



The Flyers

Jennifer Cloud

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Prologue

In a world divided, hatred grew from a war of misunderstandings. The greater forces sent something down. Some thought the gift was a weapon, others thought it a sign of peace. It turned into a seed.

When the humans and flyers went to war, their blood spilt over the gift. The magic, combined with the blood of distant brothers, started a blight on the land, one that would destroy the world if not stopped.

The blight was called the void because nothing could live in its black grasp. For years it existed as nothing more than a small puddle, but something came near it and the thing fed.

Chapter One

It started in the valley, where the light hadn't been good for some time. Water mixed with land in a swampy mess where existence unraveled. The very miracle of creation was being sent into reverse. First the animals and plants died that it touched. Next the air had turned sour. Light mixed again with darkness and what was, turned into the void.

Anzele supposed the tiny thread holding the world together had begun to unravel. Here in the little section of woods known as Deer Ridge, she knew everything was coming apart. The plants had died, turning black or sometimes a mushy gray. All around color had been sucked up by this void making even the sky bleak, cloudless, yet nothing the sun could cut through.

She stood at the top of the gully, looking down at the tear. She could see cracks climbing up the bank toward her, moving too slowly to be seen. It could take years before the mess finished. Maybe it was all the time life should be given.

A tree with roots in the muck showed signs of infection. The rot ran up the bark, seeping into the pulp beneath. A few leaves were already dead, caused not by the change of season. This death turned the tips into a brown juice, dripping onto the ground below with black lines matching the void running through the leaves' veins.

She wouldn't worry over it. Years seemed like long enough. Every day lasted forever to her, since she'd been turned out. Maybe it would be better if it all vanished completely. At least she wouldn't be so alone.

The forest was growing dark and with the night came danger. There were the hunters, creeping along in packs with their swords drawn ready to capture prisoners. Night demons also crept about under the cover of darkness. Those didn't scare her as much as the hunters. The misty demons rarely bothered anyone. They spent the nights gathering herbs and looking for willing prey. Anzele might be lonely but she was far from willing prey.

Ahead voices spooked her. They sounded human; at least their tongue was one she recognized. Immediately she ducked to the side and shimmied up a tree. If they found her, they might kill her.

"It is supposed to deteriorate. These things can't last forever." Spoke one man with a very deep voice.

"Our job is to check it." The second sounded a great deal younger.

"Fine."

The two were well dressed. She watched them walk beneath her. They must have come from the big city beyond. She'd never been there but heard rumors of it as a child. It was supposed to be a wondrous place. Wonder and humans didn't run hand in hand so Anzele doubted the stories were true. Still these men were curious things so she followed, keeping to the trees and out of reach of their senses.

One of these strange men had red hair, bright and ghastly. The other wasn't too bad, brown headed with terrible mats of hair on his face. Such a beastly animal made her skin turn to gooseflesh. They seemed like abominations, nothing the true creator would tinker with.

Her curiosity got the better of her or perhaps it was just boredom. They were examining the void. The oozing mess had interested her several times, seeming to draw her to its shores just to see how much the damage had spread.

"It grows wider," the brown haired man spoke. "See the root lines. It's trying to set itself beyond the gully."

"How long before it reaches Carna?" The younger man poked a stick into the blackness then tossed it into the center.

"No telling. Some days it gains inches, some no noticeable increases can be seen." The brown haired man squatted on the bank staring into the void. "What in the hell is it made of?"

"Should we take a sample?" The redhead pulled a dipping cup from his knapsack.

"No." The older took the cup and stuck it in his sack. "That stuff loose in the city could destroy us all. Besides I doubt we have anything that would contain it."

"We can't destroy it without study." The red head put his hands on his hips. "Would you rather us wait until it reaches the city walls?"

"Then bring the scientists here." He kicked a rock, watching it sink into the ooze along the edge. "They can risk their lives not the lives of innocents in the city."

It had been many months since Anzele had heard full conversations. Any interactions seemed to pull her in. Because of her fascination with real words and seeing creatures other than animals again, she didn't notice the locus spider that joined her on the tree branch.

There were several hazards in the forest when tree hopping, but for Anzele, the worst of these were locus spiders. They were large creatures that glided from tree to tree grabbing their dinner and returning to their nest to feed the crawlers that have yet to learn to fly.

The one facing Anzele now was large enough to carry her away kicking and screaming back to feed its brood. It spotted her, so she dared not move. Those creatures attacked when their victims made a run for it. They preferred to get dinner from behind, snatching animals by their backsides to avoid injury to themselves.

It crept closer, reaching out with its hairy legs. Anzele's body trembled. She hoped it thought she was part of the tree, at least something unappetizing. One long leg stretched out. As the leg brushed against her, the hair pricked her flesh, making her stifle a scream. She couldn't stand its touch. Men below or not, she dropped from the branch.

She tumbled, rolling to a stop on the ground a few feet from the two men. The landing knocked the breath out of her but other than that she was fine. She rose, straightening her skirt, and brushing away the debris.

"What the?" The redhead spoke first and drew his sword.

Anzele was a flyer, but given the poor diet of the last months and the distance from home, she hadn't had the strength to fly. She was also a wind tamer, not the winged variety so it was easy for these men to mistake her for one of their own. She was simply a very pale, raven-haired beauty. The men knew no different. If they had, they would've killed her on sight. Being weak, she was willing to play along at being human.

"Miss, are you all right?" The brown haired man spoke. "That was quite a fall."

It took Anzele a minute to find her tongue, at least an accent matching theirs. "Yes. Thank you. I'm fine."

"What were you doing up there?"

"I was looking at the disease in the gully. The view is better from up there. What do you make of it?" She went to the edge studying it again. The void had been a point of interest so the statement wasn't a total lie.

"Don't know." The red head gave her a strange look "The thing started growing more aggressively over the last few months. One of the old men in town accidentally stepped in it. His leg has gone game. It's like a cancer I suppose. Nasty with rot, he is."

"How horrible?" she exclaimed.

Anzele had seen the void eat up a rabbit. The small thing had jumped into the mess running from a dog. The black started sucking it in but not beneath the surface. As if putting on a show, it held the rabbit high enough for her to watch its fur decompose to the meat and ooze to bone and then to nothing. The entire process didn't last five minutes at most.

"We were heading back. Let us escort you home." It was the bearded one who spoke.

"No. I don't want to be a bother." She took a step away trying to make it appear as if she were simply looking around and not making an escape. "I'll be fine. Go on ahead."

"Please miss. This is Brian and I am Lee." The one with the beard spoke. "It is a long dangerous walk in the wood. Let us escort you."

"No thanks." She offered them another smile and took a few more steps away. "I want to watch the fire flowers. They should be opening soon. When the moon comes up, they unfold the most beautiful petals."

"What is your name miss?" The one called Brian eyed her suspiciously. Just looking at him made her skin cringe. "I don't recall seeing you before."

Anzele was a clear indication of her origin and an immediate death sentence here among the savages. "Anne." It was a human name and one that should put them at ease.

"It's too dangerous for you to be out alone after dark. I've heard there are flyers venturing this close to the walls." Brian looked at the sky then back at her. "Flyers are dangerous animals, bloodthirsty. They'd have you for their dinner."

She was the only flyer this far out and only because she'd been banished. It would be interesting to see another. Too much time had passed since she'd spoken with someone as herself. She longed for their conversation and music. The flyers made the most beautiful music, filling their village with song.

"I will be fine. Thank you for your concern."

Anzele started on her way when one of them touched her shoulder. It had been even longer since someone had made physical contact with her. She immediately withdrew.

"I meant no disrespect ma'am." Lee lowered his eyes in apology. "I only wish to see you safely home."

"I need no help."

The sun lowered more in the sky. Anzele began walking away. If they caught her eyes at night, they might see the flare and it would give her away faster than her name. In the village her eyes shone the brightest purple. Many suitors admired her lovely eyes. These human men wouldn't admire them, though. They would try to pry them from their sockets.

She could control her eyes of course, but it was hard and she was so weak. Many things were hard these days. Even her thoughts felt clouded. Maybe it was the way she would die. She'd go crazy then let a mortal man skewer her on one of those swords or burn her alive.

“Don’t be foolish woman.” Brian stepped around her trying to block her path. “Seeing night flowers isn’t worth risking your life over.”

“It’s my life to risk. Let me pass.”

If only she could fly, rise above this man and go home where she belonged. Perhaps she should drain his life force and find a new land to roam. If she were stronger, travels would be easy. Alas, she wasn’t a true flyer but a half-breed and that made feeding harder. Her powers to lull mortals were gone, if they’d ever existed at all.

“I insist we take you home. If we must carry you, then so be it.” Lee took a step closer.

She didn’t want him to touch her again. The human contact felt strange, like feeling a disease. There weren’t too many options and she was running out of time. The air had deserted her but perhaps her legs would carry her to safety. She could manage a fast run.

“Then I will lead the way.” She stepped around him and realized the clouds were filling the sky making darkness come faster. Her eyes would show soon. “Try to keep up.”

She started running. It was her only chance. The approaching storm took the men by surprise and neither gave chase. After a few yards, she realized what held their attention. The storm clouds were a cover. There were flyers in these woods. One stopped a few feet in front, blocking her path.

“I’ve come for you Anzele. You are required at home.” Setiar stood in front of her, wide wings of gold blocking the last rays of the sun. She knew him well. He was a high guard, obviously on official business.

Anzele looked back over her shoulder while the men who she’d met, were easing into the woods. She thought they’d go to the city when they found a clear path. Soon there would be a small search party looking for flyers, ready to burn them alive for simply being.

“I have no wish to return if it is as his bride.” She crossed her arms defensively. Part of her might have been willing to return home, even to a loveless marriage if the entire village hadn’t turned against her. “My mind is made up.”

“Your consent is no longer needed.” Setiar stepped forward, locking eyes with Anzele. “Your mother has offered your hand.”

Her mother? That figured. “I have already chosen a mate.” The lie came quickly. It sounded terribly fake to her but it made the flyers stop.

Anzele took a few steps backward but found Liking blocking her from behind. He was a beautiful male, no wings but with a mane darker than anything she’d seen and eyes of silver. Many times Anzele wished he’d had feelings for her, even after his binding to another.

“Who is this mate?” Liking smiled at her calling her bluff. “Where is he to send his bride out in the night with mortal men about?”

“I will not marry a man I do not love. Leave me. You sent me from my home because I wanted more than a cruel man who only wanted me to clean his clothes.” Anzele looked back and forth trying to find an escape route. “I have chosen a man that I love to marry. It is none of your business who he is.”

A horse neighed making the flyers jump. They weren’t used to domesticated animals and as far as Anzele knew, no flyer had ever ridden a horse. Several more horses joined

the first with human riders. Brian and Lee got on the back of another horse led along by the group.

“What business do Flyers have in human woods?” The speaker was tall with hair dark enough to rival Liking’s. She’d never seen a prettier mortal or heard one with such an exquisite voice.

“It is not of human concern.” Setiar faced the humans. “We have a half breed we are returning for her binding.” Setiar flexed his wings, spreading them to make himself appear larger. It was a common move before a battle or challenge.

“I believe the townspeople would have some concerns. There’s been bad magic near the void. The thing has tripled in size. Would you happen to know anything about it?” The dark haired man cut his eyes at them, as if they were nothing more than rats.

“We would not.” Setiar flexed his wings. “I told you that we are only here to fetch one of our own.”

“It is good to know the strange creature standing so close to the root of our trouble, had nothing to do with it.” The man on the horse squared his shoulders. “The void has nearly taken the life of a human. Just over today the infection has eaten up to his hip. Luckily for him, the blackness slowed or he’d be dead by now.” Trouble crossed the man’s face. “The infected leg has been cut off. The blackness lives in his blood now. The people in the city have quarantined him. My men and I came out to examine the void and its new growth spurt.” He looked over at Brian and Lee. “Would you have any words of wisdom to save a dying man in the city?”

“I am sorry to hear of your friend. We had nothing to do with it nor would I know how to cure it.” Setiar eased a step back toward Anzele. “As I said, we are here to retrieve this girl.”

Liking stayed behind Anzele with Setiar at the front, keeping her pinned from both sides. She felt Liking put one hand on her shoulder. In an instant that hand could jerk her up from the ground and carry her home.

“I told you, I have already taken a mate.” Anzele jerked her shoulder trying to remove his hand. “Leave me, Liking. The laws state I can choose another and so I have.”

“If you have chosen another, why are you wandering the woods?” Liking leaned a little too closely when he spoke. “Quit lying. If we leave you now, these humans will kill you.”

There was a good chance the men in the woods would haul her to town and burn her in the court. Flyers were treated like the witches who stole cattle and cast magic over men. Treating both groups the same was outrageous. Anzele didn’t even eat meat nor had she felt inspired to entrap mortal hairy men for sex slaves.

“I will not marry one I do not love.” Actually her stomach turned nauseous when she thought of marrying Dahi. “Leave me here with these humans. If they kill me then so be it.”

“You know the laws, Anzele.” Liking brushed his body against hers. “Quit being stubborn.”

“To hell with your laws. You turned me out. You call me half-breed. I have no more business with you.” Anzele pulled her shoulder free at the second attempt and tried to step forward but Setiar wasn’t giving up so easily.

