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Diabolique



DESIREE EROTIQUE



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Desiree Erotique

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Dedication

With gratitude to friend and editor, Barbara Marshall

For Robert, my beloved.

Prologue

Dearest Henri,

I apologize that I must decline the invitation to the reunion of our alma mater with particular regret. My decision is not without sadness, as, of all the young men of our mutual society, you have remained my friend, and are the only individual, until recently, who ever shared the intimate details of my mind and heart. It is because of my affection, and my knowledge of your inner soul with its enviable honesty, that I hope you will accept the monies found in this missive, and grace me with a visit at your convenience. I have sent a map along for your journey, and I wait with expectant heart to renew our friendship. As you have always been kind in writing, and enduring the long intervals between my responses, allow me now to relate my most recent esoteric adventure. It is the last and, of them all, the most humbling.@@

For you, with that easy acceptance of yourself, met the censure of the university and the snubs of our society -- and worse, my personal mockery -- now have been vindicated. I stand corrected regarding those philosophies of yours that rubbed my shallow propriety as immoderate, earthy, and shamelessly human. As much for this overdue vindication as to

renew the friendship, which I alone allowed to stray, read on my particulars for not wishing to leave.

Chapter One

I had just spent several months tutoring history and German to the son of a minor English nobleman and returned to Berne for further assignment, when a messenger from France arrived with a lucrative offer to teach the women of the German settlement, Urdhels, history, calligraphy, and poetry. Before I set out from Berne, the guild director provided me what information he personally knew of the charter tribe that had settled in the valley hundreds of years before.

There were a few verified bits of information on record, too. The original edicts of the provincial duke, who had allotted the land to the tribe, allowed for an exemption from taxation and the right to keep their own customs. In exchange for these grants, the Urdhel men were bound to uphold the hereditary title of their patrons and their descendants, and to serve in some huntsmen capacity, the exact nature of which was unclear.

Among the records were accounts of rifts between several of the dukes and their spiritual and political detractors regarding this tribe. The chronicles I read made repeated references to the pagan Urdhels, and accounts from missionaries testified to the tribe's strident refusal to accept Christianity. Chronicler after chronicler commented disparagingly on the Urdhels' godless and inexplicable fortune in having avoided the fate of the Cathars

and Knights Templar. The same chronicles alluded to the fact that through the generations the province's dukes had suffered censure and scorn for keeping the compact with the settlers.

Not that I was overly concerned with theological disputes. I was Phillippe LaFaire, open-minded scholar, who wisely adhered to customs of faith as it served propriety, even while retaining my personal skepticism of religion in general.

Upon first entering the valley and setting eyes on the medieval-like village of Urdhels, it struck me as a marvel indeed that these people had held onto their primitive ways for so long without interference.

On the day after my arrival, the councilmen brought me to my new schoolhouse. As they introduced me to my waiting class, I was suddenly and completely aware of how very far I had ventured from the sterile academic halls and chambers of my past.

My routine had not been complicated once in the ten years I had been teaching. During those years, when my brain was not immersed in the routine of educating the young men under my supervision, my time was consumed with the pursuit of my personal hobby. While my peers were spending their evenings and holidays relaxing in taverns or romancing prospective wives, I browsed occult manuscripts, dedicating every spare moment to building my collection of texts. I rarely thought of women other than as fleeting, nameless images a man creates and utilizes to afford a decent night's sleep. Marriage was on my agenda, but advancement came first, as it would provide the connections a man of my station needed to find a woman of acceptable social status and quality for matrimony. Because of this regimented plan, I had no use for, and certainly little interaction with, women.

That was, until I arrived in the charter village of Urdhels.

The councilmen let it be known straight away they would not pry into the affairs of my classroom, as long as religion and politics entered not into my oratory. Although my pupils were their wives, fiancées, and daughters, the council seemed to have no compunction

about leaving the fairer sex under my utter and closeted supervision. In fact, they informed me that I was expected to be stern with my pupils. I had to smile at this, for I simply could not imagine grown women giving me the types of disruption often encountered with the headstrong male children I was used to.

Wisdom tempered complaint, of course. These people had paid the guild twice the average salary for my services. They had also supplied a small, furnished cottage as accommodation, along with a servant boy by the name of Weistreim to take care of my household and bring generous baskets of food to me from the Burgomeister's own table twice daily. I felt welcome, which seemed, in its way, extraordinary to me, for I detected from discussions with the councilmen that they were none too fond of strangers in general.

* * * * *

During the sixth week after my arrival into the village as the new schoolmaster, I stood at the doorway of my schoolhouse, watching the last of my pupils return home for the day.

It had been a trying day, as just keeping my thoughts to the subject matter had been a labor. But now the cold bath planned for my return home vanished from thought as my eyes clung to the sight of two sisters, skipping off hand-in-hand. Maresa's dark braids flew over her shoulders, and Laurea's long blonde tresses bounced over her voluptuous hips as they glanced back, giggling and regarding me with bold eyes, before prancing off the lawn for the smooth, dirt street. My face flushed smartly, but the awkwardness I felt did not show in my bearing, for I had years of experience in wearing the stern countenance of the schoolmaster. I knew they saw it, too, for a chagrined bloom rose at once in their fair cheeks, and their mouths pursed like those of scolded children. But children they were not; and what luscious mouths, tinged with rose, as smooth as their legs that showed from under the hems of their frocks.

My pupils had a distinct fashion to which they adhered: shin-length, lacy frocks dyed in various pastel shades, with white bodices so tightly laced that their breasts heaved

vulnerably close to spilling out. On their feet they wore slender-heeled, white leather boots that came to their ankles and which only added to the allure of the peep of their legs. From the youngest to the oldest, each of my students -- all women grown -- wore these innocent enticements. And each of them was imbued with a seductive mystique that was utterly distracting.

But on this day, it was all I could do to draw my appreciative eyes from the two young women and return to my classroom. I gave myself some time to tidy up my desk and check the floor for misplaced papers -- I had long demanded tidiness from my pupils as well as their full attention. Of course, I could not imagine myself scolding grown women for something haphazardly fallen to the floor.

As I straightened my papers, I had to ignore the perfume that lingered in the air, the heady scent of pure femininity. I forced my mind to matters other than their flowing tresses and pretty, flouncing skirts. I left the classroom quickly and locked the door of the schoolhouse. The outdoors air was crisp and sobering.

The village was quiet, and I knew that, officially, this hour was regulated as a time of rest for women and children. I left the school behind and strolled down the well-trodden clay path that stretched through the village, to the little bridge that spanned the small brook at the eastern end of town. From there, I crossed the path that skirted a fenced-off field where a great spiral of wattle beehives stood. The bees flew drowsily through the air here, glutting themselves on the nectar of coneflowers and lilac sowed thickly between the shade trees. The path led me around, toward the wilder part of the valley that cupped the eastern rim of a gorge. The grass was high here, green as emerald and surrounded by the woods blanketing down the slope. I was in the mood for some fresh air and quietude, and to forget the tantalizing, yet discomforting, job I had taken on. At least the school's hours were accommodating compared with most of my previous assignments, since the town council had determined the classroom hours would commence at nine and end at two in the afternoon. So, I had time to research my manuscripts and scrolls on alchemy and the occult, which I

had had little time to truly read before, due to the exacting obligations to my former clientele.

I approached the edge of the eastern woods and found a small retreat in the soft grass. Alone and calmed of the emotions that had raged in me all day, I took a small, leather-bound volume from my vest. The book had cost me a small fortune in Berne, and the translation was challenging, and the cabalistic subject difficult enough to demand my full concentration. As the unfamiliar and humbling awkwardness imparted to me by my distracting little pupils dispelled for a time, I drowned my thoughts in the arcane text.

But in my determination to relax, I had forgotten the monastery. As the sunlight stretched further toward the western horizon, a shadow fell over the whole of the meadow. I looked up once to the eastern summit to find the sky had turned an ill shade of blue behind the religious structure. Of Romanesque design, the monastery was built very close to the lip of land above a steep ravine and stood like a disapproving watcher over the picturesque valley. I studied it now dispassionately; the masonry was somber and dark, the columns and piers thatched with vines. The nave and spires contrasted brightly with the otherwise gloomy ambience of the place, metal plating shining much like silver and reflecting the sun off the levels below, further enhancing the forbidding atmosphere of the rest of the edifice. I had been obligated to pass by the borders of the place on the carriage ride that had brought me to the charter village. The councilman who had been waiting to greet me had seemed hesitant to answer my questions regarding the monastery, saying only that the fraternity who dwelt there were members of a privileged religious order.

Civility had prevented me from inquiring further; but I was left with a sense that there were some unspoken ill relations between this mysterious order and my hosts.

Now, I turned my eyes from the monastery and was surprised to glimpse four young women running across the valley from the path leading from the village. Two brunettes, a deep redhead, and one with auburn tresses that swept down to her hips. No more than twenty yards from my retreat, they stopped and divested themselves of their school frocks,

laying their clothing across the grass beneath a small hazelnut tree. I forgot the book entirely and watched them run out of the tree's shade. The women laughed as they held hands and formed a circle; they began to sing a soft melody as their feet padded clockwise in the long, velvety grass, their nubile breasts swinging lightly, and their unbound hair waving down their backs. Lovely, all of them, and my loins stirred pleasantly as I stood and walked quietly to the opening of my retreat for a better view.

The four women were indeed all pupils of mine, but it was the auburn-haired one who made my heart surge in my chest. Tatiane!

My knees weakened even as my cock swelled under my trousers. The daughter of one of the town councilmen, Tatiane was twenty years of age and one of the most bashful creatures I had ever met. She rarely spoke in class, and her responses to my questions were always soft and courteous. And, yet, of all the women, her presence had especially proved uneasy for me. I was not certain of the exact cause for the inner turmoil she caused; she was no lovelier than her companions, and certainly not as lively or giddy as most of them. Her large turquoise eyes seemed hard-pressed to meet mine, but when they did, I lost all sensibility for a moment as my thoughts were swept away by decadent, unabashed desire. Several times that very day, on the chance that she might lift her pretty face and give me a smile, I had strolled between the rows of seats while my pupils studied their history books. And though she hadn't, I had caught my share of glimpses of her cleavage pressing against her snugly laced bodice with its lavender ribbon and bow, which had lain perfectly between her rose-kissed bosoms.

Giggling merrily, these four pupils fell now as one to the grass. Catya, one of the brunettes, sat up on her knees and threw her hair behind her shoulders. The breeze carried her voice to me, though her silken words were uttered in their native dialect, which I still had trouble understanding. Her tongue lolled lazily over her plump lips, and with a shriek of laughter, she fell upon the redhead, Sascha, throwing her to her back. The brunette kissed Sascha's mouth and throat, drawing her mouth over the redhead's breasts, and Sascha sighed

wantonly, her legs parting a little as Catya's hand massaged the dark patch of hair between her own thighs. Tatiane and the second brunette, Dagmar, lay on their bellies side by side, chewing on daisy stems as they watched the other two embrace fervently.

Sascha whispered something soft and urgent, and her pelvis rose pleadingly toward Catya. The brunette smiled and, with a husky sigh, forced Sascha's legs widely apart. A thatch of red hair glistened between Sascha's thighs.

Catya's face dove over the thatch, eliciting a loud moan from Sascha, whose hips undulated immodestly under her companion's ministrations. Catya's long legs widened and she lowered her pelvis to Sascha's face. Gingerly, Sascha unfolded Catya's sex and licked the crimson labia close to her mouth. The brunette's buttocks clenched ever so tellingly and, as I watched, their naughty tongues flicked hungrily over each other's founts. Soon, their heads were bobbing up and down as they feasted in mutual abandon.

An abrupt shriek from Sascha told me she had climaxed first. Catya's frenzied mouth worked almost brutally now upon her, for Sascha's hips began to twist this way and that as she pleaded it was enough, she could bear no more. At this moment, Tatiane and Dagmar crawled over to them. They pulled Catya off and pressed her onto her back on the ground. Catya struggled, but Tatiane quickly caught her arms and pinned them on the grass over her head. Dagmar held Catya's ankles and pried her knees apart. Grinning languidly, the blushing Sascha sat up and, moving to Dagmar's side, draped herself over Catya's left leg. Both of these girls' tempting derrieres danced toward me as Sascha's face dove forward and she began to feast on Catya's exposed nether mouth. Catya's pelvis arched forward as she moaned wantonly against the sweet flesh that tantalized her. Soon the shrieking sound of her orgasm filled the valley.

My mouth watered, and I glanced away a moment. When I looked again, the girls were helping each other to their feet. Upon standing, they joined hands and began to sing and slowly sway on their feet. As their voices rose, they pranced widdershins in a circle. The prance escalated into a wild jog, their song a cheery, paganish hymn.

Suddenly, their hands released and off they went, spiraling across the grass. Their song was now an angelic chant that ascended and rose from the valley. I soon realized the whole eastern wall of the gorge was vibrating. The four nymphs ran toward the gorge, and facing it, they fell simultaneously to their knees. At once a breeze stirred, as if from the very ground itself. My pupils' hair was tousled every which way. Tatiane's hair caught the rays of the sun, and I was enraptured by her shapely, naked form.

Their faces lifted, and in unison they clasped their hands over their chests as their song transformed into a commanding chant. The breeze pitched into a violent wind that tossed grass and flowers across the landscape and battered the shrub I hid behind so that a hard limb thrashed my face. Pushing it aside, I saw the four staring upward as one. I looked to find what their wide, sober eyes contemplated; it was the monastery, and their chant -- I sensed -- was directed toward it.

They continued to chant steadily. I watched as the scrub and stone of the gorge quivered in root and gulley, and above the desolate monastery the clouds darkened and gathered together. To my astonishment, these clouds cut over the entire fortress, concealing it almost instantly from sight. The four continued their monotone for perhaps five minutes, a hostile lilt in their voices and their faces scarlet, enraged. Their pretty hands balled into shaking fists as the sound escalated into a shrill, synchronized scream.

Abruptly, the chant ended. The valley echoed with an unnatural silence, and the wind died just as suddenly as it had come.

My spine tingled, and I crept a little ways back into my retreat. But I could still see the women as they returned to the tree and reclaimed their garments. Although instilled morals cautioned this was best and proper, my heart sank with disappointment to see Tatiane dressed again. With their little frocks back on, the young women clasped hands and headed toward the village in silence.

I exited my retreat and looked to the crest of the gorge. The dark clouds still hung low, although they had drifted just enough for me to make out a dark figure emerging from the

monastery. Only the slightest breeze wound through the valley, but my skin tightened with apprehension as the figure seemed to scrutinize the valley. Some overpowering repulsion urged me to move out of the retreat altogether and run for the bridge, only looking back as I reached it. I could not see the figure now, but the clouds were rising with sluggish steadiness away from the monastery.

Chapter Two

I slept fretfully that night, my dreams filled with the recurring image of my class interrupted by the pounding of a hammer. Time and again I went to the window of the school, to see a man, in the garb of a cowled monk, crouching on the ground outside the school. His back was to me so I saw only the rise of the hammer in his hand before it swung down. I called for him to stop, to wait to finish his work at least until my class was over. He either didn't hear me or simply ignored me. With each new dream, the hammering grew louder, and I grew less patient. It wasn't until I turned from the chalkboard and found that the rhythmic hammering was putting my class to sleep at their desks that I went outside to confront the man. Jogging up behind him, I tapped his shoulder.

"Monsieur," I said politely. When he did not acknowledge me, I strode around to face him. And there, I saw the task he had been working on -- a short cross of wooden bars -- and upon the eye of the cross-section he had nailed a mass of viscera. The blood that had seeped from it already stained the standing beam. Disgusted, my mouth opened to ask what in the name of hell he was doing. But my eyes rose to the fearsome sight of my own face glowering back at me from under the cowl.

After awakening from this last dream, I could not return to sleep. So I sat up until dawn arrived, then dressed and ate some of the rye loaf and butter left over from the evening before. I was not hungry, but it seemed wise to eat and to ground myself and, hopefully, lay to rest the residual disgust imparted by the malignant dreams.

It was only later, when Tatiane made her timid way into the schoolroom, that I was able to wholly discard the dream. The memory of seeing her lovely body dancing over the grass made me more uneasy than usual. She sat behind Catya and Sascha, while Dagmar was seated behind her. It pained me not to look at Tatiane, but I did not dare, lest I give in to the urge to order her to my desk and strip her out of her confining little dress. This dilemma strained my focus, so that I grew brusque with them all. And when several of the women began to fidget and whisper anxiously amongst themselves, my constraint snapped. I slammed the book I was carrying on my desk, bringing a resounding hush to the room.

