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Opening extract from
Rebel Heart

Written by
Moira Young

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REBEL HEART

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CONTENTS

Jack	1
The Waste, one month later	27
The Snake River	83
The Wraithway	151
New Eden	183
The Lost Cause	245
Sector Nine	261
Weeping Water	289
The Road to Resurrection	321
Resurrection	351

for my sisters





It's late afternoon. Since morning, the trail's been following a line of light towers. That is, the iron remains of what used to be light towers, way back in Wrecker days, time out of mind. It winds through faded, folded hills, burnt grass and prickly bush.

The flat heat of high summer beats on his head. His hat's damp with sweat. The dust of long days coats his skin, his clothes, his boots. He tastes it when he licks his dry lips. It's been a parched, mean road all the way. He crests a ridge, the trail dips down into a little valley and it's suddenly, freshly green. The air is soft. Sharply sweet with the scent of the scrub pine that scatters the slopes.

Jack pulls up his horse. He breathes in. A long, deep, grateful breath. He drinks in the view. On the cleared valley floor, a small lake glints in the sun. Beside it stands a junkshack with a bark and sod roof, the rest of it cobbled together from Wrecker trash, stones, dried mud and the odd tree trunk. A man, a woman and a girl are working in the well-tended patches of cultivated land.

People. At last. Apart from the white mustang, Atlas, he hasn't spoken to a soul for days. His aloneness was starting to weigh him down.

An there was I, he says aloud, thinkin I was th'only person on the planet.

He whistles a tune as he rides on. He calls a hello as they leave their work and come to meet him. They aren't particularly friendly. They've got weary faces. Wary eyes. They're little used to company, take little interest in the wider world and have little to say. Never mind. Just seeing them and having this awkward, mainly one-sided conversation cheers him no end.

The man's worn out. The woman's sick. Dying, if he's any judge of such things. With yellowish skin, her mouth set tight against pain. The girl's sturdy enough, fourteen or so. She stares at her boots. Silent, even when he speaks to her direct. But her plain, flat face lights with love when her brother comes running from the shack, calling her name, Nessa! Nessa!

He's a cheerful berry of a child. A barefoot, round-eyed four-year-old called Robbie. His family gazes at him with such fond wonderment that it's clear they can't quite believe their good fortune. He leans against his sister's legs, sucks his thumb energetically and sizes up Jack. The battered, wide-brimmed hat. The silver eyes. The lean, tanned face that hasn't seen a razor for weeks. The long, dusty coat and worn boots. The crossbow on his back, his well-stocked weapons belt – bolt shooters, longknife, bolas, slingshot.

Boo, says Jack. Robbie's mouth drops open. His thumb falls out.

Jack growls. The boy shrieks with delight and tears off

towards the lake. Nessa gives chase. The valley sings with their shouts and laughter.

They aren't sociable people but they aren't mean. They see to it that he and his horse are watered, washed and fed. They offer him a roof for the night, but he's anxious to keep moving. Dusk is falling as he sets off again. They're hard workers, early risers. They'll be in bed as soon as he's gone.

By his reckoning, the storm belt should be no more than three days' travel from here. And that's where he's headed. The storm belt, a tavern called The Lost Cause and an old friend named Molly. He's the bearer of bad news. The worst. The sooner he delivers it, the sooner he can turn around, retrace his steps and keep on heading west.

West. To the Big Water. Because that's where she is. It's where he promised to meet her.

He pulls out the stone that he wears around his neck, threaded on a leather string. It's smooth and cool to the touch. Pale rosy pink. Shaped like a bird's egg, a thumb's length in size.

It's a heartstone. It'll lead you to your heart's desire, so they say.

She gave it to him. He'll head west and he'll find her.
Saba.



He's only just left the valley when Atlas falters. Tosses his head and whickers. There's something up ahead. Jack doesn't stop to think. In a moment, he's off the trail, into the scrub pine and out of sight. From the cover of the trees, his hand over the mustang's muzzle, he watches them pass.

It's the Tonton. Nine black-robed men and horses. They're escorting a couple in a buffalo-cart. The commander leads the way. Four men behind him, then the cart, followed by three men on horseback. The last man, the ninth, is driving a wagon with an empty prison cage.

