

The Wreck of Heaven – Chapter 2

written by Holly
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Chapter 2

Cat Creek

Lauren froze in place, trying desperately to think. She picked up Jake and held him close, and whispered in his ear, “Hush, puppy, everything is going to be all right.” She stroked his hair and moved out of the ice blast that almost had to be one of the Orions.

“Mama, the guy wants to talk to you,” Jake said, and started sobbing loudly. “Lets go. Come on, Mama. Lets go.”

Lauren headed out of the kitchen toward the front of the house, bypassing Pete, who turned with a bewildered expression on his face and came after her.

“Whats wrong?”

Lauren said, “I dont know. Jakes been having – if he were older Id say he had panic attacks every time we came to the back of the house. He has a bad reaction in the foyer by the mirror, of course, but he also gets panicked in the kitchen. He wont go in there on his own, and he tries to talk me out of going back there.”

Pete looked chagrined. “Im sorry. I didnt know. I thought bringing him back would help him get past being afraid of the mirror ...” He patted Jake on the shoulder, and Jake turned his

head away and buried his face in Laurens hair.

“Go way.”

Pete looked at Lauren. “Hes mad at me?”

Lauren, showing Pete to the front door, gave him an apologetic smile. “Hes gotten very good at laying blame recently. The person who gets him into a situation he doesnt want to be in becomes the enemy – at least for a little while. Usually its me, since Im the only one hes with all the time.” She shrugged as she opened the door for Pete, and with Jake still clinging to her like a barnacle on a boat, said, “He doesnt hold grudges, though. Hes a pretty cool little guy that way. Next time he sees you, hell be fine.”

“But we were having such fun,” Pete said, stepping out onto the porch.

“Yep. And then he realized that you got him to go into the kitchen, where he knew he didnt want to go – so in his eyes, you became just another sneaky adult.” Lauren stepped far enough out onto the porch that Pete had to clear the doorway completely. When she was sure hed committed, she took a half-step back in and said, “Ill have to get the gate for the new girl later. It isnt like she has to have it right this minute, anyway. She can just be off-duty when shes home until I have a chance to get over there. I think I need to make sure Jake is calmed down and okay right now.”

Pete, who clearly couldnt figure out how hed been steamrolled onto the porch, started to protest. Then he nodded. “Yeah – go ahead and get him feeling better. Im sorry, little guy. I didnt want you to be scared.”

Jake yanked his head around so he was facing away from Pete.

“Hell get over it,” Lauren said, and stepped into the foyer and closed the door.

Pete stood on the porch for a moment, the flummoxed expression not leaving his face. Then he turned and walked down the steps. Lauren locked the front door – her fellow Sentinels had an unnerving habit of knocking to announce their presence, and then coming on in if the door wasn't locked. Those small-town habits didn't bother Lauren most of the time.

Now, however, an uninvited guest – rather, a second uninvited guest – could be a problem.

“I'm not coming back to the kitchen,” she said when she saw Pete pull the black-and-white out of the drive. “If you want to talk to me, you're going to have to come up here. My kid is afraid of the kitchen.”

She saw a shimmer at the back of the hall – something transparent moving toward her. She waited, and the thing took shape. It was one of the veyr. Because it remained translucent and kept itself toward the back of the foyer away from the bright outside light, she had to guess at color, but she thought it was one of the blue-green ones.

“I have news,” the veyr said. Lauren could now hear its voice, but it sounded to her like it was calling to her from the end of a very long, echoey tunnel.

“So you said.” Lauren held Jake tight against her chest. His little body had gone rigid, and she could feel him shaking with fear. “Make it quick. You're scaring my little boy.”

Veyr faces were hard to read – Lauren could only guess at the emotions that flashed across this one's tattooed visage. He looked nervous, timid, and at the same time sort of excited.

“Brief. Yes. I will be brief. The Imallin sent me – you must come to Oria to carry out your destiny.”

“My destiny died with my sister,” Lauren said quietly. “I don't have a destiny anymore.”

The veyr snapped his wrists emphatically by shaking them up and down; Lauren had no idea what that gesture meant until he said, “No, no, no. Your destiny is reborn. The Vodi has returned to us.”