“Have you no manners? Is this the etiquette your fathers and husbands expect?”

The mass of dismayed eyes and becoming blushes only added to my frustration. I looked squarely at Tatiane. She sat with her face bowed as usual, the apples of her cheeks rosier than ever.

My palms dewed with perspiration as I fought the urge to order her to come forward. I eyed my desk drawer where I kept my old, stiff, leather flog which I had put away when I'd first discovered my pupils were women instead of children. But now I felt like taking it out. I wanted this innocuous girl -- this arousing girl -- humbled for disquieting my composure. She deserved chastisement for the frustration she had wrought, a chastisement thorough and sound.

But in that moment something quite unexpected happened. Tatiane raised her face and met my eyes without hesitation, her brow crumpled with the distress of one stunned.

I blinked, my only desire to kiss that distress away -- and, bashful as a butterfly's caress, the softest of smiles turned up the corners of her mouth. My frustration fled, and my blood

ran pure and hot, heedless of the social etiquettes I had practiced before coming to this village.

I excused the class and watched as Tatiane's cousins and sister-in-law tried to coax her from her seat. She sent them on with reassurances that she would be along soon, and they all gave me parting looks that contained a mix of emotions which would have confused polite society beyond this village. I paid no attention to these women; I was enraptured. When the other women were all gone, Tatiane stood and approached my desk.

"Would you care to accompany me outside, schoolmaster?"

I nodded and locked the schoolhouse door as we left. Indeed, it was an unusual situation; but I did not feel so much under the spell of surrealism, as having suddenly awakened from a delusion to the crisp hold of a reality that had escaped me a lifetime. I had known this young woman for only a few weeks, yet I now realized I could not bear the thought of letting her slip from my life. Her eyes held the beaconing light to eternity; her elusive smile, the single link between banal existence and living.

I took her arm in mine and escorted her into the village. We conversed for many hours, forgetting all else save the thirst to drink our fill of one another's experiences. She was fascinated with my travels, though she said she dared not think of leaving the valley.

I told her I should just roll her up in a carpet. "As Cleopatra had ordered her servants that she might be presented thus to her lovers."

She squeezed my arm and laughed. No silvery bell ever rang so precious.

At length we crossed the bridge into the wild part of the valley, which spread out to the eastern border of the gorge. I took off my waistcoat and spread it across the grass so that she might sit. As I helped her down, I looked up at the monastery and noticed the clouds had departed completely. No figures walked about its estate now, and I perceived the oddest standoffish feeling from the forlorn place. Ridiculous, I knew, and I pushed the thought aside as I sat down beside Tatiane. I took her hand; it was small, the skin and bone delicate in my

clasp. She looked up at me, and the kittenish fire that glowed in her demure eyes compelled me to kiss her.

She murmured faintly, pressing her bosom against me. My loins swelled, and I kissed her throat and face, enduring the honeyed torture of her scent and timidly roaming hands. I wanted her fiercely and contemplated taking her to the retreat I had found the day before. But for all her desirous sighs, I feared the consequences of such an act.

“You had the most forbidding look in the classroom,” she whispered, caressing my stiffening cock as I nibbled the hollow of her throat.

Her fingertips slowly stroked the length of me through my trousers. I drowsed in the sensuous torment of desire and confided against her ear, “I wished to chasten you, Tatiane. And I am not so certain I have changed my mind!”

She pulled away suddenly and, with her head cocked adorably to one side, regarded me with much seriousness. “There is none to stop you, monsieur.”

I smiled with all the affection she had so guilelessly inspired. “You are impudent, and, yes, it would be a tempting gesture. But not wise.”

This brought a little frown to her brow. “No? Why do you say that?”

“Would you have me lose all civil restraint, Tatiane?”

She smiled winsomely. “Yes, that is exactly what I expect, if you intend to court me.”

I laughed tenderly. “I do wish to court you, sweet Tatiane. But with discretion, of course. To do otherwise would lose me the confidence of your father, and all the village councilmen. Then we would lose what opportunity the future offers.”

She shook her head. And, truly, she seemed perplexed. “This is ridiculous, Phillippe LaFaire. Are you so educated you have allowed yourself to become dense?”

Her question and tone both seemed bent to goad me. I had to grin; I could not be angry, though her displeasure intrigued me. “I do not know how to answer such a charge.”

“You feign ignorance well, monsieur.” She blinked and then crushed her lips softly against my mouth, parting my lips with her tongue. I accepted her kiss and, lacing my hands about her small waist, pulled her to me. Her bosom heaved hotly against my chest, as her fingers traced my manhood again. It took all my resolve to pull her pretty hands away. But I did, and then pressed my lips chivalrously over her hand.

“I wish it could be so simple,” I sighed at last. “But I am a professional, a man of manners and breeding. I shan’t allow my desire to disgrace either of us.”

This brought a sharp, vexed sound from her. Suddenly she cast herself away and got to her feet. She was shaking, and my heart sank to see tears brimming in her eyes.

“You dare condemn my confessions as disgraceful!” She was breathless as she wrapped her arms snugly about herself. “My people have enemies -- evil, eternal, and ancient enemies. And we are shunned by your proper society. But between the two, I would bow to the forces of the unholy before disgracing myself again with the touch of a coward such as you!”

I was confused and distressed by her evident anger. Before I could summon the words to speak, she turned and sped off. I chased after her, nearly catching the ends of her flying tresses as she rounded the field of beehives. But as she flew over the bridge, I heard her sobbing and stopped. I watched as she ran up the path and into the village and cursed myself for what I had done. An image of her father paying me a visit and demanding an explanation for her tears compounded my regret.

But no one came that night, and the next day Tatiane did not attend class. On questioning her cousin, Avelina, I was informed that she had seen Tatiane come out of her father’s house that morning with a breakfast tray for her brothers, who worked in the blacksmith’s shop, and that the two cousins had spoken briefly. Despite my relief at Tatiane’s health, I was plagued by remorse, and I vowed to myself that in the future I would mantle myself in a wholly new directness. I realized I had been inarticulate and stupid during our last encounter; I should have tried harder to convince Tatiane of my reason for not taking

her as she'd desired. And there was now no honest denial of my feelings toward her. My professional career meant nothing to me without her.

That night I considered my options thoroughly and came to the decision that if she had not returned to school the following day, then I would pay a call to her father and announce my intention -- no, my decision -- to court his daughter. He could upbraid me for the audacity of inciting her emotions and for dallying with her beyond the scrutiny of a chaperone. Even if my confession cost me my position as schoolmaster, it was a consequence I was prepared to accept.

* * * * *

My newfound assertion ushered in a sound night's sleep, and I was whistling as I got up the next morning and shaved.

A thunderous knock at my front door so addled my repose that I cut my chin. I had not yet put on my shirt, but the knocking grew frantic. I dropped the razor into the brass dish beside the bowl of water on my dresser and dabbed at the stream of blood inking down my throat with a linen. I opened the door to find Weistreim standing there, his arm around the shoulders of a trembling and weeping Avelina.

Her reddened eyes sought mine, and my heart was touched by a foreboding even before the words slipped from her mouth.

"Oh, Monsieur LaFaire! Tatiane is dead!"

I felt faint and had to steady myself against the solid door. Looking to the sky beyond the two young people, I saw a glint of unnatural blackness haze just behind the scattering tangerine clouds of sunrise.

* * * * *

I was not told what malady had stricken my precious Tatiane to cause such a sudden demise, and I refused to believe Avelina that her cousin was dead without further evidence. I

followed Avelina to her father's household, where a crowd had gathered on the lawn. None of this grieving crowd spoke, though some of the women were red-eyed, and all seemed reluctant to answer my inquiries about Tatiane. One of my pupils called to me over the heads of those clustered around the front door. I did not understand her vocabulary, though it rang of some Germanic dialect. A minute or so later, the crowd parted and Tatiane's father appeared. A hardy tailor with huge, callused hands, he was at least a foot taller than me. Recalling Tatiane's tearful flight home, I feared I was intruding where I was not wanted. But the giant's solemn countenance gave way in the next instant as he fell to his knees, sobbing pitifully.

An old woman with a mane of startling white hair emerged from the house and went to stand beside him. Her thin arms enfolded his head and drew it to her breast.

So the news was true; Tatiane was dead. My head reeled, and I felt sick as I thought of how, with the best of intentions, I had mocked Tatiane and shut out the first breath of life beyond routine that I had dared to think of inhaling in years. I stared at the old woman as if she might comfort me in my own disbelief.

"Tatiane," I whispered.

The woman's small blue-green eyes bore into me, the intimidation in them slamming me back to the present moment.

I was allowed only to surmise from the few words secured from some of my pupils that a sudden sickness -- a malady that once had been common and had supposedly been kept in check for years by certain precautions -- had befallen Tatiane. When I asked about these precautions and the symptoms of the malady, the young women shrugged unconvincingly and excused themselves.

* * * * *

Two days later, a procession followed Tatiane's father and the pallbearers to a grove near the western wall of the gorge, where a great section of the gorge's wall contained natural catacombs.

As the procession stopped by the shelf that had been created for Tatiane's remains, I stood on the sidelines, watching the pallbearers set her casket upon the rough, oak table that stood outside the tomb.

The young men who had carried the casket stood at their positions like wary warriors, and a voice from behind the bier droned solemnly in the native language of the Urdhels. Peering about the heads in front of me, I saw that the voice came not from a priest, but the old woman I had seen before with the streaming white hair. She wore a shapeless leather dress that was so thoroughly tanned that it retained a tawny sheen. Stringed flowers, beads, and fresh water shells hung from her neck, and circlets of gold clasped her forearms. As she lifted a staff of twisted oak high over Tatiane's body, a reverent and expectant hush fell over the crowd of mourners.

She turned toward the open burial shelf and delivered what seemed to be a blessing upon it. When this was done, she opened a leather pouch that hung from a strip of rawhide about her neck, fishing out a handful of what appeared to be ground peppercorn, and pitching it onto the shelf. When at last her litany fell silent, one of the pallbearers raised a guttural hail, and at once all six youths moved away from the casket.

It was first clear look I had gotten of Tatiane's body. She had been divested of all clothing, her long hair had been brushed out so that it lay shining and even over her white shoulders, and sprinkled with sprigs of wild violets and Sweet Williams. She looked like a napping fairy. Her lovely cheeks were bereft of bloom, and yet her features bore the illusion of life. I was compelled to advance closer to the casket; as I looked down at her, this vibrancy played upon my mind. I half expected, half wished she would simply leap off the bier. I imagined her laughing and dancing again as she had done in the verdant valley grass a few days ago. I touched her silken hair and admired sadly the magnificent white rose that had

been placed over her navel with her hands folded over the long stem. Her hands, too, looked vibrant, as if with my next breath her lovely fingers would quicken and prick one of the thorns.

I could hardly believe this girl was dead, but my disbelief receded in that moment under an unexpected deluge of loss and injustice. Tatiane would never again enjoy the pleasures which had so elegantly imbued her spirit. This touched me as even more regrettable than her untimely passing. I did not know that I was weeping until a pregnant woman offered me a handkerchief. Thanking her with a nod, I unfolded the cloth and wiped my eyes.

As I looked down on Tatiane again, I noticed something ugly just beneath a lock of her hair at the side of her neck. Dismayed, I lifted the auburn lock aside and saw two dark, puckered puncture marks upon her throat.

The sound of shock that rose to my lips was lost under a wail that rang through the grove. Tatiane's father rushed forward on the other side of the table to stand beside the old woman. His face ravaged by grief, he held a worn battleaxe with a highly polished bronze handle. The crone inhaled deeply and nodded to him, then raised her arms over Tatiane's body. As she began to chant in their Germanic tongue, Tatiane's father brought the weapon to his lips. He turned then, and gripping the handle firmly in both hands, lifted it high over his head. With the howl of a wounded bear, he slipped to one knee and brought the blade sweeping down. It bore deeply into the earth and the quivering handle sang lightly.

I was too lost in my own self-reproach to ponder the reason for the weapon or his action ... until the old woman looked over at him and gestured him up. He rose and came to stand beside her and cupped Tatiane's cheek. The old woman drew a posy of dried valerian from her pouch and laid it beside Tatiane's head. She mumbled something and unfolded the dead girl's lips, while the grieving father held them apart with the first two fingers of his free hand and gently separated her jaws. I watched, mystified, as the woman lifted the posy and

started to crumble the dried valerian into Tatiane's mouth. With this finished, the crone nodded to the father, who ever-so-gently re-closed Tatiane's stiffened lips.

His head fell forward and he sobbed now without reservation. The crone's eyes rose to the mourners. There were family members all about me, and yet the woman stared directly at me. Hardened with an emotion beyond my understanding, her gaze punctured my grief and found my conscience, my cultured propriety. It needled straight through the prim repose that had been cultivated so long now that it sheathed me as securely as secondary flesh. Time bogged down in those moments as she appeared to examine my soul, so that she and I seemed removed from the grove and the mourners. An intelligence that transcended even the wisdom of her years burned in her absorbing gaze.

Bindmaster.

I heard the word, of that I had no doubt. A gravelly whisper, audible only between our consciousnesses.

I could not draw my gaze from the crone, even to blink as she laid bare my educated reason and falsehoods with her unseen picks and claws. Her eyes widened into two great mirrors -- in one, I saw the reflection of my cowardice; in the other, my sophisticated arrogance smirked back at me. Any excuse I could devise against the stark, revealing images seemed shallow. By becoming a servant to propriety, I had compromised my claim to manliness and rebuffed my humanity.

The crone's consciousness bade me to contemplate the beautiful possibilities I had destroyed. And, as my eyes lowered to the casket, the impact of my failures accelerated time again. Tatiane was dead, and never again would I have chance to speak the words that self-deceit had refrained. My shame and regret transformed into an anger so torrid I felt the skin of conventionality burn away. I saw another man help Tatiane's father to his feet, and my sympathy released me from the last vestiges of timelessness. The emotion on his face was unreadable as I smoothed my fingertips across the auburn strands over Tatiane's shoulder one last time.

Her fair shoulders, which I could have massaged while she was alive, but for my lack of courage. Her lips were sculpted rosebuds, beseeching me even yet to throw off the shackles of respectability and kiss them with unabashed desire.

The crone touched my hand, her bony fingers and soft, living flesh as heated as Tatiane's skin was cold. I looked up at her again and perceived a flash of the girl she must have once been -- a bashful, playful kitten just like Tatiane. Her lips were glazed with radiance as she smiled.

"Bindmaster."

The word was only a whisper, yet it sliced through the air as clean as the blade of Tatiane's father's battleaxe. My chest was jarred momentarily, and a sharp pain seized both my temples. When these sensations passed, I felt much as if I had sobered from the most shameful intoxication. I looked at the crone, but her eyes had taken on the mist of the aged again; her narrow, leathery lips puckered as if my presence bothered her.

"Return home, schoolmaster."

My fingers curled mournfully about Tatiane's hair, but I turned as the crone bade and left them all to their pagan rite. I made my way out of the grove, and as I stepped into the unveiled sunshine, I heard the crone's wail. I had never heard such a flesh-shuddering sound as that scream of unforgiving, savage wrath. It was not directed at me, that much instinct confirmed, and the shocked, soft response it brought from the mourners prompted me to stride quickly for home.

Alone in the house and needing something to help forget the funeral, I uncorked a bottle of wine I had brought along from Berne. I rarely allowed myself to indulge to the point of inebriation, but this time I quickly guzzled a quarter of the bottle while re-reading the last newspaper I had bought before taking my new position. At last, too blind with drunkenness to read, I stumbled to the bed and fell across it.

As my eyes closed, the funeral shifted back into my mind. I drifted to sleep, mumbling curses upon myself. In my dreams I stood beside Tatiane's casket. As I touched her face, a vine fell from the branch above my head, landed on my hand, and twisted around my fingers tightly enough to draw blood. The harder I attempted to remove it, the tighter it squeezed, until at last the fibers broke through my flesh and my blood spurted everywhere.

Suddenly, a scream drew my attention away from the vine, and looking down, I saw Tatiane's body had disappeared. I turned and scanned the grove, but saw no one bearing her body away. There was only a shadowy serpent slithering toward a great cross in the darkest recesses of the grove.

I awoke with the fingers of my right hand throbbing. The sensation was only the spectral pain of a dream, but as I rubbed my hand, I saw a wisp of something bound about the first two fingers. I got up and went to the hearth where a dwindling fire remained. As I examined my hand, I found several auburn hairs caught between my fingers; I pulled them off carefully and laid them on the nightstand before finishing off the rest of the wine.

