LUNA'S KISS

A. S. Hildebran

“Freedom is not the absence of danger or pain, but the ability to meet the horizon without chains and choose one’s course honestly.” – A.S.H.

PROLOGUE

The night it happened, the moon was thin and sickle-sharp, hanging over the coast like a blade too hesitant to strike. William had always trusted the rhythm of his home: the crackle of peat in the hearth, the hum of his wife's soft lullaby, the gentle clicking of wooden toys as his son pushed them across the floor. Their cottage sat alone at the edge of Caerwyn Forest, where the trees whispered of old gods and older curses. But it was safe—had always been safe. Until the wind changed.

It came suddenly, bending the treetops as if something massive moved through them. The animals fell silent. Even the sea stopped its distant rumble. William felt the hair on his arms rise as a metallic scent drifted in—a cold, coppery tang. Blood. He stepped outside, a lantern trembling in his hand. The night pressed in thick and suffocating, swallowing the warm glow as fast as it appeared. His boots sunk into something wet. Mud, he thought. Until he saw the tracks. Huge. Deep. Clawed. Not human.

A low growl rumbled through the dark, vibrating in his ribs. William spun, but the creature was already upon him—a blur of mottled fur and burning yellow eyes. It slammed him into the ground, steel-hard claws pinning him at the shoulders. His scream was drowned by another—his wife's. He fought free with a surge of terror, sprinting toward the house. The door hung open, one hinge torn off. His lantern illuminated chaos: splintered wood, shredded cloth, a trail of blood smeared across the floor toward the crib. "Elain!" he roared.

He found her in the corner, clutching their lifeless son to her chest. Her throat was torn. Her eyes were open but empty. The creature barreled in behind him. William reached for the fire poker, swung with everything he had, cracking metal against bone. The beast reeled but didn't fall. It lunged. Teeth like daggers sank into his shoulder. Pain exploded through him—white,

blinding, searing—as if the moon itself had driven a spike through his flesh. He felt the infection burning instantly, crawling through his veins like wildfire. Another presence stirred within him. Not his own.

With a desperate, primal howl, he rammed the poker through the creature's eye. It collapsed against him, snarling until its breath sputtered out. William slumped beside it, fading in and out of consciousness. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard distant boots approaching the ruined cottage. Soldiers. He tried to speak, to beg for help, but the words dissolved into a growl. The last thing he remembered was the moonlight, pooling on the floor like silver blood… and the whisper of a goddess he had never prayed to:

'*You are marked now, William Fenwick. By fang, by loss, by Luna's will. Rise… or become the monster they fear.*'

Darkness swallowed him whole.

ACT I

I

Fever of the Wild

I woke to the smell of smoke and blood. Not the comforting smoke of my hearth, nor the coppery scent of a rabbit freshly snared. This was sour and stale. Much like a battlefield long after the screaming stopped. My eyes opened to a ceiling of warped timber beams. Someone had draped a damp cloth across my forehead. My shoulder throbbed with a steady, pulsing heat, as if a forge had been lit inside the wound. I tried to sit up. Bad idea. Agony tore through me so sharply that the room blurred. A groan escaped my throat—low, rough, not entirely human. I froze at the sound of my own voice.

A healer, gray-haired and thin as driftwood, hurried to my side.

"Easy now, lad. Easy."

"Where… where am I?" My throat felt raw.

"Tavern cellar, Caerwyn." His hands pressed me down with surprising strength. "You were half dead when the hunters dragged you in. Fever so hot I could feel it through your coat."

The memories hit like a hammer. The growl. The splintered door. Elain's scream. My son's crib overturned. Empty. Teeth sinking into my shoulder. The beast's eye bursting on the end of my poker.

My breath shuddered and broke. The healer said something else, but the words washed over me unheard. Elain was gone. My boy, my tiny Rhys. The way his whole fist could wrap around just one of my fingers… Gone. I tasted iron. I realized I'd bitten my own tongue. A distant voice drifted down the stairs. Soldiers.