He studies them carefully. He knows the Tonton well. They're rough and dirty and casually violent. A loose collection of amoral thugs who swill around the power. Only loyal to each other, only answering to a master if and when it suits them. To a man, they're ruled by self-interest. But these ones seem different. Everything about them is clean and shiny and polished and ordered. They're well armed. They look disciplined. Purposeful.

And that makes him uneasy. It means that the enemy have changed their game.

He checks out the couple in the cart. They're young, strong, healthy looking. A boy and a girl, no more than sixteen or seventeen. They sit close together on the bench seat. The boy's driving. He holds the reins in one hand.

His other arm circles the girl's waist. But there's a gap between their bodies. They sit stiffly upright. They aren't comfortable, that's for sure. It's as if they hardly know each other.

They stare straight ahead, their chins held high. They look determined. Proud, even. Obviously not prisoners of the Tonton.

The cart's neatly packed with furniture, bedding and tools. All you'd need to set up house.

As they rattle by, the girl turns her head sharply. She stares into the trees. Almost like she senses that somebody's there. It's dusk and he knows he's well hidden, but he shrinks back anyway. She keeps on looking until they've gone past the woods. No one – not the Tonton, not the boy sitting beside her – seems to notice.

Jack gets a clear view of her forehead. The boy's too. They've been branded. And not long ago. The circle, quartered, in the middle of their foreheads looks raw and sore.

They're headed into the valley. Towards the homestead. With an empty prison wagon.

Now he's more than uneasy. He's worried.

Keeping to the trees, leading his horse, he turns around and follows them.



From the wood at the top of the valley, as darkness begins to fall, he has a clear view of the homestead he's just left. The Tonton are already entering the shack.

He has to stop his feet from moving towards them. Halt his hand as it reaches for his bow. Because the survivor in him knows that this is a done deal. Whatever's about to happen, he can't stop it.

But he can bear witness. He will bear witness. With clenched fists and a rising rage, he watches what happens below.

By now they've roused the family from their beds. The weary man and woman, their children, Nessa and Robbie. Flushed them out at the point of a firestick. They huddle together in the fading light while the Tonton commander makes a short speech. Probably telling them what's going to happen and why. Words to frighten and confuse people already too frightened and confused to properly listen.

Jack wonders why he bothers. It must be procedure.

The young branded couple wait in the cart, ready to move into their new home. A land grab. A resettlement party. That's what this is about.

Everybody looks small from up here. Doll-sized. He can't hear what's said, not the words. But he can hear the alarm in the raised voices of the family. The girl, Nessa, falls to her knees. Pleading with them, holding her brother tight. One of them takes Robbie while two others grab her by the arms. They move towards the prison cart. She struggles, yelling, looking back at her parents.

They shoot them at the same time. Husband and wife.

A bolt through the forehead and their bodies crumple to the ground. Nessa screams. And this time, Jack does hear. Run, Robbie! she screams. Run!

The little boy kicks and wriggles in the Tonton's arms. He bites his hand. The man cries out and drops him. Robbie's free. He runs through the fields, as fast as he can, while his sister yells to go faster. But it's summer and the crops are high and he's only four years old.

The commander shouts orders. One man starts after the little boy. Too late. The eager new settler is out of the wagon. Aiming his firestick. He shoots. Robbie drops in his tracks.

The commander's lost control of the situation. It should have gone smoothly. But it's chaos. As he and the settler yell blame at each other, Nessa begins to scream. Her high-pitched wail of grief and rage shivers Jack's skin.

Her shirt has been torn. The men laugh as she tries to cover herself, weeping, screaming, lashing out. They pin her hands behind her. One of them touches her roughly.

The commander sees it. He moves fast. He shoots his man through the head.

Somehow, in all the confusion, Nessa gets hold of a bolt shooter. She shoves it in her mouth and pulls the trigger.

Jack turns away. He leans his head against the white horse's neck, drawing in deep breaths. Atlas shifts uneasily.

What a mess. A botched job. They were obviously supposed to take Nessa and Robbie, young and healthy, and kill the sickly parents. Instead, all dead.

The Tonton have changed their game all right. He'd

heard rumours of land grabs and resettlement months ago. But not this far west, never this far west. They're rolling over the land like the plague.

