lisel's plan was a simple one. A passage led away from the great hall to the kitchens and servants' quarters and ultimately to a courtyard containing coachhouse and stables. Here the grooms and the coachman would sleep, and here too another gateway opened on the park. These details she had either seen for herself as the carriage was driven off on her arrival or deduced from the apparent structure of the château. Unsure of the hour, yet she felt dawn was approaching. If she could but reach the servants' quarters, she should be able to locate the courtyard. If the coachman proved a villain, she would have to use her wits. Threaten him or cajole him. Knowing very little of physical communion, it seemed better to Lisel in those moments, to lie down with a hairy peasant than to remain the Matriarch's captive. It was that time of night when humans are often prey to ominous or extravagant ideas of all sorts. She took up one of the low-burning candles. Closing the bedroom

door behind her, Lisel stole forward into the black nothingness of unfamiliarity.

Even with the feeble light, she could barely see ten inches before her, and felt cautiously about with her free hand, dreading to collide with ornament or furniture and thereby rouse her enemies. The stray gleams, shot back at her from a mirror or a picture frame, misled rather than aided her. At first her total concentration was taken up with her safe progress and her quest to find the head of the double stair. Presently, however, as she pressed on without mishap, secondary considerations began to steal in on her.

If it was difficult to proceed, how much more difficult it might be should she desire to retreat. Hopefully, there would be nothing to retreat from. But the ambience of the château, inspired by night and the limited candle, was growing more sinister by the second. Arches opened on drapes of black from which anything might spring. All about, the shadow furred, and she was one small target moving in it, lit as if on a stage.

She turned the passage and perceived the curve of the stair ahead and the dim hall below. The great stained window provided a grey illumination which elsewhere was absent. The stars bled on the snow outside and pierced the white panes. Or could it be the initial tinge of dawn?

Lisel paused, confronting once again the silliness of her simple plan of escape. Instinctively, she turned to look the way she had come, and the swiftness of the motion, or some complementary draught, quenched her candle. She stood marooned by this cliché, the phosphorescently discernible space before her, pitch-dark behind, and chose the path into the half-light as preferable.

She went down the stair delicately, as if descending into a ball-room. When she was some twenty steps from the bottom, something moved in the thick drapes beside the outer doors. Lisel froze, feeling a shock like an electric volt passing through her vitals. In another second she knew from the uncanny littleness of the shape that it was Anna's dwarf who scuttled there. But before she divined what it was at, one leaf of the door began to swing heavily inwards.

Lisel felt no second shock of fear. She felt instead as if her soul drifted upward from her flesh.

Through the open door soaked the pale ghost-light that heralded sunrise, and with that, a scattering of fresh white snow. Lastly

through the door, its long feet crushing both light and snow, glided the wolf she had seen beneath her window. It did not look real, it seemed to waver and to shine, yet, for any who had ever heard the name of wolf, or a single story of them, or the song of their voices, here stood that word, that story, that voice, personified.

The wolf raised its supernatural head and once more it looked at the young girl.

The moment held no reason, no pity, and certainly no longer any hope of escape.

As the wolf began to pad noiselessly toward Lisel up the stair, she fled by the only route now possible to her. Into unconsciousness.

THREE

She came to herself to find the face of a prince from a romance poised over hers. He was handsome enough to have kissed her awake, except that she knew immediately it was the dwarf.

"Get away from me!" she shrieked, and he moved aside.

She was in the bedchamber, lying on the canopied bed. She was not dead, she had not been eaten or had her throat torn out.

As if in response to her thoughts, the dwarf said musically to her: "You have had a nightmare, m'nselle." But she could tell from a faint expression somewhere between his eyes, that he did not truly expect her to believe such a feeble equivocation.

"There was a wolf," said Lisel, pulling herself into a sitting position, noting that she was still gowned and wearing the scarlet cloak. "A wolf which *you* let into the house."

"I?" The dwarf elegantly raised an eyebrow.

"You, you frog. Where is my grandmother? I demand to see her at once."

"The Lady Anna is resting. She sleeps late in the mornings."

"Wake her."

