

Eighty-one pounds of gorgeous power – steel and satin and sheer liveness. As I saw Thandria leading that black-and-tawny dog into the ring, I got a shiver up my spine. There was no way to get it all back. I knew that. There were no other dogs like Amber, I'd told myself. No other dogs that could start a nighthawk out of its nesting bush or face down a charging unicorn. So why was I here, watching, scratching an old scar raw again?

Mirk and Myret and Amber. Two siblings and a dog. We were a team. If there was trouble, we were on top of it - country or town - night or day - we'd faced whatever the mad world could throw at us. Ever since I was eleven and there was a hippogriff in the next county, we'd been working at it. Mirk would bundle us up into the old pickup truck and we'd take off, in our old sweatshirts, with my crossbow and Mirk's gun and Amber sprawled across the backseat.

One afternoon it took, one afternoon and a pegasus mad with the bullets some silly neighbor had fired into its leg. One afternoon ended it all, after six long years. Now I was seventeen and of Mirk and Myret and Amber, Monster Hunters, only Myret was left. Is there another girl that faced so much at once? I've seen folk cry over their dogs, their *hamsters*, for heaven's sake. But I lost my dog and I lost my *brother* in one dark afternoon.

No healing, no reversal. The best way was not to think about it all. I'd only now just gotten "fine" again. Or – nearly fine.

Renna had dragged me to the dog show: my poor wishy-washy Catherine, best friend who'd hung onto me through thick and thin since third grade. She was terrified of the monster hunting, bewildered with my courage that I took for granted, but she loved me and clung to me like duct tape. I'd hit her the night Mirk and Amber died, after the sirens and the lights had come and her touch startled me where I knelt in the mud, but she'd not backed away even then. I'd itched to hit her again when she'd suggested the dog show, but Renna hadn't left me alone. So here I sat, watching fluffy idiots parade their fluffy idiot dogs over the scattered wood shavings. Until Thandria Avalinda brought her Doberman female into the Working Class ring.

Renna gave me a dig in the ribs. "Told you there were good ones here."

"That dog," I said. I couldn't take my eyes off her. "That dog." She pranced next to Thandria, deerlike, her cropped ears alert, her dark eyes fixed only on her mistress. I watched the muscles rippling under her smooth black coat, the tan patches on her chest flexing as she trotted around the ring. The thin leather leash was slack, the fine silvered chain collar loose.

"Look at that German Shepherd!" said Renna, pointing. I flicked my eyes to the newest entry: sloping hips, coat that would turn black clothes tan. I went back to the Doberman.

She shook her head with a little sideways-upward twist, to gaze at Thandria. And Thandria's fingers skated over the dog's head with the gentle touch that I remembered.

For a second I imagined I felt that silken fur under my own hand, and myself sitting in the front seat of the pickup truck next to Mirk... my hand trailing down and touching Amber's head... Mirk turning on the Gospel station and asking me if I had my crossbow oiled...

But stronger than that came the memory of the clotted blood hard and rough in Amber's fur as I held her cold body close... Mom prying my stiff fingers back before we laid Amber down in the hole in the ground in the backyard...

Choose life, Myret. That was what Mom said. Choose life.

The loudspeaker was going again. The Doberman had won first place, which didn't surprise me. And for the first time I heard the name:

"Phoenix Firebird of Harrowgate, owned and handled by Thandria Avalinda." And I had the sense of standing on the edge of a cliff, about to jump off or turn back – but it wasn't a cliff; it was the doorframe of Mirk's pickup, where each time I had to choose whether to fight or to hide.

I dragged Renna with me, following after Thandria and her dog through the crowded aisles between rings, away to the kennels on the edge.

There was a message on the answering machine as I came home; two, in fact. One from Mom: "Sweetie, I'm going to be home late - there's a little girl who needs my help here. Expect me home around nine." Mom worked as a hospital psychologist, and there was no such thing as normal hours for her – by her own choice. We weren't as different as we might have been.

The second message was worse. "Duhannon, there's something in my woods that's following my kids. Animal Control won't come out here... You got rid of that little dragon in my neighbor's culvert, he said I should call you. I'm out down Norberhart Road, onto Jackson."

*Obviously* someone unobservant. Someone who'd missed the news article and six-inch picture of the three of us, as well as the pictures of Amber's grave, and of Mom and Renna hugging me at Mirk's funeral. One wonders how the world suffers such idiots. Hadn't he read the disclosures when he bought the house? That end of the county was no place for people like him.

