



1. Trial at Tribulation



HERE IS HE? WHERE is Toby?"

The old man turned around slowly as the stiff Atlantic wind danced with his long gray beard. A hint of a frown, a brief glimpse of puzzlement, a glimmer of pity in his eyes, then a smile. "Caleb, I didn't expect to see you here." He walked closer, head to one side while inspecting the boy. "You've grown two inches in the last six months, if I'm not mistaken."

"Who cares about my height!" It was controlled anger, not the wind needling through his thin jacket, that caused Caleb O'Connor to shiver. "René is dead and my best friend is accused of—" His tongue tripped, fell, and refused to get up and say the word. "You think I'd stay away?"

"A tragedy," replied Clovis Fintonclyde with a wistful shake of the head. "The Cousineaus are understandably distraught, with all the difficulties they've had. Bit of a panic in the Community, people not knowing if they're going to be murdered in their beds."

"Sophia called me last night, told me about René, and said they'd taken Toby into custody. Where is he, Fintonclyde?"

"Ah, well," said the old man mildly, as if he were still tutoring a much younger Caleb in geography or the care and feeding of dragons. "There will be a trial, of course." He waved a hand toward Tribulation House, the old stone mansion that occupied this tiny island off the Maine coast.

The ancient building on the cliff was officially a museum of local history with such odd hours of operation that tourists never visited. Stone sphinxes flanked the iron gates and looked out across the Atlantic with weather-beaten indifference; a rusty iron fence, leaning hard, tried to shield the building from

the spray and surf. Any visitor hardy enough to take a boat out to the remote pile of rocks would find an overgrown brick path and a jaunty yellow sign reading “Closed—We’re Sorry We Missed You!”

“Trial?” For the first time, Caleb noticed that the gates leading into the yard of the squat granite building were, for once, open; people had lined up in front of the fence and were shuffling through the gates. He felt as if a large pit had just opened up at his feet. “She didn’t mention a trial.”

Fintonclyde put a hand on Caleb’s shoulder, though it did nothing to quell the shaking. “The outside world doesn’t bother with the Community much, as you know, and sometimes, well, it’s best if we keep some of our problems to ourselves. There hasn’t been a trial since 1942. And that’s got folks upset, because we thought we’d executed the lot of them back then and sealed up Lilac House for good. But when Toby broke in, he must have let something out that killed René. Some people are wondering if Toby was in league with... what he found there.”

“How can you—” Nearly blinded with rage and confusion, Caleb stumbled, certain he would throw up. “You know Toby. He’ll do anything on a dare, the more outrageous the better, but that doesn’t mean that he would help a vampire. Because that’s what we’re talking about here, isn’t it? No one will come right out and say it, will they?”

“The Community has to take measures to protect itself,” Fintonclyde said. “Surely you can understand?”

“I understand what a kangaroo court is,” Caleb snarled. “It sounds as if you and the rest of the Community have already convicted Toby. I want to be in that miserable courtroom. I want to see Toby!”

The old man sighed, the pity briefly returning to his face. “Come along then, but I can’t guarantee you anything. It’s clear that I can’t stop you.”

They approached the iron gates. Two silly-looking men in violet chemises demanded rings, staffs, potions or metals—anything they might have on their person that could be used to cast a spell or interfere with the proceedings. Their cheerful dress annoyed Caleb, all the more so when he recalled that within the Community, violet symbolized justice. He feared there was not enough violet in the world for justice to be served that day.

At the head of the queue, a guard looked Caleb up and down, frowning. “Mr. Fintonclyde, sir, you can’t bring this...you can’t bring him inside,” the guard said with casual contempt, as if he expected Fintonclyde to leave Caleb tied to the fence like a well-trained dog.

Caleb almost turned and bolted right then. This was the reason he had left the Community and all of its prejudices six months ago.

“Marcus McNulty, I don’t know where you get your quaint notions,” Fintonclyde scolded. “This young man has every right to be inside. There is no prohibition of which I’m aware in the Community’s laws, and I helped write the 1933 amendments on trial law and the 1947 revision on *habeas corpus*.”

“Beg your pardon, sir,” the guard said, ducking his head, “but precautions have to be taken.”

“And they will be,” replied Fintonclyde. “Now, let me see, I suppose you will want this.” He turned out his pockets and handed the guard a collection of metal objects: a brass letter-opener with a dragon’s head handle, a set of rusted screwdrivers, and a handful of foreign coins.

The guard visibly cringed to touch Caleb. He ran his hand only over his back pockets, making sure they were empty. Then, with a grunt, he let them pass through the gates.

The crowd pressing to enter the immense weather-scarred doors parted around Caleb and his old teacher, not wanting to get too close. Fintonclyde didn’t seem to notice, but Caleb had a feeling that something nasty was going to happen.

Subdued whispers became a roar in the entrance hall of the courthouse, where the high curved ceilings echoed and amplified the sounds of wind, sea, and spectators. The floor was bare stone, the temperature five degrees cooler than comfortable. The somber décor in the flickering candlelight gave the impression of an underground cavern. It scared Caleb nearly to death.

Cedar doors, varnished to a deep violet, led from the entrance hall into the courtrooms. Purple, too, were the robes of the guards flanking the entry to the room. Clusters of showy, bell-shaped flowers—also purple—grew at the courtroom’s entrance, out of place with their lush cheeriness. The purple of justice? Caleb sneered silently. Toby Byron would be tried surrounded by purple, with only the judges and the witnesses in attendance.

So that was how they did it, Caleb thought with an odd sense of triumph, giving Fintonclyde a disdainful look.