Chapter Three

The next day I awakened with a chill and the gloomy determination to see no one. From my window, I saw what I could not explain: seeming festivity amongst those who had just not hours ago been in mourning. I watched as women garlanded the doors, shutters, and lintels of the shops and other buildings with flowers, apparently preparing for some festivity. Young men carried in kindling from the woods and built a great cone for a bonfire in the village square. Elders and children were setting up tables and singing. The cheery lilt of their voices and the occasional whoops of the young men rankled me. Arriving with the morning meal, Weistreim brought two plates of smoked meat, a large wheel of cheese, and an entire loaf of bread. He explained he would not be back that day as he was attending the celebration planned that evening.

“And what celebration would this be?” I asked politely, but I heard the sourness in my tone. Since awakening, my familiar priorities had returned to haunt my every move. I reproached myself for the memory of seeing myself through the crone’s eyes, arguing with erudite persuasiveness that the ordeal had been nothing more than having allowed my misplaced guilt to be swayed by the pagan funeral.

His answer was bright, but guarded. “In memoriam of certain ancestors. You would not be familiar with them, monsieur.”

At the moment, I was not interested enough to inquire further and, when he left, I pulled the shutters closed and laid the tray he had brought inside the pantry.

Although the weather was temperate, I could not shake the feeling of being cold. I threw some kindling onto the low flame in the fireplace and, when there was a good, steady fire, I browsed through my collection of books and manuscripts. At length I found a treatise by Grigori Rastrelli, *The Mathematical Properties and Mystical Symmetry of Musical Notes*. I sat down in the overstuffed chair before the fireplace and became so absorbed in the text that the sounds of growing merriment from outside soon faded from my consciousness.

I sat reading most of the day, rising only when nature called or I wanted to nibble on something from the pantry. The celebration outside was in high order by mid-afternoon; drums beat from the square, and their pagan toll grew steadily deeper and more fervent as the day progressed. Eventually, it became so loud I could no longer concentrate. I laid the book down and went over the assignments I had planned for the next day’s class. But as I pored over my notated journal, a chorus of shrill voices suddenly pierced the monotonous drumming. Laying the journal aside, I went to the window and peeked out again. The bonfire burned high above the silhouettes dancing and sitting cross-legged around it, and smoke wafted from the flames, lazily licking the orange threads of twilight on the horizon.

As I watched the arcane festivity, I saw naked women amongst the shifting throngs of dancers, the light of the bonfire gleaming on their bare flesh like smooth cream. The ritual seemed so indecent to me suddenly; though propriety tried to convince me it was my morality that was offended, my heart knew better.

Tatiane had been in the grave less than a day.

Later, as I cut some of the bread and cheese for dinner, I was startled by an abrupt silence. The drums had quieted, the voices of merriment hushed completely. I sat, expectant,

while I ate, but the festive sounds did not rise again. I returned to the treatise for some time, and when I was too tired to read anymore, I looked out the window one last time. The crowd had emptied from the square, and the bonfire remained burning, a lone man pacing before it. I squinted and made out the familiar features of Tatiane's father, his arms crossed and his eyes buried beneath an iron-hard furrow of brows. With a twinge of sympathy that softened my earlier judgmental thoughts, I left him to his privacy and readied for bed.

I did not reach my bed, however. The troubling image of Tatiane's father pacing the ground stirred my remorse again. Before it could compel the illusions I'd surely suffered in the grove, I returned to the chair. Draping a quilt over my legs, I read long into the night, until at last I fell asleep.

So deep was my slumber I cannot swear what next my conscious mind knew or whether what happened next was real or something from a dream. Startled by a scratching sound, like sand rubbed against glass, I believe my eyes opened long enough for me to see or imagine the text in my lap before my mind lulled back into black numbness.

I dreamed a viper slithered over the shingles of the house, maneuvering over the under laps slowly, so that the splinters snagged its old skin and loosened it from its body. It was a sluggish process, but I heard the echo as each old scale peeled from the snake's form. I flinched with every snap of parched skin, knowing that soon the viper would find its relief and make its way down the floorboards in search of some tiny cranny or hidden hole. It would enter the house then, and find me, asleep and vulnerable in the chair.

The image dimmed, and I started to return to a deep sleep. Then, abruptly, I perceived a low grating sound, like the tearing of tin. A distant image of opening fangs glinted at me from the beckoning blackness, and my heart rate accelerated as I fought to open my eyes. Ice grazed my cheekbone. The minute hairs of my face froze beneath the chilly touch, and the tissue and bone under my seared skin throbbed with the intrusive coldness. This coldness at once spread throughout my face, as intense as if I'd dived into icy waters of the White Sea, and my nostrils and throat felt frosted completely.

Rattled to full consciousness, I gasped for air. My eyelids opened and shattered the crystals that seemed to bind my lashes.

It was then that I saw an oblique shape, too dense to be shadow, crouched between my chair and the hearth. I was struck with an instinctive terror; my limbs were paralyzed with fear. But even as I beheld this unnatural blackness, a dawning determination to know what it was surpassed my fear. I ignored the rational voice in my head that warned me to get up and move away.

As a flicker from the hearth embers caught a glint of dark sculpted form, I gasped and jumped, the sudden acceleration of blood in my system intensifying the voice of reason. But as the form began to take on substance and human dimensions, my natural inquisitiveness again silenced my brain. This lightless figure slowly rose so that I could make out the silhouette of a head, shoulders -- the distinct and rounded outlines of a woman.

My conscience screamed for me to flee. As I finally moved to obey my conscience, I felt her mind pierce the space between us. I could not read her thoughts, and yet her unspoken command I felt inflamed my curiosity -- goaded it, willed it to a frenzied, single-purposed thing over which she alone held power. Rational fear lay dormant, and I sat in a stupor of fascination under her demanding will. It was an enchantment known and taught by unseemly spirits; ancient and potentially lethal to mortals.

But at the moment I could not have cared less.

Her hands rose and she lifted the length of her hair from her back and neck. For the first time I perceived more than a dark outline as she let go of the strands, and they cascaded like glowing copper over her slender shoulders. My heart skipped a pace as her skin began to take on color and texture -- all pale, satiny cream -- and as I stared at her rounded, desirable limbs, I felt my will drained forcibly away. I attempted again to respond to my common sense, but as I started up from the chair, the ghostly figure pounced into my lap. I was weighted down by sheer, primitive horror.

Her thighs straddled my legs. I discovered I had lost control of my body. My limbs were utterly immobile, though I could feel with acute clarity the cool hands that laced the back of my neck, the dewed sex that glided lightly over my crotch. Her face was still hidden from me, but her mouth braised my chin, and her icy tongue flicked over my gaping lips. She said something to me; the resonance of her voice lulled my fear as if it were hers to control entirely. Even now I do not know what it was exactly she commanded, only that I could not refuse. My jaw moved, and I began to recite some lengthy, mystically imbued alchemic procedure in the original Arabic. I related this knowledge of which I was acquainted only by chance from a manuscript I had come across during my university days. My brain was raped, slowly and steadily, in the pilfering of this arcane formula.

At the same time my other senses were aroused by the closeness of this unearthly, nocturnal figure. And as my mechanical recitation echoed against the wall, the copper halo dimmed before my eyes, and the disguise of darkness fell away.

It was Tatiane, my kittenish Tatiane, who had offered in life the warmth of desire that I'd so callously, so coldly, turned my back on. As lovely as always, her presence was as real as if she had never died. My stomach knotted with dread; my heart pounded with guilt. Tears burned at my eyes, and as they fell, she licked them from my cheeks. I wanted to speak her name and demand an explanation, but my speech seemed entirely under her control.

Her thighs slipped over the armrests of the chair and she lowered her knees beside my unmoving legs. She began to undulate over my lap, so that her auburn hair whipped my shoulders and her nubile breasts bobbed before my eyes. I was possessed with the smoldering urge to lift her up, throw her across my lap, and deliver the chastisement I should have dealt her that day in the classroom.

The thought of it honed my passion to an almost painful need. She must have suspected my thoughts, for her eyes lowered a moment. As they rose again, she smiled that kittenish smile I so adored, then reached between her thighs and unbuttoned my trousers. Drawing

my cock out, she stroked its hardened length, which brought the most delighted purr to her lips.

She tilted forward a little and rubbed her moist slit back and forth across me, tantalizing my need sorely. I longed to suckle her nipples and devour her breasts with my mouth. Instead, I had to endure her husky coo as she tore apart the buttons from my shirt. She flicked her fingernails across my nipples, licking and sucking them until they panged, then Tatiane pulled my trousers down over my hips. Her pelvis and pert bottom rose and, holding my shoulders, she mounted me. Her nether mouth swallowed the length of my cock. Tight was her sheath, and she rode gingerly, pouting ever so softly, leaving me with no doubt that this was a virgin who ravished me.

I no longer heard the words that continued to flow from my mouth. My muscles tensed as my thoughts focused wholly on her almost cruelly slow strides. My jism shot into her, so that the next word stifled in my throat. She heard and kissed me tenderly, inhaling the word from my throat. With kisses she drank the rest of the alchemic procedure as the words spilt forth -- every addendum and comment of the text, which I had memorized. And when she had devoured the final remark, my consciousness faded.

“Phillippe, Phillippe, we are not finished! Phillippe ...”

My eyes opened to her rueful gaze. She kissed me until I was roused to full consciousness. It was then I felt the blood of her maidenhead on my balls. I still could not move of my own volition, and watched as her pelvis ground over my spent cock. Her nether muscles clenched it desperately as she weaved up and down, and very soon my passion was coaxed back.

This time she was a little bolder, clasping my shoulders and throwing her head back so that her hair swept down between my thighs as she rode. I struggled in the fraught aim to cast her to the floor and pummel my cock into her until her seductive little backside spanked the floorboards. But it was hopeless, and as my pleasure escalated, she rocked with growing abandon. Suddenly, her little mouth parted wide and her brows; her fingernails sank into my

shoulders. I felt the orgasm ripple through her. The sweet contractions gripped me like the touch of a skilled milkmaid. Almost immediately, my seed surged into her again.

She folded her naked body over me and kissed me. Such a light and ethereal thing was this woman-child, who controlled me with invisible bonds. For a time she simply looked at me, and her face grew more rueful with each passing moment. A sharp twinge of remorse softened my dread, clarified my passion.

In that instant, I saw what my guilt, the crone's tricks, and the restless indifference of that day had failed to grasp. If I could only put my arms about her! Never again would I let her go. My chest tightened with horror; I was either mad, or Tatiane had become the victim of something more abominable than any malady that could create the illusion of death for the sufferer.

A hollow rapping sound from the other side of the room snapped Tatiane's attention away. Her eyes narrowed hard on something past my shoulder, and so great was her sudden change of focus, I could feel my bones and muscles released from their paralysis. I tried to slide up in the chair a bit, but I had not yet the strength; in fact my intestines and stomach were racked with nausea nearly as debilitating as the paralysis had been. Tatiane's countenance was wary, incensed. As I tried to utter a word or at least a sound, I heard the rapping again, and knew now it was from outside the window that was beside the bed. I tried to turn my head, but my neck was like a wilted lily.

Tatiane pitched herself forward and clasped my face between her cool hands. Her lips brushed my mouth, and my loins stirred anew. "Do not venture out at night, my handsome schoolmaster. For I can see to it that they obtain what they seek ... without you meeting my fate."

As weak as I was, there was nothing I could do but look into her eyes. I frowned, straining with all my willpower, my fingertips finally touched her firm hips. A whisper of a smile touched her mouth and, suddenly, she reeled back from my lap into the drape of obliqueness. My head fell limply over one shoulder, and I watched her dark form billow

from the hearth to the door before changing into a mist that threaded itself through the keyhole and passed out of the house altogether.

What seemed like hours passed before my sluggish limbs, bones, and muscles obeyed my need, and I was able to rise from the chair. I was inspired by two thoughts -- to find Tatiane and bring her back and, whatever the cost, to free her from the evil that had claimed her. Once on my feet, however, I took no more than three or four steps before the darkness of unconsciousness obliterated my vision.

Chapter Four

I awoke in an unfamiliar room. Dusty beams crossed the ceiling over my face and the sun shone through a cheesecloth that draped from the window above and to the side of the bed. I sat up and pushed aside a worn quilt that had been spread over me. Kneeling, I pulled back the drape and looked outside, but my view was blocked by a thick tangle of flowering brambles that grew against the glass.

I turned from the window, unable to dismiss the smell so pungent to my nostrils. Surveying the room, I saw herbs and bulbs of numerous varieties hung to dry from the higher beams in the center of the room. On the wall across from the bed was a small fireplace, where something aromatic simmered in the brass cauldron that hung there; my mouth watered. A table stood against the wall facing the bed's footboard. I rose, mindful of my lightheadedness, and stepped curiously to it.

A wide oilcloth, strewn with a hodgepodge of things, lay atop the table, along with a small white cabinet that looked like a child's toy, painted over with delicate flowers and tiny dragons. A slender iron chain hung tautly between the handles of the cabinet doors, complete with a miniature iron lock.

Upon a circular wooden stand in the center of the table was a meticulously preserved human head. The skin was imparted with only the slightest of tawny felt texture. The lips, nostrils, and ear canals had been sewn closed, but whatever gutting or thread had been used had been tailored from the inside, so that the orifices retained their basic original contours. Had I not seen such displays in the homes of acquaintances who collected such morbid items, I might have been shocked. I was reaching out to touch the shiny hair when the creak of door hinges sounded from behind me.

Startled, I spun to find standing at the entrance the same white-haired woman in the beaten leather dress that I had seen at Tatiane's funeral. Weistreim stood behind her and over her shoulder cast me a quick congenial smile. He did not speak, however, and I sensed his silence came from an intense and habituated deference toward the elderly woman. As she came to stand before me, an expectant quiet seemed to brace the room. Her blue-green eyes looked me up and down, the crow's feet tightly drawn at the corners, and her mouth pursed with a displeased look. My stomach knotted and the nape of my neck crawled, much like when I was a child about to be interrogated by the nuns who administered the school I had attended.

This sensation turned my next thought to the time. It was surely time for me to be headed to the classroom, if I wasn't overdue already. I wondered if my pupils had arrived at the schoolhouse door and found it locked. Were they fretful about what had happened to me, or had someone already informed them that I was occupied elsewhere?

Then I remembered one desk that would be absent of its pretty occupant ... and my chest panged miserably.

"I am Ambla, Monsieur LaFaire. And I know you have recently seen my daughter's child, Tatiane."

Understanding now the nature of their relationship, I could not bring myself to speak of the passionate, heartrending incident with Tatiane the day we walked to the valley. Instead, I feigned self-interest. "How did I come to be here, madam?"

“This boy found you, of course. He fetched Tatiane’s father to help bring you to me.”

I glanced at Weistreim, but he was staring at his feet. “I must thank you then, for whatever --”

Ambla cut me off briskly, “He thought you ill to be lying on the floor so pale and almost lifeless, but I have found no fever, no sign of illness. Tell me, what quelled your strength, schoolmaster?”

As I rubbed the chafing tenseness from the back of my neck, she sighed and spoke something to the boy in a language I did not understand. At once, Weistreim slipped out again and shut the door behind him.

The crone gestured to the bed. “Sit.”

I started to protest that my pupils needed me, when she grasped my arm. She pressed me to comply, and I did not realize how very weak my body was until I relented. My head spun with relief as I sat, relieved of the burden of standing. She walked over to the hearth, ladled some soup from the cauldron into a clay bowl, and brought it back to me.

Ambla said nothing as I took it into my hands, but even to me the shaking of my hands was disconcerting. Still, I managed to blow on the soup and take two or three sips of the broth. My stomach spasmed painfully, but in a few moments I felt it settle.

“This might be your last meal, if you insist on keeping your secrets concerning Tatiane.”

I was shocked by her implication, but she went on, “No, it is not I whom you should fear, schoolmaster. But I see that those who have used my Tatiane have already commenced to thief on your vitality -- though I suspect it is not your body or blood they seek.”

My accustomed dislike for superstition winced at these speculations, but I listened as she continued in the same stony voice, “I can help you. I know who directs her, just as I know why she left no marks on you.”

I sipped the broth again and tried to keep my emotions from my voice. “What is it you believe happened to me, madam?”

“My Tatiane told me of your expressed wish to court her -- but also that you refrained your passion, as if her own honest passion was unseemly to you.”

The very lack of criticism in her tone sharpened my guilt.

“I was thoughtless; I apologize.” I felt pressed to give Tatiane’s grandmother some understanding of the cultural conflict that the encounter of which she referred had rattled in me. “You must understand, madam; in the world beyond this valley, such arduous expectations are considered imprudent.”