“You found a new Vodi?” Lauren asked, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

“No. Your sister. The Vodi. She is alive.”

Lauren felt something twist in her gut. Anger. Fear. Something dark and ugly. “I buried Molly,” she said, her voice dropping and getting softer as the anger grew. “Shes dead. I can take you to the grave if youd like. But Im not going to be dragged into Oria with my little boy for some farce you people thought up. Without Molly, I cant do anything that matters.”

“And without you, neither can she,” the veyr said. “She gave me a message for you. She said you would know that it was from her, that this was something that only the two of you would be able to make sense of. She told me that your parents planned for her to be the warp, and you to be the weft.”

Lauren stared at the veyr, disbelieving. “Explain yourself.”

“I cannot. I can only relay what she told me to tell you. She said your parents planned the two of you to weave our worldchain back together, and she was to be the warp, and you the weft.” He shrugged – that gesture, at least, Lauren could make some sense of.

Your parents planned for her to be the warp, and you to be the weft.

Yes. That was it precisely – the analogy that they had implanted through magic in Laurens and Mollys minds. That image had exploded to life, along with a thousand other connections, when Lauren and Molly finally met and touched. In the same day that it came to life, though, Molly died, without

having an opportunity or a reason to share that information with anyone else. Lauren had never told anyone – had never said a single word about what had passed between the two of them. Perhaps the veyr had ways of reading her mind – she wouldnt put that past them. But somehow ... somehow this felt real to Lauren.

Could Molly be alive?

No. Of course not. Lauren had been to the funeral, seen her sister lying in the coffin, watched June Bug Tate quietly fall apart standing there staring at Mollys body. Jake was alive because Molly had given her life to save him.

Warp and weft.

She took a deep breath and asked the veyr, “How? How is she alive?”

The veyr said, “She is the Vodi. She wears the necklace of all the Vodian who lived before her, and it protects her the way it protected them. She is alive, and she and the Imallin beg you to come to Oria.”

“Hes bad, Mama,” Jake said, his face pressed into her neck. “Make that bad guy go away.”

Lauren leaned against the wall and stared at the veyr and rocked her son against her body, patting him on the back as if he were still a baby. Warp and weft – the threads that would weave the dying worldchain back together. Her parents had left that message with Molly, theyd left it with Lauren – and here it was, come back to haunt her.

And if Molly truly still lived, then the plan lived, too. Laurens parents hadnt died for nothing. Lauren still had a destiny. The world she loved and wanted to leave for Jake and Jakes eventual children still had a chance.

And if the plan still lived, then the Sentinels might be a

problem, and other things might be a problem, and Lauren and Jake, unprotected in the old family house, were sitting ducks for anything that came looking for them with an eye toward rectifying a situation that Molly's funeral hadn't quite taken care of. Shit.

Copper House would be a safe place for her and Jake – at least for the length of time it would take for her to determine whether Molly was alive, and whether Lauren and Jake had any real danger threatening them. Copper House lay through the gates, downworld in Oria, and it had been built to ward off the magics of the oldest and most deadly of the dark gods. The veyr might be edging close to extinction, but it wasn't because they'd failed to take adequate precautions in covering their asses.

If Molly lived, Lauren had an obligation to go to Oria. She had a duty. She had work to do – and she couldn't turn her back on it, because she of all the people in the world had been born to do the things she had to do. Molly – half-human, half-veyr – had been conceived and born at enormous personal cost to Lauren's mother. Lauren wasn't sure if her parents had actually figured out their plan before or after they discovered that Lauren could weave gates, and that she had a real knack for weaving them to places she'd never been. She knew, though, that even among gateweavers she was a rarity.

Lauren looked around the house that had belonged to her parents – that now belonged to her – and realized that if the veyr told the truth, she was going to have to leave it behind, maybe forever. She didn't want to do that. Her mother had planted the daffodils and the crocuses, the phlox and the forsythia, the dogwoods and the azaleas. Her father had built the bookshelves and the window seats, fixed the front porch and made the porch swing, and did things up in the attic that Lauren still hadn't completely figured out. This was the only place in the world that she could truly claim as home. She didn't belong anywhere else.