Norberhart Road was where the pegasus had been, that last afternoon. Maybe it was a bad place even if one were intelligent, and observant, and all the other things one ought to be.

But in my hand I held the paper with Thandria's address on it. Four o'clock the next day I was going. And it was not down on Norberhart Road.

"Mom, I'm going to see a dog tomorrow," I told her that night. "Harrowgate's the place."

Mom looked up from her steaming teacup. "Why, sweetie? What do you hope to do?"

"Renna took me to a dog show after class," I said. "I met a Doberman named Phoenix Firebird. Her sister was Amber's mom. And there are pups, too. "

"Don't go back," said Mom. Fiercely. "Don't go back, Myret."

"I'm not going back. I'm going...onward. And I want a dog again. It's about time, isn't it?"

"Eight months, nine days, and four hours," said Mom. "That's how long it's been."

"Look, Mom, I'm not trying to be a monster hunter again," I said. "I just want a dog. To sleep on my feet and bark at my online teacher and chew on my cuffs. To just play with."

"Oh, sweetie," said Mom. Reaching over, she patted my hand. "How much will it cost?"

"I have money," I said. "In my bank account. I'm not into college, Mom, not now... not after Mirk... There's enough that I can buy whatever dog I want... if you're all right with it."

Mom frowned. "But you got such good scores on the SAT, Myret! You can't stay home! Scholarships... your future.."

"My future got buried in Goldenhill Cemetery under a stone that says Mirken Christopher Duhannon," I said. "And let's not even *start* on how that feels. All I said was I want a dog. Nothing is ever going to be the same again anyhow, okay?"

Mom brushed a hair off of her black blazer and looked up at me. I saw how her face had taken on new wrinkles, new hollows, in the last - how long? - eight months, nine days, and four hours. "All right, sweetie. You can get yourself a new puppy if that's what you want. But - " and here came my old Mom back - "you'll have to get it housetrained, and if it chews up any of my good shoes you'll have to pay for them."

"They have good taste, Mom," I said. "Like you do."

I did my schoolwork in a hurry the next day, finishing up my online English class quickly and completing my pre-calc by lunchtime. Around then I remembered I couldn't wear my good

brown sweater to go visit dogs. I knew I'd better put on something tougher, like my old dark blue sweatshirt. But where *was* that sweatshirt? I hadn't worn it since that day.

Renna had stripped off my muddy, bloody clothes then and pulled me into the shower, washing the muck out of my hair till the blond streaks showed in the brown again. What had she done with my blue sweatshirt? The one with the little metal eyelets on the shoulder? The one that smelled of dirt and blood and pine and Mirk's cologne? I didn't know. So I went in search of my old favorite sweatshirt.

At last I found it – deep in the bottom of the rag closet, washed clean and left to lie. It was full of detergent-stink, but I changed into it anyhow. The cuffs were as ragged as I remembered, where Amber had nibbled them gently. The spray of eyelets still glinted as I pretended to cast one of the nets had surprised so many a monster. I gathered my sun-streaked hair into a braid, clumsily, and checked the clock; not time to leave yet.

So I wandered out to the shed. The old storage shed, where we kept the nets and the slingshot and the catch-poles, all the gear Mirk and I had accumulated and cobbled together and re-purposed. I hadn't been out there since the day before Mirk's funeral, where in one fierce storm of bitterness I'd put everything in order and locked the door behind me as I left. But here I was again, a thousand tears later, picking up my crossbow where it lay dusty on the shelf. The string hung slack and limp, and the material of the bow creaked as I strung it up again. Definitely quite time to oil. I took down the half-full bottle of linseed oil from the shelf, the stiff brush and the bit of cloth. There was something really beautiful about the dark sheen of oil on the wood of the crossbow, in the gold light of the storage shed's bulb. I'd done it often, back before, and oh, how good it felt. I worked at it until it was time to leave.

In the car mirror I saw myself: a cat-slim girl with a faintly scarred face, hair in a warrior's braid thrown over one shoulder, dark blue shirt picking the blue out of her eyes. I looked like Myret Duhanon again, and it scared me for a moment. I blinked sharp tears away as I gripped the steering wheel and started the car up.

Harrowgate was a tall white house out north of the city, set in a green sward of grass and trees. Thandria stood in the front yard, raking leaves as I approached. Phoenix came bounding out next to her and stood at attention, waiting, as I climbed out of the car. Waving, Thandria called, "Here, I'll get a dog out - or you can come back to the kennels with me, do you want?"

