

Wild One Excerpt

Chapter One

Everybody wants to be a superhero. They want to be special, believe that they can save the world and all that blah, blah, blah, bullshit. Well, that would be everybody but me. All I wanted was to save my own ass, and maybe one other person, before I ditched what was left of the human race as soon as I got the chance.

Why? Because when the Bloody Death wiped out most of the world, what it left behind was pretty much crap. I've only known a handful of decent people and I've lived on this earth for eighteen years, give or take a couple of months. That was a large enough sampling size for me.

Of course, because all I'd ever wanted was to be normal, stands to reason I'd end up as anything but that. I've been cursed from the day I was born with this strange gift. You know what was worse than having a power you never wanted? Having one that was absolutely worthless to you when you needed it.

Like right now, being super strong would have been great, so I could kill the asshole standing in front of me. Or what about flying? So I could escape. But I'm not killing anyone or escaping because, as I mentioned, my power sucks. It was worse than having no power at all.

"You think you can leave here?" Baryn's spit flew between the rotted teeth he had left and a foul odor blasted my nostrils as he screamed. His fist, covered in my blood, waved inches from me, as his pustuled face served as an unwanted backdrop.

Baryn wasn't my curse. He was just the nightmare that kept reoccurring. Every. Damn. Day. And my superpower couldn't do a thing about him.

"You're going to pay for every second my men had to look for you." His face grew as red as that last fall tomato he'd eaten for breakfast.

That was how long I'd been gone too. Since breakfast. Not even a full day. Not that long in the scheme of things, but I guess if you were counting every single second, it added up. "You sure you've got the balls to back up something that big? That's a whole lot of seconds you're throwing around there, *bud*." I hit the B hard, knowing that calling him bud would take him over the edge.

Baryn's bald head gleamed, a bead of sweat dripping a trail to the side of his nose. I might've imagined he was bursting some blood vessels as his heart hammered through his chest. He was entitled to his surprise, considering I was changing things up unexpectedly. Normally, during our times together, he did most of the talking, while I played more of the silent, mysterious type.

But something had snapped in me this morning when I'd taken a step out of the village, and then a second. It was as if that first breath of free air had seeped into my lungs and then grabbed a hold of my soul with an iron grip that wouldn't let go. All the feelings and emotions I'd kept caged within me,

beaten back so I could make myself so very small, halving myself so I'd hopefully go unnoticed whenever possible in my fight to survive—they wouldn't go back in. I couldn't beat them down anymore. It was as if the iron grip had spread out from my heart into everything that was me. That part I'd pummeled for so long, it was refusing to listen to reason. It didn't care if Baryn killed me. Didn't want to hear how it was better to be careful and survive. It couldn't seem to fit inside that little space I'd allowed it.

Craziest part was—I. Liked. It.

I didn't want to beat it back, force myself to shrink within, and the cost didn't matter.

“Don't you ever speak to me like that.” His arm pulled all the way back, loading up for another swing.

That wild thing that had broken free inside of me still refused to be cowed. “Fuck. You.”

His fist struck my nose. The familiar crunch told me it was broken—again. It was already a mangled lump on my face, so it wouldn't look much worse, and I'd moved past vanity long ago. My head bounced off the wall and then wobbled back. Blood dripping down onto the packed earthen floor, I waited for my head to clear. Waited to see if that thing inside of me, that part that wanted to live large and fuck the consequences, was ready to shrink back into its small box and hide again.

No.

It still didn't give a fuck.

My skull leaning against the wall for support, I angled my head back to get a look at Baryn. “Be careful exerting yourself too much. You're not as spry as you used to be. The ole ticker might get tired out and quit.” The nasally tone of my jibe lessened the delivery, but the ragged intake of his breath said it hit its target well enough anyway.

Baryn's biggest fear was death, not that you'd know it the way he wasted his days. The problem with Baryn was the same problem lots of people had. They acted like tomorrow was a guarantee. Yes, logically they knew they could die today, but that wasn't what they truly believed. They walked around as if they had an eternity at their disposal, wasting minutes as if they were nothing. Minutes piling up into hours and days. Years later, they had nothing left but a spent life. Then the reaper knocked on their door and they prayed to the gods of the Wilds for just a few of those minutes back, because *then* they'd treasure them. *Then* they'd do this and that and everything in between.

But everyone has a moment when it all ceases to exist, and the reaper doesn't care if you beg, get on your knees, and cry. The reaper isn't an ex who might give you one last go around. When the reaper shows, it's a date with death.

