

An exclusive excerpt from
Wolf's Cross by S.A. Swann
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Interlude: Anno Domini 1333

continued from the Spectra Pulse newsletter...

Her name was Lucina, and she didn't remember who had named her. She lived in the deepest woods east of Gród Narew, and was mostly ignorant of the humans dwelling there. The people who lived on the fringes of these woods—especially those whose families had spent generations in its shadow—knew of her and her kind. Lucina's ancestors had haunted their tales ever since the land had become Christian.

However, it had been a long time since Lucina had family. And a long time since her kind occupied these woods in any numbers. She was alone, and the old folks' tales of about wolves clothed in human skin had become less urgent, less of a deterrent for hungry men who needed to hunt for their family's survival.

Lucina would watch these men as they made their weak attempts to capture game. Sometimes she would watch with the eyes of a wolf, sometimes with the eyes of a raven-haired maiden. She would watch them come into her wood and, more often than not, return empty-handed.

She watched, not out of any malice, but out of curiosity and a deep loneliness. She was the last of her kind in these woods, and she thought perhaps the last of her kind anywhere. These men who came to find food, they all had a home to go to.

Home was as alien a concept to Lucina as having to trap her prey or shoot it with an arrow.

Each winter, her despair grew deeper. She would always be alone, and she envied these human women who sent their men out to poach on her turf. But why? What could these frail human women give that she could not? She was stronger than they were, faster, and a better hunter than these poor men. . .

It was not long before she decided that there was no reason she couldn't have what they had. And when she decided this, Lucina studied these men with a new eye, looking for someone she could love, and could love her back. She watched how they moved, how they hunted, how they carried their kill.

And only days into the winter, when the snow barely dusted the needle floor of her woods, she saw the man who would become her mate. This man had broad shoulders and a presence far superior to the others who braved her forest. He also carried a masculine scent that made Lucina lick her lips in anticipation.

This was the man who would free her from her solitude.

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When Karl first saw her, a light snow was falling. Lucina stood in a clearing, white dusting a red cloak she had stolen from a cottage close to the woods. She smiled at him from under the hood, smelling him, watching him.

She stood between him and a dead hart. The freshly killed animal lay sprawled in the snow, slowly leaking blood from the wound Lucina had torn in its neck.

“What is this?” he asked. “Who are you and why are you alone in the woods?”

“My name is Lucina,” she said, her voice hoarse from so long without speech. “These woods are where I live.”

“It is dangerous. The animal that killed that deer may still be about.”

She walked up to him and placed a hand on his chest. When the cloak parted, it became obvious that the cloak was the only thing she did wear. His breath caught, and in his scent Lucina could tell he did not dislike what he saw. She leaned forward and whispered, lips brushing his ear, “The kill is mine.”

He didn’t move, didn’t speak, as her hand found its way under his shirt. “Do you wish some of it?”

“That is your kill?”

“I smelled it, tracked it, and tore its life-blood free with my teeth.” She licked his ear, tasting his sweat, smelling the first hint of fear.

“What are you?” he asked.

“You know,” she said. “These are my woods.” She caressed him, running her hand down the side of his chest. “Do you want a share of my kill?”

“What are you asking?”

“A leg perhaps? The meat would feed several mouths.”

“You would give that to me?”

She brought her face around in front of his, their lips a finger’s breadth apart. “In return for something.”

“What?”

Her hand traveled lower, into his breeches.

“A respite from loneliness,” she said before she kissed him.

It may have been fear, or shock, the thought of a hungry family, or simply the heat of Lucina’s skin so close to his own. It may have been the fact that her loneliness was manifest in every word she spoke. It may have just been the fact that Karl was a man, and men are weak.

Whatever the reason—any or all—Karl did not pull away from Lucina when he could have. He tasted her mouth, and let her place his hand on her naked bosom. Her cloak fell away and she led him down to the snow-covered earth and buried him under the weight of her solitude.