"I'll come," I said. I followed her along the side of the house to a long line of wire-mesh kennels. Black and tan dogs, chocolate and tan dogs, all coming out to the end to their runs to meet us: not a one of them barked or growled. They only watched: alert, bright, waiting. Thandria had a word for all of them, and they relaxed, fawning against the gates and following her with their eyes. I recognized them, each of them - the bits and pieces and curves - I knew all that. They were Amber's relatives, Amber's kin. Did they recognize me too, somehow?

Then, three kennels from the end, Thandria unhooked a gate and let a dog slip out. "Starless Night of Harrowgate," she said. "Born mid-March last. The night your brother and your Amber died. Heard the news on the radio right as I was drying her off from birth, and her first little breath came right along with my crying. 'That poor girl,' I said. 'Left alone like that.' "

I was hardly listening. Starless stood there for a moment, her black coat with the tan patches shining in the sunlight. She stood as tall as Amber had, but her form was immature yet. She had the narrow head and the strong jaw, the tight feet and the slope of the back.

"Hey, Starless," I said, and held my hand out.

She trotted forward and snuffled my fingers, then licked them carefully. I reached out further and scratched her under the chin, feeling the taut tendons and muscles beneath her coat. Then she drew closer till she was leaning up against me, and all of a sudden I had my arms wrapped around her and her tongue washing my face. "I'll take her," I said. "How much?"

That night I had a dog in my room again, sleeping on my feet. It was such a surprise to have an eight-month-old instead of a little pup. Starless was already housetrained and knew not to chew. She was registered and on a spay contract, so I'd have to take her to the vet soon... the same vet that had sewn up Amber after our worse "jobs" and patiently waited for our longabout payments (all medical bills incurred while getting rid of the monster were covered by the client). Mom had been surprised, too; she'd expected a younger dog. And she certainly hadn't expected me to be wearing my old blue sweatshirt. She'd done a double take upon coming in the door.

Starless had quirks Amber never had, I learned as the days went past. If I left my dirty socks lying around, she'd pick them up and trot around with them. I'd have to call her quite sternly before she'd give them back. And she had a way of tangling her leash in her legs and hopping out of it like a girl with a jumprope. She would play around with my papers – and steal my pencils, too. She knew all her obedience commands, so I dredged up my memories of

Amber's puppyhood and taught her the hunting cues, too – holds, catches, directions. We stalked frisbees in the backyard until dark, Starless mock-growling as she shook them in her teeth.

"You've changed a lot since you've gotten that dog," said Renna one day as we settled down after English class for hot chocolate and essay-writing.

"Really?" I sat down on the back of my chair and let Starless nibble my toes.

"Yes." Renna shrugged her mess of blond hair back. "Sort of more like you used to be, I mean, before last March." She sighed and rummaged in her bag. "You're braiding your hair again and wearing your old clothes. And you - you sit sideways on things. For months after it happened, I would have given a hundred dollars to see you sit on the arm of a chair again."

Renna had always had the habit of saying things to make them come clear to me. "I think I *have* changed," I said. "And I like it."

Autumn turned winter. Christmas came. I was expecting Christmas to be awful but it wasn't – Mom didn't try to pretend that nothing was different, so we went to a carol-singing service in the morning and opened our presents later. I liked singing carols. There was something very good and *right* about "Joy to the World" that I couldn't find anything all year to match - though I sang through my tears at the end, sharply recalling other times, other years.

Then a few weeks later it was January, and the first snow had just fallen, to Starless's great wonder. And I opened the newspaper and saw in the Supernatural section the headline: "Witch-Bear Spotted, Norberhart Road; Young Boy Missing."

It'd been a quiet time since the pegasus, till then – or else I just hadn't answered the phone. I thought of the message on my answering machine that night before I brought Starless home – the man complaining how something was following his children... No. Why was I thinking these things? I was retired. Finished. Most of the me that mattered had been buried with Mirk, and the rest I kept only by the grace of God and the intervention of Starless and Renna.

A witch-bear hunting children. Something odd, that - usually the biggest creatures didn't come down out of the mountains so late in the season. Witch-bears were hoarders – they'd take kids, animals, even yard debris, back to their dens. Mirk and I had run off half a dozen of them in the early years. They had claws but not much in the way of a brain.

