

## Chapter 1

*The land is full of shadows - was created to hold shadows  
and keep them from spilling out into the waking world.  
But shadows incarnate into even darker things --  
nightmare creatures that threaten the land...and some of those  
creatures cast shadows of their own.*

*Yet, even in this defiled place, the inhabitants cling to hope...the  
promise of a magic child who will heal them....*

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The Screaming Mother squats within her nest of bones. Red eyes. Red mouth. Bare bloody breasts. The blood runs down her belly and thighs, leaving crimson streaks on her long blue legs. It is time for Beast to be born. She spreads her great red wings, extinguishing all the nearby stars. In darkness he will come.

In the land below, worshipping hags gather to await his birth, smearing themselves with blood not their own, while their familiars yowl hymns of praise, (secretly grieving for what they have lost...*Sef! Sef! Sef!*) Their conjure-wives do not hear their quiet grief.

It is time for Beast to be born, but in the hour and the minute and the moment of his birth the Wind Lord's wife, Kaelin, also delivers a child, born in the silver light of the Faegild tree. When the Screaming Mother sees his light, she takes her own child and hides him deep, deep within the growing shadows until the time is

ripe for him to show his face. Then she summons the Unlit Ones to appear and commands them to kill the Wind Lord's son.

Asthenia, Daemon, Cornu and all the others with ravening eyes, shake their heads and wail. "We need souls! Souls, souls, souls!"

The Screaming Mother clamps her lips together and replies in a strangled voice, "You shall have souls. Every soul in the land - when you bring me the eyes of that brat."

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Kotha cast her spell on Moonpaw long before he was born. When the other hags come to the Pit on Hallows Eve to choose their familiars, they will not choose him. He is already bound. "Why does she want me?" he asks Mam.

"Why do you think?"

Moonpaw looks at his paw. Unlike the other cats that are pure black, he has a white moontouched paw. It is why the young ones won't play with him or let him sleep beside them on the brimstone shores of the lake.

The older cats scorn him too. "White paws bring bad luck," they say, talking amongst themselves while they groom. "Do not let him touch you with it!" Their words enrage him. He raises his foot, pretending that he is going to pat them. Their fur bristles and they hiss. His tail twitches with pleasure when he sees their fear. Then they turn away.

He watches them smooth down their rough fur with sulfurous steam, rising from the vents. They are pretending to ignore him, but he can see their eyes. Their yellow eyes dart, nervously.

"They cannot help how they feel," Mam says.

"Why not?"

She lashes her tail, but otherwise refuses to speak.

"You despise me, too!" he cries.

"You are bound to Kotha," she says, choking on the Conjure-wife's name. "Your moon-scummed blood is corrupt."

"It is your blood, too," he replies.

"No, it is not! Kotha put you in me and made you grow, but you are not mine."

"Then where do I come from?"

"She is afraid to tell you," a voice sneers, when his mam does not respond. Moonpaw flicks his eyes over a group of four or five

sleek, young cats all looking for trouble. "I know where you come from," their leader says, winking at the others, "but I won't tell you, either."

"I do not believe you," says Moonpaw.

"Are you calling me a liar, spellslime?"

"Do not call me that!"

The other cat jumps down from his rock.

Moonpaw tries to back away, but there are rocks behind him.

"What would you like us to call you?" the bully asks, pushing closer.

Moonpaw says nothing, just cringes lower.

"Answer me!" the other cat demands.

Moonpaw shakes his head.

"See that?" the bully sneers. "He thinks he's too good for us, and that his white paw makes him special."

"Maybe he thinks he's kin to the White Cat!" one of the other cats suggests.

"Maybe he thinks he is the White Cat!" another one says.

"Maybe we should all call him Sef," says the bully.

"Sef! Sef! Sef!" they chant as, one by one, they jump down from their rocks and slowly surround him.

"Leave me alone," he mutters.

"Of course, Great One!" the bully says. "Have you come to free us?"

Moonpaw glances at Mam. She is not chanting, but her fear-glazed eyes warn him not to ask for help. Slowly, he raises his white paw and prepares to defend himself.

"Stop that now!" cries a voice, and they all freeze. A grizzled old cat leaps down from the shadows and sits beside Moonpaw.

"You should be ashamed," he snarls. Silently, they hang their heads. "How dare you speak Sef's name with disrespect? Have you forgotten who he is -- and what he promised us?"

"No, Spook!" they mutter.

"Good," he says. "I am glad you remember something I taught you. Now go, and leave Spellslime alone."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. We won't do it again."

"See that you do not," he says, "and perhaps, later on, I will tell you a story."

The young cats slink away. When they are gone, Moonpaw reaches out and touches Spook on the shoulder.