If this is Tonton territory, then so is the storm belt. And that means Molly's in danger.

Now he's more than worried. He's afraid.



Jack leaves the trail. It isn't safe.

He and Atlas travel east along unknown roads. The going's hard and unfriendly. Dark, stony ways, never warmed by the sun and seldom used. He spots the odd traveller in the distance – a moving dot in the landscape – but they must be as keen-eyed and eager as he to pass without notice because that's as close as anybody ever gets. He hurries, resting for an hour here, two hours there. He has plenty of time to think about what he saw.

The Tonton. Most recently, the private army of Vicar Pinch: madman, drug lord and self-styled King of the World. Now dead.

They defeated the Tonton at Pine Top Hill. He and Saba and Ike, with the help of Maev, her Free Hawk girl warriors and their road raider allies. And Saba killed Vicar Pinch. But they didn't wipe out the Tonton. They didn't kill every last one. Even if they had, he's lived long enough, he's seen enough to know that you can't kill all

the badness in the world. You cut it down in front of you only to find that it's standing right behind you.

The Tonton are most definitely still standing. But different now. They've always been scruffy, grubby even, with long hair and full beards. These were clean-shaven, with short, cropped hair. Their robes were clean. Their boots, too, and all their gear. Their horses were groomed, with shining coats. A new clean-look Tonton.

Not quite clean enough. The operation back at the valley went badly wrong. The commander didn't have control of his men. They were slow to obey him. And the way that one roughed up Nessa showed that some of them still want to play by the old rules. But the commander shot him. Fast. Without hesitation. Message delivered loud and clear to anybody else who might be thinking that way. New game. New rules. No second chances.

So.

The little green valley. A good patch of land. Shelter. Clean water. The Tonton kill the sick wife and the worn-out husband. And if it had gone according to plan, they would have taken Robbie and his sister. Both young and healthy. But where would they have taken them to? Where did the boy and girl in the cart, the resettlers, come from? Maybe they'd been snatched from their families too. But they certainly seemed willing enough. More than willing. The boy joined in with the clearance, took matters into his own hands.

The quartered circle brand on their foreheads means something. In Hopetown, the Tonton branded the whores

with a W, but he's never heard of anything else like that. Branding marks you out permanently. Shows what group you belong to.

Healthy young people, branded. Territory expansion. Grabbing the good land and the clean water. Control of resources. A new, more disciplined Tonton carrying out orders. But whose orders? Somebody higher up. Somebody working to a larger plan. A man with a plan.

Such a man would have to be powerful. He'd have to be determined, disciplined, persuasive and very, very smart.

Jack knows of only one such man. A Tonton. He was Vicar Pinch's second in command. The power behind the throne. He rode away from Pine Top Hill before the battle even started. He abandoned his mad master, leaving him to his fate without a backwards glance. And he took a number of men with him.

DeMalo.

All of this must have been rolling out for some time. To get to this point, it has to have been well under way while Vicar Pinch was still alive. Alive but toothless. DeMalo must have been building up his operation on the side. That would explain the rumours Jack started to hear a couple of years ago. From the little he knows of the man, that he's seen for himself, he can tell that DeMalo isn't the type to go for a bloody overthrow.

He's much more subtle. He's the stiletto in the dark. The poison in the drink. He'll have been biding his time, waiting for the right moment. Jack can imagine the tiny inward smile DeMalo must have allowed himself when he

realized they were about to do his dirty work for him at Pine Top Hill.

The main thing is, he got his plan rolling out of sight and earshot of Pinch. He couldn't have done that without somehow winning the continued loyalty and silence of his Tonton followers.

Unheard of. Very interesting. Very worrying.

Jack would give a great deal to know exactly what DeMalo's up to. Where. How. And why.

The sooner he gets to The Lost Cause, the better.



The tavern stands at the crossroads ahead. It crouches low, hugging the ground. A shabby heap of a place, alone on the dry, wide plain, ringed in by black, brooding peaks.

The Lost Cause. At last.

Thanks to the route he took to avoid any chance of meeting the Tonton, it's taken him a week of hard travel to get here. Much longer than he'd expected.

It's just before dawn. Dawn and dusk, show time here in the storm belt. He checks the sky above. Right on time, ugly brown clouds are piling up over the plain. They scud in from all directions, tumbling and tripping in their haste. There's a mighty blast brewing. A sulphate storm.