“Unless another claims you to belong to him, then you must fulfill your mother’s bargain.” Liking took a step closer. “We can take you by force.” He smiled at her as if he’d been hoping she’d put up a fight.

“No!” She started to run to the side but Liking easily blocked her path again. “I don’t love Dahi.”

“Love isn’t as important as breeding.” Liking touched her arm. “Come now Anzele.”

“I have another. I swear.” Tears filled her eyes as she desperately looked for a way out. “I belong to another.”

Then the most amazing thing happened. Just as Anzele expected to be hoisted into the sky and carried home, the dark haired man locked eyes with her. Humans rarely helped flyers and never did so in front of other humans but this one was extraordinary.

“Stop.” The dark haired man on the horse slid from his saddle and approached them. “She is mine.”

“Yours?” Liking took a step closer, head high, challenging the statement.

“I am Sir Vincent Deloroy.” He stepped closer, meeting Liking’s gaze. “What business do you have with my bride?”

Anzele’s mouth dropped open. Humans hated, feared flyers and never came to one’s rescue. Here was a tall extraordinary man who walked up to her with perfect confidence and gave her a little wink as he took his place next to her.

“If she is yours, where is her mark?” Liking exposed animal teeth in an evil grin that would’ve taken a lesser man’s breath.

“She’s agreed to a human ceremony next week. We do not mark our women. It is sufficient to give them jewelry.” He slid an arm around her. “You know, the sparkly rocks women wear.”

Anzele smiled at him and mouthed thank you. Her own teeth weren’t as impressive as Liking’s or many of the flyers. She was a half-breed after all and had teeth closer to human.

“Next week? Perhaps her family would like to be in attendance. Would you deny her mother’s viewing of the wedding?” Liking came forward another step as if to intimidate the human although he didn’t seem impressed and held his stand next to her.

“That will be up to my bride. I don’t expect to be sending you an invitation though. The church will be quite full.” He slid his arm off Anzele’s shoulder and took her hand. “Come my dear. We have much to discuss, if you’re through with these gentlemen?”

“I am. Thank you, Vincent.”

He led her to the horse and panic hit her hard. It was a huge animal. Its powerful body could easily throw her to the ground and trample her to death. She stopped next to it.

“Don’t worry,” Vincent whispered in her ear. “He’s as gentle as a lamb. Put one foot into the stirrup and wrap your other leg around then I’ll get on behind you.”

She complied, feeling steely arms helping her into place. Vincent got on behind her and pulled her against his body. He reached around, taking the reins in hand. Him being close to her brought a surprising comfort. She leaned against him enjoying the sensation and the first human who didn’t make her skin crawl.

The flyers were below. Setiar’s mouth hung agape as if he were lost without his duty to perform. Liking looked more than shocked, he looked angry. The look on Liking’s

face as he had to gaze up at her on this strange beast was worth whatever price she had to pay for this man's help.

Looking at them, she couldn't help but giggle. They'd expected to take her home kicking and screaming. Now she was riding a horse of all things. She let out another laugh. It was the first time she'd laughed since she'd left her home and it felt wonderful.

"Are you okay?" asked Vincent, sounding a little like he was worried about her sanity.

"I think I am."

Vincent turned the beast easily and took them in a trot toward the city. The horse kept a steady, gentle pace in tune with his master's commands. They rode in silence until she saw the gates to the city. Riding through those could mean certain death and her inability to fly would trap her.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked feeling her body tense. She'd heard stories of flyers being taken to the middle of town before they were tortured and killed.

"What was your name again?" asked Vincent. His voice was low but held a gentle quality.

"Anzele. You can call me Anne."

"Anne. It's not as pretty as Anzele but perhaps it is more appropriate given the circumstances." He slowed the horse. "I believe your friends are following us. See the shadows."

Even at the dusky dark holding the land, she could make out three shadows above them holding to the west. Liking and Setiar had not been so easily fooled by claims of matrimony.

"Thank you for your kindness." She wasn't sure how to approach the subject. "What payment do you expect?"

Vincent laughed. "My dear, I expect nothing. You obviously have no money and, although you are beautiful, I wouldn't dream of trades against your will. I thought I would bring you to my home for the night. I have a spare room. Tomorrow or the next, your friends will grow weary and go home. You can make your way then."

The gates grew closer and she felt panic overcome her body. She wanted to run. Maybe being with the flyers wouldn't be so terrible. Her body shook a little. She felt it and so had Vincent. He eased one hand around her waist. It didn't feel confining but calming.

"If they are watching, you might want to relax. I promise I will not ask anything of you in return." His voice was soft against her neck as he nudged the horse toward the gate. "The horse likes you. You'd make a fine rider."

She let out a long breath. "Won't the people kill me? I've heard terrible stories about flyers caught near towns."

"No one will know. You look human to me." He eased the horse to the trail way leading to the gates. "Trust me. Even sitting this close to you I couldn't tell you weren't human."

"What about the other men with you? They saw the flyers come for me."

"Brian and Lee are notorious liars. I wouldn't worry about them. The two men who rode with me are loyal to me and will not cross my favor."

It was difficult to accept. In her most desperate moments, a human, an enemy, had come to her rescue wanting nothing in return and promising his protection. Perhaps

rumors of human cruelty were exaggerated, or Vincent may be the kindest creature she'd ever met.

"Why are you helping me?"

She turned her head and locked eyes with him. His eyes were dark nearly black. It made her relax and she let the flare pass, lighting her eyes in brilliant purple. Vincent looked a bit surprised and his shock filled Anzele with terror. She expected him to throw her to the ground proclaiming evil magic at work. Instead he smiled.

"I'm helping you because someone should." He looked deeply into her eyes. "I've heard of flyers but never met one until today." He stared at her a moment longer, never once appearing repulsed. "Your eyes are very lovely, but please try to avoid showing them to others. They might not be so taken with you as I am."

"As you wish." She lowered her head. "Thank you."

"You are welcome."

They rode through gate with planks larger than her creating two swinging doors to protect the walled city from intruders. The doors stood open most of the time. She'd seen them from a distance but never dared to venture inside. If those doors shut, she'd become a prisoner.

The walls were as impressive inside as out. Homes and stores had been built along them outlining the outer area of the city. From the main gate ran a road where a dozen other roads connected. There were a few trees inside the walls, but most signs of nature were gone from this place, although there was no shortage of rails to tie horses.

Not far from the gate was a two-story cobble stone house bordering the main wall. Vincent got off his horse there and tied it to the post, then held out his hand and helped Anzele down.

"My home is actually in the country but I inherited this place a few months ago after mum passed." He looked at the old place seeming to reminisce.

"I'm sorry to hear it." Anzele wasn't sure what to say. Death seemed a strange concept.

"Don't be. Her life was a hard one." He touched the stone solemnly. "She sold herbs she'd gathered in the woods. At least she used to before she became sick. At one time this lower section was the store with her home on the second floor. When the sickness hit, she couldn't climb the stairs anymore." He pulled an odd shaped key from a bag on his horse and slid it into the lock "I'm staying here long enough to take care of business then I will be heading back to my farm."

They went through a heavy oak door. He turned on the electric lights, which buzzed noisily from odd wooden candles with glowing glass on top. Anzele had heard of lights such as these but had never seen any. She ventured near one to touch it.

"Be careful. The glass isn't easy to get anymore."

She withdrew her hand and continued her examination of the house. A seat large enough for five was at one wall. This one had separate cushions unlike the ones at her home which were made from a single set. There was a smaller chair that matched it on the adjacent wall. A short table, heavy and dark, was in front of the large seat.

"Is everything okay?" He watched her. She never liked it when people watched her. It made her self-conscious.

“Fine. I’m just new to all this. My people rarely have stone houses. They usually live in the woods taking shelter in trees or houses made from builder’s cloth. Those are the loveliest.”

“Builder’s cloth?” Vincent shook his head not seeming to understand the words. “It must be nice living in the woods. I’m afraid my people prefer certain comforts and have given up on outdoor life. That couch over there,” he pointed to the large chair, “has been in our family since I was a boy. Most of the beds and such, the same. Mom wouldn’t even go on hunting trips for fear she would have to sleep on the ground.”

“I prefer sleeping in trees to lying on the ground.” She touched the table in the center of the room, running her hand across it. “Things find you easier on the ground. The trees are nice. They cradle.”

“I’m too lazy for that. Besides, I’d fall out.”

She giggled and he smiled warmly as if he didn’t mind. “Sleeping in a nest is nice. It’s warm and you can see the animals roaming about on the ground. On a windy day, the branches sway, rocking you to sleep.”

He pulled open a screen. Anzele recognized it as a fire pit of sorts. There was a thick metal grate in the bottom where Vincent put logs and twigs. He drew a flint from the shelf above the fire pit and began striking it, creating sparks.

“Can I help?” Anzele drew near to him, close enough to catch his scent. It was a nice mix of pine and leather.

“You can build fires?” He handed her the flint. “Women rarely know how to build a decent fire.”

“Watch.” She handed him back the flint. “I don’t need your rocks.”

She shut her eyes and mumbled softly with her hand extended to the wood. In a moment a spark started then it grew into a flame. The exertion weakened her and she stumbled backwards. Vincent was quick and caught her before she landed on the floor.

“Anne?”

“I’m okay. I shouldn’t be showing off. I’m very weak.” She started to lean up but felt dizzy again. Besides it felt good to be in Vincent’s arms. “I’ve been living in the woods like mortals and it has drained me.”

Vincent picked her up and carried her to the couch. “You mean you aren’t absorbing humans?”

Anzele hung her head. “I’ve been eating food.” The comfort she felt, faded. “You wouldn’t understand.”

She felt tears swell in her eyes. She was tired of the stigma. No one in her clan had ever taken a human life but they were treated like murderers and called child stealers. None of it was true. They had the utmost respect for all living creatures great and small. Certainly more respect than mortal men.

“Can I fix you some dinner?” He went to the side of the room lined with cabinets. A table sat in the middle surrounded by four chairs, one on each side. “I don’t have a wide selection. I have some jerky if you want something right now for strength.”

“No thanks. I don’t eat meat.” She looked back at the fire. It had caught well, taking up the larger logs. For all her lack of magic, at least she could make dry wood burn.

“Okay.” He put his hands on his hips. “How about some biscuits?”

“What are biscuits?”

“A round kind of bread. I was going to make some beef stew but I can make it vegetable soup instead if you’re interested.” His gaze went over her. It made her feel a little strange and her stomach fluttered. “I know it’s a little late for dinner but I was traveling all day.”

“You don’t need to go to any trouble for me.” She smiled and looked back at the fire. It was a silly thing to do. *Why had I felt the need to show off?*

“No trouble. In fact, I’m not a bad cook.”

“What can I do to help?” She stood and he started to say something. “I’m better now. Anyway, I can’t let you wait on me.”

“Very well. Come with me to the cellar. That’s where I keep the vegetables. You can help me carry some up.”

They went into the hallway and to a narrow door near the kitchen. When he opened it, the smell of dirt wafted up making Anne cough. She’d never smelled such a thing except when the mortals buried one of their own. Of course this wasn’t fresh dirt. This place smelled old.

He must’ve caught her expression because he kept staring at her. “Do you have cellars?”

Anne shook her head no. “It smells like a grave.” She stepped back from the door. “You aren’t going to kill me are you?”

“No. It’s cool down there and vegetables stay fresh.” He touched her cheek and smiled at her as if she were a child. “You’ll see.”

They went down a long set of steps. At the bottom were several shelves and two bins. One held potatoes. Those she recognized. The others looked strange. Nothing like the clover, grasses, or bark she was accustomed to.

“You are an interesting lady.” He watched her in that strange way he had since they’d met. “Will you teach me about your kind?”

“Your people cannot tolerate mine.” She shrugged. “The more you know about me, the more you’ll hate me.”

“Maybe all we need is understanding. You don’t seem to be much different from me.” He gathered up several potatoes and handed them to her while he took a colorful variety of other things to add to the soup. Each of these he put into a basket to carry upstairs.

“I guess what you really want to know is if we eat humans. No we don’t. The feeding that started the rumor is called energy transfer. It doesn’t hurt and leaves no lasting effects.” She sounded defensive but that’s how she felt. “We only feed from the energy when we are far from home. Under usual circumstances we have no need of humans.”

“Oh.” He started upstairs and she followed happy to get out of the stinky room. “I guess rumors about you are greatly exaggerated.”

“To say the least.”

He went to the room lined with cabinets. A large white dish was set into one of the counters with a sort of water pump above it. She’d seen such in the country where people would pump water, letting it flow into buckets. This worked much easier. He lifted the handle and water poured easily into the ceramic basin.

“I guess you’re not used to sinks either.”

“No.” She blushed. “I’ve seen the outside hand pumps but nothing like this.”

“The electric is good enough here to run the pump from the basement. I lift the handle and here is water in the kitchen.” He lifted the metal handle again in demonstration. “The lavatory works the same.”

“Lavatory?” She didn’t know the word.

“Bathroom, washroom, toilet, any of those ring a bell.”

“I understand.” She felt her cheeks heat once again.

“It’s at the end of the hall.” He rinsed the vegetables. “I’ll give you the tour in a minute.”

