Hannah Thornton's son is sixteen when the hunters arrive. Fanny is too young to remember her father, too young to understand what is happening when Nathaniel staggers home, Gilbert Argent’s arrow still buried in his forearm.

Nathaniel Thornton is not the only werewolf in Milton.

Hannah, his wife, isn't surprised when he tells her this. "Well, what did you expect?" she asks, dry-voiced and unsmiling as she sips her tea. "You came here to build a future for yourself, for your family. Did you think no one else would do the same?"

She's always been too good for him, he thinks. His clever wife, strong enough to bear the truth about his nature, his curse. Strong enough to bear a werewolf's children.

“It could bring danger down on our heads,” Nathaniel says. He speaks quietly, although their son, John, is fast asleep in his bed, a flight of stairs and a corridor away.

Hannah sets her tea aside with steady, deliberate movements. When she reaches for his hand, clasping it in her own and pressing a kiss to his knuckles, he knows that she is not afraid.

“IThere is risk in every venture,” she tells him. “Your place is well established here. The gentlemen of Milton welcomed you as a man of industry and honor.”

Nathaniel shakes his head. “Only because they do not know what I am.”
“Nor will they,” Hannah says firmly. “That is no one’s business but our own.” She rises, her skirts brushing against his knees. “If you do not want these others here, there are ways to make them leave. The other Masters will listen to you, if you speak against the employment of these newcomers.”

“It would be safer,” Nathaniel says. Her fingers curl against his palm, and he looks up at her, tilts his head into her touch when she cradles his cheek. “Hannah,” he says. “Tell me what to do.”

She offers him a rare smile, her spine straight as any queen’s. “Come to bed, Mr. Thornton.”

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She’d thought her first labor was difficult, but it’s Fanny -- her entirely human daughter -- who almost tears her apart. Nathaniel has taken John, nearly fourteen now, into the country for the full moon, and she grits her teeth, refusing to give voice to the pain of so natural an event.

She did not scream at her son’s birth. A daughter will not break her.

There was no way to tell, as the baby grew inside her, whether or not Fanny would be like her brother, would bear her father’s curse. As much as Hannah loves her son, she would not have chosen to bring another child like him into this world. Fanny is unplanned but not unwanted, especially when Nathaniel and John return with the sunrise.

Nathaniel cradles his daughter’s head, smiling broadly with relief. Hannah sags into her pillow, beckoning her son to her side. “You must be gentle with your sister, John,” she says, tilting the baby so John can see. “She is not like you, or your father.”

John stares at the baby, then silently offers her his hand. She can’t quite close her tiny fist around even one of his fingers, her eyes still shut tight.

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Milton prospers, and the Thorntons prosper along with it. The riots in Kent and Sussex don’t spread to their small city, the workers who would destroy machinery out of fear that it would cause unemployment seem to have dwindled in the face of the harsh punishments faced by earlier such Luddites.

Milton prospers, and the prosperity draws new men, in search of work. New men, and new werewolves.

“There’s a whole pack, coming in,” Nathaniel tells his wife. He’s anxious and hides it badly. Hannah pours him a cup of tea and waits for him to take a sip, then another.

“What concern is that of ours?” she asks. “You’ve no need to hire such creatures, not when you have your pick of workers who’ll draw no such unwanted attention.” It’s hypocritical, perhaps, but her husband and son have exemplary control over their transformations. The curse is an annoyance, but something they can manage. Other werewolves have proven to have far less mettle.

She chose well, accepting Nathaniel Thornton’s proposal, all those years ago. Hannah hides a tiny, satisfied smile behind her teacup.

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Her son is sixteen when the hunters arrive. Fanny is too young to remember her father, too young to understand what is happening when Nathaniel staggers home, Gilbert Argent’s arrow still buried in his forearm.
The poison spreads quickly. Hannah could have cut his arm off, if he’d gotten home sooner, but he’d taken the time to lose the hunters chasing him.

“They didn’t see my face,” Nathaniel assures her. His veins are black from the wolfsbane coating the arrow. “They have no reason to suspect our family. The other pack is dead. If the Argents leave town before anyone finds out I’m dead, as well, John will be safe.”

“And what am I to do with a dead body?” Hannah asks. Her throat feels tight, like she is the one being poisoned. Her voice comes out snappish because the only other alternative is weeping.

There is no other alternative. She must focus on the matter at hand.

Nathaniel hesitates, then chokes, writhing. “Suicide,” he gasps, when he can breathe again. He claws at his chest, at his heart, then forces himself to lie still. “Let them think I killed myself.”