“Your world breeds senseless inhibitions, monsieur.” Ambla paused, then said in a voice as brusquely compelling as that of any schoolmaster, “I feel you regret your decision -- am I correct?”

I flushed hotly. It was not that I would have dared to contradict her, not now that I had my own resolutions concerning Tatiane. But her probing question was almost as invasive as her mind had proved during the funeral. Thus, to give prelude to my own speculations regarding Tatiane, as well as sidetrack the old woman’s curiosity, I replied frankly. “Before I answer, you must tell me what you believe befell your granddaughter.”

The left corner of her mouth turned up to give me a derisive flash of age-darkened, but hardy, teeth. “We of the ancient ways are not the stupid chickens those of your society make of us. Your credentials were well reviewed before our councilmen decided you were the best candidate to teach our women. But it was not a man who made the final decision on your suitability, Phillippe LaFaire.”

Her telling gaze made me feel like a child. In her no-nonsense, sage tone she continued. “You know as well as I what has befallen Tatiane. She has fallen victim to that race known as the vampire.”

I blinked. According to everything I knew, vampires were no more than allegorical archetypes. Whether it was the infant-devouring Lilith, or one of the countless legends of the vengeful spirit, erudition preached that these creatures were pure superstitions invented by the minds of the unsophisticated.

“They are real, schoolmaster. And were it not for Tatiane’s melancholy, they never would have dared take her. She was a priestess-guardian of ancient faith, one of the women who serve as living wards to our village against the vampires who, in times past, lured our little children into danger. But Tatiane had never loved before, let alone been spurned, schoolmaster. I know how devastated she was. She told me of your practicality. She could not eat; she could not stop weeping. Thus did she set out to the wilds where she and her priestess sisters perform the old rite. I stopped her father from following after her, thinking she needed time to collect herself. Evidently, her self-doubt drew the vampires from their lofty lair.”

As wild as this tale was, self-reproach needled my gut. But the echo of the words “lofty lair” quaked the foundations of my arcane education. For a moment I could not see the wrinkled face before me, but instead heard the climactic scream uttered by Tatiane and her friends as they stood naked and shaking before the eastern summit of the gorge.

“The priestesses summoned the clouds over the fortress monastery,” I whispered. Startled by my understanding, I nearly dropped the bowl of broth. Tatiane’s grandmother righted it in my hands.

“So you watched them,” Ambla sighed, “and still you did not see.”

She tut-tutted like a disgruntled mother. Chagrined, I finished the soup as she continued. “My people were avowed to the destruction of the vampire race ages before setting eyes upon this valley. There were six branches of the vampire family, all spawned passionlessly from the wombs of six of the Trickster’s seven malevolent daughters.”

Trickster was a pagan term I thought I'd heard somewhere before. My unspoken concern, however, for once outweighed my selfish curiosity, and I listened attentively as she went on. "My forefathers vowed to eradicate one of these branches entirely -- the spawn of Aniceo -- to slay them, destroy their every lair for the honor of the gods we worship. The bloodless matriarch, Aniceo, is mad, as are all the Trickster's daughters. She is mother to vampires, and yet, she is more. Unlike the life-hating chaos from which the Trickster came, Aniceo is a being of corrupted mortal desires. This is as the Trickster designed; he created himself as a flesh and blood creature that was neither male nor female, yet both, that he might self-propagate. The daughters he bore -- these six by self-conception like himself -- are human abominations, corruptions, mockeries of mortal needs and desires, and born to his designations, beings of insatiable desires and self-interests that they might be a plague to mankind."

Ambla paused a moment and a single fearful furrow crossed her brow. "There was a seventh, sired by an even more abhorrent method. But this one the Trickster did so misuse, she evolved into a force so frightful that even her father cowers at her approach. She is not one of the vampire mothers, but a dark and brooding leech upon mortal life in another way... and whom no man or magic may stop."

I was piqued once again, but before I could ask of the seventh daughter, Ambla continued. "Aniceo was the Trickster's first offspring, his favorite, the testament to his own powers. He was so proud of his feat of self-perpetuation that he transmuted into a peacock after her birth and assaulted the first peahen he came across, therefore placing an anathema upon the tragic offspring of that union. Even to this day, the doomed peahen's descendants live constrained to lionize Aniceo's creation with their morbid call.

"Just as with the Trickster's other self-conceived daughters, Aniceo has no maternal instinct. She did, however, have need of an army of unswayable allegiance. Thus did she conceive her brood through the seed of a dead man. And she has nurtured these undead children to believe themselves unworthy to share in the very delights for which they were

sired. Loathing their existence, they remain torn between the perpetual desire to feed on the flesh and the need to serve her in shame of themselves, while still clutching to the futile desire to gain her maternal love.

“When our ancient seers discovered she had led her vampire brood over the Alps questing for fresh pillage, they pursued. Aniceo and her brood managed to elude these pursuers during a blinding snowstorm and came to this province, whereas our forebears were forced to wait out the winter in icy caverns.

“But they were crafty, these descendants of the Trickster, and knew their trackers would pursue them until the end of time if need be. Thus did their matriarch instruct them to act on the political animosity that was felt at the time toward the familial prince of the province, Duke Boheme. Toward this aim, the vampires sought to gain the favor of the king of this land. The duke was not Christian, you see, his power reliant entirely and vulnerably on his ancient bloodline. The vampires discovered that if they aligned themselves with the Church of Rome and took vows of faith, they could more easily gain the king’s favor. This they accomplished; the king, happy to have sympathetic ears and eyes ready to spy upon his rival, built them a holy fortress. He recruited masons educated in the antediluvian knowledge of how to build a sanctuary that would serve -- unknown to the king -- as a sanctuary to the vampires. And, so, when my people at last reached the province, it was to discover they could not enter the lair of the vampires or even trespass its property without the consequence of immediate death from the magical forces imbued by the architect.

“We remained, however, safeguarding the province from the vampires’ unholy hunger. As well, we are indebted to Duke Boheme and his descendants for giving us this valley and braving the hostility and censure of the Church throughout the generations. The dukes protect us and, in exchange, we protect their family and people.”

The room fell silent except for the distant voices of children from beyond the bramble-covered window. The talk of vampires with unholy hunger echoed brutally against their laughter and blithe chatter.

Ambla's emotions softened her tone. "I knew they had taken Tatiane when I saw the marks on her throat. But I could not say this until there was undeniable proof. And, you, monsieur, are the testament of what she has become. Tell me, did she come to you alone?"

At the hesitant flush in my cheeks she pressed on. "How do I know Tatiane came to you? There is no other manner of illness that could drain the vitality from your aura. She will kill you, perhaps even unwittingly, monsieur, unless there is intervention. But I would like to know first, her manner of draining your strength."

Shocked, I clamped my lips shut; it was not that which she sought to hear that prevented my vocalizing, but rather the remnants of propriety that still possessed me. How could I admit the carnal truth to Tatiane's granddame?

"You are a fool, schoolmaster." She seethed with a fierceness that startled me. "Did she bite you or not? Do not allow modesty to bar me from possibly saving her!"

I was startled further, but now I had no question that she cared nothing about whether or not I had had relations with Tatiane.

"No, madam. She did not bite me."

Her eyes closed a moment, and when they opened again, tears spilt over her cheeks. "Good. Then she is not willingly aiding them. Still, you must have bade her welcome for her to have entered your house."

"Bade?"

She smiled sadly. "The foul creatures cannot enter the valley because of the priestesses' wards. Only through a priestess who has been taken can their damned souls interfere with us. Tatiane had to know she was welcome to your home. There could have been no other way for her to enter. Did you call out her name or have some item that belonged to her?"

I nodded uneasily. "I was speaking aloud to myself shortly before ..." My voice trailed off as I remembered something else. "On the nightstand were strands of Tatiane's hair, which I had inadvertently carried back from ... her funeral."

Ambla bit her bottom lip. "Alas, had I foreseen Tatiane's passion for you, I would have sent for someone else who possesses the potential of breaking through their wards."

My voice sounded distant to my ears. "What are you saying?"

"Their sanctuary can be entered," she explained, "but only by one educated in the very sorceries used by the mortal magicians who designed and constructed their lair. These sorceries come from the realm of chaos -- magical incantations, devices, and rituals whispered into the minds of men and recorded by foolish, greedy, mortal hands. Aniceo has no patience to learn the secrets that could protect her from the interference of mankind, but such knowledge is powerful, and can either be the bane or succor of the vampires."

"My folk discarded most of them as the tools of evil, practicing instead the rites of the good gods. Aniceo, obligated to bide her time in her cloistered refuge, awaits a mortal versed in the sorceries, a bindmaster. Through draining the knowledge of such an educated mortal, Aniceo can, in this leeching way, obtain the ancient secrets she seeks."

"Doubtlessly, Aniceo sensed your potential the moment you were close enough for her to read your thoughts and heart. She hungers for more than the blood her sons need, and would prefer to have you with her, to adore and worship her as other men have. Whether just by draining your knowledge, or possessing your body and soul, she will stop at nothing to have at her command the secrets that can free her from the monastery. But more important than even that, she wishes to obtain the secret by which to become completely invulnerable to mortal interference."

I was speechless at this revelation, a story all educated practicality urged me to discount. But this was no hysterical peasant sitting beside me; my prejudices were not so strong as to deny that this woman's decisions were inspired by reason. I could have been angry as well, understanding that, all unwittingly, I had been chosen for this fantastic quest of Ambla's. She had jeopardized my life and future. Yet, she had done so for a purpose more precious to her than even the granddaughter she had unknowingly sacrificed.

“But my augury has weakened with age.” She sighed. “I do not believe I shall live to see Aniceo defeated. I can only hope to save Tatiane. Now that the proof they have taken her has been shown, we must act promptly.”

She looked at me calmly. “I am trained in the ancient secret of the only amulet that can save Tatiane without killing her. You possess the fortitude and passion required for the amulet to work. If you are willing, I will instruct you in what preparations must be carried out for its design, as well as show you how to construct a weapon of personal protection in case the ravenous predilection of Aniceo’s sons complicates her purpose to recruit you for her cause.

“Be assured that Tatiane will visit you again -- not only on the vampires’ commands, but because of her desire of you; the increasing wasting of your body that will result from these visits cannot be kept secret for long. When our men begin to suspect the reason of your illness, they will come to me to deny or confirm their suspicions. As a priestess, I am sworn to speak only the truth. Monsieur, the men are bound to hunt Tatiane down and destroy her body, and Tatiane’s own father has more reason than the rest to do so. His wife, her mother, was attacked when returning from a visit to a friend out in the province and utterly devoured of both flesh and blood by the vampires. My daughter’s widower is a good man, and will abide no hesitation to release Tatiane’s soul from the same power that murdered his beloved.

“Of course, it would be wrong for me not to explain that you could simply leave the valley now and be done with this, with us. It is my failure of vision which has brought this upon Tatiane. You will know no blame if you choose to depart now and return to the civilized world.”

I looked around the cozy room and smelled the comforting aroma of the last of my broth. But as I turned back to the worn face beside me, not too far beneath the heavy drapes of wrinkles, I saw the resemblance between this woman and her granddaughter. Her eyes were bluer than Tatiane’s, but they implored me now, with a passion like Tatiane’s ardent

confession that day in the grass, a passion to match my love for my auburn-haired pupil. And I heard again the concern and desperation in Tatiane's voice as she warned me to avoid venturing out at the night.

I lowered the bowl to the floor and inhaled deeply. I did not know that my body quaked with anger until Ambla's feather-soft fingertips combed soothingly through my hair.

"Whatever must be done," I told her lowly, "tell me now."

Ambla rose, bolted the door, and closed the shutters at the window.

Within the next few hours, I learned more magic from the old crone than days spent devouring the pages of one of my arcane manuscripts. If there was a price for sharing her people's earthy sorceries, and more so for unveiling the mysteries of their principles, Ambla never commented. Out of respect, I vowed that afternoon to hold my tongue forevermore in matters pertaining to these pagan mysteries, though even then, I knew it was doubtful that any intellectual and haughty soul beyond these remote borders would consider their value worthy of interest.

Chapter Five

Before a streak of twilight amber even breathed into the sky, I was home again. Ambla had sent Weistreim along with a crate filled with the items necessary to make the amulet and a basket of preserved meats. The old woman had reminded me twice to eat all of the meat before commencing the project, as I needed my strength for the ordeal, and it would be the last meal I could eat until the amulet was completed. The invocation that would imbue the amulet with its powers rang as fresh in my mind as when she'd shared it. A runic verse, this; a magical incantation, which she had taught me by singing it over and over while she had tattooed the runic symbol for Tatiane's name onto the inner flesh of my left thigh.

So, at Weistreim's departure, I ate, then set the loaded crate beside my desk. Before evening was fully set in, I drew water from the well at the back of the cabin and filled the oaken tub in the house. Then, I bolted the door and bathed. When I was clean, I dried well, but did not dress. Starting a fire in the hearth, I fetched a large, clean kettle from the pantry and set it in the center of my desk.

I then took a pouch of thick muslin from the crate, and poured the gold dust that stuffed it into the kettle, spitting into it to make it mine. I hung the kettle from the iron hook

in the warming fireplace, and set three vials from the crate upon the hearth. The last item I fetched was a birch spoon I had cut and whittled to Ambla's specifications.

I laid the spoon upon the stones of the hearth as I opened the first vial, which contained a gelatinous liquid the color of cobalt. Before pouring it, I spit into the vial, too. As I upturned the vial, the liquid dribbled slowly over the gold and formed glassy teardrops in the dust. The second vial contained sea water, and as water is free and the mother of all life, I refrained from claiming it with my spit. When it was added, I uncorked the final vial, which consisted of my blood, drawn by Ambla's leeches, and as such, already claimed. With all of these ingredients combined, I kneeled and grasped the spoon with my right hand, holding it over the mouth of the kettle and inhaling as I uttered the incantation for the first time.

Seventy times I stirred the concoction with my right hand; seventy times I repeated the words. I thought of Tatiane. Not as the specter that had come to me the night before, but the living girl who had captivated me with her becoming blushes that had so attractively concealed her earthy desires from the world. With the last stir, I laid the spoon atop the kettle and lay down in my bed.

For some time I reminisced of things I had longed to do with her -- and to her -- before, that was, bloodless propriety had stayed my hand. I envisioned her naked body as she had danced on the open grass and the branding touch of her lips upon my throat as she had pleaded the last day we'd spoken. My desire to take her in living flesh was almost unbearable as my hand sought my manhood. My flesh was tender from Ambla's red-hot needles, but my need was thoughtless to this. The calculated, slow strokes I made over my flesh were stressful, as was the necessity to restrain my mounting pleasure, but I succeeded in building my pleasure to the point of ejaculation, stopping before my passion released.

As Ambla had suggested, I immediately drank a cup of cool water, and then relieved myself in the chamber pot. I checked on the kettle before retiring and found the concoction just beginning to bubble. Throwing on just a small piece of wood to keep the hearth flame alive, I settled back into bed.

I was almost asleep when there sounded a rattling on the shingles. At once I sat up, not daring to let my will slip away into the shadows of dreams where I would be helpless to another attack. Now, I recited the second incantation Ambla had taught me -- the command of hindrance, words that would constrain Tatiane from entering the house without diminishing her desire to do so in the slightest.

The spell of mastery, Ambla had explained ... as I repeated it, my voice grew in boldness and clarity. The rattling turned into an agitated scraping that soon paused a moment or two as the magical words resounded through the room. Then there came a knock at the door, as clear and familiar as if it were Weistreim come with breakfast. It sounded once, twice, and then continuously. A chilly sweat filmed my flesh and my loins pulsed warmly, yet I ignored these sensations and concentrated on the incantation.

After a time the knocking died away. My words did not falter any less than when Tatiane had forced the alchemist's secret from me the night before. This turned out to be fortunate, for soon I heard Tatiane whimpering from the other side of the door. This sublime note of abandonment and rejection might have swayed my course at another time. Instead, I listened raptly only to my own voice and took dispassionate satisfaction in the command I projected.

Slowly her whimpers faded away.

Chapter Six

I opened the classroom the next morning and gave my apologies to the class for my absence. Somehow, I managed to take up the recitations in proper feminine and masculine inflections and resume the lesson on medieval ballads. As my students practiced their letter writing, I thought only of what lay ahead that night, and rehearsed the coming incantation in my head until I forgot time. Only when the women started to fidget and whisper more than usual was I drawn back into reality. Smiling, I apologized again and sent them home.

