

Chapter Three, “Mark of the Werewolf”

1

“Helga, come on!” Nell said.

Helga turned to her two sisters, Nell and Beatrice, and hurried after them. The three of them had just left the House of Horrors and Helga was still rattled by the appearance and demeanor of the Electrified Woman. She didn't know if she'd ever shake the frightful but hauntingly beautiful living corpse at the back of the scary exhibit.

The three sisters were from the nearby village. Helga was the prettiest of them and, at seventeen, the youngest, as well. Her older sisters had convinced her to come with them to the camp. The travelers offered the thrill of the unknown but no real danger.

It had been a lovely day. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the mountains and the moon would be full and high soon enough. The walk from the village through the woods had been pleasant but Helga feared the walk back, in the dark. After the House of Horrors, she was likely to see either the Mummy or the Electrified Woman behind every gnarled tree.

“Nell, look!” Beatrice said.

She pointed towards one of the caravans. A sign hanging from the arch above the entrance was illustrated with an all-seeing eye.

“There's no one waiting at the fortune teller!” Beatrice continued. She grasped Nell's hand. “We could walk right in.” Her eyes landed on Helga. Smiled. “Oh, Helga shook have her palm read!”

Helga shook her head. “I don't know.”

Nell also looked at her sister. “Oh, come on, Helga. It'll be fun!”

“You could find out if that boy likes you,” Beatrice said. “Maybe the old woman will tell you that the two of you are destined for each other!”

Helga shook her head again but both of her sisters grabbed hold of her and practically dragged her towards the caravan. As she was being man-handled – or sister-handled, as it were – Helga spied the dancing woman that had been performing for them earlier in the evening.

The young woman – Christina was her name – was leaning against another caravan, partially hidden in shadow. She was grasping the hem of her skirt, holding it up, and counting coins out of it. They were clearly her earnings from the night's performances.

For a moment, the dancer locked eyes with Helga. She smiled. Her eyes were big and bright and shone out in her odd but lovely round face with its rather high forehead. Helga found herself smiling back.

The moment passed as quickly as it started. Helga's sisters pulled her towards the caravan and Christina – now finished counting her coins – ducked out of view behind the caravan she had been leaning against.

The three sisters stopped at the fortune teller's wagon, letting another small group exit. Bright beads hung in the open doorway, swaying from side to side after the small group exited. Helga's sisters pushed her forward, making her mount the small set of stairs leading up to the doorway.

She paused at the top of the stairs and knocked on the door, which was standing open on her right. A moment later, an old woman's voice called out from inside. “Enter, my child.”

Helga looked at her sisters, unsure of herself, before pushing the beads aside and entering the wagon. The front area had been converted into a small sitting parlor with a round table in its center. Helga saw no crystal ball, like in the stories, but the place gave off the same impression, nonetheless.

The fortune teller herself sat at the table, waiting for Helga and her sisters. There were already two chairs available for them and the old woman gestured to a third sitting in the corner. Nell grabbed it and pulled it to the table. All three sisters sat down across from the old woman, Helga in the middle.

Helga felt nervous and uncomfortable in her chair. The old woman was staring at her and she felt that she had to clear the air between them.

“Hello,” she said. “What's your name?”

“I am Kezia,” the old woman introduced herself.

“That's a lovely name. My name is –”

“I know your name,” Kezia interrupted her.

“You do?!” Nell said.

“I don't believe it,” Beatrice said.

Kezia looked at each of them in turn, then looked intently at Helga. Nodded. “Your name is Helga. Isn't it that right?”

Helga, stunned into silence, nodded. Kezia also nodded, sure of herself. She extended her hands across the table, palms up. Helga was hesitant but reached out with her own hands, stopping just short of taking the offering.

“Are you afraid, my girl?” Kezia said.

Helga shook her head. “No, nothing like that.”

Kezia raised one inquisitive eyebrow. Helga, feeling like she had to prove herself, took hold of the old fortune teller's hands. Taking a moment to massage Helga's hands, Kezia turned the girl's palms up, squinted down at them. When she spoke, she did not look up at Helga.

“What is it that you want to see, my dear?” she asked.

“I...” Helga said. “I guess I don't know. I'm a little flustered.”