"Im going to have to bring Jake with me," she told the shadowy veyr.

"Bring him."

"You dont understand. I cant get him anywhere near a gate without him going completely to pieces. Something awful happened to him related to Molly and gates, and I dont want to cause him any more pain."

The veyr looked sympathetic – at least Lauren interpreted his expression and body movements as sympathy. He said, "The little boy will be safer in Copper House than here. The Imallin told me to be sure you knew that forces aware of the return of the Vodi – and of the import of that – have already begun to gather. They will know your relation to her. They will understand your importance. And if they cannot get to her – and they cannot, because she is safe in Copper House – they will come after you."

"No," Lauren said, but she already knew the truth in his words.

"Please. For your safety, for our worlds – for our people. Please come. She needs you. We need you."

Lauren tightened her grip on Jake, and stroked his hair. "Go back. Tell her that Ill be there as quickly as I can. I need to take care of a few things before I leave here – I cant know how long Ill be gone, and Ill need to make arrangements."

She couldnt tell any of the Sentinels she was leaving, though. She couldnt trust them to be on her side if they knew Molly was alive. Except for Pete, maybe. She thought she could trust Pete. She needed to make sure he had her keys, that he could get into her house, pay her bills if she couldnt get back quickly enough ... and she needed to be sure that he could keep the rest of the Sentinels from coming after her if she couldnt return to Earth quickly.

Lauren wouldnt have to worry too much about packing for a journey; the veyr would take care of everything she needed while she stayed in Copper House. Once she left the veyr stronghold and began to carry out her duties, she would have magic to provide for most of her needs. Shed have to have a couple of Jakes favorite toys. Shed need her picture of Brian. Beyond that ...

Shed been staring at the floor, and she looked up to tell the veyr that she would be along in a day or so – and he was already gone.

Lauren took a deep breath. Molly alive. Maybe – and if she was alive, how? And how did her being alive relate to the Sentinels flat prohibition against bringing anyone back from death – or against the sick twist Lauren got in her gut when she even thought about using magic to resurrect the dead?

But those were details she could only know when she got to Oria. First she had to get there.

Lauren listed the things she needed to accomplish. A note and a key to the house shoved through a little gate into Petes apartment, left on the table where hed find both when he got home – and some sort of plausible lie to put in the note; put the house services on hold; get someone trustworthy to keep an eye on the house; put Bearish and Mr. Puddleduck and the Crashable Cars in a backpack with Jakes flannel jammies and Brians photo.

And the letters. She wasnt leaving home without the letters she and Brian wrote to each other when he was stationed overseas.

She could do all of that in an afternoon. Rocking Jake in her arms, she realized that she could very possibly be out of the house before it started to get dark.

She didnt want to be. But the faster she got to Oria, the

faster she would know the truth. And then maybe she would find that it was all a lie, and she could come back home.

But inside, she knew the veyr had been telling her the truth. She could feel it, like the coming of a storm. Molly was alive again, and the two of them had work to do.

#

Cat Creek to Copper House

Lauren got the gate for the new girl out of the way simply because she didnt want to leave things undone. She had her paper stopped, left a note in the mailbox for the postman, turned the thermostat in the house down so that it would kick on and keep the pipes from freezing if Cat Creek had a late frost. She checked to make sure all the doors and windows were locked, that her car was locked away in the storage building to the back, that her private gates in the storage building were all shut down and blocked with her personal key.

All that, and twilight was just settling around the town. She wasnt ready to go.

“But I dont know that Ill ever be ready to go,” she told Jake. “The big question is, do we ever get to come back ... and I cant answer that one for us.”

Jake, used to being the listening part of conversations that made no sense to him, gave her a tentative smile and focused on the words he recognized. “Go?” he asked. “Go to Hardees, get biscuits?”

Lauren said, “Not today, Jake-o. Today we have other things to do. Time to go visit your aunt Molly.”

That meant nothing to him. Well, hed only met her once, under the worst possible circumstances; no reason to think her name would stick. Going through a gate would ring a few of Jakes

bells, though. Lauren got her little overnight bag, slung it on her shoulder, and went to the hall mirror. She had Petes note all ready. She read it again, looking for flaws.