Atlas tosses his head, dances a bit. Jack heels him on. Once they reach the tavern, he jumps down and settles

him in the stables. The only other horse there is Prue, Molly's reddish longcoat mare. There's fresh fodder in the bin and water in the trough. That's a relief at least. All this time, he's been worried that he'd find the place had been torched by the Tonton. Still, the stable's usually full of customers' mounts: mules, horses, and the odd camel.

As he walks towards the door, the tavern sign creaks in the rising wind. The paint's flaking and faded, but he can just make out the tiny boat foundering on an angry sea, about to be swamped by a huge wave. Every time he's been here, he's half-expected to find that boat gone. Sunk to the bottom of the sea.

The Lost Cause. Never was a name more suited to a place. A pile of Wrecker junk a rat wouldn't sniff at. Tattered shreds of who-knows-what. Battered bits of this and that. It looks like a heavy sigh would do for it. But it's been here forever. Long years. Way before the weather changed and the storms moved in. When this was a grassy, green plain with life in plenty.

Even then, it was a well-known hooch and whores joint. But once Molly's family became landlords, it became notorious. Four generations of Pratts made it the only stop in this part of the world. Famous brawls, rogues plotting mischief in corners, the hectic jangle of music, drink rough enough to numb your hair and bad girls of all persuasions. He wonders if Lilith's still working the room. She must be knocking on a bit.

He's never known The Lost Cause to be closed, day or night. Molly's likely to be awake, even at this hour. She's

an early riser. Gets by on four hours of sleep with a catnap in the afternoon. She might even be working the bar.

Jack pauses outside the door. His stomach's jittery with nerves. He's pondered, over and over again, what he's going to say to her. How he's going to tell her about Ike. And he still doesn't know. He's never had to do this before. He'll just have to hope the right words come to him.

To buy himself a moment or two, he knocks the dust from his hat. Flicks the pigeon feather stuck in the band. A little smile quirks his lips as he remembers the fuss Emmi made, choosing the perfect feather to beautify his battered old hat. He puts it back on. Tilts it to a jaunty angle.

He takes a deep breath. He opens the door. He goes in.



Molly's behind the bar. She's drying hoochers. The rusty, dented drinking tins and pots look even more harmful than the last time he was here. She's working her way through a stack of them, like she's got a crowd of thirsty drinkers waiting. He's the only punter.

She looks up. She can't hide the little start of surprise. The quick flash of joy that chases over her face. And something else, too. Relief. Then, just as quickly, it's gone. The mask's back in place. The heard-it-all smile. The seen-it-all eyes.

They've got history together, he and Molly. And it goes deep. But that joy wasn't for him. Never for him the wild, hot joy he caught a glimpse of just now. No. She thinks Ike's with him. He swallows around the sudden tightness in his throat.

Well, well, she drawls, look what the wind blew in.

She goes back to her work. Her long tangle of blonde curly hair's tied back in a tail. She's got distracting lips. Dangerous curves. Direct eyes. Travelling men make wide detours just to be in the same room as her. That's the most that even the best of them can hope for.

Molly Pratt, he says. Remind me, what's a heavenly creature like you doin in a dump like this?

Servin rotgut to scoundrels like you, she says. An if you call my place a dump agin, I'll bar you.

You barred me the last time, he says, an the time before that, an the time before the time before that. Remember?

Oh, I remember, she says. Well, step in, don't be shy. Yer hangin back like a virgin on her weddin night. Siddown, have a drink, pull up a stool fer Ike. Where is he? Settlin the horses?

He doesn't answer. He'll work his way up to what he's got to say. Have a drink or three first. Wait for the right moment. He goes to the bar, grabbing a couple of stick stools on the way. He settles himself, slinging his bark saddlesack on the floor, dumping his weapons belt on the bar. There's sand everywhere. Piled in the corners. Drifting around his feet in the draughts from the door.

There's bad stuff goin on out there, Molly, he says.

Welcome to New Eden, she says. It's a brand new shiny world.

A bloody world, you mean, he says.

It's always bin a bloody world, she says. Only nowadays, some people's blood is better than others.