And the one thing I knew all too well was death. That was my gift, if you wanted to call it that. I couldn't always tell you when the reaper was coming, but I knew how he was going to collect and how ugly it was going to be. I knew who'd beg and who'd go out standing tall. When Baryn's time came, and it was going to be soon, he wouldn't have a chance to beg.

Of all the deaths I'd seen, and hated every glimpse of, Baryn's was the one I'd been waiting for. What a death it would be. Way too grand for the likes of him, but I'd take my opportunity to dance on his corpse any way I got it. Even if it were only for a minute, that minute couldn't come soon enough.

Baryn's face scrunched up as delayed rage finally set in. "Worthless bitch. You deserve everything that's coming for you." His fist connected with my ribs.

The pain was shocking. I didn't care what anyone said, you never really got used to taking a bad beating, but I knew I'd survive. Once in a blue moon, seeing a person's death before it happened had an upside. Long ago, I'd realized that I saw fewer deaths with babies and children. Since I couldn't see my own either, it made me think maybe I only saw the deaths that preceded mine.

Winded from doling out the beating, he stepped back, the bulge in his pants obvious. A beating was his foreplay. The swelling and the blood all added to his arousal. Most people didn't find me attractive, but Baryn did. He got off on the many scars he'd given me through the years. The way my right leg bowed from a crudely healed break he'd caused. The scars that covered my body.

He moved to his bed, sitting with his legs wide open and leaning back, rubbing between his legs. He mumbled and spoke softly, sick words I drowned out in my head.

He wouldn't touch me, no one would—not like that, anyway. That was the only blessing of my gift. There were too many superstitions around my kind. They said I had Death Sight, that I was tainted by the reaper. To sleep with me might bring instant death. But that didn't mean he wouldn't look his fill while he did his business.

His stares and grunting used to make bile claw its way up my throat, gagging me. I didn't feel anything now. Wouldn't let him have that part of me. I stared out the window above me, with eyes that were swelling shut, at the tree tops beyond the wall that enclosed our village. I pushed him from my mind until I was alone with nothing but the stars and the sound of owls hooting in the distance.

What it had been like to run free through those trees. They said that everything out there, in the Wilds, was too dangerous. That bloodthirsty beasts ran the forest at night, killing anything they came upon, and that pirates would kidnap you and sell you at slave markets.

They said the world wasn't what it used to be a couple of hundred years ago, back in the Glory Years, when there were great machines everywhere. Mechanical birds soared through the air and great metal boats cut through the oceans like whales, carrying people all over the world on their backs. And that was only the beginning of the stories I'd heard.

So many people had been alive then that they'd lived in huge cities of towering buildings, and when they walked, they'd bang into each other *accidentally*.

But then the Bloody Death came, wave after wave. And with each wave, the human race became weaker and weaker. Now? We're hanging on to the bottom rung, prey to the beasts and all the other creatures that rose after the fall, and continued to rise.

People said it was safer here, enclosed in five square miles of hell. But those people didn't live my life. Maybe for them it was, but for me, death was preferable.

Since I was a baby, I'd never been outside of those walls—until today. I'd take my chance again as soon as I got it. I wanted to run through the trees with no one watching and no one telling me when to stop or when to start. I wanted to be alone and away from here.

And I had to get away soon. Worse was on its way.

Chapter Two

I woke sometime near dawn to Baryn's fingers digging into the fleshy part of my upper arm. Eyes barely open, I tried to untangle my legs as he dragged me after him toward the door.

Ivan was waiting for him right outside the door, as always.

"Put her in the circle," Baryn said, and then went back inside.

Ivan did the bulk of the dirty work and was a stellar employee, always doing his duty with a smile. I was handed off, this time by my hair, as I stumbled to keep from being scalped.

Minutes later, I was chained to the post, a half-circle of stones around it. Three inches of iron bit into the skin of my wrist. The circle of shame, they called it. This was where they put you when you did something *bad*, which could be anything from glancing the wrong way or saying the wrong word.

I settled in, leaning against the wood, knowing I'd be here for at least the day, if history told me anything.

I pulled my knees up to my chest, resting my chin upon them and letting white-blond hair curtain my face. People would be rising for their duties soon, and it was much easier to not see them than to pretend I hadn't. It was mutually beneficial, as they didn't want to pretend to not see me either.

I'd gotten as comfortable as I could when Baryn's door opened again. It had a very distinctive double bang when it closed, and his house wasn't that far from the circle. Sometimes I wondered if he liked the view outside his window. I glanced over, and he had that *look* in his eyes as they met mine.