Pete,

Sorry to beg a favor from you without warning, but Jake and I have to go to Charlotte – Brians parents are going to be in town for the next few days, and have called from out of the blue and asked that he go visit them. Since there is no way in hell hes going to see those people without me around, Im going to be out of town for the next few days. The Sentinels can get coverage from the gateweaver in Vass if you have an emergency before I get back. Im not going to leave a phone number – this is something I have to do, and it isnt open for negotiation or cutting short time limits.

Please pass on my apologies to everyone – I would have done a more graceful job of this with more warning. Ill be back as soon as I can. Meantime, please keep an eye on the house for me, and eat anything perishable that you want from the fridge.

Thanks,

Lauren

It looked okay to her.

Lauren let Jake sit on the bottom step at the front of the foyer to wait for her. She went to the huge mirror at the back, took a deep breath, and rested one hand against the glass. She stared into her reflected eyes, and concentrated on Petes kitchen table, and after a moment she could see a tiny flash of green shimmer in the eyes of her reflected self. She called that fire to her, and beneath her splayed fingertips felt the mirror begin to purr like a happy cat. She unfocused her eyes just a bit, and the picture she saw changed – no

longer a dark-haired woman standing with her hand on a full-length mirror in the hallway of an old house. Now she saw a neat, almost bare kitchen, the card table in the corner wiped clean and with a tiny handful of unopened bills placed at an exact 90 angle in Petes little apartment across town. She looked at this kitchen through a green glow – a haze of pale, cold fire. She didnt want to just shove the letter through, in case he was around, so she concentrated on pivoting her view to take in the rest of the kitchen.

His pantry, doorless and with neat wire shelves that she knew hed installed himself, was terrifying. Lauren had lived within the military system, and shed still never seen anything quite so compulsively neat. Hed alphabetized the cans, and cans occupied a different set of shelves than cereals and baking goods – which he actually had. Go figure. Not the typical bachelor.

She got a full-circle look at the area, and if he was around, he occupied some corner where he could see her. So she shoved the letter through the surface of the mirror, feeling the sensual pull of the paths spun between the worlds. Then, because she wanted him to see the letter, she made sure that it didnt line up at a right angle, but instead looked like shed tossed it from the other side of the room and only barely hit her target. She dropped her key-ring on the table beside the letter.

She pulled her arm back, and the fire shed summoned died away. She turned to find Jake curled up on the bottom stair, his arms wrapped around his face. He was whispering “No, no, no ...”

“Oh, Christ,” Lauren whispered. She hurried to his side, crouched beside him, and pulled him into her arms. “Hey. Monkey boy. Jake-puppy. Its okay. Its all right. Nothings going to hurt you. I have you.” She kissed him, and rocked him, and waited.

After a long, long time, she felt him relax.

Lauren wanted to throw up. This was the kid she was going to drag through a gate; this was the kid she was going to put face to face with the woman who almost gotten him killed, in the world that had almost killed him. She closed her eyes and tried to think of anyone, anywhere, that she would trust with the life of her child. And there was no one. Not one single person. Pete came closer than anyone else – but Lauren suspected Pete of harboring a secret, and until she knew what it was, she wouldn't take any chances with him, either.

We have to go, she thought. I have to do this, because if Molly and I succeed, we will save this world for all the generations that follow – and revive the worlds above it, and protect the ones below it. If I don't go, the next screw up, the next disaster, the next slip, could be the last, and everyone on the planet but the few who can find or create gates will die.

I have to go.

I cannot leave Jake behind.

I cannot wait until he's ready, because he might never be ready, and Molly and I don't have forever to do what we have to do.

She held her son, and rocked him in her arms, and silent tears ran down her cheeks. She hated what she had to do, and what it would do to Jake, and she hated feeling like a bad mother, and she hated her lack of options. For a moment she hated her parents for giving her such a burden to bear.

Then, because she knew the weight she carried, and because she would not shirk her responsibilities, she carried Jake back to the mirror and rested her free hand on the glass and summoned the fire that would carry her through realities. She summoned the world of Oria with its vast, ancient forests, and closed

in on the walled village built around the magnificent Copper House, and drew herself a circle of fire in the center of the cobblestone street in front of the palace, between the two tall, blue-skinned veyr guards who stood at either side of the door.