He came to her many times that winter, and each time her heart grew fuller at his presence. To him, she was a secret vice—a spirit that lived in another world of trees, and snow, bloody carcasses, and lovemaking in the snow. To her, he was a reason to live—a joy, a lover and a husband in what sense she could understand the term. They spoke little—he walking in his dream, she drinking in obsession.

There was no doubt in Lucina’s heart that the next time Karl came to embrace her, he would tell her that he would stay. It was that hope that carried her through the depth of winter. And it was that hope that died slowly in the spring.

As the snow melted, and the ground softened, the men who braved these woods stayed upon their plots of land to till the soil and grow the harvest that would keep them and their people alive through the next winter. There was no one to explain this to Lucina—for all the watching of the men in the forest, all the listening to their language, she still didn’t understand. All she knew was that, as the first buds grew, her Karl did not return to her.

Many times she stood, in her red cloak, next to some beast she had taken. She attacked larger and larger prey, as if Karl might be enticed back—bucks, a bull elk, a mountain cat, a bear.

As the months passed, her heart shrank, and her belly grew.

And as summer became verdant, and Karl’s seed grew large within her, her heart grew black and cold. She had been cast aside in worse isolation than the loneliness she had thought to escape. As gravid as she became, it became impossible for her to change, to run as a wolf does. Hunting became difficult, and she became gaunt.

When she gave birth, it was with blood and screams and the rending of flesh. However, she survived, as she could bear far more insult than any human woman. Three children she had, all girls. And as she licked the blood off of Karl's daughters, she decided that Karl would have to come help care for them. And that meant she had to remove any reasons he had for staying away.

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She found Karl's farm in the midst of a horrible storm at the end of harvest season. Ice fell like needles from a sky boiling and black as ink. The wind howled and bit with a force that felt as if it could tear flesh from bone.

Her howls were louder than the storm, louder than the thunder. Karl heard her cries as he huddled with his family around the fire in their cottage. At first he didn't want to admit to himself that he knew what made those terrible, terrifying sounds.

But he knew.

Even though he had never seen his winter lover in other than her human guise, he knew. Just as he knew that his trysts were no dream, and the wood where they had happened no fairyland.

He had bought more than meat, and at a much dearer price.

Karl took an axe and told his wife to protect their young son, to bar the door and shutters, and let no one in before morning. Not even him. Then he left the cottage to face the beast that cried for him in the storm.

She stood in front of the cottage, waiting for him. She was naked, but no longer human. Lips that had borne his kisses were curled in the lupine snarl of a feral she-wolf. The hands that had caressed him were now dark-furred and long-fingered, ending in hooked claws. The legs that had straddled his body were now the crooked legs of a wolf.

He didn't want to know her. He wanted this apparition to be something new and strange to him. But he looked into her eyes, and he knew who he faced, and what.

"You left me." Her voice, always rough from lack of use, came out of her lupine throat as little more than a growl.

"I had to tend the harvest." The words were empty in Karl's mouth. She had come to him, true. She had been the one to place her lips on his—but he never pulled away. He had never said that he had a family, a wife, a son. He had pretended that because the situation was unreal, that it wasn't real. That because she wasn't human, it didn't matter.

And the horror he felt was more for what he had done than for the monster standing in front of him. She panted, steam rising from her muzzle as lightning carved highlights from black ice-matted fur.

“You left me alone, with child.” She growled and took a step toward him. His axe dangled impotent from his hands and he shook his head, trying to deny the truth of the allegation.

“I didn’t know,” he said finally, as knives made of falling ice scoured the tears from his cheeks.

“I birthed your whelps, alone in a cave, and swaddled them in the skin of a bear I had killed. . . for you.” She stood before him, barely taller than he, and starvation thin, but still seeming to loom over him. He felt her breath on his face as she growled.

“I didn’t know,” he said, as if those were the only words left he knew.

