

HOPE

THE BRACHA LIVES



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Prologue

Medieval England - Year 1377

They had made it! A small puff of white smoke escaped the woman's trembling blue lips, a shiver travelled up her spine, leaving thousands of tiny hairs rising on end. Heavy rain splattered around her and her companion. It's every drop pelting paltering the soggy, brown earth.

Venusa, the older of the two women, knew that Hope, the young girl she had raised from a newborn, to be just as miserable as she was — if not worse. She tried to tighten the muscles around her jaw, wishing her teeth would stop chattering in her mouth. With a hand that shook from the cold, Venusa reached out to pull on the bell cord at the entrance of the huge stone fortress and prayed, they both desperately needed shelter from the pouring rain. The cord slipped out of her grasp, wiggling in the air, teasing. She held back a curse, and tried again; grasping it tight pulling down on it with a vengeance. Her frozen fingers complained at the movement, by shooting flames all the way up to her forearms. They heard the sound of the bell echo on the other side of the massive, wooden double doors. Now, all they had to do was wait for someone to come and greet them. Please hurry, her heart whispered. Venusa looked at Hope

from under the hood of her wet woolen grey cape, and swallowed back the fright and panic of what they were about to do.

So much had happened in such a short time. Their entire world had crumbled around them. Gazing at her companion she knew what hid under the soggy material, it was the face of a young beautiful woman, with luminous light green eyes, and hair as dark as night that fell all the way to her waist in soft, unruly curls. High cheek bones and soft pink lips that rarely smiled. Even as a child, Hope had walked as an adult. She was tall for a woman, with a slim figure.

There wasn't a facial expression or gesture Venusa did not know. Her stare devoured Hope, wanting to keep in memory every detail of the one who had owned a part of her heart for eighteen years. She took a deep breath, feeling tears well up in her eyes; she swallowed back the pain vowing not to fall apart. Venusa shook her head trying to get a better grasp upon her emotions. It would do them no good to upset the girl more than she already was.

She needed to be strong for the both of them. Venusa could not tear her gaze away from the one she had called *daughter*. So long ago, this beautiful woman had been a newborn baby in her arms. The rain continued to splatter around them but she no longer cared or noticed. Her mind going back to that fateful night so long ago So long ago, and yet, it seemed like yesterday.



I

Eighteen Years Earlier

With the soft glow of moonlight guiding her, a lone female figure roamed about the forest, cursing the thick foliage of tall trees, making it excruciatingly difficult to see where she was headed. Exhausted from her extensive trek, Venusa berated herself for not having stopped searching for her quarry, and instead finding shelter before the sun set. Her body begged for mercy but something greater than her physical needs pushed her onward with urgency. She took comfort in the melodious sounds of the night, as its creatures serenaded the stars. The high-pitched whines of a lone wolf gave her pause for alarm. A stealth and steady hand reached for the dagger at her waist, slowing her footsteps to a halt. Patient, she waited for the rest of the pack to reply. The whimpered howling that followed had the dark grey hood covering her reddish disheveled hair fall softly upon her shoulders as she sought out the location from which the lamenting wails had come from. *They seemed to be frightened of something, but what? Wolves were predators, and acted as such. Something must be afoot for them to sing a song of such dismay.* Her cobalt blue gaze settled upon the moving fog ahead, as it too, most peculiarly, followed the distressed echoes of the furry beasts. Stunned, holding her breath prisoner

within the confines of her chest, she observed with tremendous disbelief the grey cloud move with precision and *haste*?

A newborn's piercing cries resounded beyond the mist, disturbing in its wake all that rested in peaceful slumber throughout the forest. Unfamiliar, the new life's boisterous voice demanded to be recognized as a part of its new world. Venusa moved at once, if a newborn was close by, then it had a mother as well. With the wolves circling about, mother and child were in grave danger. She followed the wails as one would a beacon. A thick wall of grey swirling mist made her stop short. Cautiously she pressed her hand forward in order to convince herself there was no harm to be had should she continue on ahead. The urgent pitter patter of movement halted her once more. *The wolves were moving about ... retreating? Who or what could inspire such fright in a pack of hungry animals?* She advanced slowly, entering the haze before her.