Then, her little bag of personal items on her shoulder and Jake clinging to her hip, frozen rigid with panic, she pushed gently against the mirror glass, and felt it give, and felt the universe beyond welcome her into its embrace.

For a time that was no time and an eternity, while the music of the universe vibrated and strummed every cell of her body, she fell and floated and soared and the universe streamed by her, and she touched her own immortality and her soul commingled with Jake's. It's okay, she told the universe and Jake, all in a breath and a thought, and somehow she made it okay. She moved within the pain and the terror he held in his tiny body, and smoothed off the edges so that it was still his pain, which he had earned, and which was his by rights – but now he could face the pain.

Magic. Through the gates lay magic; the building blocks of the universe and the birthplace of godhood. For that time outside of time, she was pure spirit, the weight of her body fallen away to nothing, and she and Jake flew like eagles or angels.

Then the universe pushed them out the other side, and she and Jake were standing in front of the two veyr guards, who, unprepared for their eruption from nothingness, howled and lowered weapons into attack positions.

"I'm the Vodis sister," Lauren screamed, and clutched Jake tight. Should have thought of something besides her own convenience in making the gate, she realized. Those spears had hellish sharp points, and they were too close to her skin. She could summon a spell and blast both of the guards to oblivion – but they were supposed to be on her side. She willed them to

move their spears to an upright position, and when they did, though she could see their muscles bulging as they fought to keep her at spear point, she said again, "Im the Vodis sister. Im here because she sent for me."

They stared at her, and one of them turned his head fractionally, while still staring at her, and shouted, "Guest for the Vodi; claiming to be her sister."

She didnt push past them. She could have, but she didnt choose to make enemies. Something had them frightened and on edge – she should have recognized the signs as she watched them through the mirror. Guards walked the parapets of Copper House, and squatted atop the towers along the wall that ringed the city. Soldiers, armed and watching the skies, and now some of them watching her.

Lauren looked up.

Dark shapes soared high overhead. She would have thought them vultures, or maybe ravens, but the scalloped trailing edges of their wings and the whiplike length of their tails made her realize how very high above they soared. She counted a dozen before she turned to the guards who watched her. "Rrn," she said, and shivered.

They nodded. "Gathering since the Vodi returned. They want nothing good."

"No," Lauren agreed.

Humans called them dragons, and had known them as dragons when they lived on Earth, and had feared or worshiped them. With reason. They were creatures out of nightmare. Shed seen three one very bad day, and had killed one. She was tempted to use the magic she controlled in Oria to create some sort of accurate, long-range weapon to shoot them out of the sky. Except magic that dealt death had echoes that flowed upworld; if she killed one of the rrrn here, something terrible would

happen to a dozen innocents back on Earth – or perhaps to a hundred or a thousand who were less innocent. No one understood how magic moved between the worlds well enough to predict the echoes that any action could cause. But everyone could point to correlations – a healing spell that spawned remissions, a murder that spawned a killing spree.

She would kill nothing using magic unless she had no other choice. She left the rrrn to their circling and turned her attention to the front gate, where an amber-skinned, golden-haired veyr stepped through the front arch of Copper House and walked toward her.

King of the castle, she thought. Master of an empire. He wore a simple tunic of deep red velvet, black breeches and soft, low black boots, and he had neither crown nor scepter. But he wore power, and that gave lie to the simple clothes, the unadorned braid hanging down his back, the fact that he carried about him no symbols of power.

His men turned to him and offered deep bows; he responded with a nod of his head.

This, then, would be Seolar, Molly's love.

Lauren waited, not bowing. Seolar, when he reached a spot between the two guards she still held at bay, stopped and studied her for a long, still moment. Eyes of jet black, enormous, without scleras, looked into hers and she felt as if her life had been laid bare for everyone to see. She was, to the veyr, one of the old gods. But, dammit, the veyr had presence. She could roast this fellow with a word and a wave of her hand, but he outclassed her on a scale that defied measurement.