He poured water into a cast iron kettle then peeled the vegetables. Anne helped with this. She hadn’t ever peeled what he called carrots but it was fun watching the orange slivers fall to the counter. There were a few things she could identify in his soup such as musies, and the potatoes. She was quick at shelling musies. Those were plentiful in the trees. She’d grown very good at shucking the outer shell to reach the soft juicy innards.

After he seasoned the water, he set the pot into the fireplace and stirred the mix slowly letting a little drop into the fire. The flames sizzled hungrily and Anne felt her stomach growl in unison.

“I guess you are hungry.” He turned to her. “This will take a while. Let me show you around.”

He took her back down the hallway opening the door to his mother’s room. It was sad. Nothing looked touched since her death. Even the bed remained turned down as if he expected her to sleep there.

“You must’ve loved her a lot.”

“I was her only son. We were very close.” He swallowed hard but never let a tear emerge from his eyes. “She’s better off. The sickness changed her from the woman I knew. It made her strange.”

He shrugged it off and showed her a linen closet and two more bedrooms, one belonging to him and the other was for her to use. She took a cursory glance at the two rooms facing each other. Both were away from his mother’s old room. That much she was thankful for.

It touched her that he would miss his mother so. Death was a term she was familiar with but not the feeling. Her kind was disease resistant as long as they fed and only severe injuries could take their life.

Despite this, she had known a few people who died. Her grandparents had both passed but that was at the hands of humans and then there was her father. All of them died before she was old enough to understand.

“My father passed. I was very young so I never experienced the full grief you are having now. I do understand the hole it can leave when family pass from this world. I wish I knew a way to make it better.”

“You’re very sweet.” They stood for a minute in the dark hallway, gazing at each other. “I’m very glad I came your way this evening, Anne.”

“Me too.”

They stood in the hallway watching each other for several moments, neither wanting to break the mood by leaving the darkened space. Finally awkwardness kicked in and Vincent led her through the hall to the main part of the house.

“I would walk you around town but it’s dark and those eyes of yours keep glowing.” He walked her into the main room, both took a seat on the couch.

"I'm sorry." She felt ashamed. Her pride in her world became a mark that could end her life here. "I'm weak and it's hard to control right now. Please don't be offended by them."

"I'm not offended. They are beautiful like some strange star light in the form of a woman." He touched her face again. "Don't be ashamed of anything here. Certainly not of what you are."

"I wish all your kind were as nice. Flyers are usually hated and hunted like animals."

She shook her head slowly. "Many nights I've laid on a branch wondering if that would be the night hunters would find me. They have dogs you know. Several times they've come close on bear hunts. It's been a long time since I've felt safe." She sighed and looked around his stone home. "One slip up, one night my eyes glow or someone catches me eating clover in the field and my life could end. It's so strange. For us it is a sin to harm any living creature unless there is no other way. I wish your kind shared that sentiment."

"If flyers are so wonderful, why were those guys after you? Why aren't you with your kind?"

"I was given by my mother to marry. The man wasn't a kind man. In fact, I despised him. Since I had no other suitors and couldn't beat him in a rival's game, I had to marry or leave. I became an outcast." She shrugged. "It could've been worse. They could've forced me then instead of leaving me in the mortal world."

"What is a rival's game?"

"When a woman has a suitor he can be challenged for her hand up until the day she accepts his proposal. That's why when you told the others we were to wed, they backed off. Unions between mortals and flyers are possible, unwelcome, but possible so they had no choice but to honor our arrangement." She looked into the fire and the boiling pot of soup. "Some women are strong enough to protect themselves and may fight to choose their lover. I'm not so strong."

"Because you don't feed on humans or because you are a half-breed?"

"I wish you would forget about that. I swear we do no harm and as for my bloodline, flyer blood always outweighs human. Some of us are just born a little weaker. A lot of it has to do with my mother never training me, not my blood or feeding habits."

"I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just curious." He glanced over at the fire. "That and I think food is on my mind. I wonder how the soup is coming."

He checked it then went to the kitchen and started getting bowls out of the cabinet. Next he put the biscuits near the fire to warm them. Another thirty minutes passed before he dipped two large bowls of soup and set them on the table with the biscuits and two glasses of water.

Anne joined him, sitting across the table and the using spoon. It felt odd in her hand then again she'd never eaten soup before either. Most of it was good although the potatoes weren't completely done. She didn't complain. The biscuits were very good. Much better than the fried breads they fixed during solstice. These were light and flaky.

"Thank you for dinner." She smiled at him. He was very surprising, and very handsome in the firelight.

"Thank you for the company."

They finished their dinner, occasionally looking up at each other. Conversation was scarce but it wasn't too uncomfortable. Vincent was very pleasant even when he fell silent.

Once dinner was over, he gathered the dishes and took them to the sink. She watched his ritual of washing them. She took a towel and began drying, then the two put everything away.

When the chores were finished, they went to the couch and watched the fire burn. She felt full, not satisfied, but she'd forgotten what truly feeding felt like. There was strength in it. Sometimes being weak was the worst thing in the world.

"Why did you stop feeding on humans?" The question came as if he'd read her mind. "I mean you're out here among us. Why not feed?"

"I have been shunned from my world and forced to live near yours. I don't want to be hunted." She looked at the floor again. "If someone sees me or remembers what I did, then I wouldn't live a day."

"If feeding doesn't hurt, why would anyone hunt you?"

"Humans hate. If my feeding made the old grow young, someone would still find a reason to hate me for it." She sighed. "You hated Liking and Setiar. I heard the way you spoke to them, the glare in your eyes."

"I suppose you're right. I am ashamed of my ignorance." He paused and lowered his eyes. "Can you forgive me?"

"It is I who should be forgiven. You've been kind enough to bring me into your home and I insult you. Please pardon me. It has been too long since I held a conversation."

"Think nothing of it. I am glad you're speaking your mind."

She looked at the floor then back at Vincent. "Things are so complicated for me. I don't think my time in this world is long, unless I take the husband anyway. Living here is just too hard."

"Is he really so terrible, the man you were promised to?"

"Yes. My skin crawls when he touches me. I guess I'm foolish to think I could marry for love. It's one thing about you humans I envy." She looked into Vincent's eyes and felt like she was melting. "My people have love, fancy names for different kinds, but lately offspring is all they care about."

"Well at least there's something you envy about us." He met her gaze and held it. "What would happen if you fed off of me?"

"Nothing. You'd just feel tired."

"Promise that's all?" He sat next to her, close enough for their bodies to touch. "No death, disease, or magical entrapments."

"I'm not lying. Flyers cause no harm to those they feed on."

"Then show me." He leaned closer and she felt his chest brush against her arm. "I want to see."

She swallowed hard. "I've not fed in some time." Part of her really wanted to feed, not only for the energy, but just for a few moments of touching his skin.

"Does that mean you don't want to?"

"No. I don't want you to hate me." She felt her eyes flare and shut them tight. "You've been so kind to me. I don't want that to change."

"If what you say is true, then no harm will come to me. Besides, I'm curious. I want to see what it's like. Show me everything about you."

"Very well."

She sat up and locked eyes with him. He was very pretty for a mortal man. There was something about him that made her smile. It was his eyes, so soft and caring even when they looked at a female most would consider a monster.

Her hands were cold. She rubbed them together letting the nerve endings lighten. When she touched her hands to his face, he jumped a little. Worrying that he'd changed his mind, she started to let go. As if to reassure her, he put his hand on top of hers. It was her turn to feel a bit of electricity pass between them.

"I trust you," he whispered.

The transfer started slowly. He let out a low sigh as she touched his face and stole a little away. The energy moved like static on a breeze, simple and soft but still powerful. It took very little to charge her and by the time his head lolled back she was whole again.

"Are you okay?" Anzele touched his face again but this time it was to check him. She got up on her knees and looked down into his eyes. "Please tell me you're fine. Please?"

He smiled and raised his head. "Fine. A little sleepy but fine. In fact, it tickles just a bit."

"Do you hate me?"

Vincent reached and touched her face. She didn't pull away even when he drew closer. He looked into her eyes and seemed to hold her in place as his mouth came closer brushing against hers in a soft kiss. Her throat hitched, her breathing came hard as his lips left hers. This kiss was light and sent shivers through her being.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." Vincent licked his lip as if trying to taste her again. "I really shouldn't have done that. Please don't be offended."

He pulled away and crossed the room to the fireplace. Anzele touched her mouth delighting in the fading sensation of his lips. She'd only been kissed once before and never had it lingered.

"I didn't mind."

He smiled weakly and bit his bottom lip. There was a hunger in his eyes, something she hadn't seen before. "I'm tired. Your bedroom is down the hall on the left across from mine. Make yourself at home."

"Wait," she watched him stop halfway through the room. "You never answered my question. Do you hate me?"

"Of course not." He laughed a little. "I find you enchanting but then again, aren't I supposed to?" He rubbed his eyes and started to his room.

Great, another myth was sticking its ugly head into her world. Flyers were supposedly low dark artisans filling men's minds with magic. "Vincent." She followed him down the hallway. He didn't stop. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No." He opened the door to his room. It held a huge bed with large posts at each corner. "It's just been a long day." He started unbuttoning his shirt giving her a glimpse at his bare flesh. "Please stay. The room across the hall is made up." He walked by her and opened the door to a lovely room done in lacy drapes and a thick quilt. "You may like living inside."

“I’m not a witch. I don’t put spells over men or anything. It’s a crazy myth a villager made up about flyers.” She stood in front of him blocking his retreat into his bedroom.

“Really?” He took a step closer making a strange but nice tension. “Not a witch huh?”

“You sound like you don’t believe me.”

He touched the side of her face, letting his fingers trace their way from her temple to her jaw line then looked into her eyes. For a moment she thought he would kiss her again. She licked her lips and looked up at him, enjoying the sensation of his hand gliding across her cheek.

“Something tells me you could cast a spell on any man.” He smiled and let his fingers trace her lips. “I need to keep my distance from you right now. It is no fault of your own and certainly not meant as an insult. I really and truly want you to stay.”

He eased closer to Anzele but she didn’t retreat. She liked him being close to her. There was a feeling in the pit of her stomach, like butterflies, when he came so close. It was nice.

“I can’t go to my room if you’re standing in front of me, unless you want me to stay in here with you all night.”

There was the look again. It was hunger. She didn’t know what to do. Her body froze and thinking became too difficult. She didn’t want him to go to his room but she didn’t know what she wanted.

“If you truly want to get away from me right now, then go ahead.” She stepped to the side.

“Believe me, it’s not fear of my safety that causes my retreat. I just need to rest. Will you promise to be here in the morning?” He eased to the side. Now it was Anzele who was trapped between him and the wall. “Promise me you’ll be here when I wake.”

She didn’t want to promise but the look in his eyes made her ready to agree to anything. “I promise.”

Chapter Two

Vincent pulled at the blankets as sleep hung over him, weighting down his eyes. The woman in the next room stayed in his thoughts, her soft skin, and that strange touch that made his flesh tingle.

“Sweet Anne.”

Her eyes, burning bright purple, danced in the darkness. He sensed her, the scent of the trees and her sweet aroma came to him. At first he couldn't move. Sleep tried to hold him prisoner.

She didn't say a word, but one small sound came to him in the darkness as her clothing fell to the floor, swishing through the still air. Like a primal call, he forced his eyes open and caught her naked body covered in moonlight. She was the most beautiful sight, but a bit bashful. Even as she approached, she reached down and covered her sex with one hand, while the other hid her nipples from view.

It had been so long since he'd been with a woman and he'd never been with a flyer. Any concern over their differences faded as she stood at the foot of the bed with her head lowered.

“Will you have me?” she whispered.

Vincent pulled the covers away, showing his engorged desire. She was all he wanted from the first moment he'd seen her in the woods. It had been an act of will to keep his hands from running over that pale luscious skin. His cock pulsed with need as he waved her onto the bed.

Like a beautiful gift, she lowered her hands, exposing perfect round breasts that bobbed and dipped as she slid onto the bed. She crawled up, letting those soft tips graze his body.

When her mouth was in line with his balls, she bent her head, licking the underside then continuing up the shaft of his cock. She lapped the glistening drop from the head, then took the length into her mouth. He gasped, running one hand into her silken threads. She went up and down methodically trying to force his release with gentle suckling lips. Her tongue was wicked, tickling the underside before engulfing him again.

“Let me taste you,” he begged, knowing he couldn't hold out much longer.

She sucked the head once more before rising to her knees. Her sweet mound stayed hidden in shadow. His mouth watered at the thought and he longed to taste her, lick those forbidden lips.

“Here,” he pulled her forward, not stopping until he had that shadowed slit near his face. “I want to be buried in those folds.”

He lifted her and wrapped those smooth thighs around his face. Her scent was intoxicating, fruity. With ravenous desire, he dove his mouth and found her made like any other woman. The soft rosy bud hidden in those lips pulsed against his tongue while he circled it and listened to her rising moans. When her body grew to a fever pitch, he plunged his tongue into her moist center and felt her climax, hot and sweet.

She writhed against him for a moment, then bent down while rolling next to him. Her face was flushed with the first real color he'd seen on her cheeks and he thought she'd never be more beautiful.