“Is he awake yet? Governor wants a statement.”

The healer stiffened. “You’re in danger, lad. They think you did it.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“They say you killed your family in a drunken rage. That you tore up your own house.” His eyes softened. “I told them no man makes tracks like the ones outside your cottage. But Crown inspectors hear only what they want.”

Rage burned through the grief. Not hot. Cold. Cold enough to cut. Footsteps thundered toward the cellar.

“Go!” the healer hissed. “Out the back. Run!”

I tried to stand. Pain lanced through me, but something else did too. Power. Wrong, unnatural power. My muscles flexed without my permission. My nails scraped the wooden floor and dug grooves into it. My vision sharpened. Smells exploded around me—the sweat of the healer, the iron of the soldiers above, a faint trace of wet soil carried on boots recently in the forest. I staggered upright.

The healer’s eyes widened. “By the gods… what did this to you?”

Before I could answer, the cellar door burst open and three soldiers stormed down the steps.

“There he is! Grab him!”

Something inside of me snapped. Not a bone. Something deeper. I moved faster than I should have. Faster than any wounded man. I shoved a table aside and barreled through the back door, splintering it off its hinges. Cold night air slapped my face.

“STOP HIM!”

I ran. Feet pounding the earth. Lungs burning. The world stretched into streaks of moonlit color. Trees whipped past, the scent of moss bursting sharp and alive in my nose. Behind me, soldiers cursed and stumbled, unable to match my speed.

“What am I…?” I gasped.

But the answer chased me as surely as the men did. I wasn’t running like a man. I was running like a beast. And something inside me, something wounded and furious, liked it.

II

Echoes Over Their Grave

I don’t remember how long I ran, only that when the moon dipped low and the sky began to pale, I collapsed beside the ruins of what had once been my life. The cottage stood slouched and broken, as if ashamed to still exist. Smoke had long since stopped rising from the hearth. The roof sagged. The door I’d repaired so many times now hung crooked, clawed nearly in half. I stood there for a long time, unable to step inside. My body ached. Not just the wound, but my bones, my marrow, my spirit itself. Exhaustion pulled at me, but grief anchored me in place.

The morning wind whispered through the forest, brushing against the blood-stained grass. It sounded like Elain’s voice for a heartbeat. That was what finally broke me. I pushed into what remained of our home. The lantern I’d dropped the night before still lay where it had fallen. My son’s carved toys were scattered across the floor, cracked or crushed under heavy weight. Elain’s favorite shawl was torn where she must have grabbed it in panic. The world swam in front of me, and I let myself fall to my knees.

I buried them myself. I dug the graves with my bare hands because each swing of the shovel was too slow, too human, too distant from the burning inside my chest. My nails tore. My arms shook. The wound on my shoulder bled anew. But I kept digging until the soil was deep enough—two graves, side by side beneath the old ash tree. My son’s small body I wrapped in the blanket Elain had woven for him, sky-blue thread with crooked stars. He looked asleep. Almost peaceful. I kissed his forehead one last time.

Elain… the gods should have shielded her. She never deserved this. I carried her as gently as I could. Her hair brushed my face. It still smelled faintly of rosemary and smoke. I laid her beside our boy. No priest came. No neighbors. No soldiers. No words. Only me. And the

forest. And the moon, hiding behind gray morning clouds as if ashamed of what it had witnessed. When the earth was smoothed over each mound, I sat back and waited for tears that did not fall.

Perhaps I had none left. Perhaps the fever burning through me had consumed them. Or perhaps the beast inside me had eaten them as greedily as it had eaten my life. Bootsteps approached behind me. I didn't turn.

"You should have run farther," a voice said. Sharp. Clipped. Unfriendly. "William Fenwick, by Crown order, you're to be arrested for—"

"For?" My voice came out rough, dark.

"A man, his wife, and child dead," the soldier said. "You were found raving like a mad dog. Tracks all around the house, blood on your hands—"

The shovel I'd left lying in the grass was in my hand before I even realized I'd reached for it. The soldier tensed.

