

Stars hover longer over St. Elspy's Mountain. The moon makes its
fickle rise and fall every twenty-eight days, but the stars? ~~...~~

~~they're~~ They're immutable. ~~Unchangeable. Definitive.~~

~~—~~ They stay where they are.

Not many notice any more.

They did, once, though the seers. ~~Seers, and~~ sages, and
people of old. They ~~would~~ watched the stars and wondered ed,
waiteding.

~~Always waiting.~~

~~And t~~Then the time of horrors came and, ~~a time that~~ left
no window for ~~star-gazing~~ stargazing. No thoughts of romance or
peace ~~on Earth~~. No thoughts of anything, truly, but survival.

Few made it through. Those who did scarcely spoke. ~~And of~~
~~those, scarce spoke~~ of the short realm with its. ~~G~~grizzled days
and, ~~horrific~~ nights. But every generation had a whisperer, one
who passed the story along as a warning to those yet to come. ~~7~~
~~warning those to come.~~

~~As if there was something to be done.~~

~~There wasn't.~~

~~Among the humans, that is.~~

Chapter One

Wolf eyes, thought Gideon, meeting the young woman's gaze head-on. Pale gray leached to ivory, surrounded by a dark blue rim. ~~Her eyes beseeched him to see beyond what others suspected.~~

~~But~~ sSome mountain-dwelling elders still whispered of long-past ago horrors, when wolves ruled with snarling throats and bared teeth, changelings that won trust before annihilating unsuspecting inhabitants.

Foolishness, of course.

Her eyes beseeched him to see beyond what others suspected-
to ~~He held the woman's attention, wanting to~~ see her heart, h~~.~~
Her soul. Her fear blocked his intuition, while her eyes ~~a woman~~
~~dragged in because she had pale, unusual eyes. Eyes that~~ tugged
at his ~~breath, his~~ heart maybe ~~.~~ ~~And maybe~~ his soul.

Wolf's eyes.

Were they?

Yes.

No. Couldn't be—could they?

Mental protests rose ~~within~~, but Gideon had been a cop a long time. Not much scared him ~~anymore, but this time~~. ~~But~~ his internal warning system suggested otherwise ~~said maybe it should~~.

~~He ignored the prodding and indicated the chair facing his.~~
"Have a seat, please, ~~,~~" Gideon said, indicating the chair facing him.

~~Wary,~~ ~~s~~ She hesitated.

Gideon ~~dropped his~~ looked to the chair with an easy nod, hoping his calm reassured her.

She sat. But on the chair's edge ~~and glanced around~~.
Watching. Listening. Apprehensive.

~~With good reason if the deputy's report proved accurate.~~
~~She'd been set upon by a hostile group in the hills, a hard-to-reach section of Colm County.~~

~~He~~ Gideon sat and, ~~and~~ braced his elbows on his thighs. "What's your name?"

She eyed him, silent.

Great. ~~Probably one of those tree-huggers that believed the mountains should be left unsullied by mere mortals.~~

~~The locals would eat her alive, figuratively, especially with the proposed mining operation slicing north from the south face of St. Elspy and the lumbering concern thinning the east side of Briar's Crossing.~~ Gideon drew a breath, clenched his jaw and met her gaze. "You scared people."

Indignation raised her jaw. Cool fire flashed heat into her nearly translucent eyes. "A woman alone? In the woods? Unarmed?

I scared *them*, Sheriff?"

~~Incredulity deepened her voice. Her An~~ arched brow said she wasn't buying ~~i~~this declaration. ~~She bristled and shoved back a hank of long, dark hair.~~

"A woman alone by a fire, wearing..." He ~~swept~~ scanned her cape ~~a quick scan~~, "a Wiccan cloak."

~~"Whereas," s~~She leaned closer, her look direct. ~~.~~7 "I would call it a classic wool cape because the morning air chilled, Sheriff." She leaned back into the chair. "But weave the story as you choose, ~~Sheriff.~~"