“I want you inside me.”

He'd been so concerned with her pleasure that he'd forgotten about his own. His balls started to ache, needing release only this lovely flyer could bring. He started to rise, ready to take her, show her what powers a mortal man truly possessed.

“Let me ride you.”

She rose, grabbing his shaft and petting it softly. In seeming slow motion, she spread her thighs, displaying the wet mound he'd plundered. Then she eased the head of his cock into those slick folds. She was so hot and tight that he bit his lip to keep from exploding immediately. She held no mercy for him though. With her hands rubbing his chest, she started up and down.

“No way, milady.” A man should fuck his woman the first time, not the other way around.

He gripped her waist, fully sheathing him in her body. She groaned and together they found their rhythm, faster and faster, spilling over the sweet edge. She came first and as her cries filled the room he followed, exploding into that wondrous place.

“Anne” he gasped then bolted upright in bed. The room was empty. Her scent wasn't on his body nor had she been in his bed. “Damn the night demons and their spreading lusts.” He flopped over, knotted the blanket in his grasp.

It had been ages since such dreams clouded his mind. He'd never met a woman like Anne before though. He smiled a little, hoping that she would have a similar dream or maybe make one come true.

* * * *

Anzele sat on the edge of the bed in the room Vincent had directed. The moon was bright outside but not close to full yet. Usually she delighted in bright moons but not this night. It showed her the stalkers circling above. There were at least two probably three flyers circling. Setiar and Liking had to be there, but who was the third?

It might be Dahi. She'd bet anything it was him. He'd probably pouted the months she'd been away, hoping that she'd come crawling back willing to accept him as a mate simply to be among her people again. His heart was cruel. If he had appealed to her mother, then he would get his way, and force her hand.

Marriage should be her choice not a primitive act brought for the purposes of breeding. She had been the product of love and not an arrangement. Why would her mother force a union?

She knew the truth was because mother had mated for love. From that had come the stigma. It wasn't common for a flyer to breed with a human. It happened, but the humans never villaged with flyers, although her father had tried. It had been a poor mistake.

They say his death was an accident but deep down inside Anzele knew he would be living if he'd stayed with his kind. Too many others in her village looked the other way and whispered when Anzele walked through the village as a child. She'd heard the talk and all of it sounded like murder.

Her mom and dad had almost chosen to live with the humans. Mom was not a winged flyer and could blend, as long as she watched her eyes and didn't smile. Her smile was a silver gleam with teeth too sharp for mortals to trust her to be docile. The flare in her eyes was the color of bright pink. She was beautiful.

The problem came with the pregnancy. They weren't sure how Anzele would turn out. If a midwife helped deliver a winged baby both Anzele and her mother would've been killed. In theory, the flyers would be more accepting. The theory was wrong.

Other half-breeds had been taken in as family but they were perfect incarnations of flyers without any human traits. Those that seemed more human were banished to the mortal side of the world, where the flyer in them would eventually get them killed. Of course she'd only personally known one other half-breed, Magese. She was winged and more beautiful than many other true bloods. The only difference Anzele had ever seen was that her teeth were flat and not fanged.

A figure at the window disturbed her thoughts. Liking's silver eyes flared brightly from behind the glass. He smiled with such an evil intensity that Anne backed from the window.

They were watching and waiting. The moment she left this human's care, they would swoop down and force her to bind with Dahi. She only put off the inevitable.

Maybe she shouldn't fight the union. It might be nice to go home even if it were in the arms of a man she didn't care for. Tears filled her eyes as Liking motioned for her to come outside. It was against the law for them to take her from her future husband but the look in Liking's eyes made her wonder if he cared what the laws were or not.

There was one way. She could sleep with Vincent. Not being a virgin might squelch Dahi's desire. That didn't feel right. She found Vincent attractive but wasn't ready to give herself to a stranger, at least she didn't think she was ready.

A lie might solve her problem. Liking wouldn't have to know she hadn't really slept with Vincent. It might convince the flyers to leave her. She could have her freedom then. She might even settle in a human town. If she were careful, no one would know she was different. Vincent could teach her to fit in, use the right words and such.

Anzele crept into Vincent's room. His breathing stayed slow and steady. It was wrong but she wanted to get a look at her human friend before passing the lie to Liking and his crew. She wasn't even sure what a naked man looked like. If any asked her questions, they would see through the lie.

With a delicate touch, she pulled back the blanket. At first only a small amount of his body showed, then she pulled it further down. His chest was well defined with a few small hairs growing along his breastbone. It was nothing different than that of a flyer.

She started to pull the cover down again when a hand landed on hers. Another hand wrapped around her waist and pulled her completely into the bed. It happened too fast for her to fight. The next thing she knew was that she faced Vincent. He was on top of her, holding her in place. The blankets were now wrapped more around her than him. She got to see her first naked man, at least the backside of him.

"Anne?" his tone was threatening, his eyes wild. "What are you doing in my bed?"

"I'm sorry." She tried to wiggle free but he was surprisingly strong. The weight of his body on hers was pleasing as well as the way he looked down on her. It made her thighs open.

"Were you feeding again? Going to kill me? What?" His words were harsh but the tone of his voice and his eyes made her glad she'd been caught.

"There are flyers outside." She felt her face grow hot. It was time for a confession she wasn't sure how to make. "Liking motioned for me to come out." She was embarrassed but the look on Vincent's face urged her on. "I was going to tell him that

we'd slept together but I didn't know what a naked man looked like. I was..." she stopped and closed her eyes, unwilling to meet his stare.

"You were what." His hand released her wrists so that only his body held her in place. His free hand brushed the hair out of her face in one soft motion. "Tell me."

"I was taking a peek."

He smiled broadly. "You were hoping he wouldn't want you after you'd been with a human?"

"Yes." She lay beneath him with her hands above her head. They were free but she wasn't sure what to do with them. Deep inside she wanted to touch him, feel the body pressed against her but didn't dare. Still the position was awkward so she slid her hands down letting them rest on his arms. "Please don't be angry."

He shifted his weight and she felt his leg slide between hers. "I've got an idea. Instead of going out to meet them, why don't you share my bed tonight?"

"I couldn't." She put her hands against his chest and started to push him away then stopped. The feeling of his flesh delighted her. She didn't dare move her hands along his body the way she desired to. Instead she kept them in place hoping he wouldn't notice her building emotions. "It wouldn't be right. I hardly know you."

His face slackened. "I'm not going to rape you or anything but I keep seeing a flash at the windows. I'm assuming it's one of your friends. If they are watching, maybe we shouldn't be sleeping in separate bedrooms."

"Don't look." Anzele was terrified trying to slide her body beneath Vincent, and away from the window.

"What's wrong?"

"Outside." She slid further beneath Vincent causing him to bite his lower lip but the expression didn't show pain. "I think Liking is at the window watching us now."

"Stop." He rose up a little and she noticed an obvious change poking her through the blankets. "Will you answer me honestly?"

"I'm not lying about Liking being outside." She felt him pressing against her from above and liked the sensation although she didn't understand why. He moved several times as if trying to move away from her but it only seemed to make things worse.

He let out a hard breath and gave up on keeping himself from her. "I know you're not lying about Liking." He smiled again. "I just wanted to know if you liked my kiss earlier?"

Anzele nodded and smiled, feeling her cheeks growing hot. "Is that wrong?"

"It's wonderful." He sighed and dropped his face into the pillow next to her head. "You are so innocent, so sweet." His words were muffled in the pillow but she heard them.

"I don't mean to upset you." She reached over and touched his hair. It was shoulder length and so very black. "I like you Vincent. I don't want to make any more grief for you."

"Then let's give them a show." He rose up and locked eyes with her. "He's still out there watching and waiting. Let's give him something to watch." He eased himself back into position over her. "We'll kiss a little then I'll go shut the blinds. If I get out of line, tell me. They'll think we're doing more and maybe it will be enough to make them leave you alone."

Anzele smiled. "I don't know if that's a good idea." It wasn't that she didn't trust Vincent, at the moment she wasn't sure if she trusted herself. She felt strange, hot with him lying on her.

"Shh."

He scooted his body up, lining his mouth with hers. His nakedness in the moonlight didn't seem to bother him nor the watchers at the window. Vincent tilted Anzele's head and kissed her softly. She felt her will melting. Love or not, this was wonderful. His tongue flicked gently at her lip, as if urging her mouth open. When she complied, she was rewarded with the most delightful sensations. She tried to mimic the action. This seemed to excite Vincent who moved his hips against hers reapplying that strangely wonderful pressure against her body.

Something deep inside quivered and where her legs joined grew moist. This mortal man brought more emotion from her than any flyer in the city. Oh, she wanted more.

His kisses continued down her throat creating a searing sensation. On impulse she ran her fingers through his hair. It was long and dark like a flyer's but softer. Then she felt the ties to her top release. He was undressing her. She nearly told him to stop but something more powerful awoke inside her. It forced a moan from her lips as the cloth across her bosom fell away. Every nerve ending seemed to heighten as she felt his chest against hers, his flesh rubbing warm and smooth against her nipples.

"Vincent," she breathed as his kisses trailed closer to her breasts. She arched her back wanting more but not knowing what to say. "Vincent," she called again.

Vincent's mouth stopped its progression. Anzele opened her eyes and found him staring down at her. Only her skirt remained, entangling her legs in the cloth and the blankets he'd thrown aside. His gaze made her pulse quicken and her tips pulsed with this new excitement.

"Forgive me." He leaned up but didn't take his eyes off her. "You're so beautiful, I forgot my place."

He stood breathing hard, and stepped to the window to close the blinds. When Vincent looked up, the appearance of Liking seemed to surprise him as if he'd forgotten about him completely. Liking stayed, glaring at him from behind the glass. No shame marked Liking only hatred. He touched his mouth then pointed to Vincent as if he wished to have a word.

"Anne," Vincent turned his back to the window, naked and beautiful in the moonlight. She saw what had been poking her from beneath the covers and felt another blush come and go. "What would you have me do? I can open the window to speak to him or close the blinds."

It took her a moment to think. She felt strange and very vulnerable. Anzele covered herself with his blanket. It didn't bother her for Vincent to see her nakedness but Liking made her want to hide.

"His name is Liking. Do whatever you wish. I will even go if it is your desire but I'd rather stay here with you." She looked to Vincent hoping he wouldn't turn her out to those men. In fact, she wished he would just come back to bed. There was more she wanted to experience.

"I think you know my desire." He reached for his pants lying across the chair. "If the choice were mine, you'd never leave me."

Anzele tried to hide her smile but Vincent looked at her with more affection than she'd ever known. Deeper emotions stirred. She didn't understand the feeling but the idea of returning home sickened her.

Vincent slid on his pants then opened the side panel of the window. It swung out bringing cold air. Anne brought the cover higher and began feeling through the blankets for her top.

"Liking, what business do you have here?" Vincent looked more annoyed than angry.

"Dahi wishes to converse with Anzele. Since she belongs to you, I must ask you for permission." Liking nearly spat the words as if communicating with a human were beneath him.

"*Anne* doesn't wish to converse with him. In fact you are disturbing us." Vincent wiped his bottom lip and looked back at Anzele. "We have things to do."

"My apologies." He looked at Anzele and shook his head. "Dahi simply wants to make sure she has agreed to this union with you."

"You mean he wants to make sure it isn't forced the way his union would be?"

"You don't understand our ways. Very few bindings are forced. The women pretend they aren't interested in the binding because it is unseemly for a woman to openly want."

"In my world it's fine for a woman to openly want her husband. It is also fine for her to speak her mind. Give us a moment and I will ask her what she would like to do." Vincent shut the window back.

"Anne," Vincent looked at her. "You're dressed?" His voice dropped and she hoped it was in disappointment.

"It is best if I speak to Dahi. You are the most wonderful man I've ever met and to bring trouble to you would be a sin."

"It is up to you, but I would prefer you come back to bed. We can shut them out. If you don't want me to touch you again then I'll abide by your decision just don't go out there. Please. In a few days we can move to the country. They'll never find us. I have a little house there that might please you."

It took her a moment to register what he was saying. This mortal man wanted her and for more than a few hours in his bed or to complete a good deed. "You would take me with you?"

"Yes." His eyes seemed sincere.

Anzele went to the window where Liking stood like a centurion. Vincent was next to her. She reached to Vincent and pulled him towards her, kissing his lips the way he had done hers.

"I will stay with you." She kissed Vincent again. "If you will have me."

"Thank you," he whispered against her mouth.

Liking's eyes flared brighter, ending the moment. Anzele pulled open the glass meeting his glare with her own. She felt strong, whole. It was more than the feeding. It had to do with being with Vincent. She felt more than want in her belly but something deeper.

"I have nothing to say to Dahi or any want of his words. I've made my choice. Vincent will be my husband."

"You seem brighter. Have you fed recently?"

“Vincent takes care of all my needs.” She smiled wickedly not fully following the meaning but having a good idea. “Even the needs I didn’t know I had.” She turned and winked to Vincent. “Now, I have no desire for you to watch our marital relations. Please leave.”

“So you are no longer a virgin?” Liking looked her over as if trying to find some proof.