The concoction was bubbling steadily in the kettle when I returned to the cabin. I stirred it the appropriate number of times, then read until evening set in fully. Then I performed the cleansing rite once more and stirred the concoction again. I went to my bed and performed the heated rite as before. I could almost taste Tatiane's skin as I worked myself that night, could almost feel her beautifully molded limbs and every firm curve. My body pleaded for satisfaction, but again I denied it release. When I was finished this time, my mind was clarified of all else but the single purpose of my design. I could not sleep, and I felt no need for it. I read for a time in bed. Later, when the scraping commenced on the shingles, I knew no desire but to quiet my beloved until I would summon her. The command of hindrance silenced all but her frustrated whimpers at once.

Then, abruptly, the whimpers were silenced by another voice outside my door. Like the chords of an iron-strung mandolin it uttered, dismantling my composure and puncturing my focus. The words were alien to me, but their tone held undeniable malevolence. At the sound of Tatiane's fearful cry, I sat up tensely; the subsequent heavy impact against the house prompted me from the bed. For defense, I took from the crate a small wooden hammer that I had previously carved and ritualistically imbued with my blood and jism; hoisting it over my heart, I opened the front door.

I saw nothing from its threshold, yet the soul-pricking voice grew ever more scathing. I advanced, following it to the eastern corner of the house with all the stealth at my disposal. At once my searching eyes found Tatiane. She wore a flimsy white silk gown, and her lovely knees were on the ground, her arms crossed over her head defensively.

In the shade, beside my Tatiane, stood her assailant, a towering woman in a clinging gown of purple velvet. Even with the moonlight to her back, the woman's complexion glowed pale and flawless. Her voluptuous ruby lips were drawn back angrily, her dark eyes gleaming like the choker of black diamonds at her throat. Her hands were graceful, her fingernails sensuously long and sharply manicured. Upon one thumb she wore a wide ring with a large carnelian orb. As she continued to browbeat Tatiane, her voluptuous body shook so hard that the moonlight sparkled in her flowing waves of dark hair.

The woman's tirade stopped with a frightful silence; as her face turned to me, her hazel eyes shone like two beacons pulling me toward some sensuous realm. Despite the lust that surged spontaneously in my loins, instinct avowed this creature was much more than a drinker of blood and life.

An enemy of the living, birthed in chaos far older than legend or tale.

Yet this enemy possessed a flawless, tempting body and a face so exquisite, it surely humbled the goddess Aphrodite. She drew herself to her full height, and her confident smile attested that already she had enslaved a legion of mortal men with the faith that evil design was inconsequential beside such beauty.

But my heart had already mastered by my submissive Tatiane. With a growl, I ran forward and thrust the hammer between Tatiane's fair head and the vampire.

"Let her be!"

The vampire's eyes flared. For a moment, I saw the shock and terror in her eyes; the next, a force impacted my chest and sent me reeling back against the boards of the house. As I charged a second time, her lips pursed tightly into a crimson bow. With an exhale, she sent me reeling back again, this time so hard my skull thudded against the logs. As she clutched Tatiane by the roots of her hair, I raised the hammer high in my left fist.

"Let her go, I say!"

I rushed forth and grabbed Tatiane's arm with my free hand. Her arm could not have been colder had she been carved of ice, and her tears -- like globules of rose glass -- confirmed that she was no longer human. But the melancholy and terror in her eyes melted suddenly into the canvass of night. A whirlwind spun me about, knocking me back against the house. I tried to run back to the spot where I had been assaulted, but the whirlwind was as impassable as limestone. My ears perceived no sound but its violent scream. I felt an intelligence from the unnatural zephyr, one that mocked the wrath that pulsed in my veins, and in the next instant it tore straight through the nearby wood, leveling the copse and cleaving branches as it plunged through.

My sense of impotence was as encompassing as the stoic power I had known only minutes before. Slowly, the powerlessness bled away, and I grew curious over what I had witnessed. The vampire woman had not attacked me; with a stunning but unshakable certainty, I knew that the temptation had not even passed through her dark thoughts.

I went back into the house and returned to bed, but wrenching visions of the vampire woman hurting Tatiane allowed for shallow rest. The she-demon had been furious with my Tatiane; why, I neither knew nor cared. However, my uncertainty as to what she might be doing compelled me to throw off the covers a couple of hours before dawn. I jumped out of

the bed and quickly dressed. I placed the hammer under my trousers, with the head hung over the waistband at my hip, then took a lantern and set out of the house once more.

The villagers were peaceful as I'd suspected; the only person I met was a constable who patrolled the street. He pulled me aside and asked, in the mildest of tones, where I was off to so early in the morning. I explained that I had forgotten some papers to read over at the schoolhouse and that, without my diligent attention, my pupils would find their expected lesson in romantic ballads unprepared. With a nod, he let me pass and continued on his way. I plodded on in the direction of the schoolhouse, but deviated at the crossroads in front of the long lodge house where the councilmen held their meetings. The new path I took led out of the village main and through the woods that ascended the southern valley side. The path grew very steep within these primitive shades, but it was well cleared by use, so it did not take me long to ascend to the top.

The path ended, or began here, depending on one's perspective. The fertile countryside lay silent under the heavens before me, and with the lantern's light guiding the way, I strode eastward across the rim of the valley. It was a lengthy walk, and I was panting by the time the lamplight found the fence of blocks I sought.

On the day of my arrival, a fellow passenger aboard my carriage had explained to me what these blocks bordered. As high as my hips and separated each by a good yard, these black objects encircled the monastery's perimeter. They were uncluttered edifices, without a strand of the dead overgrowth that so heavily carpeted the grounds beyond them.

I placed a hand on the block standing to my left. Smooth as satin was this uncertain stone, and the block was colder than steel. With the pads of my fingers, I caressed the sharply hewn edges of the top. After a moment, a leaden vibration began to resonate from within the block. I drew my hand back and heard a crow cackle angrily behind me. Another bird chirped worriedly, and another squawked as if in warning. In moments, it seemed every tree I had passed on my way resounded with avian discontent.

A banshee-like shriek jarred the night air. It was a peafowl's call, and its foreboding sound silenced the other birds.

I set the lamp on the ground long enough to draw the hammer from my waistband. It looked so unthreatening, this toyishly made tool, but I brandished it in front of me as I picked the lantern back up and started across the property line. It was only seconds before the lantern light revealed the dour masonry of the monastery's southern transept, with a single portal hewn at the crux. As I contemplated which direction to take, a sulky, fretful cry trailed toward me from the right. Padding quietly, I came upon a passageway of black tile laid between two limestone archways. This passage, I knew, led to the eastern crux of the monastery, and as I drew closer, I saw that the limestone was covered by vines with thorns as large as daggers. The cry sounded again from down the long vista. I breathed deeply and turned the lantern's oil down to only a hair of a flame. I whispered another charm learned from Ambla and proceeded between the archways.

It was darker than I had imagined within this intimidating corridor, and the thorns shivered as I passed through. My ears picked up the distinct sound of vines rustling across the stones, but I did not walk into any of them. To my relief and despite my suspicions, they did not touch me. Another, more agonized cry hastened my gait, and soon I exited the dreadful passage and stepped into a courtyard of the same black tile.

I stood silently, allowing my vision to adjust to the open night air again. A peafowl screeched close to my left, but when the ungodly sound faded, I heard the cry again. My eyes moved to the direction from which it issued and lit upon a large object in the center of the courtyard. After a moment or two, my scrutiny clarified, and I knew what I looked upon was a very deep rectangular stone sarcophagus. Its flat, unornamented lid, however, had been edged away slightly. I saw movement behind it suddenly, and raising my eyes, I made out two or three shadowy silhouettes.

Lowering the lantern silently, I took a few steps until I could make out their dimensions clearly. Two lean, robed and cowled monks -- and between them, they held

Tatiane by her wrists. Her flimsy gown was torn, and her hair smudged with mud. She struggled to release herself from their impassive hold. The monks ignored her struggles, and when one of them peered suddenly over his shoulder, I saw another monk advance out of the shadows on the far side of the courtyard. The cowl of his robe was pulled back, so I had a good look at his sickly white face and pious sneer. He walked up behind Tatiane and snatched the ends of her hair with one hand. With her head forced back on her neck, she had no choice but to endure his scrutiny as he glared down at her with chiseled, porcelain scorn.

He tapped her brow with a bony forefinger, making not only Tatiane jump, but my heart as well. My breath was anxious, but I dared not move, at least not until there was undeniable indication of violence from the vampire monks.

I listened as the one gripping Tatiane's hair spoke -- and if disease had a voice, its resonance could have been no unhealthier than the one I heard at that moment. "Your continued effrontery to our mother is unforgivable, Urdhel *fraulein*. It is time you learn to serve properly, with the simplicity and humility which is our condition and duty. Just as we do, you shall not insult the laws of the universe by assuming the passions which our gracious mother has sole prerogative to indulge, and the wisdom alone to utilize."

Tatiane's mouth quivered. "Please," she sobbed, "just let me die!"

"You will be grateful for the state we have offered you, after you have learned to serve properly."

Tatiane shook her head. Her eyes glistened with contempt. "No, I will not nurse Phillippe's thoughts again -- I am not a passionless leech like you, or even a glutton of flesh and blood like your vain and greedy mother! I would rather die than serve her!"

A sharp hiss cut through the night air from beyond them. Before Tatiane could turn her head, Aniceo emerged. Moving as gracefully as a gazelle, she strode up to Tatiane so quickly that the uncowed vampire jumped timidly and backed away from the other side of

the sarcophagus. Aniceo grasped Tatiane's face between her trembling hands. The other two vampire monks held onto Tatiane all the firmer, but their mother's luminous scowl cowed them visibly.

"You will die, human sow, when I am ready for you to die." She had spoken with Tatiane's own dialect, but now that I was unaffected by her startling physical allure, I perceived a distinctly coarse but undefined Anglo timbre in her accent.

One of the vampires holding onto Tatiane made a low and uncertain murmur. At once Aniceo snarled at him so savagely that his knees buckled slightly as he cringed.

"She is unworthy, you fool -- how dare you voice sympathy for a vile creature, one who would assume those privileges only I can appreciate!"

The vampire's head shook vigorously. With an indignant grunt, Aniceo turned her imperious attention back to Tatiane.

"You are an ugly insect compared to me! The only reason you have not met death yet is that we need you to guide us past the trifling wards placed in the valley by you and your damnable priestess sisters. Death will come, justly and soon, you ugly, brazen thief!"

Aniceo released her and wrapped her arms about herself. She spat on Tatiane, then glared at her for a time with the pout of a spoiled child. But her next direction came in the voice of the practiced self-victim. "Place her in the sarcophagus. There she may plead with the spiders and other insects until she is persuaded to serve me willingly."

The uncowed son moved about the sarcophagus eagerly. He untied the hemp cord from his robe and, with a nod to his brothers, the three of them wrestled Tatiane's struggling arms behind her. While his cowed brothers secured her elbows, the berating vampire tied Tatiane's wrists together. But when he bent over and grabbed for Tatiane's knees, she shrieked and flailed her legs violently. Pinned by the other two, however, she was no match for his determination, and at last his ashen hands grasped her ankles. Together, the three conveyed her over the rectangular opening of the sarcophagus. As they raised her high over

the portal, I caught a glimpse of something dark and hairy as it scurried down from one corner into the murky recesses. Tatiane shrieked again as they dropped her inside, and the thud of her impact upon the cold interior surface stilled the next beat of my heart.

I squeezed the hammer's handle in frustration as they worked to push the lid back into place. Tatiane's screams echoed within the stone confines. My chest was heavy with the impulse to run forward and challenge them right then and there. Only Aniceo's last heartless words reassured there was still time. They were not planning to leave her in the stone coffin forever, and, so, would not yet harm her in any way that might damage her priestess's ability to avail them safe passage into the valley. No, Aniceo's aim at the moment was merely to condition through terror.

When they finished sealing Tatiane inside the tomb, Aniceo's sons began to utter some heavy, woebegone chant. The words were not Latin, but some unknown language, its cadence reminiscent of somber Christian chants I had heard in other parts of the world. Aniceo's lips turned up in a self-assured grin. She spun and paraded over the courtyard toward the shade from whence she had come, her monstrosly blithe laughter wafting through the air as her sons turned and filed after her.

I despaired to leave Tatiane alone in the sarcophagus, but the rite was not finished and I knew she would suffer more if I acted rashly. I waited awhile, until her panicky screams deteriorated to thin sobbing. I let the sound of her cries imprint itself on my memory and welcomed the vision of what vile creatures must surround Tatiane in the blackness. These things were branded upon my purpose and clarified the rationale for my hatred.

My grip crushed the hammer's handle so that some splinters gave way under my hand. Drawing a long, calming breath of air, I turned away and headed back through the archways.

Chapter Seven

I did not sleep for a long time. I was miserable to think of Tatiane shut up in the sarcophagus, yet I knew my feelings were unproductive. Compelled to search through my collection, I found the hemp-paged copy of *The Breath of Life*, a manuscript I had only skimmed through before. I spent the remainder of the hours until dawn digesting it.

The book was only one of five known existing copies of the personal, and quite priceless, diary of the sorcerer-priest, Catullus of Aricia, written before his death by assassins of Constantine the First. Those historians who were acquainted with the rare manuscript discounted it as the delusional testimony of a half-mad pagan fanatic, but the few educated minds who had actually read it without religious bias considered Catullus's notes some of the most practical and easily understandable manuals of demonology ever recorded. In the past, my personal infatuation with ostentatious ritual had allowed little credence for the importance of such an unelaborate work. However, something within me had changed; for once I had no consideration for what aesthetic ambience I came away with. All that mattered was finding the information that I sensed was to be found within the diary's pages.

Sometime later I put the diary away. I went to the schoolhouse, my thoughts on the ritual that awaited completion and of all that my eyes had drunk in the night before. My

teaching duties did not interfere with fidelity to my cause; I performed with mechanical, yet flawless, self-possession. This worked, so that even when the whispering little discussion between two of my pupils escalated into impertinent disruption, I reacted, but was undaunted.

The familiar, comfortable strictness which I had feared to exert over the past few weeks came back to me. In my most implacable voice, I ordered the women -- Rosemar, and her daughter, Gildemar -- to their feet. They obeyed with giggling apologies that only confirmed my suspicion that unless the situation was handled with a firm hand, I would soon lose all respect in my own classroom.

Without a second thought, I ordered them to lift the hems of their frocks to their hips. The daughter's mouth fell open, and her mother crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow to deliver me a most disapproving look. It was this matronly haughtiness which had to be humbled first. Snatching up my crop, I strode toward Rosemar so swiftly that she jumped.

"Dare you, sir!"

"Madam, you will remain silent, or I shall send for your good husband straightaway."

Her pretty mouth puckered angrily, but there was a frightened blush in her cheeks.

"There shall be no more impertinence demonstrated in this classroom, madam. Now, you two shall lift your frocks, bend over your chairs, and hold firmly to the seats."

I caught the terrified glance exchanged between mother and daughter, but solemnly they complied, lifting their frocks ever so fastidiously. Each wore a pair of white silk underpants with scalloped lace hems, their delicate garments a sublime complement of sensuality and innocence. They turned and bent over their seats, eliciting a couple of gasps from the rest of the class. I ignored the other women and poised myself behind Rosemar, laying a steadying hand over the small of her back. As I raised the crop over her backside, she let out a low, agitated groan, and her shapely buttocks clenched in anticipation beneath the silk undergarment. At the first thrash of my crop, she shrieked loudly, but I dealt the

following strokes so rapidly she hardly had time to gasp between them. I dealt her fifteen sound strokes. Then, warning her not to move from her properly humbled position, I proceeded to the daughter.

Gildemar received the same number of thrashes, but I allowed her to lower her frock when the punishment ended. Only Rosemar, I deemed, needed further chastening; not only for her challenging behavior of before, but also to set an example to the rest of the class. Thus was the daughter allowed to sit back in her seat with a discomforted pout to keep her company, while her mother remained bowed over her chair. I returned to the lesson they had interrupted, at ease for the first time within my sphere. And though I spied an occasional teardrop fall from Rosemar's face to her seat, not a single peep or whisper did I hear from any of my pupils for the remainder of the day.

Chapter Eight

Ambla was standing under one of the apple trees outside as I left the schoolhouse that afternoon. A small wicker basket lay at her feet, and the green cloth inside prevented me from seeing whatever she carried in it. Her hands were behind her back as I greeted her, and the staunch timbre of her voice was a little more subdued than I recalled.

“You have the look of the famished,” she said.

I smiled humorlessly, though it was a comfort to see her.

“The hunger has passed. And though my perceptions are clearer than ever in my life, it seems I do not think, but rather, functionally go about my routine.”

Her eyes glinted. “And never have you been more assured in your actions, yes?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you have slept, at least a little.”

