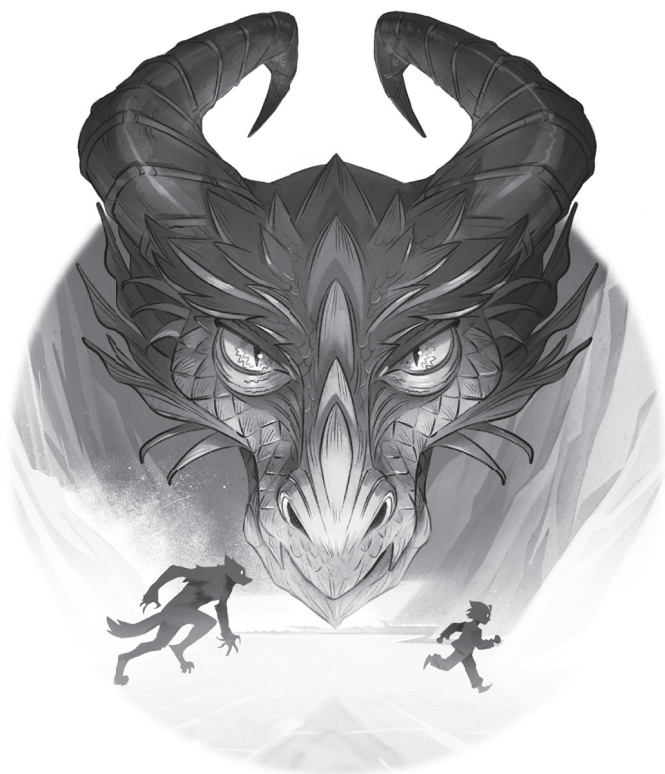


WOLF CROWN

A MIDNIGHT TREASURE BOOK



PIERS TORDAY

Quercus





PART ONE

DEATH OF A WOLF



ONE

IF TIBOR SQUINTED, he could see through the waterfall, frozen solid but translucent like a bottle glass window. Beyond this wall of ice, the distant snow-covered valleys, woods and plains of Princeland shimmered in the early morning mist. And beyond that lay a whole empire, the vampirs' Claw – stretching from the monster-infested Thousand Islands in the north to the haunted Desert of the Dead in the south. To be ruler of such a magical realm was never a wish Tibor had sought, but at the age of just thirteen, it was now within his grasp.

He dreamed of other things, too. Although he would never admit it to anyone, not even his sister Roza, he still fantasised about becoming a werewolf one day, of running through the silent dark trees under a great moon.

But most of all, he dreamed of returning home. A return to his beloved House of Gold, where the evening light over the meadows was always soft and warm, where everything was safe and good.

Yet if anyone had told him – at that moment, in the cavern – what he would suffer for that dream in the days that followed, he would have closed his mind like a trap and never dared imagine so much as a single drop of sunlight ever again.

For now, he just wrapped his bear furs tighter around himself. Tongues of ice rippled over the cavern's limestone walls, but he drew warmth from his most treasured possession: a dusty lantern that rested on the ground. It was dark and unlit, but the comfort Tibor enjoyed came from the magic power within, and he picked up the lamp, holding it close to his chest.

It was nearly all he and Roza had in the world – apart from his precious pocket watch that still ticked away in his pocket, the only surviving inheritance from their parents.

Later, Roza would also wish that they had never found the Dark Lantern, or that they had left it hidden deep below in the ground. She knew the Lantern's power. Its light could grant dreams, making them real – and by doing so, it had given her a new life. Before, she had been a vampir transformed into a dog – and now she was just a mortal girl.

There was no going back.

Death of a Wolf

Roza had seen what the vampir life – immortal and eternal – did to people, how it corrupted their souls, and was glad to be free of that prize.

As Tibor paced, she lay in her sleeping bag on a wooden trestle bed wedged up against the uneven cave wall, and spied some bats roosting in the dim vaults above. A softly rippling canopy of fangs and fur, a living shadow of her former vampir self. But they were not what made her shiver.

What she feared was both the unimaginable power in that Lantern – that could undo lives and remake worlds – and her brother's hunger for it.

'We are done with that magic of the dark,' she said again. 'Leave it be.'

Tibor scowled and grudgingly set it back down on the ground.

'You know we can't use that thing again,' Roza added. 'It kills people.' Every night, she still had nightmares, watching Baron Ambrus dissolve before them – melted into ash, his taloned arm outstretched. In self-defence? To strike them? Or to beg for mercy? They would never know.

'You mean it kills vampires,' Tibor said.

'Not just vampires. We don't know who else it might kill. Even by mistake.'

It was barely over a month since they had beaten the White Prince, the vampir emperor of their world, in the

race for the enchanted Midnight Treasure. Their guardian, Baron Ambrus, had betrayed them and perished in the Lantern's beam. The wizard who helped them, Professor Halim, had vanished with her assistant, Panina.

But Tibor and Roza's greatest discovery had been that they were not just best friends but twins. Their parents had been taken from them by the vampirs, who had hoped to stop the two children from ever discovering an inheritance more meaningful than any treasure.

They were heirs to the mortal throne of Princeland, a throne that had been stolen from their ancestors by the vampirs over five hundred years ago. Although the fact that they were heirs to so much as a crumb of bread became harder and harder to believe, every day they remained in hiding behind a waterfall in a freezing cavern.

'I wish they were here,' Tibor said.

'Who?'

'Our mother and father.'

'You keep saying that.'

'But we could be a family again. All back at home together. That's my dream.' He sighed, brushing a loose lock of hair back over his head. 'And we could ask them all those questions we don't know the answer to.'

'Such as?'

'Such as, do you seriously think we can do it? Two mortals defeat a vampir tyrant and take over his empire? How?'

Death of a Wolf

She had lost count of how many times he had asked that question.

But neither of them was ready for the answer.