What's the news? he says. The Tonton sure ain't what they was. What about the man in charge? You ever hear the name DeMalo?

She shakes her head. He's called the Pathfinder, she says. The landgrabbers – pardon me, Stewards of the Earth – they breathe his name like he ain't even human. They say he makes miracles. That he's here to heal the earth.

You shouldn't be here, he says. It ain't safe.

Well, it's true, she says, the Tonton don't like hooch an they don't like whores. My, how times've changed. But them bastards got bigger things on their mind than this place. Storm belt land's no good to 'em. I let Lilith an th'other girls go an, as you can see, I ain't ezzackly overrun with customers. No whores, not much hooch, they ain't gonna bother with me.

You don't know that, he says. You need to leave, Molly.

This is my home, Jack, she says. My business. I had it since I was fifteen. My father had it before me an he got it from his father. I bin dealin with hard-nosed sonsabitches my whole life.

I seen 'em, Molly, I seen 'em in action, he says. Are you willin to give yer life fer this place? Fer this?

It'll never come to that, she says. An if it does, I can take care of myself.

Well, you shouldn't be here by yerself, he says. When did the girls go?

A while back, she says. It's fine, me takin chances on my own account, but not them.

Something about the way she says it makes his eyes narrow. What're you up to? he says.

Leave it, she says. This line of conversation is now closed. She shoves an overflowing, rusty tin at him. There's a dead beetle floating on top.

Drink up, she says. No charge fer the bug. I better pour one fer Ike. You boys must be parched. While she fills another hoocher and he fishes out the beetle, she glances towards the door. What's keepin him? Oh, don't tell me, I know. Hidin behind his horse. Ain't it jest like him, sendin you ahead to scout out the enemy while he waits fer the all clear. I'll be back in three months, he tells me, three months, Molly, I give you my word, an then I ain't never gonna leave yer side agin. Three months, my aunt patootie. Try three years, ten months an six days. I said it to you then, Jack, an I'll say it to you now: do not step through my door agin unless yer bringin Ike back to make a honest woman of me, ferever an ever amen. If you do, I'll shove you in the still an boil you into bad likker. Did I say that to you or did I not?

You did, he says.

An ain't I a woman who keeps her word?

You are.

Well then, she says.

He throws down his drink. Gasps as it hits his throat. That's unspeakable, he says, when he can speak. What is it?

Wormwood whisky, she says. Brewed last Tuesday. It keeps off bedbugs, lice an flies. Good fer saddle itch too. The last man to try it ran outta here on all fours, howlin like a wolfdog.

Yer gonna kill somebody one of these days, he says.

Who says I didn't already? What the hell's keepin that man? She asks like she couldn't care less. But her eyes say different.

One more drink, then he'll tell her. He shoves the hoocher at her. Keep it comin, he says.

Help yerself, she says.

She's busy checking her reflection in the shard of looking glass she keeps behind the bar. She pinches her cheeks, bites her lips, and fiddles with her hair, all the while shooting little looks towards the door. Twenty nine, but like a nervous girl, waiting for the one who makes her heart beat faster. To see her so makes his own heart squeeze tight.

He drinks. Nerves twist his stomach. Go on, he tells himself, do it. Tell her now. But he finds himself saying, I swear, Molly, every time I see you, yer more beautiful than the last time. How many hearts you broke today?

Shut up, she says, I know I'm a hag. He snorts with disbelief and she smiles at herself in the glass, pleased. Livin in this dump is playin merry hell with my looks, she says. I've grown old, waitin on Ike. The Lost Cause. That's me

all right, Jack, the biggest lost cause ever lived. An you know why? Fer thinkin that man might ever mean what he says. Ike Twelvetrees settle down? You might as well ask the sun to stop shinin.

Now. Tell her now. Molly, says Jack, there's somethin I—

Oh, enough about Ike. He'll show his face when he's worked up his nerve. She leans her elbows on the bar. What's this sorry-lookin object? She flicks the brim of his hat. It tumbles to the floor. That's better, she says. Damn you, Jack, yer a handsome devil an no mistake. You an them moonlight eyes of yers.

Listen. Molly. I, uh—

D'you ever think about her? Molly says it abruptly.

He doesn't answer. He stares into his drink.