Kezia nodded and finally looked up at the girl. Their gazes met. The old fortune teller seemed to be reading Helga's mind. The girl didn't like it. It was over soon enough and Kezia looked down at Helga's palms once again, concentrating on the left hand after a moment.

The old woman began to read Helga's palm, nodding to herself as she spoke. “You've lived a hard but happy life.”

“Hard?!” Nell said. “She's the spoiled one!”

Beatrice giggled. Kezia shushed the girls, raising a hand into the air to emphasize the wordless order. Nell and Beatrice quieted right up. Helga couldn't help but smirk to herself.

After another moment, Kezia concentrated on Helga's right hand and her face darkened. She seemed to spot something in Helga's palm that disturbed her and the girl looked down to see what it was. But there was nothing to see. Her palm was unblemished and clean.

Kezia looked up at Helga, let go of her hand and leaned back in her chair, away from the girl. She shook her head. “You must leave.”

Helga frowned but it was Nell that spoke. “What? Why? What did she do?”

“Go now,” Kezia said.

“She didn't do anything,” Beatrice said, sticking up for her sister.

Kezia stood up from her chair, hands planted flat on the table. “Go now! And be out of the woods before the full moon is high!”

Nell stood up first. She shook her head. “That's no way to treat people! Let's go, Helga.”

Beatrice had also stood up and she gave the old woman the sign of the evil eye. “And don't expect to be paid, either.”

“Leave!” Kezia ordered, pointing at the exit.

Helga lingered, afraid now. When she spoke, it was barely a whisper. “What did you see?”

“Come on, Helga,” Beatrice said.

“In my palm,” Helga continued. “You saw something that you didn't like. What was it?”

Kezia couldn't meet her gaze. In fact, she seemed ashamed. Of what, Helga didn't know. Kezia

shook her head in despair. “You must go. Go quickly!”

Finally, Helga stood up, joining her sisters. Once again, they had to practically drag her with them, this time down the steps and away from the wagon.

Kezia stepped towards the hanging beads which swung to and fro and watched them leave. She looked, to Helga, like she wanted to say something but didn't dare speak it.

2

Night fell over the camp.

As the full moon rose in the autumn sky – only a few clouds hanging about it – a hush settled on the camp. While there were still villagers in the camp, playing cards, listening to the travelers' music, most of them had already gone home. There was something in the air, something unsettling, that had driven them to their homes.

The sounds of owls hooting in the trees filled the air. The lonely barks of wild dogs punctuated and quieted conversations.

Soon there came a sound that was neither of these. It was a howl, but not of a dog.

When the villagers visiting the camp looked at each other before turning to the travelers in fear, asking the question – “What was that?” – the answer came in hushed, serious tones. Four words uttered over the sign of the cross under the traveler's chin:

“It was a wolf.”

3

Nell, the oldest of the three sisters, took the lead as they headed home through the woods. Despite the warnings of the old fortune teller, they had lingered a little longer in the camp – watching games of chance as they were played out and the like – before returning home and the full moon was now peeking out above the gnarled trees as they trudged through the woods.

To Nell, Helga looked scared. The girl was looking all about, her eyes wild. Nell frowned at her youngest sister. The old fortune teller must have gotten to the girl.

A heavy fog or mist drifted out of the trees and swirling about them, almost as if it had its own intelligence. A malevolent intelligence.

As the shadows and fog pressed in on them Nell, too, started to become afraid. She wished that they had left right away and not lingered.

Beatrice, on the other hand, didn't seem affected by the atmosphere or the evening's events at all. The middle sister practically skipped through the fog, down the path. Nell shook her head and concentrated on the way ahead.

It wasn't long before Nell became convinced that the three of them were being followed. Or perhaps the word was stalked.

Something moved through wild on the other side of the trees, keeping pace with them, a few meters back. Nell could hear leaves crunching under someone's – something's – feet.

And it was getting closer.

Nell picked up her own pace, not yet at a run but getting there. Helga kept up just fine but Beatrice scoffed as her sisters pulled ahead.

“What's gotten into you two?” she said.

Neither Nell nor Helga answered. They were scared now. Nell was convinced that they were being stalked by some beast. A creature of the night.

