

ÉLODIE TIREL

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Luna

THE CURSED CITY

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THIS BOOKLET IS AN EXCERPT
FROM *THE CURSED CITY*,
THE FIRST VOLUME OF THE SERIES LUNA.

With her sensitive nuanced style, Élodie Tirel draws us in with her tales of the adventures of Luna, a 12-year-old Moon Elf with translucent skin and silver hair, who was raised by a pack of wolves and whose exceptional talents mark her out for many extraordinary missions. With her, we discover strange worlds that, one after the other, introduce us to the subterranean city of Rhasgarrok and the sinister Black Elves who live there, the kingdom of the gods, the winged elves of Nydessim, the world of vampires, the lycarides and werewolves, as well as the realm of the dead.



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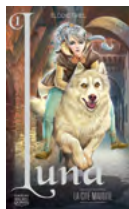
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Luna

THE CURSED CITY

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PROLOGUE

“It must be hot on the surface ...”, sighed Ambrethil, the young silver elf.

In the sinister depths of the underground city of Rhasgarrok, there was never so much as a wisp of fresh air. Spring had already come and gone and it pained Ambrethil to have missed the fragrance of the underbrush springing to life. She had not heard the secret song of the blossoming buds, inhaled the perfume of the dew-soaked wild flowers, or delighted at the joyful trill of the birds at the first light of dawn.

It had been months since she had last glimpsed a ray of sunlight or the magical twinkling of the stars. Even the pale light of the moon was forbidden her. To her great despair, only candlelight would mark her days and nights from now on.

Ambrethil had not come to Rhasgarrok willingly. No sane silver elf would risk leaving behind loved ones to adventure into the depths of the accursed city of drows, the black elves who had been exiled since time immemorial.

The young woman blinked to hold back her tears. Her fate was sealed, but was far from the worst. How many of her brothers and sisters had perished under a drow blade ... For centuries, a hate passed on from generation to generation had separated the elves and drows. The latter, believing themselves superior, thought of their cousins on the surface as potential slaves at best and, at worst, as future sacrifices to Lloth, the cruel Spider goddess.

A sharp pain in her lower belly brought Ambrethil back to reality, causing her to grimace. The child seemed to be in a hurry to be born. She slid her pale, almost bluish, hand over her rounded belly to soothe the little life that was growing inside her. Ambrethil caressed the distended skin, chasing away the bloody images that sometimes haunted her memory. It was not good for the baby.

Since she had realized she was pregnant, the young elf had forbidden herself from dwelling on the terrible acts of violence the drows were inflicting on her kin, tainting the world with their blood. This baby had become her only

reason to live and Ambrethil forced herself to remember only the good times, the happy years spent in Laltharils with her parents.

A sharp contraction caused her to double over in pain. The young woman took a deep breath in and clenched her teeth to get through it. Then the painful grip subsided and Ambrethil could breath again. There was no point in calling Viurna now. It was better to let her sleep a while longer and wait until the contractions became truly unbearable.

Dear Viurna ... Ambrethil thought of how incredibly lucky she had been to be able to keep her faithful companion by her side. A nurse, servant and confidant in one, the worthy wood elf was almost family. The two women shared a strong bond. Viurna had been with her when the drows had attacked their convoy and it was a miracle that the elder woman was still there to assist her at the birth of her first child.

Ambrethil flashed back to the night of the kidnapping.

The marauding drows had surprised them at sundown. It was towards the end of last fall. Their convoy, made up of around twenty noble moon elves and a handful of servants, were travelling along a road on the outskirts of the Ravenstein forest en route to the city of Laltharils. Fierce and cruel, the black elf

warriors were ruthless, killing anyone who dared resist.

It was thanks to her uncommon beauty, her fine features, her clear gaze, and her magnificent blonde mane of hair, that Ambrethil had been spared. The marauders had spotted her immediately and set her apart. The elderly servant to whom she seemed attached - a sorry potential offering for the Spider goddess - had also been spared.

The drows were counting on a handsome price for this lot of slaves. The prisoners were bought as soon as they arrived in Rhasgarrok by Elkantar And'Thriel. This black elf sorcerer was a member of the prestigious Shadow Guild, an expert in the dark arts. For a male, he enjoyed a privileged position in a deeply hierarchical matriarchal society, controlled by sinister women Elders.