"Your pardon, m'nselle, but I take my orders from Madame." The dwarf bowed. "If you are recovered and hungry, a maid will bring *petit déjeuner* at once to your room, and hot water for bathing, when you are ready."

Lisel frowned. Her ordeal past, her anger paramount, she was still very hungry. An absurd notion came to her—*had* it all been a

dream? No, she would not so doubt herself. Even though the wolf had not harmed her, it had been real. A household pet, then? She had heard of deranged monarchs who kept lions or tigers like cats. Why not a wolf kept like a dog?

"Bring me my breakfast," she snapped, and the dwarf bowed himself goldenly out.

All avenues of escape seemed closed, yet by day (for it was day, the tawny gloaming of winter) the phenomena of the darkness seemed far removed. Most of their terror had gone with them. With instinctive immature good sense, Lisel acknowledged that no hurt had come to her, that she was indeed being cherished.

She wished she had thought to reprimand the dwarf for his mention of intimate hot water and his presence in her bedroom. Recollections of unseemly novelettes led her to a swift examination of her apparel—unscathed. She rose and stood morosely by the fire, waiting for her breakfast, tapping her foot.

* * * *

By the hour of noon, Lisel's impatience had reached its zenith with the sun. Of the two, only the sun's zenith was insignificant.

Lisel left the bedroom, flounced along the corridor and came to the stairhead. Eerie memories of the previous night had trouble in remaining with her. Everything seemed to have become rather absurd, but this served only to increase her annoyance. Lisel went down the stair boldly. The fire was lit in the enormous hearth and blazing cheerfully. Lisel prowled about, gazing at the dubious stained glass, which she now saw did not portray a hunting scene at all, but some pagan subject of men metamorphosing into wolves.

At length a maid appeared. Lisel marched up to her.

"Kindly inform my grandmother that I am awaiting her in the hall."

The maid seemed struggling to repress a laugh, but she bobbed a curtsey and darted off. She did not come back, and neither did grandmother.

When a man entered bearing logs for the fire, Lisel said to him, "Put those down and take me at once to the coachman."

The man nodded and gestured her to follow him without a word of acquiescence or disagreement. Lisel, as she let herself be led through the back corridors and by the hubbub of the huge stone

kitchen, was struck by the incongruousness of her actions. No longer afraid, she felt foolish. She was carrying out her "plan" of the night before from sheer pique, nor did she have any greater hope of success. It was more as if some deeply hidden part of herself prompted her to flight, in spite of all resolutions, rationality and desire. But it was rather like trying to walk on a numbed foot. She could manage to do it, but without feeling.

The coachhouse and stables bulked gloomily about the courtyard, where the snow had renewed itself in dazzling white drifts. The coachman stood in his black furs beside an iron brazier. One of the blond horses was being shod in an old-fashioned manner, the coachman overseeing the exercise. Seeking to ingratiate herself, Lisel spoke to the coachman in a silky voice.

"I remarked yesterday, how well you controlled the horses when the wolves came after the carriage."

The coachman did not answer, but hearing her voice, the horse sidled a little, rolling its eye at her.

"Suppose," said Lisel to the coachman, "I were to ask you if you would take me back to the city. What would you say?"

Nothing, apparently.

The brazier sizzled and the hammer of the blacksmithing groom smacked the nails home into the horse's hoof. Lisel found the process disconcerting.

"You must understand," she said to the coachman, "my father would give you a great deal of money. He's unwell and wishes me to return. I received word this morning."

The coachman hulked there like a big black bear, and Lisel had the urge to bite him viciously.

"My grandmother," she announced, "would order you to obey me, but she is in bed."

"No, she is not," said the Matriarch at Lisel's back, and Lisel almost screamed. She shot around, and stared at the old woman, who stood about a foot away, imperious in her furs, jewels frostily blistering on her wrists.

"I wish," said Lisel, taking umbrage as her shield, "to go home at once."

"So I gather. But you can't, I regret."

"You mean to keep me prisoner?" blurted Lisel.

Grandmother laughed. The laugh was like fresh ice crackling under a steel skate. "Not at all. The road is snowed under and won't be clear for several days. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with us a while longer."