Its bitter, frigid air nipped at her, pushing her onward to the other side. Before her, cradled in the enormous roots of a Rowan tree, protected and sheltered, sat a young woman whose features were hidden by long strands of black hair, as dark as night. Venusa hesitated to venture further as the incessant cries from the child were beckoning her to come closer. A small ragged breath escaped from the mother's mouth, she wiped away the tears upon her cheeks before reaching for the child from between her legs with trembling, blood-soaked hands. Her soft sobs of overwhelming love pierced through Venusa's soul. Guilt crept up her spine for spying on such a sacred moment.

A testament to their refusal to let go of such an easy prey, the whines of the wolf pack broke her out of her spell. She stared, dumbfounded, as the animals paced back and forth along what she concluded to be an invisible border created by the mist. They growled their discontent one last time before retreating. Had she not witnessed this with her own eyes she never would have believed it. *The smell of the blood should have whetted their appetites, why had they not attacked such an easy prey? The woman was weak from giving birth and as defenseless as the newborn in her arms.*

Bewildered and confused, Venusa stood as still as a thousand year old tree, her earlier fatigue and physical pain gone. Feeling the earth tremble gently beneath her feet, a sure sign of the goddess wanting to address her, Venusa exhaled, wishing her mind, heart, and spirit to be free of anything that could hinder the deity from speaking to her, *"Well done my child. You have found the one named Kelsa, and her daughter who is in need of all that you are. Go and take my daughter, protect her always. Keep her hidden from man until it is time for her to reveal herself."* With great regret Venusa felt the essence of the goddess gently leave her senses. Excitement filled her, her quest would be crowned with tremendous success and happiness for all concerned. Finding this pair was a confirmation of her gift, recognition of her life's purpose. From the first moment, she had felt the soft butterfly flutters of another heartbeat next to her own as she meditated in the hot springs inside the sacred mountain she had known what to do. Certainty had grabbed hold of her in a way she still, to this day, could not explain. Soon enough, the child's voice had begun haunting her dreams, beckoning her to come and find her or all would be lost.

Eager to start upon her journey, she had sought out the wisdom of the elders and their Ollam, the oldest and wisest druid of her clan, who delighted in the revelation of her gift from the goddess — *A hunter of lost souls, disciple of the goddess who walked the earth in search of her wayward children*. Ever since the invasion of the Romans upon their shorelines, instrumental in propelling the knowledge and magic of the goddess into the dark abyss in men's hearts, the birth of *hunters of lost souls* as a gift from the deity, came and went in discreet waves in order to assemble her people once more without alerting her foe's attention, whomever they may be.

Travelling back to the sacred mountain, her tribe, living in secrecy with this mother and child was going to be a challenge but she did not care. Her people were going to be overjoyed at her success. An invading unpleasant afterthought settled itself viciously upon her good humor. Only one would be part of the journey. *The goddess had mentioned her*

daughter, her child, not they, her children. Aghast, she wanted to scream her anguish. *No! It could not be so. It just could not be. She refused it to be so.* But no matter how much she wished to fight against it she could not deny the soft whispers skimming upon the surface of her heart. The young mother would not be alive much longer; this explained why she felt the lone heartbeat, as well as why the child had pressed her onward so ardently. The infant knew of her mother's coming demise.

Venusa mentally flogged herself for the pain she was about to inflict upon the unsuspecting woman. The elders had warned her many times that throughout her future quests as a hunter many hardships would come her way, difficult decisions would befall her. An absent hand touched her left forearm with its inked drawing, reminding her of what she had been born to do. Remembering her oath to the goddess, to her clan and to herself, she needed to do what was now asked of her. Seeking courage from those who had walked this path before her, whose courage and will to live brought her here to this moment in time. Releasing her pent-up breath from between trembling lips, Venusa took that first step, sealing her fate, and unknowingly that of mankind's for centuries to come. She approached the mother and child, disturbing as she did so, the hundreds of sleeping branches scattered about upon the forest floor in order to make her presence known. The frightened woman's silver gaze easily found her in the darkness. Venusa stumbled backwards clumsily, afraid.