“Ah, yes,” said the old wizard apologetically, seeing that Caleb was eyeing the flowers. “The wolfsbane...It’s customary, you know, to keep all Dark influence out of the courts. You’ll see they have garlic, as well—”

“I don’t care about the *garlic*,” Caleb hissed through clenched teeth. He wanted to turn and flee, but the old man held tightly to his arm. “He’s my

best friend and I'm not even allowed into the courtroom?" As much as he tried to fight it, the stench of the aconite—the queen of poisons—made him back away.

"You can see that it's out of the question for you to be a witness," Fintonclyde said gently, his gaze never wavering. "And I assure you that my testimony and Sophia's will include all of what we know. You certainly don't wish to deny under oath that Toby was capable of breaking the magical wards around the Reserve and, by extension, any ward in these parts?"

"Mistrust" and "Fintonclyde" were two words that Caleb could never have imagined stringing together, even in his mind, so this development devastated him. No one seemed capable of entertaining the slightest doubt that Toby was guilty.

His low-level seethe became a bubbling wrath as he turned his back on Fintonclyde, the noisome flowers, and the courtroom to shove his way out of the cold stone building. His mind raged not only against the old man but also against himself, his naiveté and the irony of his stubborn disbelief in the injustice on display all around him. No matter how many times they had kicked him through the years, he always came running back, wagging his tail like a golden retriever.

A light rain was falling, smelling of moss and ferns, refreshing and pure after the filthy miasma of the Community's "civilization." He knew he had to get off the island before something even more hideous happened. He had been raised as Fintonclyde's ward and read all his books, so knew perfectly well what had happened in 1942 to those accused of being vampires: They had been hanged, staked, disemboweled and their bodies burned, ashes scattered to the wind.

Caleb sprinted across the island and halted at the edge of the water, blinded by rain and tears. He was furious not only at Fintonclyde, but at himself, for running away like a coward while a bunch of crazies put a boy on "trial." He hated himself for not calling the police—and he also hated himself for not having the courage to fight them on their own terms.

The fact was, and he fully admitted it, that he was afraid of the Community. He didn't know what they were capable of. He didn't think his mind was even set up to grasp it. Fintonclyde had managed to teach him a few parlor tricks and ways to get around a dead flashlight battery or a leaky canoe, but they were games for children. Apart from the violence of his monthly transformation, Caleb had a poor grasp of the power that magic could wield, despite all

his mentor's efforts to teach him.

The rain had half filled his canoe, which heaved perilously under him when he jumped in. It had been Toby's boat. Toby knew all sorts of ways to make it glide against the current or even skim through the air, but Caleb was restricted to paddling madly, berating the waves with the foulest curses he knew.

He cut around the point well outside of the shore of Tribulation. The tiny hamlet was almost invisible among the pines, a single power line its only obvious connection to the outside world. Electricity had come only the year before, in 1985, and there was still no phone.

Just around the southern point was a different world. When he got to the rocky shoreline of Southwest Harbor, he tried a half-hearted spell to make the canoe jump up onto land, but only succeeded in landing himself in the water. Sputtering, shivering, and swearing, he swam to shore and hauled the boat out by its frayed rope, which he attached to an old post.

The few pedestrians in town threw him hard, cold stares, and he finally realized how distasteful he must look: a weeping teenager, drenched from head to foot.

Caleb briefly held his breath to stop the tears and tore off his soaking coat. Maine had two seasons—winter and the Fourth of July—so he was chilly in his thin jacket, cotton shirt, and jeans, but at least he looked respectable enough to pass among the first wave of hypothermic summer tourists. He smiled at a pretty woman in a sundress and heavy sweater and wondered what secrets she harbored. She had such lovely teeth; had she ever sunk them into steaming human flesh?

As he got into his rusty 1969 Datsun, he pondered his fate. What did it matter whether he killed people every month or was the most reliable, even-tempered SOB around? The results were the same. He was a freak and he would never again have any friends or family of any kind. The title of an old Jack London story flitted through his mind, and he laughed scornfully to himself as he got onto the toll road in Maine. The Call of the Wild—it appealed to his broken heart, but it was absurd. Werewolves were only wolves one, in some rare instances two, nights of the month. They would have no reason to cut themselves off from society and live in the woods.

He headed south, back to the school where he had hoped to find acceptance, or at least anonymity. It was better by far than the Community, but it had not worked out the way he had hoped. He choked with disdain as he thought of his fellow students and all their professors. It wasn't as though he

stood out as being particularly weird at MIT—that would be nearly impossible to do. His studies in astronomy offered the perfect excuse for his not working on nights of the full moon. He went his own way and so did all the others. But the banks of the Charles were no place for a werewolf to run free, and even a single night each month spent locked in his apartment took a toll on his health.

The fact was, he hated Boston: the filth, the incessant noise, the cars, the subways, the snobby people. And being so far away had kept him from seeing his friends and realizing just how much they were playing with fire. Now the best friend he'd ever had was going to be put down like a pound puppy. Even worse, his only family was content to sit and watch.

He had wanted to leave that world behind him, and so he had, secretly applying to all the top science schools when he was sixteen. When MIT gave him a scholarship, he'd found an entry to a world where technology replaced magic, and he had desperately hoped it would be a world that he could call his own.

Well, now he would be a better student of sorcery than he ever was of astronomy. He would find a place far from Cambridge where this other world was taken seriously, a world that would teach him the cunning he needed to return to the Community and face Fintonclyde fair and square.

Fintonclyde, the judge, the guards, the spectators—all of them...They would all be sorry for what happened today.