

Prologue

Screams filled the cold night air. Screams for help. Screams to run. Screams of pain. Screams of mourning.

Each scream was a map to Jenevrah, guiding her through the alleyways. She weaved through the dark cobblestone streets, avoiding the screams as much as possible. A scream to the right. *Turn left.* A scream up ahead. *U-turn.*

Feeders were everywhere. She couldn't count how many, but the plenitude of prey increased her chances of escape. She just needed to make it to the fields unnoticed, and everything would be okay. She was close now. Just a few more streets.

A scream to the right, a quiet alley to the left. Jenevrah turned left and froze. A woman lay dead in the street, blood still oozing from the teeth marks on her neck. Jenevrah searched the shadows for any feeders, and finding herself alone, she tiptoed over the body and ran. Another scream, another alley, this time empty.

An explosion rocked the night, almost knocking her off her feet—this one more distant than the last. For several moments, the thunderous roar ricocheted off the surrounding mountains. Jenevrah looked back. On the horizon, fire and smoke billowed from the palace wall. It was over. The last great wall had fallen. The sanctuary was no more.

Jenevrah focused on the street, concentrating only on placing her feet. She was running as fast as she could without falling. She couldn't risk tripping, not with the baby in her arms. Ezra howled his disapproval, his cries muffled by Jenevrah's shoulder. She tried to hold his head steady, but it bounced violently with each stride; she couldn't afford to slow down. Better this than dead.

So many had died already.

Finally, Jenevrah broke free from the buildings. The fields were quiet. The dead usually were. Their bodies littered the long dirt road, each with bite marks of their own. Two guards. A little boy. A tiny toddler. All dead. All victims of the feeders.

In the distance, a field of corn crops huddled together in the dark. Beyond that, the outer wall towered over the flatlands. It was presumed impenetrable... until tonight. That's where Kildron would be waiting.

Just a little further.

A feeble cry pricked Jenevrah's ears. Off to her left, a lanky figure hunched on its hands and knees, its bloody mouth buried in a young girl's neck. A long black cloak, like devil's wings, wrapped around the feeder. Beneath it, the poor girl was still alive. She writhed under its jaws and clawed helplessly at its back. Then, she fell still.

The feeder itself was nothing out of the ordinary, an average human face with a slender human body. At one point, it had been a man. But that was long ago, before it fed on human blood.

Jenevrah tried to walk quietly, but the sandy road crunched beneath her feet. At the sound of Jenevrah's footsteps, the feeder's head snapped up. She wasted no time. Jenevrah hugged her baby tight and sprinted for the camouflage of the corn foliage. She plunged into the corn stalks and, after several strides, dove to the soil. She huddled as still as possible, trying to silence her breathing. She hugged her son close and stroked his head to keep him quiet.

A subtle noise scratched at her eardrum: the scraping of leaves on skin. Peering through the corn rows, she saw the outline of the feeder against the starlight. It walked slowly through the stalks, waiting to pounce at the slightest movement. It took a step closer. Then, another. It stopped a few feet shy of Jenevrah and craned its neck to listen. A few moments passed... and then a few more.

"It's alright. You can come out now," the feeder called, its voice sweetly, deceptively innocent. "Those monsters are gone. You're safe to come out. I'll protect you."

Chills raced down Jenevrah's spine. The voice was so gentle, so convincing. But Jenevrah knew better. She saw the bodies. She saw the blood dripping from its chin. *How could something so intelligent be consumed by such evil?*

The feeder paused a moment longer. "Fine!" it hissed, innocence replaced with rage. "We'll have to do this the hard way. Lucky for me, I like my blood boiled."

As easy as flipping a switch, the feeder's hands ignited in a swirling mass of flame. As it extended its hands, the flames leapt to the nearest stalks. The burning leaves crackled as the heat drew nearer to Jenevrah. If she ran from the flames, the feeder would see her. If she didn't, it would hear her dying screams.

I'm sorry Ezra. I've failed you. I've failed everyone.

As quietly as she could, she wrapped Ezra within her cloak, shielding him from the smoke that already choked her. The flames were only inches away. She grit her teeth as the heat seared her nerves.

God help me!

Shlink!

A knife buried itself in the feeder's throat. The creature screeched and clawed at the blade before slinking to the ground. It thrashed amid the burning stalks for several seconds before submitting to its inevitable death. A moment later, the flames shrunk until they disappeared completely, snuffed out by an invisible blanket. Only the smoking skeletons of corn remained.

Jenevrah rose to her feet and spotted him instantly. He raced through the corn, his silhouette tall and lean. His features were hidden in the shadows of his cloak. Without thinking, Jenevrah ran to him, embracing her husband. She wrapped her arms around his neck while trying not to squish her infant. He was alive! Kildron was alive!

Kildron grabbed her by the face and kissed her mouth with a passion only desperation could inspire. His long blonde curls tickled her cheek. She squeezed her husband tight, laying her face on his damp chest, whether with sweat or blood, she couldn't tell. Her hair tangled around his fingers as he stroked her head. His rapid breathing hissed in her ear. It was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard. It meant he was alive.

Jenevrah pulled away first, breaking the short moment of bliss. "Where's Iris?" She asked, frantically searching for her in the dark. "Is she not with you?"

His voice whispered in short, gasping breaths. "Iris is fine. I sent her with Zane. They're on their way to Kentville."

Jenevrah breathed a sigh of relief. For now, her family was safe.

"Jen, there's no time," Kildron gasped. "The feeders have already breached the palace. You need to get out of here. Take Ezra and go to Kentville."

Jenevrah opened her mouth to protest, but Kildron didn't give her a chance. He shook her softly. "There's no time; listen carefully. Zane will wait for you at the gas station. He'll take Ezra to Cavernum. You'll both be safe there." His next words stung. "Don't wait for me. I'll find you again. I promise."

Jenevrah clung to him. "You can't face him alone, Kildron," she pled. "He's too strong. You'll die!"

"I don't have a choice. If he gets his hands on the library..." Kildron didn't finish the sentence; he didn't need to. Jenevrah couldn't speak; only nod her head, tears dripping with each bounce.

Kildron's head snapped up just as two feeders emerged from the city. They raced toward the embracing family with heart-stopping speed. Kildron kissed her one last time, so quick she wondered if it really happened. "Now, go!" He turned Jenevrah toward the outer wall and shoved her hard. "Go!!!"

Her instincts took over, and she stammered through the corn stalks. She only took a dozen steps before a blinding flash of lightning lit the field. The thunder rocked her almost instantly, a tortured scream buried within. Jenevrah didn't look back. Twice more, lightning illuminated the flatland, the shockwave rustling the leaves around her. Her eyes blurred with tears as she ran. She didn't even have time to say *I love you*. Her last words had been *You'll die*.

Jenevrah hugged Ezra close, smearing his cheek with her tears. He was all that mattered now. More than her own life, more than her husband's, Ezra had to live.