I'd thought he was through with me for now. This wasn't how things went. He'd beaten me. He'd done *that* thing. Normally he'd be content for at least a day and move on to some new amusement. Why was he walking out of his house and toward me?

He paused, looking around the ground near the wooden wall. What was he doing? Maybe he *was* done with me? Except I'd seen that look. I *knew* that look. I'd had nightmares over that look.

Suddenly he was on the move again, but this time in the opposite direction, and I sagged against the pole. It wasn't until I saw the thick branch he picked up, saw him pivot back to me with it in his

hand, that I truly panicked. Baryn liked to use his fists. He'd only used a branch one other time, when he didn't think he could get the job done.

I tried to pull my hand from the metal. It scraped over my skin, bunching it like crinkled fabric, but it wasn't enough. I would've broken it if I could've. I would've done anything if it would've gotten me free.

Baryn walked toward me with brisk steps now, determined in his path, the branch swinging at his side.

Ivan, who had been twenty or so feet away, fell into step with him, as they both now charged in my direction.

Baryn turned to Ivan. "Hold her down."

"Whatever you say." Ivan turned to me, smiling widely and probably wishing he was going to wield the branch.

Ivan's steps nearing had me slicing skin from my wrist, but unless I could sever my hand, I was caught. Ivan's foot was planted on my back, shoving me to the ground.

"Flip her over," Baryn said. "I want to watch her face as she gets what's coming to her."

Crows cawed from their perches, mingling with Ivan's laughter. He grabbed a shoulder, swinging me back around. A boot dug into already-hurt ribs and kept me there.

Baryn took the thick branch in both hands, smiling as he swung at the air. "That will be the last time you run. Anywhere."

I should've shut up and lain there, but I couldn't. I just couldn't. That thing inside me, the piece that had broken free, kept saying, *Don't live small. Don't let them rob you of what little you have left. If you're going to die, so be it. At least do it on your terms.* So, instead of shutting up and hoping he wouldn't hurt me too badly, I smiled at him, even as my stomach churned and I choked on its acidic swell.

I took the only swing at him I had left: "Do your worst now, because you won't have much longer."

"Why is that?" he asked, white-knuckling the branch.

"The Bloody Death will be coming for you soon. I can see you in a pile of your own shit and puke after you lie rotting for a week."

He smiled. "Liar. There hasn't been an outbreak of the Bloody Death in years. First I'm dying from a weak heart, now it's the Bloody Death." He laughed like a man whose heart was shriveled and black.

"We'll see," I said.

He was right. He wouldn't die either of those ways. I'd never tell him how he was going to die. Didn't want to give him a chance to stop it.

Baryn used his branch to point at me as he spoke to Ivan. "Don't let her move. This takes very precise aim."

Ivan kept his boot steady, but he was no longer smiling or looking at me. He was afraid of what he'd hear was in store for him. His death was nowhere near as satisfying as Baryn's, so he needn't worry about me sharing.

The branch came crashing down on my shin. First it stole the air from my lungs and then it stole the light from my eyes. If nothing else, I finally got the oblivion I'd longed for.

* * *

I huddled on the ground, my back to the wooden wall that circled our village, clinging to any break from the wind I could get. It was cold for fall, and even colder now that night had fallen again.

People gave me a wide berth as they made their way home for the night, no one wanting to look my way and acknowledge me. If they did, they might feel like they had to do something. It was easier to not see me. I kept my eyes downward, so I didn't have to watch the people walking past, pretending to not see me.

The bowl of broth I'd been brought minutes earlier lay turned on its side a few feet away, after Ivan had *accidentally* bumped me.

"Clumsy," he'd said, before walking away.

They wouldn't starve me to death, though. Not on purpose, anyway. They'd already sold me.

Tuesday, the only person left alive I cared a wink about, had overheard Baryn and Turrock, his brother, talking about how much they'd gotten for me. She didn't know to whom I'd been sold, or maybe she didn't want to tell me. Her refusal to look me in the eye was a sure sign she'd been holding back some of the details. No matter how I pressed her, she hadn't said a peep. All she'd kept repeating was I had to leave. That was how I knew whatever was coming was really bad.

Even though I had no supplies, or warm clothing to bear the brutal weather coming, after she told me, I'd decided to run the next moment I got a chance. The plan we'd concocted was flimsy at best, but all we had.

Tuesday had flirted with the guard manning the gate, and I'd slipped out. Even knowing I'd most likely be caught. With my limp, speed wasn't an option, but I'd been determined to escape.