“That’s none of your business. My promises to Vincent are enough by law to make you leave. Whether I’ve had him is of no consequence or how many times I intend to have him tonight.” She bit her lower lip and looked at Vincent who smiled obscenely.

“I believe my lady has spoken.” He reached past her and shut the window then drew the curtains closed.

Both heard an angry growl from outside. Anzele looked at the curtain, expecting Liking to come through the window anyway. He’d seemed so upset. It pleased her to imagine the conversation he’d have with Dahi.

“You were amazing,” laughed Anzele. “Did you see the look on his face? I bet Liking is fuming right now.”

“Can I ask you something?” Vincent’s demeanor had changed. He looked at her, this time without hunger but holding a quizzical expression.

“Sure.” She felt the smile leave her lips. Vincent’s mood seem to directly play against hers, giving her highs and lows in time with his. “What is it?”

“What is going on between you and Liking?” There was an accusatory tone in his voice.

“What do you mean?” She couldn’t imagine what she’d done to cause his change. “I don’t understand.”

“He had the look of an old boyfriend.” He sat on the foot of the bed and looked back at the window. “Have you two dated?”

“Hardly. I had a crush on him when I was a girl but that’s all. He chose another to marry.” She approached Vincent slowly. “He’s been bound for some time. We’ve never been involved.”

“Do you like him now?” Vincent’s gaze fell to the floor. “Is he the reason you don’t want to marry the other guy?”

“I told you, Dahi was a cruel man.” Looking at Vincent, she started to understand his mood. Anzele might be new at relations but she was no fool. “Are you jealous?” She grinned and joined him on the bed.

“No.” He looked scolded. “Maybe. I’m not from your world. I’m a little surprised you’d be willing to stay with me considering our differences.”

She laughed again then crawled into his lap, making him lean back on the bed. “You know I’m only half flyer. The other half is human.”

He brushed back her hair and looked deeply into her eyes. “Was it your mother or father?”

“My mother was a wingless flyer. My father was a mortal man. When they conceived me, they chose to live with the flyers.” She pressed her body against him and enjoyed the way his eyes fell back to her breasts before rising to meet her eyes.

“Half human,” he nuzzled her neck then pulled back as if more pressing matters clouded his mind. “Your father. Did you know him well before he died?”

“No.” This wasn’t the way she’d imagined the rest of their night. Still it was nice that he wanted to know her. She sat up, scooting off him and onto the bed. “My father died when I was small. Mom never took another.”

“I’m sorry.” He touched her hand and held it. “How did he die?”

“Accident I guess.” She wasn’t about to tell him her suspicions. “He was gathering valers near the cliffs and fell.”

“I never knew my father. My mother raised me alone. She did a good job but there was always something missing.” He looked down at their hands. “Now I don’t have her.”

“My mom and I were never close but the village is a nice place. Everyone was good to me, at one time at least. I miss it.” She glanced back to the closed window wondering if Liking was still out there trying to hear them. Then she decided that she didn’t care. She liked talking to Vincent. “Life gets a little lonely when you’re on your own. I never realized until I was turned out. People terrified me but I still found myself wanting to hear their conversations, anything to remind me of contact.”

“Are there many half breeds?” Vincent leaned closer.

“A few. Some are turned out if they seem human. They say the flyer blood is dominant but if a child can’t fly by the time they can walk, then they are turned out. Well I guess it’s up to the parents, but most are banished. It’s complicated. A human hasn’t lived among my kind in a long time.” She looked at their joined hands. “I could pass for human. Most flyers can as long as they don’t have true wings. We are built the same.” She looked over his body and felt the a yearning build.

“There are a few differences.” He touched her hair. “Like your beautiful eyes. I like it when you don’t try to hide the purple.”

She had forgotten about controlling it. Vincent made her feel so comfortable. “I guess there are a few differences.” She touched his cheek and wondered how long it would feel smooth. “Men from my kind don’t grow facial hair.”

“Do they grow ... uh ... any hair?” He glanced below.

“Of course.” She giggled, trying to sidestep his implication. To be honest she wasn’t sure if they grew hair below their belt such as she’d seen on Vincent. Since his body seemed very appealing she assumed hair there was normal although she personally grew hardly any hair where her legs joined. “They usually have dark hair, like yours. Lighter colored hair is considered very human, along with facial hair. I guess you could pass for a flyer as long as you didn’t show your teeth.”

“My eyes don’t glow either.” He batted his lashes. She’d never noticed how long his lashes were. They framed his dark eyes perfectly.

“No one’s eyes glow all the time.” She leaned in, staring into his face, gazing at the very deep brown staring at her. “You have beautiful eyes. I’ve never seen any as dark without them belonging to a forest creature.”

“Does it bother you that I’m not a flyer?”

“Hmm.” Anzele kissed him, delighting in the feeling of him at her mouth. She tried to use her tongue as he’d shown her and found the kiss to be even better with him teasing her mouth. “It doesn’t bother me,” she said as she pulled away.

He looked over at the window. “You know the drapes are pulled. You’re not putting on a show for anyone.”

“I know. I like you.”

She wanted to touch his chest again, but the move was too bold for her to attempt. He was the man after all. It was her place to wait for him to take charge. At least she thought that's how courtship went.

"You don't know me well enough to like me." Vincent wrapped his arms around her. "We barely know each other at all." He kissed her cheek. "I wish I understood why I feel this way about you."

"Maybe its just lust." She turned away. *Was that what she was feeling? It seemed like so much more.*

"No. I know lust. I've never invited a woman to stay with me at my farmhouse before. Maybe done a few things I shouldn't have, but never this."

"In my world, a man and woman rarely know each other before the wedding night." Her gaze locked with his. "A happy union happens when two meet and feel the unta. It's a connection that goes beyond the physical or political. It is a touching of souls. I think humans call it love at first sight."

He smiled as though considering her statement. "How do they know if they feel this unta?"

"When they are apart, they still feel the other. They say it's like having someone else inside your head. I don't know for sure. I've never felt it." She leaned closer until her body was leaning against his. She longed for the friction of his chest on hers. "Have you ever been in love?"

"No. At one time I cared for a woman, I guess I loved her but I wasn't in love. It seems odd when I think about it now."

"Oh." She didn't want to hear about him with someone else. She knew he was handsome and probably had many girlfriends but she didn't want to hear about them. It made her chest tight.

Vincent kissed her forehead. "What do you feel for me?"

How did she feel? The man she'd just met made her feel dizzy when he was near and broke her heart at the mention of another woman. She felt like she was losing her mind.

There was no way to explain all of that to him. She could only think of one response, and that was to have him lying on her again. It might be too soon or even wrong but at the moment it was the only thing she knew for sure.

Anzele ran her fingers across his lips. "I wouldn't give myself to just anyone but I want to give myself to you."

Vincent kissed her hard enough to steal her breath. His hands reached beneath her top. The sensation was like nothing she'd ever felt as his fingers ticklish light, traced her breasts, dancing across the delicate tips.

She felt free enough to explore him, touching his lips and following the flesh to his chest. Her hand rested there a moment, feeling his heartbeat. It was fast, even for a mortal.

"Are you sure?" he whispered against her ear. The feeling of his breath tore away any doubts she could have. "Really sure?"

"Yes. Vincent. Please take me for yours. I want you." She let both hands touch his body. "Please?"

His hand slid up her leg to her thighs, touching the skin lightly as if trying to memorize her landscape. Kiss after kiss brought the two together. For the second time Vincent pulled away her top. This time his kisses trailed lower until his lips took one

breast pulling her taught nipple into his mouth. Her back arched pressing her flesh into that heated mouth. His tongue danced, lapping the tip before he let the smooth surface of his teeth graze the pulsing peak. She moaned shamelessly, enjoying him. Never before had she felt so much pleasure or yearned for so much more.

He turned his attention back to her mouth, kissing her more passionately than before. The world seemed to race around them. There was nothing more important than his hands on her, the touch of his body. Her bare breasts pressed against him as he held her tightly. The sensation was maddening making a yearning grow in her womb. He leaned between her thighs placing her back onto the bed. In that moment she knew she wanted him inside her, nothing else would do.

She looked up at him amazed at the emotions running through her body, through her soul. He must have felt it too. His kisses stopped as he leaned over her and gazed into her eyes.

“I know its crazy but I think I love you.” Vincent looked a little afraid as he spoke. “I love you.”

She nodded. It wasn't that she didn't love him, it was just that words felt impossible. He seemed to understand because he nodded in unison. She pulled him to her again, relishing each kiss.

One hand slipped beneath her skirt and his fingers tickled the line at her undergarments, tugging until he slid one finger against her softest lips. She moaned, unsure if this ticklish pleasure was the sex act or a sweet prelude.

Vincent groaned, unable to pull the cloth free. His kisses grew more intense as that talented finger left her slit. She feared he'd stop and leave her in this longing, writhing in distress.

Just as he was fumbling with the clasp on her skirt, the world shook. At least the small house shook all the way to the foundation as the wall was blown in leaving a gaping hole where the bedroom window used to be. Wood and rock tumbled onto the floor.

“Vincent!”

The lovers split. Anzele grabbed her top for the second time. Vincent went for the old pistol by the bed. He was too slow. The three flyers entered the room. Two joined to throw Vincent against the wall while the third went after Anzele.

She tried to crawl under the bed but Liking took her by the heels and pulled her out. He hoisted her onto his shoulder then went out the opening, taking flight and soaring into the heavens. The other two tried to follow. Vincent raised his pistol and fired hitting one in the back. The other flew away.

“Anne,” screamed Vincent but she was out of sight. “No!”

Chapter Three

Vincent walked over to the flyer who'd been shot. Blood spread on its back, staining the feathers with a black/red. He was trying to get off the floor pulling himself up when Vincent grabbed him by the hair of the head, yanking him onto his knees.

"Bastard," muttered Vincent as one gold wing brushed against his arm. "Where have they taken Anne?"

The creature moaned as Vincent pulled him harder, twisting his neck and arching his back against the wound. The bullet had hit between the wings. There didn't seem to be much damage. A thick bone protruded from the broken skin, a covering where the wings attached but the wound obviously hurt like hell.

"I will repeat this one time. Where are they taking Anne?" Vincent held the gun over the creature.

"Stupid human," cursed Setiar. He tried to pull against Vincent, managing a crouch before Vincent turned his neck harder making the flyer tumble painfully back to the ground.

"I'll kill you where you lay if you don't tell me where Liking is taking Anne." He cocked the pistol. Rage ran through him making his hand quake with the pulse of his heart. "Tell me."

"She's not your kind." The flyer's voice wavered as he tried again to stand, making Vincent pull harder, nearly jerking him up off the floor. "What do you care?"

"She's my wife." The sound of his voice startled him. She wasn't really his wife but he couldn't stand the thought of her being taken away. "Do you wish to die or are you just stupid?" Vincent pressed the pistol against the flyer's head.

"They're taking her to the caves. They're on the other side of the dead valley where the blackness grows. With any luck they will remove the brainwashing and let her take her respectable place back in our world."

Vincent forced the flyer to stand, jerking him backwards into the kitchen and a long cabinet. Inside were several lengths of rope. Vincent took two, keeping the gun pointed on his prisoner, then made the flyer put his hands behind his back. Vincent twisted both arms as hard as he could causing the flyer to growl in pain as he secured both hands. He took the second length of rope and tied the creature's feet, making sure to leave a bit to anchor him to the main post in the kitchen.

"I will have my bride back." Vincent opened the door. "Don't move. To kill the rest of you I will need help."

Vincent stepped next door to his closest neighbor's house and began banging loudly. Gill, a rough looking man, appeared at the door. Apparently, the wall being knocked out had woken him because he was partially dressed and also holding a gun.

"What in the hell is going on over there?" He yawned as if his real concern was going back to bed.

"Get your horse." Vincent looked back at his house and the adjacent barn. "Be quick about it."

"Why?" He rubbed his face and leaned into the doorway. "I have to go to market in the morning." Gill leaned his head against the doorway and closed his eyes.

"You were with me in the woods when those flyers were trying to take Anne with them." He felt his stomach knot as Gill nodded yes. "Well they came back. They took her."

"So." He rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Leave well enough alone. She belongs with them."

"No she belongs with me." He could still taste her in his mouth. It was like honeysuckle mixed with intoxicating wine. "I have to hunt them down and get her back. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Are you sure about this?" Gill's body slumped in the doorway. "I mean there's a lot of other ladies who would be thrilled to be with you."

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life." He looked to the sky anxiously. "Please hurry. I want Anne back."

"Give me a minute to dress."

Vincent looked down. He still hadn't put on a shirt. "Change and meet me next door."

Vincent opened the door of his home to find the flyer pulling frantically against the ropes. He watched him closely. He was very human in form with the exception of the wings. Perhaps he could walk among these creatures unnoticed.

What was he doing? He hardly knew this woman. She was more than likely using him for escape, not for any emotional attachment. They had only kissed, not even made love. Still he knew in his heart that he would risk everything for Anne, no matter how stupid it was.

Vincent put his hand to his mouth and he could still smell her. The scent was light almost like fresh rain. Never before had he felt such emptiness or so much longing nagging at his heart.