I nodded. It was an embroidered gesture, but it seemed kinder than offering a comment that could inadvertently bring up the wrenching scene I had come across the night before. Ambla smiled blandly. She had the faraway look of one contemplating some old, inner turmoil as she peered about the lush, violet-sprinkled grass.

“The gods seed paradise by men’s actions,” she spoke absently, “and harvest it through the desires of women.”

At my silence, Ambla sighed and brought her arms forward, taking my hand. Turning it over, she laid a wide band of cast iron in my palm. It was pliable, but only enough for the task for which Ambla had brought it. The very feel of it made me eager to return home and finish the rite before nightfall.

“This is the last thing I may provide you. It will bring Tatiane out of darkness, but only your knowledge can keep her out of the shadows and exorcize the evil from whence it comes.”

I stared at the metal. A piece of simple iron, and yet it seemed at the moment weightier than gold.

She touched my chin with her warm fingertips, and again I was struck by the resemblance between her and Tatiane.

“I have kept Tatiane’s fate secret thus far. But if you fail, or if you fall into their hands, I will have to speak to the council. Tatiane must not suffer any longer. And if Aniceo possesses you, she likewise possesses all your knowledge. Then she shall be empowered with the means to leave her haven and resume her pillage of mortality. Worse, she’ll be immune to our wards and rites that have thus far limited her power.”

The breeze tousled her long white hair, and her wrinkles seemed more pronounced as I regarded her. “I have wronged Tatiane in my zeal to see the vampires destroyed once and for all. Do not add insult to her injury by jeopardizing yourself, Phillippe. Save her if you can, but do not confront Aniceo. Promise me this.”

I felt her mind touch my thoughts, which, bastioned by keen and sobered intent, allowed only the reassurance she sought. Smiling, I took her hand and kissed it. A wilted touch of rose shaded her cheeks.

“It is my mistake that led Tatiane to resign hope, not yours, and I intend to do nothing more now than to recapture and protect her.”

She seemed content with this, and stooping, handed me the basket.

“After your work is finished, eat,” she instructed. “Weistreim is the baker’s apprentice and made this himself from the old recipe.”

Without waiting for a reply, Ambla turned and started up the street toward her home, her shoulders rounded and her gait wearily patient. My gut twisted with outrage to know the cause of her weariness. But smartly, I subdued the emotion -- useless for the moment -- and tucked the item she had brought beside whatever was covered in the basket. Then I re-entered the schoolhouse and tidied up the classroom before hurrying off.

I did not return immediately to my cabin. Tatiane’s unexpected entombment obliged me to take certain extra measures on my part that I was unwilling to admit to her grandmother. I made a trip to the blacksmith’s shop and asked to see the sturdiest iron rod available. The man showed me an assortment of simple rods that could be used as a base material for other tools. None, however, were sturdy enough to pry open the sarcophagus. Then I noticed a rusted poker standing by the fireplace. Too large an item for an ordinary household, I inquired about the weighty-looking object that stood at least to my shoulders.

“Came by it from one of the duke’s donation fairs,” the man explained, “or, as they are known here, his housecleaning fairs.” The blacksmith’s eyes widened as he regarded the thing. “I would not wish to have to maintain the hearth for which that thing is required, would you?”

I examined it carefully; the rust flaked away easily, and I saw that the poker was only iron plated. The core was steel.

“How much would you take for it?”

He looked flustered and thoughtful at once. At last he replied with an earnest nod, “Promise to come to the wedding when I marry little Gretchen next month, and it is yours, Schoolmaster.”

The name brought the image of one student to mind.

“Gretchen, the carpenter’s daughter?”

He nodded, and the corners of his mouth turned up proudly. “The very one. And I promise, once we are married, she will be on time to class every morning.”

I laughed gently, and a few minutes later I left the shop with the poker posed over my shoulder. It was cumbersome, but I managed to carry it and the basket back home. Inside, I stood the poker against the frame of the door, which I then locked. The basket I placed on my nightstand, then undressed and performed the ritual bath anew.

Clean and still naked, I approached the cauldron over its steady flame, repeated the incantation, and performed the proper number of stirs. I set a deep bowl of water upon the hearth, and using tongs from the pantry shelf, I lowered the iron band into the bubbling gold ooze. Releasing it for several moments to swirl in the mixture, I closed my eyes and imagined the culmination of my desires. Then, with the tongs, I lifted the band out and submerged it into the water. The water hissed for a couple of minutes, and when I was satisfied, I again grasped the band with the tongs. I laid the fashioned collar over a clean linen on the desk.

While it dried, I fetched a tiny wooden container from amongst the items brought from Ambla’s abode and set it beside the wisps of Tatiane’s hair on the nightstand. When the collar was dry and satisfactorily cooled, I took it to the bed and sat down cross-legged on the mattress. I turned it in my hands, admiring for a time the gleam of the retained gold despite the other ingredients that had gone into the mixture. The entire collar tingled against my flesh, like honey when held in one’s mouth. Laying it beside me on the mattress, I glanced at the poker beside the door. Then I lay down with my head upon the pillow.

It wasn't even close to evening as I closed my eyes. I thought of Tatiane, of course, but the time to indulge fantasies was over. Yet, I knew that the realization of those fantasies was not an egg I could wisely count yet. I smiled at my own growing superstitions. My focus and resolve were primed to an almost hypnotic sharpness, and cleansed entirely of interfering mortal doubt or hesitation. I envisioned what was to come later that night, a thing unfamiliar, yet my mind had rehearsed it so well that my envisioned steps touched me as familiar. I recited to myself the incantations I had learned throughout the years that would make me invisible to the vampires' eyes when I returned to the monastery. I also repeated the words Ambla had taught, words of power that would bless my wielding of the magical hammer. And I rehearsed the banishments she had shared, those that would break any spell Aniceo had placed upon Tatiane to compel her to fight against salvation.

Yet, as I allowed myself to drift off into a half-sleep, a rite from the Callutus's writings appeared before my mind's eye, an exorcism that had fascinated me the night before, fashioned not of ceremony and detached determination, but of primordial emotion. I was not certain why my mind needed reiteration of this rite, but I soon lost all sense of everything but for the sound of my unspoken voice repeating it.

A dozen times; fifty times; maybe a hundred times I recited it. So many times did I recite it that I lost count. I was so utterly swept away into the invocation that I was aware of nothing afoot in the house until an icy blade touched my forehead.

Chapter Nine

I gasped at once and opened my eyes; what I had felt was not metal or ice, but Tatiane's fingernails caressing me.

She wore a coarse, blue-dyed gown with heavy, bell sleeves, exposing only a peep of white cleavage. Her skin was aglow with the radiance of health and life. She gifted me with that smile I had so missed as she bent down and kissed my mouth. Her lips tasted like a freshly plucked rosebud, still cool from the morning frost, and they trembled with the promise of delights fulfilled.

My drowsy mind felt inebriated; my loins, inflamed and stiffened. She drew down the coverlet and sheet with one graceful hand and shyly stroked my stomach and chest.

"Schoolmaster," she whispered. "I need you ...". She sat down on the bedside and traced her fingertips down to my thigh. A curious glint came to her eyes on seeing the tattoo on my thigh, but she only commented with a giggle and cupped my balls. My mouth watered under her caress and at the very sight of her. She was so alive, or so my eyes told me. With a bashful tilt of her head, her fingers glided up and down my shaft. How warm and alive she felt; the light sensation she impelled was maddening, defying all the logical warnings that

shouted in my brain. She bent over me, and my skin was set aflame. My nipples hardened beneath the weight of her pressing breasts.

Tatiane's tongue lapped playfully over my chin. "Will you not kiss me of your own accord, schoolmaster?"

I could only look at her; I was a man sinking under clashing waves of desire and patient caution. She kissed me again, moaning softly into my mouth. Grasping the root of my cock, she began to stroke me. I was plunged deeper beneath the waves, and the contrasting currents were vying to blind me now to everything except the physical need to claim her.

Her mouth released me; her hand, too. She inclined over me carefully, and her weight was as inconsiderable as straw. Her eyes held mine, and though they glinted with passion, there was a mechanical steadiness to all her movements, even in the somber pout that came to her mouth. My desire slackened and reason buoyed me up to crest the waves.

"I know your wishes now, Phillippe."

I felt a power emanate through her, an intelligence that was alien and separate from the true sweetness of her character. It was not even similar to the passionate vampire who had ravished me some nights before. Rather, this power sought to captivate me with ardor, confuse and bind me with my own affections. As she squeezed my cock gently between her thighs, I released a deliberate moan. I felt the power try to scour through my mind, and false desire alone now shielded my reason.

"Yes, you still desire the beauty you had denied yourself ..."

I granted her a convincingly entranced nod.

With an approving purr, she bunched the hem of her gown up to her thighs and straddled my waist. Sublime confidence sparkled in her eyes as she regarded me. She toyed with my nipples, pinching them slightly, and trailed a fingertip from my chest to my collarbone. Her hips undulated a moment, and I realized how very dry her nether mouth was, nothing like the lathering, ardent little portal I had known before. She gathered her hair

atop her head and peered at me with the look of a triumphant Amazon. She expected me to be spellbound by her gaze, utterly lost of will, as if I had been born and destined to lose myself to the unholy pillaging she planned. And, so, I feigned just that.

She pressed my wrists into the mattress over my head and leaned forward to kiss me roughly. Her lips skimmed over my ear, then down to the hollow of my throat. She released my arms and pinched my nipples harshly enough that I had to suppress a protest. But it brought a careless laugh to her, and as her lips buried into my throat, the fingertips of my right hand sought out the smooth metal of the collar on the coverlet beside me.

Her mouth roved over my jugular vein, and her tongue flicked over the area, pumping my circulation with the brisk movement. She arched her back and pressed me deeper into the mattress, and with a wanton sigh, her lips drew back. I felt the sharp tips of teeth press into my flesh.

I snatched the collar firmly, clasped my arms about Tatiane's shoulders, and took hold of both ends of the collar with my hands. The iron frame lengthened easily as I gripped it. Tatiane grunted, but unaware of the reason for my sudden movement, only pressed harder on my shoulders. I clamped the collar down hard against the back of her neck. She hissed uneasily; at the moment she raised her head, I clasped the choker about her throat.

With a squeal, she leapt back on her heels. My force held staunchly as she thrashed and tore at my hands and the collar. I sat up, and she was trapped, straddled over my thighs as I held onto the collar. Her hair was tangled between the metal and her neck. The more she struggled, the more disheveled her hair became, serving as a barrier between her scraping nails and my hands while I spoke the last incantation of the rite.

When I uttered the last Germanic word, Tatiane stopped struggling and began to growl angrily. Through her tousled auburn locks, I saw her eyes had lost the sweet light of life. Instead they looked black, devoid of even the memory of humanity. Her radiance had seeped from her skin, along with the semblance of heat.

“Pull your hair out,” I commanded. She shivered in fury, and when she did not comply, I said, “Do it now, or receive punishment.”

Tatiane howled with malicious laughter. The next moment she gasped and shook her head violently. In utter frustration, she screamed and beat the crown of her head with her fists. At length she slumped and began to sob with what sounded like shame. I rose to my knees and allowed her to fall back on the bed.

“Phillippe?” She sounded honestly bewildered, and I felt Aniceo’s possession slip away.

“Oh, no,” she said faintly, shaking her head. “No, Phillippe, let me go! What you have done is dangerous, foolish!”

I retained my hold on the collar with my right hand, and with the other, I brushed the hair from her face. Tears ran down her cheeks, and her face looked like that of a rain-misted alabaster statue. Slowly, carefully, I pulled her long hair free of the collar and pressed the ends to my lips. The corners of her pallid lips turned up sadly; her tears spilled more heavily.

“I am dead to all the world, poor Phillippe! I have wronged you and insult your household to be here. I am a failure to my people.”

“No,” I murmured, “that is not true; none of it.”

“Yes, it is. Allow me only the mercy to die now!”

My heart sank to hear her anguished words. But the time to completely finish the rite had come. I straddled her chest now, keeping the collar cinched steadfastly. She winced in shame and turned her gaze away from me, weeping desolately. With my thumb, I caressed her bottom lip.

“Look at me, Tatiane.” When she closed her eyes tightly and shook her head, I spoke with unwavering firmness. “You will look at me, Tatiane, as I say.”

At her hesitant compliance, I grasped my cock. I admired her beautiful face, those eyes which had haunted me. I remembered her sitting astride my lap and the taut, virginal nether mouth that had swallowed my manhood. All the fantasies I had avoided while she was living

surged with unbridled zeal into my mind now. My cock swelled, and I outlined her fount with the head. How sorely I wished to see her feed upon me this way.

Later, sweet later, I told myself.

She stared as I stroked off. When I felt my climax approach, I rose a little on my haunches and released over her chest. The orgasm was painfully, thoroughly rapturous, all the more so for the delay of the ritual. And when my mind was sober, I stretched, snatched the wooden container from the nightstand, and showed it to Tatiane.

“Open this.”

Her hands trembled as she removed the lid. I dipped my fingers into the red resin within and gathered a gob. Clenching the ends of the collar firmly again, I carefully smeared the resin on the touching ends. Then I dipped my forefinger into the jism on her chest and dabbed it over the resin. Tatiane made a startled whimper, but I did not meet her eyes; rather, I watched as a soft, faint yellow glow burnished the magical glue. The glow spread about the entire length of the collar, then intensified to a sunlit radiance before fading away.

When it had dissipated, I looked at Tatiane. She was sobbing still, quietly now, unaware in her shock of what I beheld -- the pallid tone fading quickly from her skin, replaced by the bloom and suppleness of real life. The blue-green of her eyes shone brilliantly once more. I was so overjoyed to feel the genuine warmth in her body again that tears sprang to my own eyes.

“You are no longer theirs, Tatiane. You are free to live under the sun’s gaze once more -- to see your own reflection and know you are warded securely from the touch or compulsion of Aniceo and her brood.”

Her eyes widened, blinked, and as she nursed her bottom lip, it was apparent she felt joy, too. “Oh, Phillippe,” she whispered. “It is true, it is true!”

I got off of her at last and sat down on the mattress. I pitched the container of resin to the pillows, then draped myself over her and kissed her. The touch of her mouth sent a wave of relief and possessiveness through me.

“I will never let you go again, Tatiane,” I declared. “The collar cannot be removed except by magic that is as ritualized and resolute as that which created it. And that is a secret I will share with no one, not even you. As long as a single vampire roams this earth, you are vulnerable without it, but even were I to discover vampires had all suddenly vanished from the world, I would still keep the collar there as reminder of what you mean to me.”

I touched the enchanted band about her throat. “Here it is, and here forever it will remain.”

I felt her heartbeat pitch as she searched my eyes. “Truly, Phillippe?”

“Yes, Tatiane. Why else would I have gone through all this?”

She was silent, frowning hesitantly as if she still could not quite believe. I kissed the salty tears from her face, lay down beside her, and pulled her close. Taking her hands, I started to kiss her palms when I noticed how dirty they were. A nameless suspicion roused the hair on the nape of my neck.

“Sit up and remove that gown.”

At her shocked trembling, I repeated the order. She obeyed slowly, and I saw with bitterness that numerous angry scrapes and raised, dark bruises were appearing over her arms and legs. The injuries, I knew, were doubtless from her struggle to escape the sarcophagus, and probably from initially unearthing herself from the grave as well. My wild and wanton woman-child had been so sorely misused!

I threw the ugly gown to the floor and laid her down on the bed. I looked upon the breadth of all she had suffered with human clarity. Her breath was fatigued, yet her gaze had lost none of the adoring ardor since that day we had spoken in the valley. I embraced her fiercely. I wished for the secret to turn time back, to stifle those proper, cowardly words with

which I had spurned her. At least Fate had been merciful to have directed the vampires to free her, instead of forcing her to remain in the sarcophagus until I could free her!

"Phillippe, I could not stop myself. I was torn between following her orders and protecting you as best I could, or at least in the only way I could fathom."

"I know," I said, "and you will not reproach yourself on this, not ever again. But I hope you can forgive me."

"What is there to forgive?"

I smiled sadly. "For the shameful propriety that I allowed to hinder me from claiming that which you offered so earnestly. I was a fool, Tatiane."

"Oh, Phillippe," she sighed. "It is only that I love you."

"Yes. And never again will you reproach yourself regarding what befell you. If you do, you shall regret it ... most sorely."

Her eyes shone with unshed tears. Her whispered answer was ripe with passion, "As you wish, Phillippe."

"As I command," I corrected, and her cheeks flooded with scarlet.

I could not help but smile and kiss her palms fervently. I reflected again on the delicious chastisements I should have given to her before, and vowed they would be administered soon enough.