She'd be six by now, she says. I know it's stupid, but . . . I like to imagine how she'd be. What kind of character, y'know. Who she might take after. She had eyes just like yours. She was beautiful, wasn't she?

Yeah, he says. She sure was.

He takes her hand in both of his. Holds it tight and kisses it. They look at each other. The air between them lies heavy with what was. With what had never really been, but still would always bind them together.

Jack? She's peering at him closely, searchingly. She draws back to stare at him, like something about him's suddenly struck her. Ohmigawd, Jack. You got somethin to tell me.

He breathes out. Yeah, he says. Yeah, I do. The thing is, Molly . . . I, uh—

Well, I'll be damned! she says. There's a slow smile creeping across her face.

He frowns. Molly?

Ha ha! I don't believe it! She slaps her hand on the bar. Gawdammit an hallelujah, Jack, who is she?

What? What're you talkin about?

Don't gimme the run around, I know you too well. Who is she? Who's the girl? Molly spots the leather string hanging around his neck. An what's this? She gives a tug and pulls out the heartstone, hidden inside his shirt.

Molly gazes at it. A heartstone, she says. She looks at him with wondering eyes. She gave you a heartstone.

Maybe I found it, he says.

Oh no, she says. I can see her in yer face, Jack. I can see her in yer eyes.

I dunno what yer talkin about, he says.

Hey, she says, it's me, remember? You an me don't pretend. We're past that. All the time I've knowed you, Jack, you kept the door to that heart of yers locked up tight an the key hid away. Looks like she found it.

He says nothing. Molly waits. Then:

Keys ain't her style, he says. She kicked the door down.

You love her, says Molly.

Oh, I dunno about that, he says. I, uh . . . huh. That sounds too safe. This don't feel safe.

Oh. Like that, is it?

I don't want this, Molly, he says. I . . . whatever it is, I sure didn't go lookin fer it.

You don't hafta, she says. If it's meant to be, it'll find

you. We like to think we're in charge of our own lives, but we ain't. Not really. You should know that by now.

You couldn't find nobody more pig-headed if you tried, he says. An she's always thinkin she knows best, even when she don't, especially when she don't. She's prickly an stubborn an everythin you'd put at the bottom of a list if you was makin a . . . a list of that kind. Which I ain't. I didn't.

But? says Molly.

But ohmigawd Molly, she shines so bright, he says. The fire of life burns so strong in her. I never realized till I met her . . . I bin cold my whole life, Moll.

I know, she says softly.

It's jest that . . . aw, hell. She thinks I'm a better man than I really am.

Well, yer a better man than you think you are, she says.

She's too young, he says. Eighteen.

Scandalous! she says. Cuz yer so old.

Age ain't about years an you know it, he says. Anyways, settin so much store in one person . . . it's dangerous.

Don't you dare walk away from this, Jack, don't you dare, Molly says fiercely. Most people don't ever feel what yer feelin. Be with her. An if it lasts one hour, one night, a week, a month, it don't matter. Be with her, burn with her, shine with her . . . fer whatever time's given to you. Now. Tell me her name. Tell me.

He takes a deep breath. Saba, he says. Her name's Saba.

Molly rests a hand on his face. Oh, my darlin Jack, she says. This . . . this is what I wanted fer you. All I ever

wanted fer you. How could she resist them eyes?

She tried, says Jack. Man, did she try. But . . . listen, Molly, that ain't why I—

A celebration! she cries. This calls fer some serious drinkin! An I mean serious! She laughs as she slams hoochers down, setting them out in a long line across the bar. Where the hell is Ike? Ike! she hollers. Gawdammit, man, git yer hairy hide in here this minute! We're drinkin to Jack an Saba! She starts to pour, splashing and spilling everywhere. I tell you, Jack, yer a inspiration. I'm gonna rename this place. No more Lost Cause, oh no. Not this place an sure as hell not me. From this moment on, it's gonna be called The Hope Springs Eternal! An when Ike walks through that door — after I finish kissin him to death — I'm gonna tie him to that chair an never let him go, cuz life's too gawdamn short an it's about time I started takin my own advice. I might need yer help, of course, but I'm sure you won't mind, seein how—

Molly! Jack grabs her hand. Stop, Molly, please. Dammit, Moll. Ike ain't gonna walk through the door.

