

## CHAPTER ONE

The creature stopped in the last reach of the shadows of the tall pines and dropped to the ground. It watched the group of stags charge from the tree line a hundred yards down, driven in a state of panic and changing direction instinctively as they went. Their feet pounded the earth and sent trickles of stone and mud sliding down the steep slope as they moved across it. It felt the vibrations under its feet and sensed the urgency with which they moved. The deer kicked their feet high to avoid the strewn boulders and scrub of the mountainside. It watched as their eyes darted back to the darkness beneath the trees to search for their pursuer. Their nostrils frothed in exhaustion, but as they stopped to snatch a few life-giving breaths, the leader of the group let out a strained bellow as he expelled the air from his lungs and continued on. The creature licked its nose as the wind brought the sticky sweet must of the animals towards it. A wave of static energy rippled along its back and across its shoulders like wind on water. It had flanked them without being seen and now lay motionless, its black hide blending into the darkness behind the thick gorse bank where it had slunk down onto the earth. Dawn was approaching and the night was retreating to the west.

It watched still, taking deep slow breaths that inflated its lungs to full capacity, the oxygen rich mountain air the fuel for the coming charge. Its paws rested on soft, dew drenched earth and budding heather that would silence the heaviest of footfalls. It waited, panting soundlessly as its silver whiskers warned it of micro-changes to the direction of the wind and air pressure, as the distance between it and its prey narrowed. It allowed a twitch of frustration to flick through its tail as the deer changed course again and headed down the hill, instead of towards it and the tree line. It rose slightly and continued its journey along the knotted and twisted branches of the thickly entwined gorse. Not in flower yet, the bank provided a dark and dense veil of branches to hide behind. Its movement was snakelike, its head naturally rising and falling as it followed the cover and the deer, its pelvic and shoulder muscles pumping together as it accelerated and slowed to match the pace of its prey. At the end of the gorse bank it came to the welcome shadow of trees again and disappeared within their darkness. Here it moved more cautiously, walking on stones and roots or flicking away the dry branches that lay in its path. Then it paused.

The sweaty, ripening must of the deer was intoxicating now and it knew they were close, even though it could not yet see them. Ahead of the creature was a small earthy bank that marked the boundary of the wood it had entered. This led to a sparse, grassy knoll that bordered a long, straight river of stone along the valley. It knew that rather than cross the stone river, the deer were more likely to hesitate and turn back to the trees with the coming dawn. It crept towards an opening on the bank between an oak and a pine, their intertwined boughs locked in a centuries-old battle for the light that formed a natural arch. The bank was steep and the creature paused, calculating its approach. It slunk down onto its belly and used the exposed roots of the oak as a stairway up the bank. It hunkered down, coiling its hindquarters beneath it and stretching its neck and head forward. Its whiskers bristled as they sensed the changes in air pressure and the breeze moved round the animal coming towards it. From the shadows it watched as the stag approached closer and it once again licked its nose and muzzle in anticipation. It repositioned itself slightly forward for better purchase and inhaled one last time. Silence fell upon the wood. The stag was stung by the sudden quiet and snapped to attention as it peered towards the darkness. The

creature saw its moment and burst from the shadows, barrelling forwards in a furious and fluid sprint that silently engulfed the ground between it and the leader of the herd. In its final bound, it launched into a headlong leap, claws outstretched for a murderous embrace as it let out the thunderous roar that had built in its chest.

In a microsecond, the creature knew its initial attack would fail. It had leapt too soon and too high to hit from the side as expected. It collided with the stag head on and gravity and the slope of the knoll did the rest, as both it and its prey tumbled backwards in roars and bellows of displeasure and panic. Instinct took over and it slashed upwards with its right paw as it slithered backwards in the wet grass, losing the poor purchase it had momentarily gained on the stag. It lunged forward again, hissing in anger as it glanced at the other stags that had bolted in fright back up the hillside, but now stood motionless, waiting for the great play yet to come.

The stag lowered its head, thrusting its antlers towards the creature. It kicked up the ground with its back legs and grunted through its nose in aggressive defiance. Its body began to shake as the deep cut on its chest began to seep. The creature uttered a purr-like, rumbling growl as it padded forward. The stag reared back in panic but then brought its antlers down towards its attacker again, but the creature was too swift for it. It batted the stag's head sideways with a clip of its paw and dashed forward to meet the exposed throat, opening its maw and biting down into the flesh. As it felt the taught skin puncture in its vice-like grip and its throat was stung by hot air and bubbling blood, the creature savagely snapped its head sideways, throwing the stag to the ground. Its claws raked downwards through the stag's neck and shoulder like iron pins. It calmly watched the other deer flee in panic towards the trees, never releasing its hold on the stag, even as it bucked in final futile spasms against death. It saw its own green eye reflected in the amber one beneath it and watched ever patient as the last life-spark went out. As the body beneath it slumped, the creature relaxed its hold and began to feed.