

The Beast

THEY CALLED HIM THE BEAST behind his back. To his face no one possessed the balls. No one. And this was something in the gulags. Once, some years past, I witnessed him murdering a guard. Manacled. He strangled him, nearly severing the man's head. So violent. So efficient. So impressive. In the midst of a gulag riot it occurred. Many suspected, but none knew, not for sure. Except me, and I did not talk. You didn't talk. You don't.

The Beast was different. To look upon him was to know this. Forget that he turned *suka*. Forget the stories. Just know that in the Thieves' World the Beast was marked to die, to have his *Vor* tattoos taken, and he didn't, and they weren't. His was a story of survival, of murder, of mad vengeance, a script of legendary reckoning etched by blade in scar tissue across his flesh. He had been hammered into something so compact and solid he appeared made of iron. A real *girevik*. The Beast. A killer born.

"How many has he killed?" they whispered. *Many*.

Suffice it to say he was dangerous. A more dangerous foe I could not conceive. Yet that is not why we killed him. That is why we killed him first.