He shut his eyes and could almost hear her voice. She was walking in the woods arguing with Liking. He pulled her by her left arm, swinging her forward when she slowed. Something else came to him like a knife in the gut. At one time, she had cared deeply for Liking. He felt it. Their tie was different than the one he shared with Anne. Maybe her feelings had been only a young girl's crush but it irked him all the same. He wanted her away from Liking.

From the first moment he'd set eyes on Anne, he knew she would destroy him one way or another. Still he couldn't resist her. Not even with her surrounded by flyers looking desperate for help.

For a moment he felt air on his face. Liking carried Anne now. They flew across the treetops. Vincent had to challenge a creature that could fly. It was insane. If it had been a demon from the bowels of hell, he would still follow. In a moment she'd captured his heart and he knew he could never let her go.

"Unta," he murmured allowed.

"What do you know of unta?" asked the flyer.

"I'm afraid I'm just learning." He took a deep breath and could still pick up the scent of her skin. Vincent closed his eyes again. "She's flying. Liking is holding her and taking her above the clouds afraid that I will track them."

"Do you really see it?" The flyer seemed to study him.

"Not really. I feel it." Tears stung his eyes. "I can feel her. It's like she's in my head but she's not." He opened his eyes as Gill knocked on the door. "I will have her back."

“Who is that?” The flyer continued to pull against the restraints. This time he lost his balance and nearly fell.

“Help,” replied Vincent. He grabbed his shirt, fastening it as he opened the door. “Is your horse ready?”

“Yes.” Gill stopped when he saw the flyer tied in the living room. “Wow. This one is winged. I heard they’re harder to catch.”

“I am not a beast. My name is Setiar.” The flyer tried to stand tall. This time the bottom rope caught hard, spilling him to the floor. He landed painfully, smacking his chest against the wood slats.

Vincent looked down at him. Part of him wanted to murder the winged man, no matter how wrong the action would be. He picked up a knife from the table, gripping it in a tight fist. It would serve Setiar right to die for breaking into the home of a mortal man. Maybe his spilled blood would teach the rest of them a lesson. His fist balled painfully around the handle, digging nails into his palm. *Murder was wrong*, he reminded himself as he leaned down to cut Setiar free of the post. “He’s a beast who helped steal my bride.”

“Bride?” Gill was astonished.

“Anne was to be my bride.” Vincent looked hard at Gill who dropped the subject. “Let’s load him on the horse. Maybe his friends will agree to some sort of trade. I have an idea of where they’re going.”

Gill and Vincent loaded Setiar onto Vincent’s horse. Vincent got on behind and started at a gallop, enjoying the painful way Setiar’s body kept slapping against the horse. Twice Vincent had to grab him to keep Setiar from falling off and being caught beneath the running animal. It wasn’t possible to slow down. Time was growing short.

The flyers had already arrived at their destination. Despite their erratic flying to keep Anne under their custody, they traveled fast. Vincent knew of the caves beyond the void. It would take them until morning to reach them.

“I’m coming Anne,” he whispered. “Hold on. I’m coming.”

* * * *

Anzele sat in the chilly cave near the fire. It wasn’t comfortable, but the hardest thing was not knowing what would happen. Vincent didn’t really believe what he was feeling. She didn’t expect him too. Humans rarely acknowledged their emotions unless it was rage. Everything else stayed hidden.

She hugged her knees to her chest. The wind coming in the mouth of the cave stung her despite the warm fire. Liking and Dahi stood by the entrance waiting on Setiar. He wouldn’t be joining them. She’d felt Vincent thrill in catching Setiar but telling those two would serve no purpose.

With no comforts near her, she thought of Vincent, closing her eyes and picturing his muscular body in bed. Oh, the things he’d done to her. She thought about them now and felt the tips of her breasts pebble. He’d kissed her breasts making the place between her legs grow moist. That’s what he’d been after.

She smiled remembering the way he’d tugged at her under garments, trying to free her body. That’s where the need grew the greatest. That’s where she longed to be filled, join with him in this wild emotion spiraling through her body.

Anzele took a deep breath and found the room had grown much warmer than just a few moments ago. She scooted back from the fire. Vincent filled her mind and she could almost feel his body.

With her eyes closed she could almost see Vincent or maybe it was a recent memory. In his attempt to calm he thought of her and sliding that hardened area of his body into hers.

He wants to put his cock inside me. She licked her lips, seeing images of them together that had never happened. They were fuzzy but she knew where he'd enter her and what he'd do once he was inside. It seemed he had dreamed of it once or imagined it now.

The image left her and her mound had grown moist again, anticipating what would come. He would search her out. Whether he fully believed in love didn't matter. Love, lust, and everything in between guided him.

"Something has gone wrong," said Dahi breaking the sweet images in her mind. He stepped out of the cave and looked out in all directions. "We should search for him."

She touched her face, still feeling hot. The tingling sensations vanished when she saw her captors. There wasn't time to indulge her fantasies or wonder what Vincent would be like filling her. She need to find an escape.

"Forget him, Dahi. Start wooing Anzele. You have to convince her to choose you over the mortal before we can go home. The council will never stand for the crimes we've committed." Liking looked back at Anzele. "Surely you can give her reasons for choosing you over worm food."

Anzele watched Dahi approach. His skin was pale, almost yellow with dark brown hair and eyes. He had no wings and strangely broad shoulders. She couldn't stand him. In the village he was known for his cruelties, never sharing at harvest, and rumored to be a thief, although that had never been proven.

He came closer, standing above her a moment. She didn't want to look at him. The elders would never tolerate a kidnapping after she'd accepted a proposal from another. Bindings could only be forced on approval from the mother if no other mate existed. Challenges to the binding could be made but only at the start of the engagement. It was too late to challenge Vincent for her hand, if a real proposal had been made. They could force her back to her home if they were aware of the truth but for all they knew, she was properly promised.

The thoughts kept running in circles but it all boiled down to her freedom. She wanted to be with Vincent and away from these barbarians. It was her people that had forced her into the mortal world. If not for their interference, she might've accepted a flyer.

"How far have you gone with him?" asked Dahi as he sat next to her and faced the fire. "Have you made love to him?"

"I am bound to him and will have no other. Leave me Dahi." She looked over but he didn't move. "Vincent and I have the unta. Be happy for me and let me go. Find you a thoroughbred, not some half breed."

"I want you Anzele. You were promised to me."

Dahi slid closer. Her skin crawled as he reached to touch her, making her scoot back from the fire. Vincent was coming. She had to concentrate on that and the hope that these men could be stopped. She could tolerate anything until then.

“Because of you I was turned out. I will never forgive you for the indiscretion. It didn’t have to be that way but you pushed until they banished me. Do you think I wanted to be left alone in the mortal world? You may burn in Hades for all I care but I will not bind to you.” She spit at his feet.

“Maybe if you feel what your kind is like, you will succumb.” He grabbed her arm before she could move away a second time then pulled her closer, trying to force his mouth onto hers.

“Never.”

Anzele reached to the fire, and grabbed a log jutting just beyond the flame. She picked it up and shoved the flame between them. Dahi pulled away in time but she caught the whiff of his singed hair during her retreat to the back of the cave. She stood, pressing against the rock and the torch held out in front of her.

“Bitch. I will have to show you how to behave.”

He reached his hand out and caught the floor in front of her into flame. She jumped to the side as Liking approached. The mouth of the cave was clear. If she were quick enough she could fly out the front, of course that was if she could clear the burning band placed in front of her. It would be close. She would wait a few minutes more.

“There might be another way.” Liking grinned his silver smirk. “A much simpler way.”

Liking put a hand on Dahi. In response Dahi stopped the flames although it was slow as if he’d prefer to burn her alive rather than see her in the arms of another. She could stop the fire herself. Vincent had fed her and given her great strength but it would be best if they underestimated her. She couldn’t defeat both, no matter how well she’d fed, so she would wait.

“What other way do you have?” Dahi looked at her again. The lust in his eyes was obvious and she shuddered.

“You have seen the void spreading in the gully?” Liking got Dahi’s attention, forcing him to stop looking at Anzele. “It is powerful stuff. I think we could use it.”

Dahi groaned. “What does rot matter so close to human cities?”

“Simple. The elders in the village said there is dark magic in the unmaking of the world. A few of them spoke of harnessing this magic for their purposes. The old men rattled about its properties, one even said it would bring amnesia if applied in a low dose.”

“She would forget the human?” Dahi looked at her and licked his lips.

“Most certainly. Then you could tell her she’d promised herself to you. If she regains her memory in a few years, who cares? By then the human would have another whore to entertain him and Anzele would love you.”

“Love me?” Dahi looked as if love was never a consideration then he said the most surprising thing. “No Liking. Don’t do this. It isn’t right.” Dahi rubbed his face and sat back near the fire. “We’ve taken this too far as it is. Using magic to force her mind is just too much.”

“It’s not right to allow Flyers to mate with mortals.” He stepped closer to Anzele. “A creature like you deserves better.” His eyes went over her torn top and she wondered who he was really erasing her memory for.

“This is against the law and you know it.” She pulled her top higher, happy that she had managed to retrieve it before being carried into the night. “The elders will never stand for it.”

His silver teeth gleamed again as he smiled down at her. “Dahi, watch her. I will go to the void and collect the darkness. I know you will be pleased with the results.”

“Will it only erase her memory?” Dahi spoke while staring into the flame.

“It may make her your mindless slave, but just think of the ... entertainment that could bring. If it makes a difference, we’ll try to keep some part of her will intact. Her fire will make her more amusing.”

Liking stepped to the mouth of the cave and took flight. He was magnificent to watch but any attraction she’d felt for Liking disappeared the moment she’d been in Vincent’s arms. Still she was happy to see his powerful body take flight. It left her alone with Dahi.

“So my dear, what shall we do to pass the time until Liking comes back?” He sneered at her. “I’ve got a few ideas. Would you like me to show you? I bet you’d like me more than the human.”

“I don’t want my memory erased. Is there anyway we could work something else out?” She tried to look sexy and felt completely foolish for the attempt.

“Allow me to entertain you. I bet we won’t need Liking’s concoctions to change your mind.” He stood and took a step forward. “Just give me one night. If I can’t change your mind, I’ll let you go.”

“There’s no other way?”

He shook his head as he came closer. She moved to the side and smiled sweetly. When he was a few feet from her, she reached out with her force and caught him by surprise. Dahi was thrown back against the back wall of the cave. While holding him she motioned for the many loose rocks at the mouth of the cave to come forward. She stacked them in front of Dahi making a crude prison.

“Anzele, release me.”

She did and he fell to the floor, immediately charging against the rock wall that separated them. It didn’t move. He cursed profusely. Anzele heard him as she took flight and started back towards the human city. He wouldn’t be trapped long. Once his temper was under control, he could move the wall. It would barely give her enough time to escape.

It felt good to fly. It had been too long since she felt air rushing past her. The night sky blurred with the world as she raced to join Vincent. He hadn’t reached the void yet. He was at least a ten minute ride from it. She could feel him haunting her mind with worries. It was beautiful. They were connected

She swerved, heading east to avoid Liking. Then she could come up behind Vincent when he reached the void. It seemed like a perfect plan, except she’d misjudged Liking’s path. It wasn’t until a sharp pain struck her side, careening her against a tree, and knocking the air from her lungs did she realized Liking had found her.

“Whore!” Liking screamed as he came at her again.

His hands grabbed at her, pulling her against his body. Anzele tried to fight back, pushing him away and gaining a little distance. She brought herself around in midair, bringing her energies outward, trying to force Liking away. He groped desperately to hold on to her but she stayed just out of reach.

Anzele let her body drop. Liking was faster and stronger but at a dead dive maybe she could lose him. She could feel his wind as he approached. The unrelenting ground was ahead and she didn't want to crash against it.

"Leave me," she screamed.

"Never," he replied.

At the last minute Anzele let out her force against the ground and propelled herself backward. Her fall reversed, causing her body to rise into the air at nearly the same speed that she'd fallen. She passed Liking on the upturn.

"No," he screamed.

Liking grabbed at her as she went up and he continued down. He tried to gain a hold with fingertips grazing her flesh. The ground came fast but his face was turned upward toward Anzele. She saw his mistake. He was paying too much attention to her instead of the ground. A moment later, Liking smacked into the earth. Bits of dirt flew high enough to pelt Anzele.

He wasn't finished, she was sure of it. Even as she rose in the air, she could feel something wrong. Power tried to catch her. Liking was on the attack. She turned, hoping to dodge his pursuit. Curiosity got the better of her as she glanced back at the ground. Liking focused, bringing his force against her.

As she headed towards the heavens, the air felt hot. Something rushed around her in whirls of red and orange. Liking had caught the air around her on fire. The fireball made her lose her bearings and blinded her as the force collided with her chest. Even as the fire sucked the oxygen from her body, she fell.

"Vincent," she whispered.

Anzele had passed out before she hit the ground, plowing through the dirt and underbrush. Her body crumpled beneath the mess. Even Liking couldn't find her as he searched the forest on foot. His energy was too spent to permit flight. He'd seen the fall but from the ground wasn't able to follow her crash path through the brambles so he walked carrying a black sphere. The innards bubbled as he went, waiting to be unleashed.

Chapter Four

“Anne,” Vincent stopped riding and sat still in the darkness. His chest felt tight like he couldn’t breath. Something terrible was happening. He couldn’t think or react only feel as a movie played in his head giving him brief glimpses into the mind of his love. “No,” he whispered.