“You favor her in a hundred ways I cannot even define,” he said after a moment. Then he bowed to her, gracefully and deeply, and said, “Quickly, please. Inside – the rrrn arrived a while ago and the Vodi has not been herself since their

arrival. They watch all we do, and I fear they may know the Vodus Hunter has arrived.”

Lauren spared another glance at the sky, and saw that the rrrn now circled closer. She held Jake tighter and clutched her shabby little carry-on bag and hurried after the master of the castle, feeling small and insignificant and nervous.

Through doors of solid copper, beneath arches bound in copper, over floors banded in copper, past copper spun into lamps and fountains and banisters and balustrades, she followed the veyr, who set a fast pace.

She stepped at last into a generous library, with books that lined the walls to a height of three stories, with walkways all around and spiraling staircases up and down, and in the corner one fine, grand fireplace. And in front of the fireplace, taller than she had any business being, and with the delicate bones and impossibly green eyes that marked her as having veyr blood, stood Molly.

Lauren saw her sister, and tears filled her eyes. Molly hurried across the room and hugged her and Jake.

They stood that way for a while, rocking back and forth, and finally Molly pulled back a little. Lauren swung her bag to the ground and shifted Jake over to her other hip. She shook her head and smiled, lost for words.

“Kind of hard to figure out what to say, isnt it?” Molly offered at last.

“Aside from Jesus, its good to see you, yeah. Kind of hard.” Lauren shook her head. “But ... Jesus, its good to see you.”

#

Cat Creek

Pete got home late. He hadn't intended to stop by work, but after Lauren turned him down again – and then shooed him out of the house in such an abrupt fashion – he didn't feel like going home and brooding about it. And Eric had needed help with one thing and then another, and they'd gotten to talking and had a few laughs, and then had taken off for Bennettsville for a couple of drinks and a couple of steaks.

He thought he'd go straight to bed. But on his way past the kitchen, he caught a glimpse of something out of place from the corner of his eye. He stopped, internal alarms going off. Put his hand on the butt of his Browning, held his breath, and listened. He could hear nothing. He tried to figure out what about the dark kitchen had set him off, and narrowed it down to a splotch of white on the kitchen table.

He hadn't left anything on the kitchen table. More than once, knowing exactly how he'd left a place and being able to spot changes had saved his life. And he hadn't started getting sloppy.

He edged back around the corner into the kitchen. It was empty, but someone had been there. He saw a piece of paper and a key ring.

Check for bombs first? Dare a light switch?

He decided to read the note. Put on gloves and a filter mask, because stuff that just showed up where it had no business being could turn out to be lethal.

Preparations taken, he read the note. He felt better – after all, at least Lauren had liked him enough to trust him with her stuff for a few days. But just when he'd decided to feel flattered, he looked at her keys and his stomach knotted and the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

She hadn't just left her house key. One even the house key and a key to the mailbox. She'd left her full key ring – including her car key. And this wasn't a spare key ring. This was her key ring, the one with the picture of the Sainted Dead Husband in one side of a Lucite frame, and Jake as a baby in the other.

Pete started running scenarios in his head – no one had come through the door, disturbing the little tell-tale he always left. The only way in through the windows was to break one, and after a quick inventory of the rest of the apartment, he cleared windows as a possible point of entry. So Lauren had used her little mirror trick to deliver the note. That wasn't the problem. The problem was, had she done it of her own free will, or under duress? And if under duress, then from whom? Another rogue Sentinel? One of the enemies Lauren had no doubt left in Oriá? Or one of his problems, who'd seen him with her and decided she and Jake would make nice leverage?

Or ... had she just made a dumb mistake? Left him her ring and taken her spare? He wasn't immune to tendencies to assume the worst, to seeing disaster where none existed, or even to going off half-cocked – though he'd gotten better about that over the years.

So what should he do?

First, he decided, he'd check her place. Look for signs of forcible entry to the house, her car, out back in the storage shed; check for evidence of a struggle inside.

Next, check out the in-laws. Where were they, what was their story?

Then ... well, depending on what he found, maybe a visit to a few old friends. Carefully, of course. But for certain sorts of problems, especially people going missing for nasty reasons, he had just the right sort of friends.

WORLD GATES EXTRAS

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