“Alright, alright,” Beatrice said, “I'll play your stupid game!”

She jogged to catch up to her sisters. As she did, something leapt out of trees, boosting itself off a fallen limb and flying towards them. It was bipedal but not human. Not quite.

The beast immediately slammed into Beatrice, knocking her aside. The middle sister went rolling into the woods on the other side.

Nell and Helga whirled around to see their sister jostled out of the path, both of them uttering screams of shock and terror as the beast turned its attention towards them.

The beast was feminine but covered in fine, dark hair. She was wearing the tattered remains of a traveler's dress, like those at the camp. Her big eyes shone in the dark, sharp teeth bared.

When she landed on the path behind them, she went down on all fours and growled up at them like a wolf. Nell and Helga only hesitated for a brief moment, thinking of Beatrice. When they ran, the She Wolf was after them in an instant.

Nell knew that they couldn't outrun the beast and she grit her teeth as she came to a decision. It was her responsibility to protect her younger siblings. She would give Helga time to escape.

Turning in the path, towards the beast, Nell put out both her hands in a fruitless attempt to slow the She Wolf down. But when the beast reached her, all she did was toss Nell aside. The older sister landed on the ground beside the path, at the base of a tree.

As she tried to get up, slowed by the impact and the pain, she came to a horrible realization: the She Wolf only wanted Helga. The beast was after the youngest and prettiest sister.

Nell managed to get halfway up when the She Wolf reached Helga. The youngest sister screamed as

the werewolf grabbed hold of her, spun her around in her grasp.

It was over in an instant. The She Wolf buried her head in Helga's neck and bit down.

“No!” Nell screamed as she stood up.

But the She Wolf wasn't listening and Helga's screams were cut off as her throat was torn out. When the werewolf let go of her, she was dead before she hit the ground.

The She Wolf lingered over her prey for a moment before she swept her head back and howled at the full moon above. She turned to regard Nell briefly – her big, piercing eyes looking straight through her – before bounding into the forest and disappearing into the fog.

As Beatrice emerged onto the path, Nell ran to her fallen sister, to Helga, and dropped to her knees. Her scream was a wail of despair.

4

A week later, in another part of the country, the caravan had stopped in a valley near a river for the day. They would stay in this area for a day or so to recuperate after a week of constant traveling. It had been hard travel and they had left the last village in a hurry in the middle of the night.

The Bride wasn't quite sure about the details – she had heard something about the death of a village girl and suspicion being laid on the travelers – but it wasn't her place to question such things. She was paying her way, helping her new family. Her new home.

A little farther down the river was a waterfall and the other women had convinced the Bride to join them for a good bathing. The men would wait their turn back at the small camp.

As the other women disrobed at the river in front of the waterfall, the Bride stayed ashore. She was shy and stayed under the shadow of a large tree by the riverside.

Keeping her head down for a time, she found herself looking towards the waterfall. At the moment, there was only one of the women behind the screen of water. The rest were in the river.

It was Christina behind the wall of water and the Bride found herself leaving the shadow of the tree and wandering up the river towards the waterfall. When she reached it, she looked around the side of it, behind the water.

Christina was running her long dark hair under the water, head swept back, eyes closed. But she seemed to sense the Bride – smell her – and smiled.

“You can come in,” she said, eyes still closed.

Cautiously, the Bride stepped behind the waterfall, carefully finding her footing on the rocks. When she was behind the waterfall, she placed her back against the rock wall, staring at Christina. She didn't

understand the emotions running through her at all.

When Christina was done washing her hair, she finally opened her eyes and smirked at the Bride. Chuckled.

“You can't expect to get clean while wearing clothes,” she said.

The Bride shook her head but didn't stop Christina when the young woman approached and helped her out of her shroud. The wrappings would take longer but they had time.

Christina began to tug at the wrappings about the Bride's neck, allowing the other woman a close look at her underarms. The Bride narrowed her eyes.

There was a strange mark on Christina's inner right arm, just above her armpit. It was a five pointed star. The Bride didn't know what it was. She had no way of knowing that it was a pentagram.

The mark of the werewolf.

To Be Continued...

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