

Prologue

While the city of Falconhurst slept soundly, unaware of the trials of the world, up in the Blackbarren Mountains that lay north of the town at the very tip of Telasaro, history was being made. A woman screamed. Another provided encouragement. Two men stood at the entrance of the cave watching for movement in the night. No one was safe in that cave. They should have gotten further away.

“One more push, Allaria,” the other woman encouraged her. “We’re almost there.”

“I don’t understand why she’s helping us,” Lucien stated to the old man beside him. “She should be furious and seeking revenge instead of helping bring Alaric’s child into this world.”

“Hush, Lucien,” the old man replied. “The ways of the Gods are mysterious to us and are not to be questioned. Lady Bestia will let us know her plan when the time is right.”

“You have too much faith in the Gods,” Lucien whispered with a glance back at the Goddess who knelt on the floor between Allaria’s legs.

“Keep focused, Lucien, your nose will tell us when they are close long before our eyes spot them,” the old man reminded him before he left his post outside the cave entrance and returned to the women. He whispered something to the Goddess that Lucien could hear thanks to his enhanced abilities. “I’m afraid we might not have much more time, my Lady.”

“We have as much or as little time as I require, Rover T. Snikpoh, or have you forgotten who I am?” the Goddess snapped at the old man.

“Of course not, my Lady, but I fear Alaric will find us soon, and the child won’t be safe here.”

“If Alaric finds us then you and the bastard wolf will hold him off until this child is born. I will have my revenge, Rover!”

The Goddess was fierce in her words. Rover did not fear many but when dealing with angry Gods it was best to do as they demanded. He slunk back to the entrance of the cave and waited with Lucien. The younger man stood alert with his nose sniffing the air and his eyes flickering back and forth into the dark night. Behind them, the Goddess continued to encourage the woman, and soon they heard the sounds of a crying babe. Rover breathed a sigh of relief. He glanced behind him as the Goddess cradled the infant. The woman was unmoving on the blankets they had set down for her. He knew what that meant.

The old man turned his attention to Lucien. The younger man had stiffened and was more alert than before. He’d seen something, or smelled something. Alaric was close. The Goddess began to chant something in a language Rover didn’t understand. He was a master of languages but this must be the fabled language of the Gods. A light glow filled the cave. This must be her revenge,

though he didn't know what she was doing. He dared a look behind him.

Floating in the air above the infant was a stone dagger with a bright purple hilt. Nerves got the better of him. Rover took a step towards the Goddess, daring himself to intervene on the child's behalf. Could her revenge involve the murder of Alaric's child? His steps towards them faltered, as if some invisible force was preventing him from moving forward. It was likely the Goddess had used her power to stop him.

"Fear not, Rover T Snikpoh. I'll not harm this child," the Goddess spoke in a language he could understand. "She shall be the only one who can wield this dagger, and the only one who can end my monstrous creation; Alaric. They are coming."

Rover knew that if Alaric arrived, his men would overthrow them. The Goddess would not fight. She would evaporate into the heavens where she belonged. The child would be killed. He knew what he had to do.

"Lucien," he addressed the man who was the blood of Alaric. "Take the child. Do not stop until you have crossed the river and are out of Alaric's territory. I will take the dagger and ensure it finds her hand when the time is right."

"Sir?"

"No time for questions, Lucien, go before they arrive. Change and stop for no one."

The man nodded. He stripped his clothing off. Rover took the discarded shirt while the man dropped to all fours and began his transformation from man to wolf. Rover used the shirt to wrap the child safely. He used the discarded trousers for a makeshift basket that Lucien could carry the child with his teeth. The wolf approached, his muzzle nudging Rover to let him know he was ready. The old man cradled the child carefully into the makeshift

basket and held the handles for the wolf. Lucien took the basket between his teeth.

“May the Gods be with you,” Rover wished him luck then turned to the Goddess. “Will you stand with me long enough for him to reach the river?”

“The sake of my revenge lies with a bastard wolf,” the Goddess replied. “I will stand as long as he runs.”

The wolf took off into the night. He could sniff out his enemy closing in on the cave he had just departed from and knew he had to remain downwind of them. They could not find his trail. He had to have faith in the Goddess and the old man to keep them busy until he reached the river. His trail would end as soon as he crossed the river.

There were quicker ways Lucien could take through the woods and down the mountain but they were risky. He knew the paths were blocked by large boulders he would have to leap over, and risk losing the child from the insecure basket. He had to stay on the beaten path. He couldn't risk the child falling from his teeth and losing her life on the rocks and roots of the forest. He could still move quickly, but the road was longer.

Lucien ran on. The sounds of the wolves howling in the distance grew further away. There did not seem to be anyone pursuing him but he would not allow himself to slow his pace, regardless of the sweat building in his fur or the froth forming at his mouth. He could catch his breath once he crossed the river. It wasn't far.

The moonlight shone down on him, illuminating his way through the woods and leading him towards its reflection on the water. With it came the bright flash of light that he had been raised to know was the entrance or exit of a God or Goddess leaving their plane. Bestia would have left Rover, which meant Lucien was at the river. His front paws splashed into the water. The cold spray woke the child, startling her to tears. In his mind, Lucien was

shushing her as a comforting parent might have but the sounds exiting his muzzle were more of a whimpering cry.

He crossed the river and set the basket down so he might change back to his human form. First, he pressed his cold nose against her and licked her soft skin, hoping to provide comfort and cease the crying. Then he changed back. The transformation was exhausting. Bones broke and reformed beneath his skin and that same skin stretched to cover the change. It was painful. It left him winded. He could not dawdle for long. Lucien untied the basket to return his trousers to his body then picked up the child wrapped in his shirt.

“Shush now, I’m going to get you to safety,” Lucien assured her though he knew the infant could not understand his words.

He ran on, jostling the child in his arms. The motion seemed to soothe her back to sleep. Wolves howling grew fainter. They would not follow him beyond the river. The river marked the end of Alaric’s territory. Though there was no law saying the wolves could not leave his territory, none ever had. There was no reason for them to leave. Alaric provided everything a man and wolf could want at Moonacre. Lucien was the first. He did not desire anything Alaric had to offer.

Falconhurst wasn’t far now. He had to descend the mountain and the city would be before him. Nestled into the base of the mountains, it was the closest human settlement to Moonacre. He didn’t know if the child would be safe there. He only hoped Alaric would not learn of her existence. Lucien would watch over her. Should any wolf stray from Alaric’s territory and get too close to the child, Lucien would take care of him.

He reached the outskirts of the city wall. Beyond it were a few homes that had been deemed unnecessary to protect. A single roomed cabin came into view. Lucien’s hope grew as he watched a woman move back and forth through the window. This place would do, for now. If the child was not safe here, Lucien would

find her another home. He approached the cabin. The steps creaked beneath his feet. With the child carefully tucked into one arm, he lifted the other to knock on the door.

“Please,” he said when a red-haired woman opened the door. He uncovered the child. “Can you take her?”

He knew nothing of these people as he set the small girl into the woman’s outstretched arms. What he did know, by seeing into their small home, was they already had one child. Surely a couple with one child had enough love for a second. Surely this girl would be safe and loved within their care for as long as he needed them to guard her.

“I’ll explain everything when I return,” Lucien added for he knew he would be returning to watch over her. “She has no one else.”