"Get your filthy foot off of me," Spook growls, whirling around to box his ear.

"I just wanted to thank you," says Moonpaw, shaking his head in shocked surprise.

"For what?"

"Being my friend."

"No one befriends moon-touched cats," says Spook. "I was just protecting those young fools from themselves."

"What?"

"As far as I'm concerned, they are right. You are spellslime."

Moonpaw's fur bristles. "Then be unchosen!" he cries.

Startled, the old cat steps backward and Moonpaw, feeling bolder, points his white paw at him.

"Be thou unchosen, false companion!"

Spook's eyes widen. "Why do you speak those words to me?" he whispers.

Moonpaw looks both puzzled and surprised. His raised fur flattens against his back. "I do not know. The words just came!"

"No other moon-touched cat ever spoke to me like that before."

"Others? What others?"

"There were eight before you," Spook says and Moonpaw's fur bristles again, this time in surprise.

"Where are they now?"

Spook shakes his head.

"Tell me," he insists, "or I will speak another curse."

"I doubt you know another curse, or how to unleash the power that flows through that paw."

"Power?"

Spook does not reply.

"What power?" Moonpaw asks, but Spook ignores him and begins to wash his face.

Moonpaw snarls and turns away.

Later, when it is time to sleep, he finds a dark corner far from the other cats. He curls up in a ball and he dreams. He dreams he is grooming hair. The hair belongs to a woman, not a cat. It is long and soft and covers her like a cape. He works his teeth carefully through her red locks, but he cannot find any snarls or mats.

"Coom to me," she sighs, and her milk-white face begins to change into that of a wrinkled, old hag. Red coils of hair snake down her back. "Coom to me!" she cries again and her eyes burn.

Moonpaw tries to look away. "Coom back to me, my magic child!" Her voice frightens him, and he wakes.

He peers around the cave, with its ceiling lost in shadows darker than night. The other cats are all sleeping on the brimstone shores of the lake that burns in the middle of the Pit. Crooked yellow cliffs rise up out of the black waters. The warm smell of sulfur and coal tempts Moonpaw, and he wonders if the others will notice if he approaches the fire. Then he sees Mam, sleeping nearby, and smells the sour milk oozing from her belly.

He creeps towards her quietly, so as not to waken her, and begins to chew the clotted milk out of her fur. "Do not bite," she says, but she does not make him stop. He rushes to finish, before she changes her mind. After a while she says, "I am sorry I could not help you."

"There were too many of them."

"I have seen other mothers," she says. "I know what they do for their young. A mother does not let mere numbers overwhelm her. If you were my child..."

"You gave birth to me."

"That does not make me your mother."

"You gave birth to me," Moonpaw insists.

"Kotha put you inside of me, but that does not make you mine."

"Then who do I belong to?"

Mam shudders.

"Answer me, Mam! Who made me? Was it Kotha -- or someone else?"

Mam shakes her head.

"Why won't you tell me?"

"I cannot. Now go to sleep."

"I am not sleepy. Tell me a story!"

"I do not know any stories," she says.

For a moment he is tempted to ask her about his dream. Instead he says, "Tell me why Kotha hates you."

Mam lashes her tail.

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," she replies.

"Everyone is frightened of her. Soon I must go with her and I do not know what to expect."

"She is a powerful hag," says Mam, "but that was not always so."

"Tell me!" Moonpaw begs.

"Once she was a girl named Kaelin. She married the Wind Lord, Four Eyes. She thought he would teach her how to fly, but he would not. Then Dark Moon said he would teach her, if she became his Conjure-wife, so she bound herself to him. That is when she took the hagname, Kotha. It means the Hollow One."

"What does she look like, Mam? Tell me so that I may know her when she comes."

"Her hair is a river of blood that flows down her back. Her hunger burns inside of her and lights her eyes with a fire that consumes whatever she looks upon."

"Real blood? Real fire?"

"You will see for yourself soon enough."

"Have you ever seen her, Mam?"

"Yes. Of course."

"What did you think?"

"What could I think...after she put on the red slippers?"

"Red slippers?" asks Moonpaw.

She glances around, furtively.

"Mam?"

"Never mind. Go to sleep."

"But I want to know." He waits for her to explain, but she does not. "Mam?" he finally whispers. "Mam, are you sleeping?"

"She pretends to sleep!" says Spook, "just like she pretends that there are magic slippers." Moonpaw looks up into the old cat's sulfurous eyes. "There are no red slippers," he says. "It is a story. She made it up to explain what happened to her hag."

"I did not know she had a hag."

"Mam's hag was Dark Moon's Bride before he abandoned her for Kotha."

"What happened to her?" asks Moonpaw.

"Do not ask."