I stroked her hair and patted her raised hip. I was just about to rise and get her something to eat when I heard an ungodly sound from outside the house. It brought to my mind the immediate image of a nest of angry snakes. Gooseflesh sheeted over my flesh, and I realized my task was not yet complete, nor would it be, as long as Aniceo and her brats existed to carry out her desires.

Tatiane raised her own head and whimpered. "They followed me."

For several moments we listened as the hissing of the vampires grew angrier, louder. The sound seemed to blanket the entire frame of the house. The windows clattered against

their sills; the interior walls jarred. From the kitchen we heard the cups and plates fall off the shelves and break over the floor. After a time, the sound began to recede, and the house stood quiet again.

“They dare not enter or make trouble,” I assured her. “The rites are complete, and you wear the collar. Without you, they must return to the monastery. They cannot venture out without your power to guide them past the wards.”

She did not seem any less troubled for all my words. Although I wished more than anything to stay with her all night, I sat up.

“Listen to me,” I instructed. “You are safe, but you will not leave this house until I can return to explain your presence to your father and the others.”

I stood up to find my clothing. Tatiane got to her knees and grabbed my hand desperately. Anxiety broke her voice. “Phillippe, what is this? I know I am safe now; I feel it. There is no need for you to go ... out there!”

I took a cleansing breath and closed my eyes against the provocative vision she made, on both knees upon my own bed.

“Obey me, my kitten,” I said. “Your collar may not bind you to my will, but bound you are, nevertheless. Another word, and I will demonstrate here and now how well I have divorced my hesitations regarding you.”

She let go of my hands, but as I dressed, I saw she had not moved, and her face was crumpled with conflicting dread and the desire to obey. When my boots were laced, I came back, kissed the crown of her head, and gestured for her to lie down.

“I expect to find you in this bed when I return.”

She did lie down, but started crying again. “You will not return! And I will live a lifetime in the sun, yes, but without you!”

For a moment I thought to toss her over, punish her at last, soundly and thoroughly. It would silence her and would consummate all that heaven had brought between us.

It was not cowardice this time which stayed my hand, but the niggling apprehension that she could be right. As well as she needed my stern discipline, and as potently as I wished to deliver it, at that moment I needed more to kiss her mouth.

And so I did, relishing her taste as a condemned man carries the memory of his last meal to the gallows. I went and got the poker, and though I knew she was perfectly safe, I deemed the steel of which it was made might give her some comfort and laid it beside her on the bed. Then, taking the hammer, I left the house.

Chapter Ten

Her sobbing grew forlorn as I closed the door behind me, but neither of us could afford my regard for it now.

I raised the hammer and pushed out all thought. On Aniceo's brood alone I focused, honing in on the malignant feeling they imparted to the landscape. I smelled their lingering corruption in the air. My eyes skirted here and there as I proceeded, suspiciously scanning every obstacle I approached or passed along my way. My head jerked toward every uncertain sound, and my hands clenched more firmly about the hammer's handle.

It was not until I had climbed the path out of the valley and stepped onto the dewy pastureland that I spotted the first ones. Two lingerers, draped on their knees under the moonlight, with their backs to me. Their cowls were thrown back and they were devouring the entrails of the dog brought down on the ground before them. The animal's face was turned toward me, but by the cloudy, unfocused look of its eyes I knew it was dead. A low, bestial growl emanated from the vampires as they gulped the entrails and slurped the blood.

I did not breathe as I came up behind them. The first swoop of the hammer met the skull of the one to my left. He let out a shrill scream and, instantly, the second vampire literally flew to his feet. As his white hands tore at me, I pivoted and struck him in the

shoulder. He screamed and tumbled away. Leaping back, I raised the hammer again and turned on the first, who was slithering toward me on the ground. For a second, I saw that the indentation in his skull was minimal, but what appeared to be a liquid smoke tendril trailed out of the flesh and bone of his tonsured head. Just as I was about to deliver my blow, the second grasped his arms about my own. The impact was halted, and I wrestled with him until my arms lowered. I thrust both back hard, and my elbows thudded into the creature's robed solar plexus. He hissed balefully at my ear, his fingers gouging through my shirt into my flesh. With a roar, I drove the hammer backward, and felt the staked handle pierce his torso.

At once, I heard something like a heavy sigh. The first vampire let out a desolate wail, and in the next moment, I felt the weight on the handle dissipate and heard the soft rustle of a robe falling to the ground.

I had no time to see what had happened; the first vampire was clawing at my legs. Whether he was trying to raise himself or draw me down, I did not know or care. I was blind to thought as I cast the hammer high. Aiming the staked end, I bore it down, straight between the vampire's eyes. The same gasping sigh I had heard before issued from the punctured brow. Blackness veined rapidly over his features, and smoke steamed from his pores. His now dusk-lipped mouth gaped in disbelief, but no other sound did I hear. His form seeped into itself before my eyes, his robe sinking over the earth. A silhouette haze winked where he had been. Then this, too, vanished.

I stood panting and studying the robes lying on the grass. They had been Aniceo's real children, not vampires sired by other vampires, and the question of whether they had souls crossed my mind. But only for a moment. I headed in the direction of the monastery. As I neared the boundary of black blocks, the skin at the nape of my neck raised. I was urged by instinct to turn around, and just as I did, an oblique shadow swooped silently from the nearest tree. I dodged left in time to see a figure in waving, voluminous cloth alight on the earth beside me.

My arms rose with the hammer as he threw back his cowl; I looked up at the face of the vampire who had reproached Tatiane with the diseased voice the night before. The surprise in his face entailed nothing of what I would have expected; rather, he regarded me with only mild disgust.

“You come now? After taking what does not belong to you? What demonstration of vain human fealty is this to our mother?”

His question baffled me, but more so the conflict that rang in his tone. My ears detected others slithering closer through the brambles, but I also felt their hesitance as I did from the speaker. They circled me, and as I spun in preparation to slay them all with the hammer, I saw they had no intention of attacking. An aura of malcontent emanated from them and stagnated the air with an uncertain madness. And, yet, it seemed to stay the aggression I had fully expected. The condemnations of the others rifled sourly through the air.

“Make him humble for pardon,” called one, “before presenting him!”

“See, brother, how he struts even now with his precious human toy!”

The one with the hideous voice gestured for silence, and their ranting subdued to only hoarse grumblings.

Whatever it was I had done to displease them, I sensed it would work more readily to my advantage at the moment than wielding the hammer. I faced the disease-voiced one who was obviously the leader.

“I will leave the hammer at the entrance to your home. It is not hers until I have inspected her to my satisfaction and am certain she is all that I have traveled to this land to find -- and certainly before giving my life for her cause.”

This brought a round of seething contempt from the pack. But their leader summoned them to peace. His shoulders slumped as he pulled the cowl back over his skull.

“Be prepared, Bindmaster, to give your apology for your high-handedness. Our mother has spurned sorcerer kings of your race! I should think a simple schoolteacher would demonstrate at least humble gratitude.” The air was congested with silence then. He approached me and gestured ahead. “But I see no reason why she should wait any longer to at least welcome the one she has chosen.”

The others stood back as I followed him through the brushed land to the passageway between the limestone archways. The vines that had seemed unnatural before now appeared as nothing more than harmless flora as we passed through. As we entered the courtyard, two peahens flew before the vampire guide, and a peacock, standing near the shadowy thickets, raised his magnificent show of tail feathers. The hateful sarcophagus had been left with its lid moved partially aside, and a large hairy spider skirted across the open frame. My chest tightened, but it was the only remnant of emotion that touched me. We continued a short distance into the dark grove on the other side of the courtyard and came out onto a slender, torch-lined clearing at the eastern portal of the monastery.

Torchlight illuminated a statue of a leonine angel that stood on a marble pedestal. His magnificent wings were caught in graceful flight, and his robes had been fashioned in such a way that the sculpted fabric appeared to cascade in ripples down his body. His face was beautiful, his fine features rendered with the severest of countenances. I was astonished to see the depicted fabric had been sculpted in such a method as to lend the impression of an immoderate phallus bulging beneath the robe. At his hip, the angel’s right hand grasped the head of a female figure by its hair. The female mouth was frozen into a disfigured circle, its eyes sunken and open in shock. The angel wielded a sword in its left hand, its stylized, rippling blade aimed at heaven.

More surprising than this, however, was the door at the eastern facade. An unusual element, as most Christian buildings of cruciform design were absent of eastern portals. The door itself was made of the same stone as the black blocks that bordered the monastery

property. The vampire monk pressed it in easily enough, and light from within the monastery seeped out as he stepped inside, glazing the clearing's grass in luminous silver.

The lead vampire spoke. "The pagan toy -- leave it at the doorway. I will present it to Mother ... after she has voiced satisfaction in you."

His evident fear of the thing tempted me to bring the hammer inside just to torment him. But I put aside the selfish notion and leaned the weapon upside-down against the frieze casing before crossing the threshold.

I blinked against the brilliant light, then saw that we had entered the eastern apse. The walls of the semi-circular room were fashioned of pale wood, and the floor was tiled with ivory. Little ebony sconces set with wax candles protruded from the walls in at least a dozen places, producing the illumination that bounced off the walls and floor. A brazier sat in the center of the room, some dried vegetation that had recently been thrown over the flame giving off a rich, calming aroma along with its milky smoke. My eyes flashed to the ceiling only long enough to glimpse a mural of a strutting peacock gazing down on us. As I followed the vampire monk toward the ambulatory, I detected a sour, putrid smell to the air that the incense could not completely mask.

My guide was silent as we proceeded past the crowded cedar walls of the ambulatory. His shoulders slumped ever more with each passing step. At length we reached a wall of black stone. It was a curious obstacle; I would have thought this way led to the high altar, though I kept my musings to myself. A rounded marble lintel thrust out, and beneath this was a door of the same pale wood found in the apse. The vampire raised his right hand, and flashing a repulsed glimpse at me, he knocked.

Within a moment the door opened, and he gestured me before him with an exaggerated bow. As I stepped into the room beyond, my nostrils were overcome with the invisible waves of a smell much like refined ambergris. The circular room was large, paneled in the costliest mahogany and carpeted with thick indigo rugs. Black lace curtains sparkling with jewels hung haphazardly from ruby pegs on the ceiling, which, I noticed briefly, was

muraled, too, with the titanic image of a masculine face. This face was beautiful, exotic, haloed by waves of black hair, and dominated by a pair of languid Aegean-blue eyes. It took only seconds for me to realize it was the same face from which the statue outside had been carved.

I only regarded it a second, maybe two; but as my attention returned to the room, I saw a lithe figure moving toward us from behind the curtains of black lace. The vampire guide bowed low as a pair of gold-sandaled feet glided into view.

She was more statuesque than I remembered, an inch or so taller than myself. The perfume of her body was so potent that my brain was momentarily addled. Her high-throated gown was of peacock-blue silk, and her hair was piled in soft waves atop her head and pinned with pearled and silver-leafed combs.

The moment I looked into her face, my chest panged with desire. The lashes of her long hazel eyes were naturally thick and dark. I noticed for the first time the beauty mark at the left corner of her wide, sensual mouth, and how perfectly sculpted her subtly arched eyebrows were. She regarded me with a strange pout as she laid one hand upon a hip and tapped the fabric of her gown there with her long, ruby-hued nails.

My every masculine sensibility felt lulled, tempted, drugged, and aroused by her incomparable beauty, flawless physique, and sweet scent, combined with the unseen but confident aura that clung to her as uniquely and surely as her own skin. She appeared perfect in every physical detail, highlight, curve, and abstraction; I knew she had every right to be so proud.

Not like Tatiane, with her short-lived mortal beauty and limited human potential.

Whether this thought had come from my own mind, or been offered by Aniceo herself, I did not want to know.

All my desire for Tatiane was welcomingly cast away. I spoke with the voice of an intoxicated lover, impassioned challenger, and constant worshiper as I fell to one knee and lowered my head before Aniceo.

"I was mistaken. In your presence, I've found all that I have sought. I am yours, Aniceo -- and willingly surrender the secrets that will free you."

She stepped toward me and placed a sandaled foot upon my upthrust knee. My eyes swept up her ankle and to the hem of her gown. I relished the image of well-proportioned legs that were undoubtedly veiled beneath the fabric.

"You come without weapons. Do you truly believe it so simple to make amends for the insult of chasing after that female?" Even with the underlying displeasure, her husky voice was sweeter than the best tuned harp. "I should take you now, reap the fruits of thy knowledge, and be done with you!"

I looked up and saw the tight purse of her mouth. She was as insulted as she was needy for my knowledge.

"I am a fool," I declared. "Take my knowledge now -- quickly -- for what I have done! I do not deserve a moment to worship you."

"Yes," spoke up the son dryly, "even unto tonight has he proved his faithlessness."

Aniceo's eyes narrowed, and she lowered her foot again. I expected her to question him about his meaning -- there was no denial I could give to excuse my actions -- but to my surprise, she turned on her son.

"It was your duty to curb the beast," she said. "I told you of the poison she was capable of plying into his heart. If there is any to be held accountable here, it is you."

The vampire flinched. His head lowered humbly, though I caught the dimmest glint of exasperation in his voice as he said slowly, "Yes, my lady. But you were not there, you did not feel what we felt at his windows when --"

His words were cut off abruptly by a release in her snug aura. It spilled over us both, a half-visible vapor that in its fury vied to snatch my breath away. It turned on the son and knocked him backward. As I struggled to inhale the thin oxygen, her wrath reverberated through the room.

“We have had this discussion before! You will not accuse me, ever! It was insulting enough to have to follow the bitch mortal once. It is not for me to roam these lands unless I choose to roam! You would have me go into mortal land without proper procession like some unrefined peasant? Perhaps it is time I turn you over to these pagan peasants, and let them deal with you to the full measure of their boorish delight!”

The son regarded her body dispassionately, his eyes two hollow, wounded black orbs. “No, Mother, that is not what I wish. All I meant --” A gust of unseen energy knocked him back again, this time so rudely he was pushed to his backside on the floor.

“I decide what is of consequence. Leave now -- inform your brothers I am not to be disturbed. And then you, my presumptuous son, are to wander the province until the approach of sunrise.”

He looked as crestfallen as a deserted child when he got to his feet.

At his silence, her voice thundered again. “Go, now!”

He bowed deeply, then turned and fled out the door. It shut heavily behind him.

Looking up at her stony hands, I saw the fingers quicken and felt her aura draw itself back into her body. As I dared to meet her eyes, the white-hot anger that had marked her face disappeared. A smile came to her lips, so elegantly severe that my mouth watered to kiss them.

“Remember this, Phillippe LaFaire,” she said. “It is I alone who determines what is of consequence. And I alone who determines how my requirements are carried out, and when.”

Her fine chin rose, and she regarded me indifferently. “There will be no easy amends for you. Now, onto your knees, Bindmaster.”

I went to all fours and languidly kissed her feet. The feel of her toes against my mouth sent a pleasurable ripple down my spine. I readily welcomed it, and envisioned the calves above my brow and the portal of her womanhood. My aim plummeted and centered into my loins, taking my willed conscious thoughts with it to hue my aura. I felt her vampire eyes pore over my pulsing aura, so boldly presented that her narcissistic regard was silently pacified.

Aniceo displayed no reaction as she scrutinized me, but at length she turned and snapped her fingers. I crawled after her clicking soles past half a dozen more black lace hangings, through a door that opened into a smaller compartment. There was a great fireplace here, burning low with scented herbs, and upon a marble dais, a huge bed covered with a rich blue coverlet and quilted over with peacock feathers.

She sat primly on the edge of the bed and crossed her legs. My eyes lowered as I waited for her to speak or act. And when she reached to my head and stroked my hair, my manhood grew erect and inflamed.

Aniceo leaned close to my face; her breath carried the scent of roses and ambergris. "Why did it take so long for you to present yourself to me, handsome Phillippe?"

I did not answer at first. At last, I thought the truth was sufficient. "I did not understand at first that it was for this moment that destiny led me to this valley."

She laughed softly. "And I am not so anxious as to allow myself to be approached easily. Unlike your mortal slut, schoolmaster." The words were meant to barb me, test me. But there was no taunt that could dismantle my aspired lust.

I replied in words she could appreciate. "You cannot deny there is a sublime satisfaction in the claiming of another."

Her smile turned languorous, and the flick of her tongue across her bottom lip heightened my passion to an uncomfortable level. "My forgiveness for the fleeting

indulgence of vanity will be my gift to you. But you belong to me now, Bindmaster -- body, soul, and mind."

"Yes." I bowed my head to kiss her feet again, but her fingers clutched the roots of my hair and held me back.

"Do you know that Solomon himself could not approach me so closely?"