“You would never,” Hannah whispers fiercely. She clutches her husband’s hand. “I could not bear the shame, letting the world believe such a falsehood. That my husband could be such a coward.”

“You must,” Nathaniel tells her. He looks past her to John, hovering in the doorway. “Be strong for them,” he says, and Hannah watches him die, his lips black, his curse no longer a burden on his soul.

Her son rests a hand on her shoulder. His face is wet, when she looks up at him.

She will not weep. There is work to do.

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“You can always hire a tutor when you’re older,” Hannah tells John, when he starts work as a draper’s assistant. “There will be time enough for learning, once we’ve established ourselves in society once more.”

She guards their meager budget like it’s Queen Victoria’s crown. She finds places to save even before John earns his first promotion, and the extra income is enough to buy their way back into industry, once a few years have passed.

“Fanny must never know,” she tells John one night, after they’ve gone over the books together. He looks tired, the curse weighing on him as much as or more than the responsibility of providing for their small family. “It’s the best way to keep her safe.” She looks down the hall, where Fanny is asleep in the small bedroom they share. “Besides, she’s a foolish child. We can only hope she’ll grow out of this tendency toward idle prattle.”

John smiles fondly, and Hannah’s mouth tightens. They indulge the girl too much, she knows. But Fanny’s vibrance makes the house seem less small, strangely enough.

“We should move to a bigger house,” Hannah says. “Once we can afford it.”

“I’ll look into the matter,” John promises.

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They move to a bigger house. Her son grows into a fine man, and Hannah can be forgiven, she thinks, if she’s proud enough to think him the finest man in Milton, if not all of England. She’s certainly met none better.

Fanny never does outgrow her tendency toward idle prattle. They learn to live with it. And Fanny
marries well enough, despite her flaws. Hannah finds herself with a wealth of space, if not money. They’ve been poor before. It’s nothing they can’t weather, especially with Fanny married off at last. And then John, her tender, cursed son, brings Margaret Hale home to Milton once more.

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“Did it have to be her?” Hannah questions him, after Miss Hale has turned in for the night. She keeps her voice hushed, not wanting her words to echo down the empty hallways. “We don’t need her money, John.”

“That’s not why I’m doing this, mother,” John tells her, and she can’t argue against the resolution on his face. The moon is close to full, bright and gleaming through the window, but John doesn’t even seem to notice.

“Have you told her yet?” Hannah asks. This soft, southern girl, who has already fled Milton once, in the wake of her parents’ death. Love won’t be enough, Hannah thinks, to keep a woman like Margaret Hale from cracking.

Hannah has seen the beast Nathaniel became, under a full moon. Before John learned to control the transformation, they would change together, the curse making them appear monstrous.

Hannah knows her son is no monster, could look into his golden, gleaming eyes and see only the sweet boy she carried inside her, all those months. She cannot trust that Margaret Hale will have the same vision.

John leans against the wall by the window, one arm braced against the frame. “Not yet,” he says.

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The wedding arrives all too quickly, as far as Hannah is concerned. Not so fast as to beg inquiry as to the cause, but there’s little enough time to plan the affair.

“You’ll have to tell her eventually,” Hannah tells her son, the night before the wedding. “Or do you think she won’t notice, when her children grow fangs and claws?”

“Or they could turn out like Fanny,” John counters. “Maybe she’ll never need to know.”

Hannah snorts, but she can’t quite bring herself to tell Margaret herself. She visits the girl’s bedroom, thinking on the kind of advice a mother might give, but Margaret’s never brooked such words, not from her.

“Get some sleep, Miss Hale,” she says, perhaps the only advice Margaret will accept from her. “Tomorrow will be a busy day for all of us. I do believe we Thorntons shall test your mettle yet.”

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She knows their first child is a werewolf the moment she sees the look on John’s face, when he reaches for his newborn son and stops, hand outstretched.

“She’ll never forgive me,” John whispers, voice hoarse, and Hannah casts an exasperated look at the ceiling, rocking her grandson gently.

“She might surprise you,” Hannah says tartly. After all, she thinks, Margaret Hale has never been what Hannah would consider predictable.
John walks with slumped shoulders to the bedroom where Margaret is recovering from her labor, and Hannah smiles down at her grandson. “It will turn out well enough, little pup,” she says. “There’s no pack so fine as the Thorntons, not in all the wide world.”

The baby is a warm weight in her arms. If the curse lies heavy on him, Hannah can’t tell. “Welcome to Milton,” she says, and goes to return the boy to his mother, if she still wants him. Despite her son’s fears, Hannah has no doubts about what awaits her.