My freedom hadn't lasted long, and with pain shooting up my leg, I wasn't sure I'd ever have another chance. Curled on my side, I let my heart harden a little more, knowing it might be the only way I'd survive.

The last noises finally drifted away, and the only thing left was the wind whistling as it blew through the gaps in the wall.

Fingers whispered across my scalp, as if fearing to apply any more pressure than a feather.

“Teddy.” My name was spoken even softer.

“Tuesday?” I opened my eyes to see chaotic, dark curls framing a pixie face so ethereal that she could have had fairy blood in her veins.

She had big, soft eyes, like Maura’s had been before they’d closed for the last time.

Maura—I still felt the loss of her like a knife slashing through my heart, even though she’d been gone for over eight years. I’d known her death was coming, but more often than not, you couldn’t escape your time. When the date was stamped deep inside the flesh, not even knowing could help you avoid it.

There was a sickness that had grown in her for a long time. She’d fought it, but death had won, as it usually did. Tuesday, her daughter, the sister of my heart, if not my flesh, was all I had left of her. We’d been raised together, after they’d given me to Maura to nurse.

As I held Maura’s hand on that last day, she’d promised me the pain would eventually dull from her passing.

I was still waiting.

“Tuesday, you have to get away from me.” I scanned the area.

People were always looking, even if you didn’t see them. They were searching for a way to get a few more crumbs for themselves, a ration of meat on the few occasions the hunters brought back more than Baryn or Turrock could eat. If it cost the blood of others, they simply made sure they turned around before they had to see the outcome of their deed.

Last time Tuesday came to me when Baryn had chained me here, she’d caught a few blows herself. The circle was isolation. A spectacle to be seen by all but not approached. To cross the stones around the post was to risk being chained here yourself.

She pulled a bun out from under her jacket. “Here. Take this.”

“No, you keep it.” Food was tight, even if her lot wasn’t as bad as mine.

Kenny, the guy in charge of keeping the walls around this place intact, was sweet on her. He’d lightened her lot while he clung to the hope she’d turn equally sweet on him. He’d managed to get her a job in laundry, which wasn’t the worst you could do. After all, it kept her clear of Baryn and Turrock.

Kenny didn't seem like the worst as far as people went, either. I'd never seen him look for trouble, but she hadn't sweetened up yet, and she probably wouldn't.

She shoved the bun back toward me. "You know you won't get much while you're stuck here. Please take it."

I laid a hand on hers and pushed it back.

"I can't eat it anyway." The inside of my mouth was so chewed up from the last punch that hunger pains were preferable. Besides, my mouth was too dry for bread, but that wasn't something I'd share with her. She'd risk her life to come back with water.

"I'm okay, Tuesday. You've got to go away before someone sees you. Please. I can handle anything but seeing him get to you too."

She was barely hearing me. She stared at where the threadbare fabric of my pants was pulled tight across the swelling of my leg, purple flesh showing through the ripped seam.

"Your leg—"

"Will heal." I'd walk on it again, and refused to think anything else.

She forced a smile even as her eyes nearly flooded, tears pooling on her lower lid. She squeezed my hand. "But you almost made it."

Not even close. I tried to smile anyway, but the effort made her grimace, the gash on my lip straining. I dropped the pretense and returned the squeeze instead.

"Next time, I will."

That was the plan. I'd escape one day. I'd settle somewhere far away and send her a pigeon in a month or two. Then she'd follow. She could leave here whenever she wanted. It was me who was trapped, but no matter how many times I'd told her to go, she wouldn't.

Part of it was fear. I didn't begrudge her that. If I had her life, this place might have been just enough to keep me here. Nothing good, but nothing too horrible. Just enough. Maybe you could do worse than getting by in this horrible place if what they said about everything out there was true. Or maybe this place was truly hell.

Would she be brave enough to set out into the Wilds without me beside her? I didn't know. But dreaming about it for hours was one of the things that had kept us both going, so I didn't delve too deeply into reality. I didn't have the strength to strip the colors from the mirage when the mirage was all we had. So we'd talk about the day we'd get out of here and neither of us said a word otherwise.

A last squeeze to my hand and she stood, making her way back into the shadows of the buildings. I watched for flickers of movement from hidden watchers as she did. If a beating came her way tomorrow, I wanted to know who to blame.

Sometimes I wondered if hate drove me more than hope now. It didn't really matter. Maybe hate was better, stronger. I had something to fuel the hate. Yesterday, when I'd run through those trees, I had hope. Somehow, it made the fracturing of my dreams that much worse. Hate was so much easier to hold on to.