Weak-kneed, two silver abysses held her captive. The soft glow of the moonlight managed to pierce through the abundant foliage, caressing the importance of this powerful stare. *Before her was a silver-eyed! The mother of this child was a silver-eyed!* Her mind repeated over and over. *How could this be?* The druids and elders told stories to the young children of such people but none had been known to exist in at least a thousand years. Still, with every announcement of a new birth, druids always rushed to see the child's eyes ... hoping against hope. *No wonder the wolves had ran away, all living animals feared them.*

The elders preached that they had roamed the earth as guides to the newly-departed, helping them to move forward onto another life, another purpose, another realm. Not belonging in the land of the living nor the dead. The legend explained how one by one these individuals were hunted down, destroyed by those fearing their infinite knowledge. Now that she stood in the presence of one, she understood the trepidation their gaze evoked. The young girl's eyes were as brilliant as the stars that occupied the night sky. It felt as though the two bright pools of silver reached beyond her defenses connecting with her very essence, her soul. Leaving her with a sentiment of having been stripped bare from the inside out, she felt vulnerable beyond belief. Trembling from head to toe, Venusa look down at her feet, willing them to move. Her wildly hammering heart ready to pounce out of her chest, she approached, kneeling next to the mother and child.



II

The exhausted woman's eyes followed the intruder's every movement, hugging her newborn daughter close to her chest instinctively. Needing to gain her confidence, Venusa slowly reached for her dagger, making use of it to sever the umbilical cord. Taking hold of her grey cloak, she handed it to the woman in order to wrap the child. Busy with her task, Venusa failed to protect her left forearm, letting her inked skin be seen. The silver eyes widened, recognizing the lost symbol of a circle made of crisscrossed lines, a pregnant woman in the middle of it, arms raised above her head, holding a precious stone. Below the circular markings was the image of a falcon, the divine image of a *hunter*. The mother's reaction was swift, as a bloodied hand grabbed hold of the decorated flesh, holding it hostage. Growling as she did so through clenched teeth, "Who are you? Why do you carry this mark upon your skin? Who have you come for *hunter*?"

Surprised by the woman's knowledge of her people, Venusa paused for a moment reining in her thoughts, treading with great caution.

"You know of these markings?"

Not fooled in the least, the protective mother's voice rose, demanding answers.

“Who are you? ANSWER ME!”

“My name is Venusa, I am a hunter as you say but I ... I seek souls. I was sent by the goddess to find you.”

Kelsa let go of the red-haired woman's arm as if bitten by a snake, directing her attention in the opposite direction, focusing her gaze intently upon ... *nothing*. Her voice trembling filled with delusion and betrayal, she addressed the empty space beside her, “You knew she would be coming and said nothing?”

Tears welled up, drowning the two silver abysses. They cascaded, one by one, gliding gently upon her pale white skin. Her outrage awakened the wildlife about them, she screamed, desperate for another choice, for another life.

“ANSWER ME DAMN YOU! YOU KNEW SHE WAS COMING AND YOU SAID NOTHING?”

Understanding she was in the presence of a spirit she could not observe, Venusa stayed silent, her mind trying its best to grasp what was taking place. Questions raced on ahead jumbling her every thought. *Who was this invisible soul? What purpose did it have in the mother's as well as the child's life?* She wavered by the forceful accusations with which the woman was speaking, whoever it was had failed her tremendously in some way.

“How could you Aniel? How could you not tell me of this? How can you profess to love me and do this?”

Venusa followed the woman's angry turn of her head, with great disbelief, as she addressed herself to ... nothingness. It quickly dawned upon her just how important her presence was to the survival of her race. Venusa wanted to shout aloud in exaltation. This woman was a silver-eye! Silver-eye still walked the earth; the great ones, whose task was to live among the humans with their many hardships, as well as interact with the departed souls. Silver-eyed people knew of the true meaning of life, of what lay beyond the mist.

The silver-eye's purpose, a difficult one, was not to be envied. They carried the heavy burden of bringing the souls of the dead back to the Great Goddess. They were revered for what they did but feared with just as much intensity. At another time this woman would have been held as a half goddess for accepting such sacrifice to have been handed to her. But not in this day, Venusa knew this poor soul must have been forced to lead a life of isolation. The infant was surely destined to have enormous potential; silver-eyed never had children, to Venusa's knowledge. The question was for what purpose had this child taken a human form? Could this child be the answer to all of their problems, for the few who remained loyal to the Great Goddess? As Venusa pondered the question, Kelsa knew something to be terribly wrong. Aniel's words had filled her with dread. Invaded with a sense of doom, Kelsa clutched her daughter to her chest. She addressed the stranger before her.