Lisel, in a turmoil she could not herself altogether fathom, had her attention diverted by the behavior of the horse. It was bristling like a cat, tossing its head, dancing against the rope by which the second groom was holding it.

Anna walked at once out into the yard and began to approach the horse from the front. The horse instantly grew more agitated, kicking up its heels, and neighing croupily. Lisel almost cried an automatic warning, but restrained herself. Let the beldame get a kicking, she deserved it. Rather to Lisel's chagrin, Anna reached the horse without actually having her brains dashed out. She showed not a moment's hesitation or doubt, placing her hand on its long nose, eyeing it with an amused tenderness. She looked very cruel and very indomitable.

"There now," said Anna to the horse, which, fallen quiet and still, yet trembled feverishly. "You know you are used to me. You know you were trained to endure me since you were a foal, as your brothers are sometimes trained to endure fire."

The horse hung its head and shivered, cowed but noble.

Anna left it and strolled back through the snow. She came to Lisel and took her arm.

"I'm afraid," said Anna, guiding them toward the château door, "that they're never entirely at peace when I'm in the vicinity, though they are good horses, and well-trained. They have borne me long distances in the carriage."

"Do they fear you because you ill-treat them?" Lisel asked impetuously.

"Oh, not at all. They fear me because to them I smell of wolf."

Lisel bridled.

"Then do you think it wise to keep such a pet in the house?" she flared.

Anna chuckled. It was not necessarily a merry sound.

"That's what you think, is it? What a little dunce you are, Lisel. I am the beast you saw last night, and you had better get accustomed to it. Grandmère is a werewolf."

The return walk through the domestic corridors into the hall was notable for its silence. The dreadful Anna, her grip on the girl's arm unabated, smiled thoughtfully to herself. Lisel was obviously also deliberating inwardly. Her conclusions, however, continued to lean to the deranged rather than the occult. Propitiation suggested itself, as formerly, to be the answer. So, as they entered the hall, casting their cloaks to a servant, Lisel brightly exclaimed:

"A werewolf, Grandmère. How interesting!"

"Dear me," said Anna, "what a child." She seated herself by the fire in one of her tall thrones. Beautiful had appeared. "Bring the liqueur and some biscuits," said Anna. "It's past the hour, but why should we be the slaves of custom?"

Lisel perched on a chair across the hearth, watching Anna guardedly.

"You are the interesting one," Anna now declared. "You look sulky rather than intimidated at being mured up here with one whom you wrongly suppose is a dangerous insane. No, *ma chère*, verily I'm not mad, but a transmogrifite. Every evening, once the sun sets, I become a wolf, and duly comport myself as a wolf does."

"You're going to eat me, then," snarled Lisel, irritated out of all attempts to placate.

"Eat you? Hardly necessary. The forest is bursting with game. I won't say I never tasted human meat, but I wouldn't stoop to devouring a blood relation. Enough is enough. Besides, I had the opportunity last night, don't you think, when you swooned away on the stairs not fifty feet from me. Of course, it was almost dawn, and I *had* dined, but to rip out your throat would have been the work only of a moment. Thereafter we might have stored you in the cold larder against a lean winter."

"*How dare you try to frighten me in this way!*" screamed Lisel in a paroxysm of rage.

Beautiful was coming back with a silver tray. On the tray rested a plate of biscuits and a decanter of the finest cut glass containing a golden drink.

"You note, Beautiful," said Madame Anna, "I like this wretched granddaughter of mine. She's very like me."

“Does that dwarf know you are a *werewolf*?” demanded Lisel, with baleful irony.

“Who else lets me in and out at night? But all my servants know, just as my other folk know, in the forest.”

“You’re disgusting,” said Lisel.

“Tut, I shall disinherit you. Don’t you want my fortune any more?”

Beautiful set down the tray on a small table between them and began to pour the liqueur, smooth as honey, into two tiny crystal goblets.