"Don't do anything foolish."

Foolish. If he only knew. "Leave," I whispered.

"We have orders."

"Leave," I repeated, louder.

A second soldier moved closer, musket raised. "Drop the weapon."

Something inside me snarled. I didn't. But I didn't need to. A howl tore through the forest, distant, haunting, answering something in me.

The two soldiers paled. "What… what was that?" one muttered.

"Wolf?" the other said unconvincingly.

I could smell their fear now. Sharp. Bitter. Delicious. I dropped the shovel. Not for them, but for me. Because I knew I stood one wrong breath away from tearing them apart with my bare hands.

“Go,” I said again.

They went.

When they vanished down the path, I knelt once more beside the graves and placed a hand on each mound.

“I’m going to find the thing that did this,” I whispered. “And I’m going to kill it. Even if I have to become a monster to do it.”

The wind stirred. Something cold and ancient brushed against my mind. Approval, perhaps? Or warning. Either way, I rose and left the graves behind, stepping into a world that no longer wanted me.

III

Teeth in the Veins

Night fell fast as I left Caerwyn Forest behind. The fever in my shoulder flared hotter with each mile, as if something alive gnawed at the wound from the inside. By midnight, I could barely stay upright. I found refuge in the ruins of an old stone watchtower overlooking the cliffs. I'd used it once as a boy to hide from storms. Funny how I found myself back here now, seeking shelter from a storm inside my own blood. The moment I sat, a tremor ran down my arms. My hands cramped, fingers curling until the knuckles cracked loudly. My jaw clenched so hard I tasted blood.

I hadn't realized I was growling until the sound echoed off the tower walls. Something was wrong. Wrong in a way no fever, no wound, no grief could explain. My senses were too sharp. My heartbeat thundered too loud. My skin felt too tight, too small. I shut my eyes. And the world opened. I smelled everything—salt from the sea below, foxes moving through bramble, stale ale from a village tavern half a mile away.

The moon above pulsed in my skull like a second heartbeat. I fell onto all fours. My bones shifted. Gods, the pain! Every nerve lit aflame. My spine arched with a cracking sound that sent panic through me. My teeth lengthened. My nails stretched into claws. I tried to scream but all that came out was a sound so deep and animal it rattled the stones. I was becoming something else. Something monstrous. I tore at the ground, desperate to hold onto even a shred of myself. Images flashed behind my eyes—Elain, Rhys, the beast that had killed them. The bite. The burning. The beast inside me surged, eager to break free.

"No…" I rasped through gritted teeth. "Not yet… not like this…"

A violent pulse ripped through my body. My jaw cracked sideways. Fur erupted along my arms in patches. My vision shifted until the world was washed in silver and shadow. The moon filled half the sky now, as if it hung inches above me.

'Let go', something whispered inside me. '*Avenge them. Tear. Hunt. Howl.*'

I slammed my head against the floor to silence it. The pain dulled my mind enough to think. Enough to cling to who I was. William Fenwick. Husband. Father. Not a beast. Not yet. I dragged myself upright, shaking, panting, only half-human, half-wolf, half-nightmare. The fever receded for a moment, letting me breathe. And that was when I saw the figure standing in the tower doorway. A woman cloaked in moon-silver cloth, holding a staff carved with runes that glowed faintly like frost under the moonlight. Her eyes were luminous, ancient, ageless.

"You fight the change," she said softly. "But it will break you if you do."

I bared my teeth without meaning to. She didn't flinch.

"I am Seris Wynne," she continued, stepping closer. "Priestess of Luna. And you, William Fenwick… are marked by the Moonkiss."

My pulse hammered. "Whatever is inside me, I don't want it."

"You have no choice," she whispered. "But you do have a path."

She extended a hand to me. And for reasons I couldn't explain–fear maybe, or pain and desperation, I took it. The fever surged again. But this time, I didn't fall alone.