



Prologue



He didn't know how long he'd been clinging there. Long enough for the bone-cold water to drive the feeling from his legs. Long enough for his fingers to tire of holding his head above water. Somewhere in the distance, the eerie wail of the hounds quickened his heartbeat.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on keeping his hold on the old well's uneven sides, willing his heart to slow. *They can't smell you in here. They'll lose your scent in the stream and they'll never find you here.*

The water's chilly touch crawled farther up his neck and he tightened his grip, looking up to the clear night sky. Sighed. Weary. How long had he been doing this? As long as he could remember. Above the well, the howls fell away; they'd lost the scent.

Just leave me alone. Haven't I paid enough? He prayed for Them to go back where They came from, but he didn't expect an answer. God's attentions were for those with souls, a status he'd lacked for a thousand years or more. He swallowed. Deep in his chest, he felt the soft

and curious rustling that meant They'd entered the cage room. He reached down through the water to his pocket, withdrew two old, rusty nails, and held them tightly. All he had to do was not cry out. He could do this.

Somewhere else, in a small, round, grey room of stone and moss as soft as a fox cub's fur, a dove beat furiously in a cage made of a net of the hair-fine wires. Wings crashed into the bars, and claws scraped at the perch only to unsuccessfully seek purchase on the thin wire sides. It was a frenzy not of a desire to escape – the cage had no door – but rather of fear. It was the worst kind of fear – the hopeless kind – and it sent the bird's eternal heart racing until it seemed it would burst out of its breast.

Somehow, slender hands took the pale dove from where it trembled at the bottom of the cage and held it out to a bright lady, oddly golden in this grey-green room.

When she spoke, her voice shimmered in the room, beautiful enough to draw tears. "The wing," she said softly, holding up a candle. The fingers gently tugged the dove's wing outward from its body and offered the prone bird to the lady. The candle she held reflected the colours of the sun in the dove's eye.

The lady smiled thinly and held the pale flame beneath the bird's wing.

The boy in the well shuddered. Biting his lip, he pressed his forehead into his arms, willing himself quiet.

The pain in his chest gnawed and burned, squeezing his heart with a fiery touch. As quickly as it began, it abated, and he gasped silently.

The lady in the grey room held the candle beside her face, illuminating her beauty: beauty that looked at the beauty of a perfect summer day and scoffed that they should bear the same description. “He always chooses the hard way, doesn’t he?” The dove began to thrash wildly at the sound of her voice. This time, she held the candle closer, and the flames seized the feathers, twisting and blackening them like shreds of paper. The dove froze, beak parted in silent pain, eyes fixed blankly on the ceiling.

In the well, the boy gasped again, audibly, and tried to remember to hold his head above water. His heart writhed within him, and as he squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could, his heartbeat stopped. Feeling curiously hollow, he slid silently under the water, fingers limp, the nails he had been holding tracing a slow line into the dark below him.

His head jerked back, his neck seized in an inhuman grip. He was pulled into the night and dropped to the clover-scented ground, water trickling from his mouth.

“You’re not to die quite yet, old friend.” The Hunter looked down at him, neither angry nor happy with his captured quarry. The chase was done, so the entertainment was over. Hounds milled around the body in the clover. “Work to do.”