Lisel watched. She remembered the nasty dishes of raw meat—part of Anna’s game of werewolfery—and the drinking of water, but no wine. Lisel smirked, thinking she had caught the Matriarch out. She kept still and accepted the glass from Beautiful, who, while she remained seated, was a mere inch taller than she.

“I toast you,” said Anna, raising her glass to Lisel. “Your health and your joy.” She sipped. A strange look came into her strange eyes. “We have,” she said, “a brief winter afternoon before us. There is just the time to tell you what you should be told.”

“Why bother with me? I’m disinherited.”

“Hardly. Taste the liqueur. You will enjoy it.”

“I’m surprised that you did, Grandmère.”

“Don’t be,” said Anna with asperity. “This wine is special to this place. We make it from a flower which grows here. A little yellow flower that comes in the spring, or sometimes, even in the winter. There is a difference then, of course. Do you recall the flower of my escutcheon? It is the self-same one.”

Lisel sipped the liqueur. She had had a fleeting fancy it might be drugged or tampered with in some way, but both drinks had come from the decanter. Besides, what would be the point? The Matriarch valued an audience. The wine was pleasing, fragrant and, rather than sweet as Lisel had anticipated, tart. The flower which grew in winter was plainly another demented tale.

Relaxed, Lisel leant back in her chair. She gazed at the flames in the wide hearth. Her mad grandmother began to speak to her in a quiet, floating voice, and Lisel saw pictures form in the fire. Pictures of Anna, and of the château, and of darkness itself. . .

FOUR

How young Anna looked. She was in her twenties. She wore a scarlet gown and a scarlet cloak lined with pale fur and heavy brocade. It resembled Lisel's cloak but had a different clasp. Snow melted on the shoulders of the cloak, and Anna held her slender hands to the fire on the hearth. Free of the hood, her hair, like marvelously tarnished ivory, was piled on her head, and there was a yellow flower in it. She wore ruby eardrops. She looked just like Lisel, or Lisel as she would become in six years or seven.

Someone called. It was more a roar than a call, as if a great beast came trampling into the château. He was a big man, dark, all darkness, his features hidden in a black beard, black hair—more, in a sort of swirling miasmatic cloud, a kind of psychic smoke: Anna's hatred and fear. He bellowed for liquor and a servant came running with a jug and cup. The man, Anna's husband, cuffed the servant aside, grabbing the jug as he did so. He strode to Anna, spun her about, grabbed her face in his hand as he had grabbed the jug. He leaned to her as if to kiss her, but he did not kiss, he merely stared. She had steeled herself not to shrink from him, so much was evident. His eyes, roving over her to find some overt trace of distaste or fright, suddenly found instead the yellow flower. He vented a powerful oath. His paw flung up and wrenched the flower free. He slung it in the fire and spat after it.

"You stupid bitch," he growled at her. "Where did you come on that?"

"It's only a flower."

"Not only a flower. Answer me, where? Or do I strike you?"

"Several of them are growing near the gate, beside the wall; and in the forest. I saw them when I was riding."

The man shouted again for his servant. He told him to take a fellow and go out. They must locate the flowers and burn them.

"Another superstition?" Anna asked. Her husband hit her across the head so she staggered and caught the mantel to steady herself.

"Yes," he sneered, "another one. Now come upstairs."

Anna said, "Please excuse me, sir. I am not well today."

He said in a low and smiling voice:

"Do as I say, or you'll be worse."

The fire flared on the swirl of her bloody cloak as she moved to obey him.

And the image changed. There was a bedroom, fluttering with lamplight. Anna was perhaps thirty-five or six, but she looked older. She lay in bed, soaked in sweat, uttering hoarse low cries or sometimes preventing herself from crying. She was in labor. The child was difficult. There were other women about the bed. One muttered to her neighbor that it was beyond her how the master had ever come to sire a child, since he got his pleasure another way, and the poor lady's body gave evidence of how. Then Anna screamed. Someone bent over her. There was a peculiar muttering among the women, as if they attended at some holy ceremony.

And another image came. Anna was seated in a shawl of gilded hair. She held a baby on her lap and was playing with it in an intense, quite silent way. As her hair shifted, trceries became momentarily visible over her bare shoulders, and arms, horrible trceries left by a lash.