I shook my head, and her mouth swept over my face, her cool, poised lips scorching my flesh. I trembled with heat and hindered desire.

"Up on your knees," she breathed. I rose humbly to my knees, and she fell back on her elbows to the mattress, then lifted a foot to my shoulder. She drew up the hem of her gown just enough to caress my cheek with one of those calves I had so earnestly imagined seeing. I did not grasp it as I wanted to do, but turned my face and kissed her leg instead. Her skin felt like silken alabaster against my lips, and she gave a throaty growl of approval.

"Worship me," she commanded. "Demonstrate that your fidelity is to me, and not only to the cause of my father."

"You are my only cause," I sighed.

She fell back completely, raised her feet to the edge of the bed, and pulled her gown back over her knees. Her milky thighs parted, and I looked greedily upon her brunette-pelted sex. As my knees padded closer, she cuddled the front of her gown, pulling her breasts over the bodice and groping her large aureoles. Reverently, I parted her thighs and kissed the inner flesh. My face lowered to her fount. The ivory lips were swollen and dewed, perfumed with a musk more tantalizing than a cabalist passage, more potent than any pagan incantation. Her damp pubic curls tickled my face, luring my passion into torment. A proud temple of unsurpassable promises was this portal my lips touched.

With my fingers, I gingerly unfolded her labia, and my tongue darted between the fine, inner lips. Ice and fire was her pulsating flesh. I slid my arms gently over her thighs and licked her cunt. I heard her sigh, and glancing up, I saw that her lovely eyes had closed. She

was massaging her breasts still as I gave her portal an adoring kiss. She moaned, and I drew my tongue lightly over her clit's satiny hood. Hard as a diamond -- and like a diamond, it drew the very heat from my mortal tongue. For a moment, I tantalized it by licking the hood back and sucking gently on the organ. Aniceo moaned deeper, and I saw her fingers rake through the coverlet.

She was abandoned now in her passion, and satisfied, I clutched her thighs firmly. She made a lush, curious sound, but with the gentle kiss I gave her clit, her hips bucked urgently and she closed her eyes.

With a final, deliberate kiss to her clit, I inhaled deeply. I envisioned the lust congested in my loins. I exhaled steadily, forcing the physical lust from my body. It seeped from the pores of my skin, and my will thrust it along with the shielding aura from my body. I shoved her thighs widely apart now and positioned my lips at her fount. Again I inhaled, and drew to the forefront of my thoughts the bided intention of my goal.

As I exhaled, my breath must have tickled her, for her muscles flinched and she made a surprised little murmur.

But my senses were focused on a single purpose now. The words of the Catullus exorcism imparted from my lips and penetrated her vagina. The echo, as I spoke the incantation, peeled softly through her sex, and I felt the resonance shatter her nether muscles and pour into the blood vessels and arteries.

Aniceo cried out painfully and tried to rise. "Release me!"

Her knees pitched against my arms, and she tried to wrestle loose from my grip. Against her immortal strength, I had to dig my fingernails into her thighs to retain my grasp of her. Her hips bucked back as she struggled fiercely to kick me off. As the incantation continued to pour into her sex, she clawed at my head, her long fingernails scraping savagely over my forehead and into my brows. Her back arched forward, and she dug her heels into the mattress, her thighs straining upward. I was brought off my knees; as her hips tossed this

way and that, I pulled her legs toward me and buried my face as deeply as possible into her bleeding sex.

“Faithless bastard -- what have you done?!”

Her thighs vised against my face. My own balance started to give just as I felt her twist at the waist, and the last syllable of the exorcism passed into her. She screamed, and in the next moment her labia quickened violently. Her sticky flesh curled away from my mouth.

I nearly fainted. My hold released as I fell to my knees, and her sandals beat wildly against my head. With a roar, she crawled on her back away from me, the peacock feathers waving under her weight as she retreated to the other side of the bed. I half-swooned to the floor, and for several moments lay in a lightless fog with only her screams to keep me company.

When I recovered enough to get to my knees again, Aniceo’s furious wails resounded upon the walls. But I did not see her. Staggering around the bed, I found her on the floor. Her long, beautiful fingernails scraped over the tiles of the floor as she stared up at me. Her mouth was agape; her shocked eyes bore into me.

My eyes moved down and saw that her hips had already imploded into her pelvis; her vagina, nothing more than a tangled mass of tissue now, was sinking into the crushed pelvis. Her belly and spine were pulling together, and looking down at her I saw that the toes of her feet were nothing now but cavities where the digits had sunk into the sandaled feet. I heard the bones of her legs snap methodically, loudly, and before my unsympathetic eyes, her feet started to recede into her ankles.

“Help me!”

Her plea did not stir compassion. The shock of her humbled vanity gave me only delight. The only regret I had was that Tatiane could not see the vampire queen’s fitting demise.

I watched a few minutes longer, until her legs had vanished into what gore remained of her torso and her breasts bowled into the craters on her chest. I wanted her to suffer the last alone, sans any admirers, without the tears of her devoted, unloved sons to comfort her ego. But I did not depart with uncivilized silence.

“I go now to make love to my own queen -- whose beauty of heart and spirit will be stamped upon my memory more surely than even the secrets you strove to pillage.”

She tried to scream, but the sound was faint and raspy, desolate like the peafowl she kept for pets. It did not haunt me, though, and I turned then and left her. Past the drapes of black lace I walked, and through the door I had entered. I ignored the mural face with its glowering, hedonistic eyes, made my way through the ambulatory, and re-entered the apse. My heart beat with confidence as I opened the door and reclaimed the hammer. Two of Aniceo's sons stood talking in the clearing as I walked out. They regarded me reluctantly; obviously, Aniceo's earlier warning had reached them. I smiled benignly. And hoisting the hammer baton-fashion, I ran upon them.

With the hammer's head, I bludgeoned the one to the right. He staggered back, screaming, as I then swung to the right and rammed the stake through the chest of his brother. I pulled the hammer out, just in time, to pivot upon the first who was lumbering toward me with his lower jaw extended like a snake. The sheen of two barbed canines and the flicker of a long tongue were my last impressions before I lanced the stake through his midriff. I broke through the grove and entered the courtyard, my heart accelerated, and heedless to everything except the desire to punish those who had harmed Tatiane.

I encountered three more of Aniceo's sons in the courtyard, and two assailed me from the air when I exited the archway. They seethed as I battled them, shrieking something about their mother, about charges of treachery. But I was like a berserker out of a fairy tale, at one with my impetus -- and blind to fear, hesitance, mercy, even the sympathy that the pitiful creatures deserved.

I slaughtered the ones that pursued me, and there were at least a dozen of them. But at length I knew Aniceo's vindicators were all dead. I walked freely toward the path that led down into the valley. In the distance across the pasture, I saw the son that Aniceo had dismissed, lurking behind the trailing ground mist. He, alone, I challenged before advancing.

I charged forward then, ready to destroy him as I had his brothers. But by the time I reached the spot where he'd stood, he had vanished; leaving no trace or even sense of his presence behind. I caught the single melancholy note of a peacock. A moment later, I heard the awkward rustle of its wings. I ran over the landscape in the effort to catch sight of it. I searched until dawn, until the cocks were crowing from the farmyards, and my throat was parched and constricted from the night's exertions. He had eluded me, and to which direction I had no guess. My only consolation was that I knew somehow he was the only one that had.

Chapter Eleven

The cabin had never felt more welcoming as I walked in that morning. I laid the hammer on my desk and stepped to the bed. Tatiane lay there, with the sheet pulled over her head like a shroud. I turned it down gently and found her asleep on her stomach with her head cradled against her folded arms. It must not have been too long since she had cried herself to sleep, for her eyelids were swollen and red, her long auburn lashes damp.

I removed the poker from beside her and laid it on the floor under the bed. I was fatigued, but upon lying down, I could not help but look at her for a time. I drew back the heavy lock of hair that curled over her face. She was perfect to my eyes. Radiant complexion and supple skin. Her hips were wide but firm, and it was all I could do to refrain from stroking her back or massaging her taut buttocks. At length, I closed my eyes and let her inciting smell lull me asleep.

Later that morning, I awakened while she busied herself in the kitchen. I rose and came upon her as she stood peeking into the pantry. She gasped when she realized I was beside her. The blush that suffused her cheeks was adorable.

“You are hungry, Tatiane?”

“Yes.”

I told her to sit on the bed while I filled a plate with what I could scrounge together. Bread and honey, a lovely quince from one of my pupils, a smoked sausage, which I cut in slivers. I could see how delicately she tried to eat in front of me, but her hunger was ravenous, and it was no time before every bit of food had disappeared.

“Are you not going to eat, monsieur?”

I smiled but said nothing, and brought her a cup of water from the pitcher. She blushed again as I sat down beside her, and then began to weep softly.

“Hush, sweet. I will have you home soon enough.”

She smiled brightly, but the tears still flowed. And handing me back the cup, she suddenly gathered the sheet up around her.

“I-I apologize,” she whispered. “Please find me a suitable garment.”

“Is that it?” I laughed, not meaning to, and she blushed even harder and turned her face away. “Now, you are again the timid little teaser?”

Her eyes widened as if wounded, and I cupped her chin. “I would have you no other way,” I admitted. “But the time has arrived for me to right a great wrong I have done you.”

I leaned close to her and kissed her mouth; her trembling lips were sweeter than Egyptian honey. I peeled the sheet away and took her by both wrists and raised her to her knees.

“Monsieur --”

With a swift but gentle tug, I pulled her so that she lay across my lap. I let go of her wrists, but cautioned her at once, “You will not struggle, Tatiane.”

She whimpered loudly, but I ignored it, and laid my hand upon her smooth back. Her dangling legs had clasped tightly together, but now I parted them with my other hand and stroked the soft flesh between her thighs. I felt her body tense, and as I drew the fingertips of one roving hand over her buttocks, she whimpered again. Without another word, I raised my palm and dealt her one smart spank.

“Oh!” She tried to get up off my lap, and when my hold proved more determined than she expected, Tatiane looked back and cast me a most impertinent frown. Her mouth opened, but before she could speak, I clamped my hand over her mouth.

“You will not speak, and you will keep your eyes straight ahead, young lady,” I instructed. “If you dare try to wrestle away again, it will be much worse for you, I promise.”

I released her mouth and grasped the bundle of her hair firmly by the roots. My left hand rose again, and this time I punished her thoroughly. She cried out in stunned little gasps, and her hips twisted fitfully, but she did not protest. And when at length I deemed she had had enough, her buttocks glowed a pleasing shade of pink.

Letting go of her hair, I helped her to her feet. Her face was aglow with proper humiliation, and when she dared to stomp her feet, I flung her over my lap again. I spanked her much harder this time, until her buttocks moved this way and that and she was sobbing loudly. This time when I was finished, I did not let her up, but raised her chin with my hand and addressed her firmly.

“You will obey me, Tatiane, and be well-behaved from this day on,” I said, “or know the swiftest reprimand.”

I felt her heart pound wildly, as I raised her to her feet. This time she stood before me unquestioningly. Her humbled eyes were lowered, and she shielded the triangle of soft curls between her thighs with her clasped hands. My need for her was wild, consuming. But for several moments, I just savored the chastened, absolutely frustrated look on her face that came with her full realization that, indeed, I had changed. Under my stern regard, her tears began to spill again. They rolled down her chin and splattered softly to her breasts.

Satisfied at last, I stood and scooped her into my arms.

My mouth draped over her lips, which were heated, welcoming. As I lowered her to the bed, her eyes shone with the same bashful wantonness that had first enamored me. I disrobed, grasped her legs, and drew her toward me so that her buttocks dangled over the

edge of the bed. She moaned as I spread her thighs and lifted her hips. Her sex was fiery against my urgent cock. I looked down at her lithe and rosy body, adoring the way she sucked on one finger and undulated her hips in a way that told me she fretted about whether I approved of her demonstrating her passion.

I touched her pussy and found it drenched; I rubbed her little clit until it was hard as a pearl. Her hips arched against her will as I incited her, and she moaned helplessly. She was the sublime image of a love slave, against which I could no longer hold my own passion. I plunged into her and stroked hard. She was as taut as I remembered, and the feel of her was sweeter now -- for I was the possessor and not the possessed.

She climaxed with a squeal, and my own orgasm burst into her, so powerful that the strength almost abandoned my legs. I crawled atop her then and swathed her face with kisses. She cupped my face in turn and kissed me deeply.

"My dearest Phillippe," she whispered.

I kissed her hardened nipples and lay my head against her chest. For a time we rested, until finally I knew I had to get her home. I dressed her in one of my shirts and covered her head and shoulders with a large linen towel. And thus with her safely concealed so as not to frighten those we met, I walked her to Ambla's house. Tatiane fell into new tears in her grandmother's arms, and Ambla beamed at me silently as she comforted the younger woman. Soon Weistreim was summoned, and he went with me to the house of Tatiane's father.

The man's reaction to my news was almost violent joy. He embraced me so fiercely, I nearly lost consciousness. I bided my time the rest of the day before giving him any more startling news. I accompanied him to see his daughter and watched in the background as he gathered her up in his bear arms and smothered her with kisses.

* * * * *

A great feast of a celebration was given at Ambla's house that night. I must have been toasted by every man at the table, and kissed by all their womenfolk and children. Tatiane,

bathed and seated, dressed in a pretty green dress at her father's side, endured the questions of these relatives and her friends' ogling at the shining collar at her throat with soft-spoken grace. And when it became apparent she had had enough of relating the details of her ordeal, her father thoughtfully, but firmly, changed the topic of discussion.

When the feast was over and most everyone had left the house, Tatiane's friends drew her away to the parlor. Ambla drove the younger cousins into the kitchen to wash the dishes, while she persuaded the aunts and uncles onto the lawn to open a keg of ale.

I was alone with Tatiane's father at last. He wanted to compensate me for what I had done; I was offered my choice of any of the family heirlooms, several of which he said were priceless relics dating back many centuries.

"Manuscripts, too." He smiled knowingly. "These, too, I possess. I can understand the language of only a handful, but of those I am acquainted, I know a few were written by sorcerers many, many years ago."

As touched as I was by his generosity, there was only one thing I sought, and that was with or without his consent.

To my relief, he proved more than consenting when he heard my words. He jumped up and summoned the entire family back to the table. Tatiane came back amidst her cluster of friends, and listened attentively as her father announced to her my intentions. The whole house waited in silence for her to respond. Her mouth formed a startled circle, and her face smoldered pink. But as her eyes sought out mine, I knew her answer. And, with a demure smile, she rose to her tiptoes and delivered a tender kiss to her father's cheek.

"Yes, certainly. I will marry our brave schoolmaster."

Cheers resounded through the house. Everyone congratulated us heartily and broke open a fresh keg of ale. Tatiane's friends pressed her toward me, and I rose and embraced her, kissing her with all the shameless pagan passion my love for her had inspired. Her

family and friends only cheered louder. One of Tatiane's uncles brought out his fiddle, and the little children sang while the others danced the night long.

Before morning came, I took Tatiane's hand and led her outdoors to the lawn. Until dawn emerged, we talked, of the future and sweet promises yet to be fulfilled. And as the sun gilded the eastern horizon, I watched Tatiane as she silently welcomed it. Its light splayed against her face, bringing out all the subtle hues of her eyes and the healthy tones of her skin. I had never been so content as I laid my head in her lap. She twisted my hair between her fingers, soliciting a lusty warning if she dared pull too hard. I took pride in the blush that crept into her face, and daydreamed about all the ways I could compel these blushes when and where she least expected.

My revelry was shattered by a faraway wail. My chest panged warily, but Tatiane's amorous smile attested she had not heard the bird's melancholy cry. And so, I pulled her down beside me on the dewed grass, and pushed concern about the sound aside for a time in the pure, shameless enjoyment of her.

Epilogue

So now I see all those things you so long understood, Henri. I have found the truth that transcends the written word, even the words of the most elucidated alchemist. My beloved's eager submission is more precious than gold, more addictive than the pursuit of the philosopher's stone. My pupil, my love, my captive ... she has wielded a magic more akin to divine purpose than all the words of Solomon. The Urdhels call me Bindmaster. But love, with its many reciprocal delights, is the master here, and I am the bound.

Alas, vain propriety, it is a confession I yield with no regret!

Your friend in good faith,

Phillippe LaFaire

 THE END 

Desiree Erotique

Desiree Erotique is the pseudonym of a bestselling author of adult fiction. In addition to writing erotica, under her real identity she is an author of award-winning poetry, literary fiction, children's stories, commentary, and also has written for American television. Very happily married to the man she credits for her erotica inspirations, Desiree resides in Tennessee near the Smokey Mountains.