I was still huddled against the wall, wondering how much longer they'd leave me here, when the gates creaked open. It was surprising they worked at all with the way they groaned at doing their job. Maybe they were trying to do their part and warn off newcomers.

At this late hour, it was probably Turrock returning. I didn't look up, lying limp, too injured to come awake. He might go inside his house and get settled then. If I looked alert, he'd be drawn to me for sport, just as his brother was. Whatever their sickness, it seemed to run in the blood.

The night grew silent again. The danger had passed. My head on the ground, I tried to sleep, tried to ignore the pulsating pain that refused to stay in my one limb.

I didn't know anyone was near me until I heard the crows caw and then a gasp. I cracked the eye that would still open to see two men, halted about eight feet away. Strangers, probably here to see Baryn or Turrock.

One of them had crazy blond hair that reminded me of a lion's mane, like I'd seen in Tuesday's picture book. He was staring in my direction, oblivious that he'd step over the stone ring as he stood in leather pants too rich for anyone I knew. It might have been the white-blond shade of my hair that was a curiosity, or sometimes it was the scars. I was a walking sideshow.

His stare wasn't the dirty kind that made my skin crawl, but pity. As much as the lion wouldn't look away, his friend seemed to have the opposite problem and wouldn't look at all. That I was used to.

There was a time in my life, when I was younger and naive, that I would've asked for help. I wasn't that girl anymore. I hadn't been her for so long that it seemed as if she'd never existed at all. The only one that was going to save me from this hell was me, and I would. I didn't know how yet, but the time was coming and I didn't need anyone. I'd be my own savior. I'd leave this place one way or another, if only to watch it burn to the ground from a few feet away.

I laid my head back down again, trying to ignore them.

"Koz, come on. We don't get involved in other people's business. She's probably a thief or something. Leave her be."

I didn't need to open my eyes to see the scene, but I did anyway. The one who couldn't look tugged at the arm of the lion who was fixated on me.

"I don't know if I can," Koz said.

There was something in Koz's voice that tugged at an innocence within I'd thought I'd murdered a long time ago. I couldn't afford expendable emotions. Innocence and trust were among the first that had to go.

But maybe, just maybe, this one would be different? It wasn't like there hadn't been a few others that had tried. Nothing ever came of it, though. There'd always been a price to pay, either in their blood or mine. Usually both.

But what if he had the strength others hadn't? He looked strong, much tougher than most of the men here.

"Koz, we need to handle our business and go." The other man tugged at Koz again. "Come on. It's not the same."

Not the same? Same as what?

I wished they'd go about their business. I needed to forget them and not get crazy ideas, like asking for help. If they turned me down and then told Baryn, I might end up so bad off that I wouldn't even be able to crawl from this place.

"Isn't it though, Zink?" Koz asked.

Zink's head angled slightly toward me but didn't complete the turn. Then he gave me his back, shutting the door on my situation. "She's one of them. Their business. Not ours. You know Callon's rule. We keep to our own, take care of our own."

I finally took a long, hard stare at this Koz. He didn't break eye contact and took a step in my direction. He wanted to help, but that didn't matter. People wanted to do a lot of things that they didn't do. But if there was even a chance, how did I not take it?

Zink took a few steps away, waiting for Koz to follow him. "Come *on*."

If Koz kept staring at me for even a few more seconds, I'd do it. I'd ask.

Our eyes held, my turquoise to his brown.

Did I dare? His eyes hardened, as if he were gearing up for action. My heart pounded with life and I opened my mouth, silently forming the word "help" on bloodstained lips.

"Koz," Zink shouted.

His eyes shuttered, Koz turned and walked away. My heart slowed, then stuttered out into a sluggish beat. I laid my head back down. It had been nothing but wishes on the breeze, as Maura used to say. Not worth the air it took to utter them before they blew far away, as if they'd never been said at all.

Chapter Three

A boot nudged me in the ribs, bringing me awake. I knew it was Baryn before I opened my eyes. I could tell by the rancid smell of him. Turrock liked to bathe, even if it was simply because he enjoyed watching the serving girls lug the hot water buckets as they splashed and burned their skin. "Boiling hot," he'd yell. "The water must always be boiling. Then you add the cold."

He said it was better that way, to steam the room before he was ready to bathe. It was bullshit. Hard to steam a room with windows wide open.

Turrock liked the subtle tortures, though. An artist of abuse, he took a chisel and hammer to his victims, slowly whittling them away, piece by piece. Baryn was more direct.