"Let me take the child," said a voice, and one of the women from the former scene appeared. She lifted the baby from Anna's lap, and Anna let the baby go, only holding her arms and hands in such a way that she touched it to the last second. The other woman was older than Anna, a peasant dressed smartly for service in the château. "You mustn't fret yourself," she said.

"But I can't suckle her," said Anna. "I wanted to."

"There's another can do that," said the woman. "Rest yourself. Rest while he is away." When she said "he" there could be no doubt of the one to whom she referred.

"Then, I'll rest," said Anna. She reclined on pillows, wincing slightly as her back made contact with the fine soft silk. "Tell me about the flowers again. The yellow flowers."

The woman showed her teeth as she rocked the baby. For an instant her face was just like a wolf's.

"You're not afraid," she said. "*He* is. But it's always been here. The wolf-magic. It's part of the Wolfland. Wherever wolves have been, you can find the wolf-magic. Somewhere. In a stream or a cave, or in a patch of ground. The château has it. That's why the flowers grow here. Yes, I'll tell you, then. It's simple. If any eat the flowers, then they receive the gift. It comes from the spirit, the wolfwoman, or maybe she's a goddess, an old goddess left over

from the beginning of things, before Christ came to save us all. She has the head of a wolf and yellow hair. You swallow the flowers, and you call her, and she comes, and she gives it you. And then it's yours, till you die."

"And then what? Payment?" said Anna dreamily. "Hell?"

"Maybe."

The image faded gently. Suddenly there was another which was not gentle, a parody of the scene before. Staring light showed the bedchamber. The man, his shadow-face smoldering, clutched Anna's baby in his hands. The baby shrieked; he swung it to and fro as if to smash it on some handy piece of furniture. Anna stood in her nightdress. She held a whip out to him.

"Beat me," she said. "Please beat me. I want you to. Put down the child and beat me. It would be so easy to hurt her, and so soon over, she's so small. But I'm stronger. You can hurt me much more. See how vulnerable and afraid I am. Beat *me*."

Then, with a snarl he tossed the child onto the bed where it lay wailing. He took the whip and caught Anna by her pale hair—

There was snow blowing like torn paper, everywhere. In the midst of it a servant woman, and a child perhaps a year old with soft dark hair, were seated in a carriage. Anna looked at them, then stepped away. A door slammed, horses broke into a gallop. Anna remained standing in the snow storm.

No picture came. A man's voice thundered: "Where? Where did you send the thing? It's mine, I sired it. My property. *Where?*"

But the only reply he got were moans of pain. She would not tell him, and did not. He nearly killed her that time.

Now it is night, but a black night bleached with whiteness, for a full moon is up above the tops of the winter pines.

Anna is poised, motionless, in a glade of the wild northern forest. She wears the scarlet cloak, but the moon has drained its color. The snow sparkles, the trees are umbrellas of diamond, somber only at their undersides. The moon slaps the world with light. Anna has been singing, or chanting something, and though it can no longer be heard, the dew of it lies heavy over the ground. Something is drawn there, too, in the snow, a circle, and another shape inside it. A fire has been kindled nearby, but now it has burned low, and has a curious bluish tinge to it. All at once a wind begins to come

through the forest. But it is not wind, not even storm. It is the soul of the forest, the spirit of the Wolfland.

Anna goes to her knees. She is afraid, but it is a new fear, an exulting fear. The stalks of the flowers whose heads she has eaten lie under her knees, and she raises her face like a dish to the moonlight.

The pines groan. They bend. Branches snap and snow showers down from them. The creature of the forest is coming, nearer and nearer. It is a huge single wing, or an enormous engine. Everything breaks and sways before it, even the moonlight, and darkness fills the glade. And out of the darkness Something whirls. It is difficult to see, to be sure—a glimpse of gold, two eyes like dots of lava seven feet in the air, a grey jaw, hung breasts which have hair growing on them, the long hand which is not a hand, lifting—And then every wolf in the forest seems to give tongue, and the darkness ebbs away.

Anna lies on her face. She is weeping. With terror. With—
It is night again, and the man of the house is coming home.