She goes still. Very still. Her smile fades. Please don't say it, she whispers.

He can't bear to. But he has to.

Ike's dead, he says. He's dead, Molly. I'm sorry.

Tear flood her eyes. Spill silently down her face. She looks at him straight.

It was a month ago, he says. No . . . a bit more. There was a . . . it was a big fight. A real one this time, not jest

some tavern brawl. The Tonton.

The Tonton, she says.

We went back to Freedom Fields, he says. We burned the chaal fields. They came after us an . . . not jest me an Ike, but Saba too, an some others. We fought 'em, Molly. We beat 'em. An fer a time, fer . . . a little while, the good guys was on top. Me an Ike, the good guys. Who'd of thought it?

Me, she says. I would. I know.

He was with friends, Moll, says Jack. I was with him. I was right there an . . . he died in my arms. He died well. He went out big. The way he would of wanted to. The last thing I said to him, I . . . whispered in his ear. Molly loves you, Ike. That was the last thing he heard.

She stands there a moment. She nods once. Slides her hand free of his. I'm glad it was you told me, she says. Don't waste no more time, Jack. Go to her. Be with her. Burn bright. Promise me.

Leave here, he says. Come with me. Please.

Promise me, she says.

I promise, he says.

G'bye, Jack. She kisses him on the cheek. Then she slips through the door into the back room and closes it behind her.

Silence. She must be holding something over her mouth so's not to make any noise. She might as well let go and have a good howl. He's the only one here. He goes around the bar and knocks on the door.

Molly? No answer. He was comin back to you, Molly, he says. He loved you.

Go away, she says.

I cain't leave you like this, he says. Let me in.

Fergawdsake, jest do what I say! she cries.

He goes back to his stool. He looks at the full hoochers lined up along the bar and starts on the first one. He knows how Molly grieves. Once he's gone, she'll lock the place up. Then she'll cry some and drink some. And she'll do that, over and over again, until the skin over this latest wound has grown tough enough for her to carry on.

He'll wait till the storm passes. Then he'll go. He pulls the heartstone out again. Rubs it between his fingers. It's cool, even though it's been next to his skin. That's the way of a heartstone. Cool until you get close to your heart's desire. The closer you get, the hotter it burns. The last time he saw Saba, she put it around his neck. It was hot.

It'll help you to find me, she'd said.

I don't need no stone to find you, he'd said. I'd find you anywhere.

Then she'd kissed him. Till he couldn't think. Till he was dizzy with wanting her.

He slips the stone back into his shirt.

The storm hits. He hears the sudden, dull thunder of sulphate raining down on The Lost Cause. Soon enough, the rain will follow and wash it away.

The door slams open. The wind wails inside, rattling the rafters, stirring the sand on the floor, plucking at his coat. He gets up to close it.

Two men walk in. They're spattered with sulphate. Leather body armour. Crossbows. Bolt shooters. Long black robes. Long hair. Beards.

Tonton. Old-style. Danger.

Every nerve, every muscle in Jack's body snaps tight and starts to fizz. But he keeps his voice casual as he says, The place is empty, fellas. Looks like everybody cleared off.

I come to see that Lilith, says one. Where is she?

Gone, says Jack, like I said. Check fer yerself.

The Tonton stares at him a moment. He crosses to a door in the corner. It leads to a hallway with four small rooms off it, where the girls used to do business. He goes through, yelling, Lilith! Hey, Lilith! Git on out here! There's the sound of doors being slammed open, one after another.

One Tonton out of the way. Jack's eyes flick to the bar. His weapons belt lies there.

A quick move and the other Tonton's got his bolt shooter out and aimed at Jack. It was the work of a second. He goes to the bar and drains one of the full hoochers. His gaze never leaves Jack. His shooter stays aimed.

The first Tonton comes back out. Where'd she go? he says.

I dunno, friend, says Jack. Like I said, there ain't nobody here.

Just then, Molly lets out a cry. A long, keening, animal wail of pain.

As it dies down, the one with the drink says, So who's that?

He and Jack stare at each other.

Leave her alone, says Jack.

The Tonton points his bolt shooter at Jack's heart.
Lazily. He smiles.

Call her, he says. Go on . . . friend. Call her.