Setiar turned to look at him. “What is it?”

“Something terrible has happened.” Vincent took a slow troubled breath. “There was fire and she was falling. Liking chased her and made her breath in fire.” He coughed hard, tasting the flame on his tongue.

“Do you sense where she is?”

“No. I can’t feel her at all.” He’d never felt more alone without Anne’s presence in his mind. “Please don’t let her be dead.”

“Relax,” Setiar tried to turn his body again. “It may not be that she’s dead. She may just be unconscious. Anzele is a flyer. They are hard to kill. Where is the last place you felt her?”

“She was flying to us, heading east around the void.” He looked around, expecting to see a fire raging out of control. The images had been so vivid they haunted him even after the connection had been broken.

“Untie me Vincent.” Setiar leaned up, pulling against the rope. “We need to hurry.”

“No Setiar. I can’t let you ruin things between Anne and me.” He locked eyes with his winged captive. “You’ll never accept me as her husband. I will always be a lowly human.”

“The unta, I believe in it. There is no power greater and nothing can break it. It would be a crime against my kind to try. Liking and Dahi can’t be allowed to cause Anzele any more grief. I will freely and gladly help you, Vincent.” His eyes were wide. “I swear it on my life.”

“Don’t believe him,” started Gill. “If you untie him, he’ll be off to help the others.” Gill reached over and touched Vincent’s arm. “You are the smartest and bravest man I know but this is the stupidest thing you’ve ever talked me into doing. Either untie the setter or whatever his name is and we’ll go home or leave him bound and let’s look for Anne.”

“I don’t think he’s lying. His words sound honest.” He looked at Setiar again. “Flyers are proud. They believe in their culture and ways. This unta thing is too precious. Surely one who understood it wouldn’t disrespect it.”

Vincent reached down and pulled his knife from the sheath at his waist. In one smooth motion he cut Setiar free. The winged creature slid from the horse he’d been draped across and stretched his wings. The wound from earlier had nearly healed.

“Amazing,” remarked Vincent as he also slid from the horse.

“We can heal rapidly when we’re strong. I worry for Anzele. It sounds like she was in a battle. We need to find her and feed her.” Setiar looked at Vincent carefully. “You fed her?”

“Yes.” Vincent suddenly felt defensive. If Setiar helped Liking then it would be harder to save Anne but without his help they might just as easily lose. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” Setiar looked at him again as if gauging his words. “Will you tell me something honestly?”

“Perhaps.” Vincent didn’t like the start of this conversation.

“I am not condemning you but I must know something. Have you slept with Anzele?”

Vincent rolled his eyes as if fucking were the best way to judge a relationship. It was true the physical had pulled at them, pushing their bodies to join, but their feelings were more than a moment between flesh. “What does it matter? Is this some trick in order to part us?”

“No trick.” Setiar’s eyes fell to the ground. “I just wanted to know where the two of you stood. A report will have to be given to the council. I suppose it isn’t that important. It’s just preferred to marry before gaining intimacy.”

“You may tell your council that I will marry Anne. She has chosen me. I’m sorry if it upsets your kind that she would choose a human over a flyer but she has.” Vincent felt his anger rising again. “Nothing will stop me.” Vincent took a step towards Setiar challenging him.

“Then I guess we’d better find her.” Setiar smiled as if Vincent’s actions were amusing. “Of course I will need something for the trail.”

Setiar didn’t start into the woods or even take flight. Instead he approached Gill. His eyes flared brightly causing Gill to jump in his saddle. The horse wouldn’t turn from Setiar no matter how hard Gill pulled the reins. Setiar kept the beast steady with a look.

“Be still. I need a quick snack.” Setiar levitated even with Gill’s head. “This will only take a minute.” Setiar smiled exposing deep fangs.

“Vincent, stop him.” Gill’s voice rose to a high pitch.

“Relax Gill. It doesn’t hurt.”

Setiar touched Gill’s face. Gill couldn’t pull away. His eyes were locked with Setiar’s in whatever magic these creatures held to keep them alive. Even as Setiar’s hands made contact with his face, Gill couldn’t move. There was only a small sound, maybe a spark as the feeding began. It lasted no more than a moment. Gill sighed then yawned as Setiar pulled away. Vincent watched all this with curious interest. Setiar was gentle with Gill. Not at all menacing liked he’d heard these creatures were.

“I will take to the air and circle the area near the void. If I see anything I will come back. Keep east of the void. I feel something dangerous there. The evil that created it is spreading.” He looked to the sky. “At the worst, I will invoke the council to our cause.”

“What is the void?” asked Vincent looking off in its direction. There the night even seemed blacker. “Is it magic?”

“It is the undoing of existence.” He paused as if considering the mortal. “Vincent, do you believe in God?”

“Of course I do, him and his son.” The question was curious. He’d never considered sharing the same God with creatures so different from him although the belief that God made all things was fixed in his brain.

“Then you believe in the creation story.” Setiar’s eyes flared brightly in the night.

“Most of it.” Vincent couldn’t see where this was going. He was hoping for a quick answer, something simple like mud or decayed plants, not a lesson in theology. “I think man embellished the Holy Book but the meaning is true.”

“Then believe me, creation is being undone.” Setiar shook his head sadly. “All that lives is at risk to come apart.”

Undone? He couldn’t imagine something being unmade. Things began and died, not undone. After a woman baked a pie she can’t make the crust dough again or the fruit raw. “How can that be?”

“Not now. First we have your future wife to find.”

Setiar raised himself, then with a whoosh of his wings, he was higher than the trees, soaring in perfect unison with the wind. Vincent was a little envious. It must be wonderful to fly.

“Come, we must ride.” Vincent started to nudge his horse forward when he noticed Gill was still out, seemingly sleeping with his eyes open. “Gill.”

Vincent punched Gill in the arm to wake him. It took a full minute before Gill was responsive. He seemed to have no recollection of being dinner, at least he didn’t mention it and seemed none the worse for the experience. Vincent had wondered if Anne had taken it easy on him or if the flyers were as gentle as she claimed. Now he knew.

He smiled as they rode despite the worries pounding his brain. Flyers could sneak into human homes, dine on them all night, and few would ever imagine anyone had paid them a visit. Such power was a frightening thing and very intriguing.

The claims against the flyers might’ve been exaggerated but Vincent could understand the fear. Flyers could wield magic, fly, and use humans as a food source. Mortal men liked to believe that there were none superior. Dealing with a species so far advanced was a little unnerving.

“Did I fall asleep?” asked Gill rubbing his eyes.

“Just for a minute.” Vincent smiled. There was no point in telling him what happened. “Try to stay with me, okay?”

“Sure.” Gill shook his head. “Setiar flew away, right?”

“Right.”

The two rode to the east of the void. Above them the air was still. Odds were Setiar had no intentions of returning but Vincent had hoped someone would accept his love for Anne.

* * * *

Setiar flew across the eastern section then doubled back over the void. There was a deep gouge in the earth like someone or something had crashed horribly into the rock and dirt. It was also closer to the void than he’d hoped. It looked like a cannon ball had been shot through the surface. He followed it but lost the ending path in the vegetation. It was time to land.

The night here felt muggy as if the air had been contaminated with the voids poison. He guessed it was closer to roots than poison. It wasn’t just corrupting, it grew, unraveling as it went.

There was no telling what would happen if it continued to grow. Setiar feared land would shrink, then disappear to small sections of islands caught in the black sea. Eventually even man would fall into unmaking.

“Setiar,” Liking spoke from the shadows. “What happened to you?”

Setiar looked at him. There was a haggard quality to Liking’s appearance. His face had lost its sheen with dark circles under his eyes. Even his voice was strange, very different from the flyer he’d been a friend to for so long. It was in his tone. Liking sounded drained and dangerous.

“I was shot by the mortals and had to wait until I healed to make my escape.” Setiar looked around. “Where’s Dahi?”

“Don’t know. I left him at the caves. Anzele escaped. I had an air with her but when she crashed, I lost her trail.” Liking took a ragged breath. “I am too weak to fly. Get some height and see if you can get a bearing on a trail? It can’t be far.”

Setiar looked down and realized they had to be close to the crash point. The line he saw from the air would match to this area. Anzele had to be no more than a few yards away.

“Liking, are you sure we should continue with this?” Setiar looked around desperate to find Anzele’s position. “Vincent is bound to her. Maybe we should accept her decision.”

“No.” Liking’s eyes flared bright silver then faded to a sickly gray. “I am tired of mortals mating with our women. It is an abomination. Humans should be kept in their city walls waiting to feed our hunger.”

“The elders would never stand for it. Breaking a pending binding is against the laws.”

Setiar took a few steps to the side, searching for sign and finding a broken branch, too low to have been done by Liking. There was also a light indentation in the soil. He was close.

Liking dropped sitting hard on the ground. “Maybe we’ve gone beyond the elders time.” His shoulder slumped. “Maybe we’ve gone beyond their guidance.”

“That’s blasphemy.” Setiar looked back, shocked. He’d never heard anyone question the elders’ decision or their ability to rule. “You shouldn’t say such things, Liking.”

“Does that mean you are no longer with me?” Liking looked up. Whatever sickness had entered him since they’d crossed the mountain drained him beyond anything Setiar had witnessed even in the most diseased.

“Of course not.” Suddenly Setiar wanted to be far away from Liking. Anzele had been hard to track from the air but the landing gave him a direction to finish his search. “I will take flight and see what is to be seen.”

Setiar did this, going high and following the flight path. Hopefully, he would find Anzele before Liking. He circled the area then swooped down. Something was wrong. According to the stars, he should be east of the void but the air felt heavy as if he were next to it.

He flew lower. The void had grown. Instead of inhabiting a small gully, it spread like a lake of black nothingness bubbling across the landscape in slow subtle waves. He started a return path to Liking then stopped. There was Anzele with Liking only a few feet away. If she moaned or even moved, Liking would be on her.

“Liking, hurry.” Setiar swooped lower. “I saw movement a hundred yards back. I think you missed her.”

Liking stood, limping off in that direction. Setiar went to Anzele. Her heartbeat was low but steady. She was still unconscious and not much healing had begun. It must've been a terrible battle. *How could Dahi claim to love her then allow Liking to do this?*

"Anzele, I know you can't speak yet but maybe you can hear me." Setiar leaned close trying to keep his voice low. "Vincent is looking for you. I will hide you until I can deal with Liking. Please try to stay still."

Setiar hoisted Anzele onto his shoulder then ran the opposite direction from Liking. He couldn't fly for fear Liking would see them. Instead he levitated twenty or thirty feet and tucked her into a thick oak, laying her across on a heavy branch with a small one running near. If Liking truly couldn't fly then he'd never see her.

"Setiar," called Liking. "That was a damn fire rat. Can you not tell a rat from a woman? Where are you?"

Setiar looked in Liking's direction. They were still hidden from sight. There wasn't much he could do for Anzele here. He adjusted her body, hoping she wouldn't tumble out if she woke.

He took flight again, circling above Liking to disguise his quick stop. Anzele should be healed soon. In fact, it shouldn't have taken this long. There was some terrible magic here if a flyer couldn't even heal.

As Setiar turned and descended, he felt dizzy. It made his flying sloppy and a branch jutting out clipped the side of his head and banged against his wing. The accident was a clumsy mistake a child wouldn't have made, but Setiar felt as if he couldn't fly steady for another minute.

His breath came short and he landed feeling weak. He'd just eaten. There's no reason for him to feel so tired. The smell of the void hit him again as if it had just gained strength. Of course. The void was undoing the world and flyers were closely linked with nature and all in it. They were being undone like the grass and trees.

"It's feeding on us Liking. We've got to get out of here." Setiar covered his mouth, feeling nauseous from the fumes. The void would take them all if they stayed. "Hurry, my old friend."

"What are you talking about?" Liking looked rough, thin as if every second drained away his life.

"The void, can't you feel it? The void is growing because of us. It was a trickle. Remember when the elders spoke of it. Then it was nothing more than an evil seed hardly more than a few threads. Then we sent Anzele out. I bet she wasn't able to fly once she hit this part of the forest. Her force helped it take over the whole gully. Now we're here, well fed flyers. It's growing again and if we don't get out of here, it could become unstoppable."

"Don't be ridiculous. I was in the muck and it didn't hurt me." Liking held up the glass orb filled with the black liquid. "I was inches from it and nothing happened. You're foolish."

Setiar stepped back petrified. "What are you going to do with that?"

Liking grinned and it made Setiar shiver. "It's magic. The darkest sort. Just the thing to turn around Anzele."

"You've gone mad." Setiar took another step away, afraid more of the bubbling sphere than Liking. "That stuff isn't magic. It's a cancer." And he was afraid if he

struggled with Liking he'd feel the voids wrath because Liking would let the sphere open over him and laugh as it ate at his body.

"No you're wrong. I heard the elders. This stuff is powerful. The oldest form of energy exists here, chaos. It is beautiful anarchy taking apart the mistakes to make something more beautiful." He stroked the ball with affection. "So much power, right here in my hands. With this I could have anything I wanted."