He swaggers, full of local beer, and eager to get to his wife. He was angry, a short while since, because his carriage, which was to have waited for him outside the inn, had mysteriously vanished. There will be men to curse and brutalize in the courtyard before he goes up to his beloved Anna, a prelude to his final acts with her. He finds her a challenge, his wife. She seems able to withstand so much, looking at him proudly with horror in her eyes. It would bore him to break her. He likes the fact he cannot, or thinks he does. And tonight he has some good news. One of the paid men has brought word of their child. She is discovered at last. She can be brought home to the château to her father's care. She is two years old now. Strong and healthy. Yes, good news indeed.

They had known better in the village than to tell him he should beware on the forest track. He is not anxious about wolves, the distance being less than a mile, and he has his pistol. Besides, he organized a wolf hunt last month and cleared quite a few of the brutes off his land. The area about the château has been silent for many nights. Even Anna went walking without a servant—though he had not approved of that and had taught her a lesson. (Sometimes it occurs to him that she enjoys his lessons as much as he

enjoys delivering them, for she seems constantly to seek out new ways to vex him.)

He is about a quarter of a mile from the château now, and here a small clearing opens off on both sides of the track. It is the night after the full moon, and her disc, an almost perfect round, glares down on the clearing from the pine tops. Anna's husband dislikes the clearing. He had forgotten he would have to go through it, for generally he is mounted or in the carriage when he passes the spot. There is some old superstition about the place. He hates it, just as he hates the stinking yellow flowers that grew in it before he burned them out. Why does he hate them? The woman who nursed him told him something and it frightened him, long ago. Well, no matter. He walks more quickly.

How quiet it is, how still. The whole night like a pane of black-white silence. He can hardly hear his own noisy footfalls. There is a disturbance in the snow, over there, a mark like a circle.

Then he realizes something is behind him. He is not sure how he realizes, for it is quite soundless. He stops, and turns, and sees a great and ghostly wolf a few feet from him on the track.

In a way, it is almost a relief to see the wolf. It is alone, and it is a natural thing. Somehow he had half expected something unnatural. He draws his pistol, readies it, points it at the wolf. He is a fine shot. He already visualizes lugging the bloody carcass, a trophy, into the house. He pulls the trigger.

A barren click. He is surprised. He tries again. Another click. It comes to him that his servant has emptied the chamber of bullets. He sees a vision of the park gates a quarter of a mile away, and he turns immediately and runs toward them.

Ten seconds later a warm and living weight crashes against his back, and he falls screaming, screaming before the pain even begins. When the pain does begin, he is unable to scream for very long, but he does his best. The final thing he sees through the haze of his own blood, which has splashed up into his eyes, and the tears of agony and the inclosing of a most atrocious death, are the eyes of the wolf, gleaming coolly back at him. He knows they are the eyes of Anna. And that it is Anna who then tears out his throat.

* * * *

The small crystal goblet slipped out of Lisel's hand, empty, and broke on the floor. Lisel started. Dazed, she looked away from the fire, to Anna the Matriarch.

Had Lisel been asleep and dreaming? What an unpleasant dream. Or had it been so unpleasant? Lisel became aware her teeth were clenched in spiteful gladness, as if on a bone. If Anna had told her the truth, that man—that *thing*—had deserved it all. To be betrayed by his servants, and by his wife, and to perish in the fangs of a wolf. A werewolf.

Grandmother and granddaughter confronted each other a second, with identical expressions of smiling and abstracted malice. Lisel suddenly flushed, smoothed her face, and looked down. There had been something in the drink after all.

"I don't think this at all nice," said Lisel.

"Nice isn't the word," Anna agreed. Beautiful reclined at her feet, and she stroked his hair. Across the big room, the stained-glass window was thickening richly to opacity. The sun must be near to going down.

"If it's the truth," said Lisel primly, "you will go to hell."

"Oh? Don't you think me justified? He'd have killed your mother at the very least. *You* would never have been born." Lisel reviewed this hypothetical omission. It carried some weight.

"You should have appealed for help."