Barely saying a word, Elkantar had taken his new slaves straight to his dingy lair, hewed out of the black rock of the city itself. At the time, Ambrethil feared the worst. The drows had a fearsome reputation: they were murderous butchers skilled in barbaric and bloody rites. Their race had been corrupted by the Spider goddess, whose cult was exclusive and required her followers to commit the most depraved acts known to humanity.

However, against all expectation, the dark-skinned, silver-haired sorcerer had treated Ambrethil with the respect due to someone of her rank. He had given her a comfortable room and did not disturb her during the day. He had, however, required that the young silver elf come to his apartments every night. Ambrethil had refused at first but relented when the drow threatened to sell the elderly wood elf.

Strangely enough, Elkantar had turned out to be quite gentle. He had never forced himself on his captive. When after barely two months of captivity, Ambrethil had announced to the drow that she was pregnant with his child, he had seemed satisfied, relieved almost. He had put an end to these nightly visits. It was almost as if his sole purpose had been to conceive this baby.

A short while later, Elkantar had given her a beautiful pearl amulet. Was it to thank her or to protect the child she was carrying? Ambrethil had not asked; she had simply slid the amulet around her neck.

From that day on, the black elf visited her regularly. He seemed to be making sure that the pregnancy was unfolding normally and that the mother-to-be wanted for nothing. Naturally reserved, the drow rarely spoke to

her but, from time to time, he offered her a bright bouquet of flowers to adorn her room.

Had Elkantar fallen in love?

Ambrethil doubted it. The black elves were incapable of feeling pure emotions like love, tenderness, friendship, or even trust. Apart from the precious talisman and the flowers he had given her, Elkantar had never shown her the least sign of affection. Not a kind word, or a gentle touch, or even so much as a smile. One night, however, the somber-faced drow had sat down beside her to confess his most secret concerns ...

A sharp contraction interrupted Ambrethil's reflections. She nearly threw up. She cried out moanfully to Viurna.

The elderly elf with the coppery skin and black hair, still beautiful despite her advanced years, woke up immediately and ran to her mistress' side. With great tenderness, Viurna laid a warm, damp cloth on Ambrethil's belly to ease the pain. Then, caressing the young woman's forehead, she began to hum an ancient elfin lullaby that, in the past, she had sung to lull her charge to sleep.

Reviled and banished by the drows, the noble tongue of the surface elves, with its delicate accents and musical sounds, instantly calmed the woman in labour. She lay down again. The

sweet, melodious voice acted like a soothing balm on her.

Ambrethil's fine fingers grasped for Elkantar's amulet between her breasts. Round, full and white as the moon, the talisman was engraved with the delicate profile of Eilistraë, the solitary, benevolent goddess. In the drow pantheon, Eilistraë was the daughter of the fearsome Lloth. Rejected by her mother, the graceful silver goddess was the patroness of the few good drows who worshipped her in secret. Goddess of the moon, of beauty, music and song, as well as of harmony between the races, Eilistraë had watched over Ambrethil's pregnancy. The young woman had fervently prayed to her every night.

The elf gripped the pearl amulet and remembered Elkantar's terrible revelation:

The ancestral tradition cannot be escaped. Each generation, every noble family of Rhasgarrok must offer a daughter to Lloth's priestesses to be raised as one of them. But the House of And'Thriel has not produced a daughter for four generations. Lloth's high priestess, Elder Zesstra, is furious. She could curse and destroy my house once and for all, but I am too valuable to her for her to do away with me permanently. You must know, Ambrethil, that I have had wives before you who bore me only sons.

To punish me, Elder Zesstra had them all taken away and sacrificed, destroying any hopes I had of a succession ... That is why I chose you. As soon as I saw you in the slave market, I knew that *you* would give me a daughter. A little drow girl, more beautiful than the night, who would undo the insult to Lloth, join her priesthood, and so ensure the survival of the House of And'Thriel. Once this girl has been given up, Elder Zesstra will no longer lay a hand on my sons. The ones you will bear me soon enough.

Ambrethil had turned pale. "And what would happen if ... if despite everything, I have a boy?"

Elkantar's voice had hardened.

If by some misfortune the child is a boy, I am doomed and can have no more hopes of siring a daughter. But this time, I do not intend to lose the child to Lloth's priestesses. I have suffered enough and seen too many of my heirs sacrificed. I will arrange for you to escape to the surface. You will return to your people and raise my son among the moon elves. I swear to you, the House of And'Thriel will disappear from Rhasgarrok but will not die out completely!

Elkantar had uncharacteristically taken Ambrethil's delicate hand and pressed it fervently

to his black lips. Then he had abruptly risen and left the room without looking back.