"Young Boy Missing." "Missing" left some room for hope. "Missing" might mean "recoverable." Might mean "still alive." Might mean "not too late." "Missing" meant "still a

chance to do something." A year ago we would have jumped in the pick-up at that. But I was short one brother since "a year ago" and my will for being heroic was dimmed.

Starless shifted her weight onto my feet; I kicked her lightly off. She was getting *heavy*, that dog was. She was growing up. We were both growing up. I thought of the college mail that zinged repeatedly into our mailbox and my email inbox. What was I going to do next year – next autumn, now? Leave home, leave Starless for Mom, and try to find a place outside my corner of the woods? Or stay and simmer in the past, with a dog like an ever-sheathed sword at my feet?

Before, it had been so simple to decide. Mirk would have graduated from college by then, and he'd have been back home with Amber and maybe another dog, keeping the monster-hunting going. I'd finish my years and return, ready to do whatever I chose. But I'd lost that future in a day down Norberhart Road, when a gray pegasus had fought harder than usual and the price of victory was too great in the end.

Starless glanced up at me, her cropped ears pointed alertly. "What do you think, Starless?" I asked her, rattling the newspaper. "What are we supposed to do now?" I cupped my hands under her jaws, feeling her warmth. She had Amber's face. She had Amber's eyes.

Maybe there was a future to be found, a new one, beyond the graves and the sorrows and the Norberhart Road. "My good dog," I whispered. "There's a third way, isn't there?"

Not leaving. Not moping. Doing. Going.

"Are you *crazy*?" said Mom that evening.

"No," I said. "If anything, I'm sane again." I wore my blue sweatshirt and Starless, fresh from a run, stood at my side. "I got to thinking today, Mom. About life. What *am* I going to do now? We should stop pretending that I should forget about what lurks in the backcountry, pack up, and head to a big-city college. And I know I shouldn't hang around home immortalizing the past. So I've taken a third way. I'm going to stay. But I'm going to do good things while I stay."

Mom's lips began to actually tremble. "Myret, sweetie. This is not necessary."

"It is, Mom," I said. "For me. For all of us. Remember what you always told me, Mom? Back when it had just happened? You said to choose life. Well, this is my choosing life."

"I don't want - " Mom's voice broke, and I saw her again as fragile, doll-fragile. "I don't want to lose everyone. Your father - then Mirk."

I reached out and hugged her. She was shorter than me, now; my eyebrows just cleared the top of her head. I must have grown since last March; I was almost as tall as Mirk had been. "I'll be careful, Mom," I said. "This is a calling. Just like your psychology work is a calling."

"My psychology work doesn't mean I might get killed," said Mom.

"But I can save people just like you can," I whispered, into her dyed hair.

"You just don't want to be normal," Mom said softly. "I should have stopped all this sooner." She sighed and put her arms around me, and I curled into her embrace.

"I love you too, Mommy," I said.

The next day I finished my schoolwork early, getting my pre-calc out of the way before it was time for my online history class. After that Starless led me a chase after an old sock that ended with us wrestling each other on the floor, but when I told her it was time for business she came to attention at once. Out to the shed I went; there was a steady drizzle falling, the snow slushy under my hiking boots. I took my crossbow and the bolts, the net, the chains, the other gear and threw them all in the back of the pick-up under the plastic cover. A few minutes spent in the junk drawer brought up the keys, the jangling bundle that Mirk used to juggle and toy with at stoplights. "To me, Starless," I said, and, locking the door behind us, we went out to the pick-up truck.

Inside, it was a little musty, but strong with the smells of before: Mirk's cologne. Old blood. Fresh sap. Pine. Mud. Wet, dirty dog. Starless went into sniffer mode and began exploring the back seat. I tuned into the Gospel station as I backed the pick-up out of the drive.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,* the choir cried out in their six-part, swinging harmony, *that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.* The guitar and the piano took over and I hummed along, rain scudding down, Starless snuffling. It was time. Myret and Starless, Monster Hunters. Not replacing, but succeeding.

It was wet and soggy and slippery, the worst weather for my business, and I was a little bit frightened at the idea of fighting a witch-bear on my own. Mirk was far away in a better place, and Starless was not Amber, and I was all alone. But when I stopped by the ever-present county road block and climbed out in the middle of nowhere (except it was somewhere), I knew that I had made the right choice.

Because only by walking Norberhart Road could I go beyond it and find my future again.