"Have you come to take her away?"

Void of any soothing words that would make this hardship any less painful, Venusa's unease was Kelsa's reply. Two accusing, silver eyes roamed Venusa's features as she attempted to come to grips with what was to come.

"She has come for our child. This is why she is here, is it not?"

Venusa gazed in the direction of the empty space to which the young woman had spoken, unsure of what the spirit would answer. A heavy silence was Kelsa's reply from both the spirit world and the human one. The lack of words unleashed her fury.

"NO! I REFUSE TO LET HER GO! DAMN YOU FOR DOING THIS TO ME! SHE IS MINE. I AM HER MOTHER!"

The mother wept, uncontrollably searching for her breath while she rocked back and forth. Her head bent over her own flesh and blood resting in her arms; her silky black hair shielding mother and child from the rest of the world. Venusa silently cursed the evilness of man for what she was to do. If not for its imposed violence, the need for hunters such as she would not exist. A soft lamenting murmur reached the mother's lips.

"I cannot. I cannot give her away. How can I? I am her mother. How can I let her go when I love her so much?"

Overwhelmed with emotion, Venusa felt the wetness on her cheeks. She suppressed the bubbling fury at Portan for sending her on this task. He had not prepared her for this. The elder had never spoken to her about taking a newborn infant from its mother. How could she do such a cold-hearted thing? *Because you must do so for the greater purpose* replied the voice of the universe, the voice of the Great Goddess. It echoed through Venusa. As much as she tried to ignore it there it was vibrating through every inch of her body. She knew what she had to do, but knowing it did not make it easier, and that was why Portan had never spoken to her of this. This was something that could not be taught, it was something that needed to be lived in order to understand it. Her teacher had known Venusa would never have agreed to this task. She needed to do something, anything to give some comfort to the grieving mother. Venusa prayed for guidance. *Oh Great Goddess, you who have suffered the most in having your children ripped from your loving arms by the spreading darkness that is upon us. Please guide me in trying to ease her pain. I beg you.* Letting herself be guided, Venusa gently reached out, brushing away the offending strands of black hair hiding the woman's face, touching her pale white cheek as a mother would do to comfort a hurting child. Surprised at such a tender gesture and with a lifetime of craving such empathy, Kelsa leaned into it. Venusa gazed at the resting infant and spoke in an almost whisper not wanting to disturb her.

"She needs a name ... a gift that can only be given by her mother. It is something that can never be taken away from her."

The new mother caressed the infant's features with a mixture of deep unconditional love and sorrow. Her smile wavered as she blessed the child with the one and only gift she would ever bestow upon her.

"Hope, I name her Hope."

At that moment, Hope waved her chubby little hands in approval. Venusa hesitated, knowing full well there was no other way for her to do what she needed. Time was of the essence.

“I need to leave now. Danger lurks, coming closer with every moment that I spend here with you. I must depart immediately. I will take good care of her. I swear upon my own life that I will love and care for her as my own flesh and blood. My people will welcome her with open arms.”

“Promise that you will tell her about me. Tell her of her three aunts, who awaited her arrival with so much love and impatience, that ... that her mother loved her more than her own life.”

Venusa fought back the lump in her throat. She reached out, her touch filled with motherly tenderness.

“She will be told of your strength, of the courage it has taken you to live and walk amongst us as a silver-eyed. She will know of your love for her and of your greatest sacrifice. I know it will bring her comfort during her troubled times. Hope will be raised amongst her people, followers of the Great Goddess. She will walk this earth with pride in who she is. I make this promise to you on my ancestor’s honor.”

Venusa quickly reached for Hope wanting to make the parting as quick as possible. She forced her limbs onward, tears blurring her vision, refusing to look back at the scene behind her. A tumultuous, raging storm of guilt plagued her, knowing she was leaving the mother to her impending doom. The constant reminder that there was nothing else she could have done to save her from her destiny did nothing to assuage her remorse. Time had run out for the silver-eyed. This woman would be going back to live with the goddess soon. Hope cried in her arms in one last farewell, one last goodbye, and one last I love you, for a mother’s ultimate sacrifice. Venusa hugged Hope close, whispering through her flow of tears, “It’s all right little one. I will take care of you. I promise that I will keep you safe no matter what, all of this pain and sorrow will not have been in vain.”