Ambrethil, beside herself, had contained her joy. But since then, not a day had gone by that she had not prayed to Elistraë to give her a son.

The contractions came closer and closer together, announcing the baby's imminent arrival. In less than an hour, Ambrethil's fate would be decided. She would either give birth to a son and regain her freedom or she would have a little girl, in which case, Ambrethil would have to reach a decision before Elkantar gave the child to the priestesses ... because she could not imagine abandoning the newborn to the accursed goddess' followers. Leave her daughter with these fearsome, bloodthirsty, vengeful priestesses who would force her to commit the most evil acts to satisfy a goddess hungry for suffering, torture and death ... Never!

Enough!

She must not think of it anymore. Elistraë would give her a son. It could not be otherwise. She had prayed too much to be denied.

“Now push, my dear!” Viurna said firmly. “Push harder! I feel the head ... Go on! One last time!”

Ambrethil took a deep breath in and managed to gather enough strength to help her

child find its way out of her body. She pushed three times. As the child emerged to the soft light of the candles, Ambrethil almost fainted from the pain. But she could not lose consciousness ... Not now! She had to know.

Ignoring the newborn's cries, Viurna carefully and methodically cut the umbilical cord that connected mother and child. Ambrethil noticed that the elder woman's wrinkled face was dripping with tears.

"Viurna," she whispered as she held back a sob. "I know you well enough to know that those are not tears of joy ... Tell me the truth!"

The old nurse simply turned away and sniffed loudly. She plunged the child in a basin of warm water to wash it clean. The baby instantly stopped crying.

"Tell me, Viurna!" cried the desperate young mother. "It's ... it's a girl, isn't it? I have a little girl ... a drow?"

The servant did not turn around or respond. She concentrated instead on the infant. Then, hearing Ambrethil's sobs, she cleared her throat and overcome with emotion said:

"Yes, Ambrethil, you have a daughter. But she isn't ... This child isn't a drow!"

"Bring her to me!" ordered the young woman, her heart pounding.

Viurna took the baby out of the bath and

wrapped her in a light cloth before placing the child on her mother's belly.

Ambrethil could not breath from shock.

Her daughter was white! As white as alabaster. As white as the moon.

Her eyes were even lighter than those of Ambrethil, and as clear as a summer sky. There was no trace of Elkantar, her father. Two tiny, pointed and delicately curved ears poked out from between her silver bangs.

The little girl was magnificent: a beautiful silver elf!

Guided by smell, the infant instinctively buried her little nose in her mother's bosom, searching for nourishment. She greedily latched onto her mother's blue nipple and, as she nursed lustily, her little fingers grasped at the pearly white amulet.

Already in love, Ambrethil forgot her pain and her fears and succumbed instantly to the child's charm. Their bodies were perfectly one; the baby's scent was so warm and inviting, her skin so smooth ... Ambrethil would have happily lost herself in the magic of the moment if not for a sudden rush of morbid thoughts.

A moon elf!

What would Elkantar think? Would he think she had cheated on him? And if so, how would he react? He had never been violent, but if he

thought himself betrayed could he be capable of killing them both? And if not, would he give the baby to the drow priestesses? Would the fearsome black elves accept a moon elf as a worshipper of Lloth?

The answer was clear. The little girl could be neither servant nor priestess to Lloth. If Elkan-tar decided to give her up anyway, Elder Zess-tra would certainly delight in sacrificing something so precious to her bloodthirsty goddess.

Ambrethil knew at once what she had to do. And there was not a minute to lose.

Chapter 1

Daylight was fading quickly. In a few minutes, the entire Wieryn forest would be overcome by the icy stillness of the night. Winter would no doubt come early this year; the first snowflakes would soon appear. Huge reserves of supplies would be needed to survive the fierce blizzards that would soon ravage the region.

For the moment, the cold was still bearable and Luna, wrapped in a heavy wolf-skin cloak, was seated on a bed of leaves at the foot of a large oak tree.

The girl had gathered the most beautiful acorns she could find and was painstakingly piercing each one with a sharp bone needle. This task completed, she ripped out one of the silver strands of hair that poked out from her hood and threaded it through the acorns one

by one. Luna then tied together the two ends of the thread and held up her handiwork to appraise it. She smiled, proud of herself: the necklace was magnificent! She would give it to Shara.

Remembering her mother, Luna realized that it was late and that she had been gone for hours already. Shara would probably worry if her daughter did not hurry home at once.