"To whom? The marriage vow is a chain that may not be broken. If I had left him, he would have traced me, as he did the child. No law supports a wife. I could only kill him."

"I don't believe you killed him as you say you did."

"Don't you, m'nselle? Well, never mind. Once the sun has set, you'll see it happen before your eyes." Lisel stared and opened her mouth to remonstrate. Anna added gently: "And, I am afraid, not to myself alone."

Aside from all reasoning and the training of a short lifetime, Lisel felt the stranglehold of pure terror fasten on her. She rose and squealed: "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Anna, "that the liqueur you drank is made from the same yellow flowers I ate to give me the power of transmutation. I mean that the wolf-magic, once invoked, becomes hereditary, yet dormant. I mean that what the goddess of the Wolfland

conveys must indeed be paid for at the hour of death—unless another will take up the gift.”

Lisel, not properly understanding, not properly believing, began to shriek wildly. Anna came to her feet. She crossed to Lisel and shook the shrieks out of her, and when she was dumb, thrust her back in the chair.

“Now sit, fool, and be quiet. I’ve put nothing on you that was not already yours. Look in a mirror. Look at your hair and your eyes and your beautiful teeth. Haven’t you always preferred the night to the day, staying up till the morning, lying abed till noon? Don’t you love the cold forest? Doesn’t the howl of the wolf thrill you through with fearful delight? And why else should the Wolfland accord you an escort, a pack of wolves running by you on the road. Do you think you’d have survived if you’d not been one of their kind, too?”

Lisel wept, stamping her foot. She could not have said at all what she felt. She tried to think of her father and the ballrooms of the city. She tried to consider if she credited magic.

“Now listen to me,” snapped Anna, and Lisel muted her sobs just enough to catch the words. “Tonight is full moon, and the anniversary of that night, years ago, when I made my pact with the wolf goddess of the north. I have good cause to suspect I shan’t live out this year. Therefore, tonight is the last chance I have to render you in my place into her charge. That frees me from her, do you see? Once you have swallowed the flowers, once she has acknowledged you, you belong to her. At death, I escape her sovereignty, which would otherwise bind me forever to the earth in wolf form, phantom form. A bargain: You save me. But you too can make your escape, when the time comes. Bear a child. You will be mistress here. You can command any man to serve you, and you’re tolerable enough the service won’t be unwilling. My own child, your mother, was not like me at all. I could not bring her to live with me, once I had the power. I was troubled as to how I should wean her to it. But she died, and in you I saw the mark from the first hour. You are fit to take my place. Your child can take yours.”

“You’re hateful!” shrieked Lisel. She had the wish to laugh.

But someone was flinging open the doors of the hall. The cinnamon light streamed through and fell into the fire and faded it.

Another fire, like antique bronze, was quenching itself among the pines. The dying of the sun.

Anna moved toward the doors and straight out onto the snow. She stood a moment, tall and amazing on the peculiar sky. She seemed a figment of the land itself, and maybe she was.

"Come!" she barked. Then turned and walked away across the park.

All the servants seemed to have gathered like bats in the hall. They were silent, but they looked at Lisel. Her heart struck her over and over. She did not know what she felt or if she believed. Then a wolf sang in the forest. She lifted her head. She suddenly knew frost and running and black stillness, and a platinum moon, red feasts and wild hymnings, lovers with quicksilver eyes and the race of the ice wind and stars smashed under the hard soles of her four feet. A huge white ballroom opened before her, and the champagne of the air filled her mouth.

Beautiful had knelt and was kissing the hem of her red cloak. She patted his head absently, and the gathering of servants sighed.

Presumably, as Anna's heiress, she might be expected to live on in the forest, in the château which would be hers. She could even visit the city, providing she was home by sunset.

The wolf howled again, filling her veins with lights, raising the hair along her scalp.

Lisel tossed her head. Of course, it was all a lot of nonsense.

She hastened out through the doors and over the winter park and followed her grandmother away into the Wolfland.



RED AS BLOOD

OR, TALES OF THE SISTERS GRIMMER

TANITH LEE



WILDSIDE PRESS

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