“You will care for our children.”

She stared into his face, the head of a starved she-wolf, ice matting her fur into spikes, muzzle wrinkled into a snarl. But the eyes were hers, and in them he saw the pain, the loneliness.

“Yes.”

The creature before him froze, as if she couldn’t quite understand his words. Her muzzle lost its snarl as she pulled back from him. “You will come back with me. To your daughters.”

“I will go with you,” Karl said. He thought of his wife and child, barricaded in the cottage. He couldn’t leave them to the anger of this beast. Better that the she-wolf received what she wanted, what he implicitly promised her.

“You will come back? With me?” The voice softened in her inhuman mouth, and her eyes shone from more than melted ice. In a flash of lightning, Karl saw one side of her mouth pull up in a melancholy smile. “Our children are beautiful.”

“Take me to them,” he said, all the time thinking of his wife and son, in the cabin.

In a moment of fear and weakness, he glanced back. He knew it was a mistake as soon as he turned his head, because he could hear Lucina growl.

“Liar.”

He turned back. “No I—”

She backhanded him in the chest, a blow that sent him rolling into the icy mud of the path.

“Liar!” she shrieked at him, jaws snapping at air. When the lightning lit her face, he saw nothing but fury.

He raised a hand, hoping to pull back the thread of hope he had seen in her eyes a moment ago. “No, I will—”

She pounced on him, knocking him to the ground, pressing his shoulders to the ground with her massive clawed hands. “You will tire of me, like you always have. You will come back with me, but you will leave. Like you always have. You will always come back here.”

“No, not this time.”

In another flash of lightning, he saw her lupine mouth smiling again, but this time it was the rictus grin of death staring down at him, dripping saliva onto his cheek, saliva that burned in contrast to the icy needles of the storm. She bent down until her muzzle was next to his ear, lips brushing him as they had the first time they met. “No,” she whispered. “Not this time.”

She leapt off of him, growling words that had lost their meaning in her fury. To his horror, she ran to his cottage.

His wife. His son.

The sudden threat drove all thought of his own guilt away. The woman Lucina had been was wiped from his mind as he saw this atavistic shadow bearing down on his family. As she attacked the door, slamming herself against the splintering wood, he pulled his axe out of the mud and ran after her.

Strong as she was, she had been weakened by her troubled childbirth and months of hunger. Were she the same Lucina that had greeted Karl in the woods, naked under her red cloak, the door would have given way with a single blow, but now she splintered one board at a time, reaching in with a furred arm to cast aside the bar sealing the door.

Karl came upon her as her shoulder pressed against the hole she had smashed between the planks. She turned her head to see him and, as the axe came down on her neck, he saw resignation in her eyes.

The first blow was grave—an awful wound tearing through her neck, spilling her life out over frozen black fur. Had she run then, she might have survived, healed from even such a massive insult. But she didn’t run. Instead, she used all her strength to say to words through her damaged throat. The words came in a froth of blood.

“Our children.”

The second blow came before Lucina's weakened body could begin to seal the damage from the first. The third took Lucina's life. The fourth was just the formality that removed her head from her body.

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Karl left his wife and son and his dead lover to find his daughters. He slogged through the ice storm, deep into the dark woods, to the clearing where he had made his trysts with the wolf. As he searched, he raged and cried, cursing himself, and Lucina, and God. As he stumbled in the dark, he selfishly hoped for the peace death would bring him.

Then he heard an infant's cry.

He found them in a shallow hollow in a hillside, wrapped in the raw hide of a bear that smelled foul with decay. For two infants, it was already too late. Their bodies were blue and cold. The last child was pink, and healthy, and screamed as the ice bit into her skin.

He brought all three home, the tiny corpses slung across his back in their rotting bearskin. His one living daughter he carried tightly inside his shirt so she would have his body for warmth. When he came home, the storm had broken, and a cold dawn had begun chasing clouds from the sky.

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