Luna tucked the gift into her pocket as she stood up. She shook off the dead leaves that clung to her cloak and looked about her. It was almost pitch black but, like all elves, she had excellent eyesight and, unlike all elves, could see in the dark. Returning home would not be difficult, but she would have to avoid tarrying on the way, as the approach of winter meant there were many hungry predators about.

The elf found a cleared out path.

The air was crisp but incredibly pure and Luna delighted in watching her warm breath materialize every time she exhaled. She saw extraordinary shapes in the smoky white spirals, inventing imaginary friends and laughing as she made out the dancing form of a fairy or the deformed face of a wood gnome.

A ray of moonlight suddenly shone on a bush in her path and her pale face lit up with a smile. Blackberries! So late in the year? Luna

hurriedly gathered the precious berries and slipped them in her other pocket. These were for Zek.

Though still young, Luna was always incredibly generous. Sharing, giving, putting the happiness of others ahead of her own was a natural instinct for her. Shara had adopted and nursed her as one of her own; she had saved the girl's life. Since then, Luna never tired of showing Shara how much she loved her and the rest of her family. The others brought back all sorts of game, but the graceful and delicate young elf girl did not know how to hunt. She offered instead what she gathered in the wild, often bringing back rare finds and, on occasion, fashioning little treasures.

Naturally curious and cheerful, the teenager fit in perfectly with the others. And if she was quiet and melancholic at times, her brothers accepted her silence and respected her space. They simply waited for her sadness to pass and then welcomed her back joyfully, proving how much they were attached to her. Luna was happy with them and hoped with all her heart that things would never change.

As she passed by the pond, she could not help but pause on the bank. Luna loved this spot. She often escaped here when she was troubled. She could spend hours watching the

reflection of clouds gliding over the mirror of water. But it was an even more fascinating scene at night.

Especially on this night.

The moon was full and cast its reflection in the dark surface of the pond. The two silver orbs shone with the same intensity in the centre of a starry firmament. They could almost have been a pair of twins, surrounded by fireflies, sharing secrets. Luna watched them dreamily. Would she one day manage to catch one of them? After all, were they not all sisters in a way? The Marécageux was always saying that she resembled the moon. It was he in fact who had named her *Luna*!

The girl leaned over the dark surface of the water and studied her reflection.

Yes, Luna and the moon were nearly identical: her milky almost bluish skin resembled the pale sheen of the moon. With her delicate features, she was already exceptionally beautiful for a girl her age. Her eyes, like two opal marbles, shone with mischief.

She pushed back her hood with a graceful sweep of her hand, allowing a cascade of hair to graze the water. She tilted her head slowly to the left, and then to the right, smiling admiringly at the pointed ears that peeked out from the silver mane. She looked almost nothing

like the rest of her family, but this pleased her. She thought herself quite pretty.

Suddenly, the mournful howl of a wolf in the distance made her jump.

It was high time she returned home. She thought it strange that Shara had not already sent Elbion to look for her, as she usually did.

The elf pulled her hood back on and slid her other hand across the water to wipe away her reflection. Then, after saying goodbye to the moon, she ran off in the direction of the clearing.

Though just twelve, Luna was a strong, fast runner. She moved so silently and fluidly that she appeared to be flying.

She was not more than a kilometre away from home, when she heard a branch crack on her left. She stopped at once, all her senses alert.

Her heart pounding, she listened intently. But the forest, in its black shroud, was deathly silent. She squinted to see whatever animal or creature was approaching, but all around her was still. She sniffed the icy air, imitating Elbion the experienced hunter, but there was no animal scent to be detected.

Suddenly, she spotted a creeping shadow in the light. Luna had just enough time to look behind her and see the beast pouncing on her.

It was a huge white wolf. Its claws were bared.



THE CURSED CITY



Luna is a young silver-haired elf who was raised by a pack of wolves. When Drow warrior women massacre her adoptive family, she takes refuge with her mentor, the Marécageux, who reveals to Luna the circumstances of her birth. To find her mother, Luna goes on a long journey that will take her to Rhasgarrok, the underground city of the Black Elves.

The young girl is disgusted when she discovers the slave market, the dirty back alleys and the dark creatures that inhabit the Drow city. Yet, it is here, in the very heart of Rhasgarrok, that she finds her true family. She also crosses paths with Darkhan, a black elf on a mission. Luna and this fierce warrior are polar opposites; yet, their destinies will soon intertwine. For better and for worse.

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