It was Baryn leaning over me now. Baryn and Turrock were the only ones allowed to go near me. Every scar on my body was due to one of them.

My good eye opened a small slit. The place was sleeping and a full moon had risen, making his shirt look blood red.

I'd never seen this shirt before in person. Only in my mind. It was the one he'd die in. In my vision, it had been vibrant and clean, just as it was now.

His death would come soon. Maybe even tonight? I took the rest of his form in. He was wearing his prized ring on his pinky finger, the one that looked too feminine for him, as if he'd taken it from a woman. I had a hunch that the blood-red ruby hadn't been the only bloody thing when he'd acquired it.

The shirt.

The ring.

The full moon.

It was happening. Would it happen tonight? Could it line up this perfectly and not?

He squatted close to me. "What do you know of Turrock's death?"

He'd never asked me about his brother. Did he think to kill him? Not surprising that he wasn't even loyal to Turrock. I needed to make something up. Baryn was obviously up to something. Was he planning on killing his brother? How would he do it? It wasn't going to work, but Baryn couldn't know that.

I swallowed, trying to act natural. Baryn must not read the worry in me. His wasn't a death that had to happen. His wasn't going to come from within. This one could be avoided. I needed to act normal.

He. Could. Not. Know.

"Answer me when I talk to you, girl, unless you want two bum arms as well."

Think! Baryn would make it a gruesome death, that was for sure. “There’s a lot of blood.”

“What else?”

He’d be sneaky about it. Poison. He’d definitely use poison. What happened when you poisoned someone?

He raised his hand but then paused as a growling sounded nearby. We both turned, listening for the noise that seemed to come from the other side of the wooden wall. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, but that sound would linger in my head for a while, maybe forever.

We were both still frozen when the wall exploded, sending chunks in every direction. The wood splintered around us.

A blur of fur and claws flew past me as something barreled through the huge hole in the wooden wall. A beast lunged at Baryn. Its massive jaws clamped down on his neck and then severed his head in one bite. It was exactly as my vision had shown, right down to the spurts of blood shooting from his body and pouring onto the dirt as the beast pinned what was left of him to the ground.

It had happened. It finally happened, and there was a gaping escape route right behind me. There was also a beast crouched in front of me.

I remained frozen at the sight of it. I’d never actually seen a beast, and to see one up close was terrifying. Its fangs hung beyond black gums, blood dripping from the tawny fur of its jowls. Claws the size of my fingers were partially sunk into Baryn’s still chest. It was a perfect killing machine.

This creature would never be vulnerable. I should’ve been repelled by the creature, but I wasn’t. It wasn’t only terrifying. It was amazing.

Its head turned and its body shifted toward me, claws leaving pools of blood behind. Red eyes burned into me.

I nodded slowly in Baryn’s direction as I watched the beast.

“Thank you,” I said, even knowing I might be next. Maybe it was my time, and what a death it would be. Much more worthy a death than the life I’d led. I’d lived in a whimper, but I’d die with a roar. It wasn’t what I would’ve chosen, but it was something. If I died now, at least I could go knowing Baryn was dead. Years of torment lay bleeding in front of me.

The creature stared at me, then the chain that led to my wrist, and I could feel the growl in its chest vibrating outward. Blood still dripping from its muzzle, it lunged for me. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, waiting for teeth to dig into already-battered skin. The bite didn’t come, just a graze of wetness. There was a clanking of metal as the weight of the iron fell from my wrist. My eyes snapped open, looking first to my free wrist and then the mauled three inches of metal lying underneath it.

I was still staring at the metal when the beast’s claws wrapped around my bicep. It leapt forward, yanking me backward as it did and then dragging me through the hole in the wall. The last view of

my village was the horrified faces peeking out from behind buildings as they watched a beast carry away its dinner.

The startled faces were soon forgotten as soon as I was dragged over the first bump. My broken leg was jerked over a log, then a stone and a list of other unidentifiable objects as I was pulled like a rag doll through the forest at a pace no human could hope to match. If not for adrenaline pumping thickly through my veins, I would surely have passed out immediately.

I'd survive this. I'd survive. I had to survive. There were too many deaths I'd seen that hadn't happened yet. I wasn't sure *how*, or in what shape I'd be, but I would.

I reached out with my free hand and managed to graze my fingers across a stick. It was too slick to catch and we were moving too fast. I reached for another, but missed again as the beast continued at its crazy pace. Every new bang and bump crowded my vision with black spots until there was nothing left.