If the ball were to break, Setiar believed it would spread like rot over whoever or whatever it touched. Liking was too careless with it, rocking it between his hands like it were no more than a toy.

"You've gone mad old friend." Setiar eased away. Liking was not always this way. There was a time he and Setiar had been very close, nearly as brothers. "You're not the flyer I knew."

"Say what you will. I will fix Anzele, for if I am mad it is because of her." Liking looked at the black ball, rolling it in his hand. "She torments my thoughts. Perhaps she is more dangerous than any void. It isn't the world she undoes. It is me."

"She wasn't meant for you. You are insane." Setiar shook his head. "Fine, stay here with your ball of death. I'm leaving." Setiar tried to take flight again, intending to get Anzele and leave this cursed place, unfortunately the void had done its damage. He wasn't capable of flight. Even with his wings, he'd need a clearing to spread them.

"What's wrong?" Liking was on the ground holding the sphere up to his eyes. "Wonder boy can't gain air?"

"It's this damned place." Setiar breathed hard. "I need to feed again. Don't you feel weak?"

"A little tired. It's not the void though. This is good magic." He kept his eyes locked on the black, swirling it as he rolled the ball in his hands. Just wait until I fill Anzele's mouth with this. She'll be Dahi's wife and whatever else I choose her to be."

"That's why you pushed Dahi so hard." It all made sense. "You want Anzele and intend to use him to get her."

"Don't be foolish." Liking laughed. "I'm married. No one would believe your ridiculous claim."

"Your married, but not to the right woman." Setiar knew Liking's bride. She was pretty but not in the same class as Anzele physically or spiritually. "You chose poorly. It was obvious from the first day of your courtship."

"Please, she has position and her father is a respected elder." Liking leaned forward and plopped on his stomach, rolling the ball between his hands like an amused cat.

"Position makes for a cold bed. Let's face it, you've lusted for Anzele ever since you became married. The beauty was right under your nose but you overlooked her because she was a half-breed."

Liking's eyes finally broke from the glass ball. He set it on the ground and tried to stand up. When that proved to difficult, he leaned against a tree. "She isn't proper. Some may not care if a mate is full blooded but an elder cannot hold position and be with one of low stature."

"You think you will be in line for the council?" It seemed a far fetched an idea. The elders never changed unless one was voted down or stepped down voluntarily. "It wouldn't happen."

“It isn’t that lofty. My clan has often helped in the village politics. Besides, the current elders have lost touch with the people. They don’t see what’s best anymore.”

His body sagged heavier, until he was lying down, his torso propped against the trunk of the tree. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow although he looked cold, and shivered against the night.

“Anzele wasn’t good enough for a wife but fine for a concubine. You figure you’ll let her be Dahi’s and when he’s gone gathering you’ll slide into her bed. Everyone knows Dahi and his clan prefer work to company.” Setiar closed his eyes. The plan was a good one, although dishonorable. “She would quickly grow lonely being Dahi’s wife. Even the highest woman couldn’t stay faithful under those circumstances.”

“Not a bad plan huh?” Liking looked haunted. Maybe Anzele had been the one to make him insane. “At least it was until that mortal got into my business. I thought things would be much simpler. We would find Anzele in the woods and be her heroes for bringing her home. She would fall for me in time. Dahi wouldn’t know and probably wouldn’t care. He only loves hoarding.”

“Well what will you do if you can’t find her?” Setiar looked towards the tree where he’d left her. Anzele was well hidden.

“I’ll find her.” Liking sniffed the air. “She’s not far. I just can’t pinpoint her exact location. I will rest a minute then it will be clear to me.”

Setiar was torn. He desperately wanted to get away from the void but didn’t want to risk Anzele being found. She rested in the tree. Maybe if he could get to Vincent, they could stop Liking and get the ball away. If not, Anzele and the village might be lost.

Chapter Five

Vincent and Gill went steadily to the east, checking the sky for Setiar. There was nothing. The more they walked, the chillier the air became, too much for this time of year. The world seemed darker as if warning them death was close.

Vincent tried to push away the thought. Anzele was fine. Setiar would find her and he'd sense her mind again. He could take her back home and care for her. They could hide, away from town. Those from her village would never harm her again.

"I don't like this, Vincent." Gill's horse slowed as their path cut into dense forest. "Let's wait here."

"We can't. Setiar may not be helping us. In fact, he should've long since returned." Vincent had hoped to find help in one of the flyers. Taking down Liking and Dahi would be easier with help.

Just then a figure in the sky caught their attention. Someone flew above, but he had no wings. It was either Liking or Dahi, coming from the direction of the caves. The figure circled once then flew back to the mountains as if going back home to the flyer village.

"Who do you think that was?" Gill watched the stranger until he was out of sight.

"I don't know. Anne trapped one before she escaped. Maybe he freed himself and decided to go home. I'm more worried about Setiar." Vincent had wholly believed Setiar understood what Vincent was feeling. Now it seemed to be a trick. Setiar had wanted nothing more than to escape.

"If Setiar's not with us, then he has warned them." Gill slid from his horse and stepped behind a tree to relieve himself. "We could be walking into an ambush. They could keep us hostage and feed on us."

"Gill, stop imagining things. It doesn't suit you." Although, his speculations weren't that far off. Setiar could've warned them. Vincent doubted they were interested in holding them for feeding, but they might plan a terrible ambush. Then there would be no way to save Anne.

"All I'm saying, is this isn't a good idea. Think about it." Gill kept his back to Vincent.

"Would you hurry?" Vincent didn't like sitting still. This place felt foul. Not moving reminded him of prey in a field with hunters, or flyers, circling.

"Ready." Gill mounted his horse and the two of them were again traveling along the trail. "Vincent, what are flyers like?"

"I don't know about the rest of them, but Anne is wonderful." She was so much more than he could've imagined, but saying so felt dumb. Gill would never understand. The longest relationship he'd had was with a hooker he'd seen once a week for the last year. "She will make me a good wife."

He didn't understand what he was feeling, not really. There was a loss in him like nothing he'd ever known. The thought of Anne being away put him in an unfamiliar panic. Even as the terrain grew strange, he kept focused on her. Those soft lips; he longed to taste them again.

His mind drifted to other things but her lips were what he craved. He could almost taste her mouth, the way her tongue had darted against his as if she'd never really kissed a man before.

She'd never done anything with a man before. He hoped he could be gentle with her, loving her the way she deserved. Anne was such a fantastic woman and so foreign to him. What if flyers made love differently? Not that she'd have anything to compare him with.

It seemed like such a simple thing, sex. He supposed it was, until love came into play. He longed for the taste of her flesh, wanted to slide between her velvet thighs and lap her mound until she cried out his name. Anne would be so beautiful lying beneath him while he tasted her then slid into her body truly joining them.

"Man, I don't like this," Gill's nose wrinkled at the scent of sour air.

The image of Anne's white flesh spread before him, waiting for his cock to slide into that tight slit faded with Gill's voice. It was for the best. He rode in dangerous territory and dreaming about making love wasn't going to keep him safe or bring his beloved back. It was time to concentrate on the task at hand.

"This is very peculiar." Vincent looked from side to side at the scenery. "I think something new is happening here."

Time seemed to stand still. The death in the air clung to everything, even their skin felt tainted by it. They were traveling in the direction they'd been told to, but Vincent could swear he smelled rot, as thick as the void if not thicker. Something dangerous lurked in these woods and he wasn't prepared to meet it.

Ahead the world grew even darker, swallowing the moonlight with something lower, from the bowels of the earth. Vincent nudged his horse but she was reluctant to continue.

Gill had fallen behind several feet. It was more than his horse. Gill looked petrified as they drew closer. He'd never been a brave man but not a coward, either. The look on Gill's face made Vincent wonder if he might turn tail and run, apologizing the entire way.

Vincent hadn't realized that he too had slowed his ride once he'd seen the darkened patch ahead. They could go around, he supposed, but it would be away from the area where he'd felt Anne last. If she had fallen into the evil looking section, then he couldn't abandon her.

He wished he could feel her again. It hadn't even been a full day since she'd entered his life and already he pined for the moments they'd shared. When he got her back, he'd propose properly. Half human or not didn't matter. He would wed her as if they were the same.

Vincent nudged his horse harder into the wood line. Gill came but stayed to the rear as the trail narrowed. Here the world was still, Vincent could only think of it as dead. No crickets chirped, no owls, nothing. The air became heavier as they traveled. It was cold, but muggy at the same time.

"Look," Gill pointed upward to the sky.

The moon had lit their way so far but here something was very wrong. When Vincent looked up, he saw the lighter section of the sky had turned black as it hovered over this part of the woods. As he looked closer, he saw a spindly vine of black reaching into the night, as if trying to corrupt the very sky above them or rope the moon into oblivion. Vincent rode with his face upturned. Certainly the thing was trying to end the world.

The darkness seemed so complete. He could picture it reaching out to a man, pulling him deeper within its corrupt lines. It would feel like drowning, being caught in its murky depths struggling for air, for life itself. The pain might be severe if it began eating away the skin, rotting the meat to the bone then taking that too. He didn't want to know what it would be like for sure, but somehow, he feared he would learn.

"What's that?" Gill jumped, startled at movement ahead in the forest. He started to turn and run but Vincent held up a hand to stop him. "Did you see that?" Gill scooted back in his saddle, nearly falling off the back of the horse.

There were many things Vincent had seen in his life. He'd snuck past demons dining, hunted a two-headed tiger along the river, and even found land piranha that chased him, but never had he seen a glowing creature coming towards him in the blackest section of forest.

Anything living in these woods had to be evil. The thing glowed. More than likely, it could see in the dark far better than he or Gill. It would make hunting easier, and hunting two humans scared-to-death, simple.

Two things held Vincent in place. One, he had to go this way to find Anne. Two, was the appearance of the lights. Two lights glimmered close, like eyes cutting through the murk. Vincent remembered Anne's eyes, glowing brightly against the setting sun. *Damn he missed her.*

"Setiar?" called Vincent nervously. The odds were against it being Setiar. This creature walked on the ground and Setiar was flying, but his gut told him to stand his ground. "Is that you?"

"Yes." Setiar stood a few feet away and still not completely visible. "This place is undoing. We must get Anzele and leave."

Vincent tried to hide the relieved breath he exhaled when Setiar responded. "Where is she? Is she okay?"

Setiar nearly ran to them. "I hid her in a tree. Be careful, Liking is roaming. He's gone mad. It is terrible."

"How do we know we're not walking into a trap," Gill put a hand on the butt of his gun. "He could've warned Liking. It would be easy to kill us here in this strange place."

Setiar rolled his eyes. "No trap, you idiot. I can't fly. I have no more power than you."

Vincent eyes him warily. "But you just fed."

"It's this place." Setiar leaned against Vincent's horse. "Even if I fed again, I doubt it would last long enough to clear me of the diseased land. The void is feeding on flyers, growing from our strengths. We have to get Anzele out of here. I fear what will happen if the void or Liking reach her before we do."

"Then come." Vincent waved for him to get on the horse with him but Setiar didn't move. "Hurry. I have no time for unfounded fears of domestic animals."

Vincent offered Setiar a hand. It took the flyer a moment to take it. Finally Setiar reached to Vincent who swung him onto the horse. Setiar was clearly not comfortable, nearly falling off the other side before Vincent righted him again.

"Horses may not be better than flying, but here, I think better than walking." Vincent started the horse, then moved him up to a trot when he thought Setiar could handle it.

"Agreed." Setiar reached into the animal's hair, touching it, then holding on. "Flyers are not natural to these things." His voice wavered as the horse bounced them along.

“Anne picked up fast enough.” In fact, it had taken her only minutes to get comfortable. “So will you.”

“How did the two of you meet again?” Setiar started pulling the horse's hair, making it turn slightly as they went.

“Ease up. Hold onto the leather so you don't turn the horse. It doesn't mind you holding its hair but when you pull, it thinks you're trying to direct it.”

“Sorry.” Setiar reached for the saddle horn. “At least you're not making me ride on my belly.”

“You're lucky this horse is big enough to accommodate both of us. Nothing personal, but I don't usually put two riders on a horse, especially two guys. The saddle isn't even designed for it.”

“I appreciate the ride.” Setiar leaned forward, trying to give Vincent more room. “So how did you and Anzele meet?”

“I don't wish to discuss it. Anything I say, I fear would be analyzed to death hoping for some trick to make her break her promise to me.” To be honest, Vincent didn't remember what story they'd concocted. He vaguely remembered telling them something before riding away with Anne, but any details were gone. He'd been too caught up with her. “Let's leave it at, we met in the woods.”

“There's something you should know.” Setiar turned to Vincent. “Liking wants her for his own. He is married but not for unta or even love, but position. Bad marriages aren't the norm in our world, at least I hope not, but they happen. Anyway, he lusted for Anzele for some time then pushed Dahi into tracking her in the hopes he could share the rewards.”

“Share the rewards?” At first Vincent thought he meant some monetary gains but quickly caught on to the implication. “You're kidding?”

“He believes the void is magic. Some fool in the village told him a potion could be made to control a woman. He intends to use it on Anzele. His hope is to make her a slave. Dahi would have her for chores then Liking would have her for pleasures.”

“I will kill him.” Vincent spoke with such certainty no one questioned him. “One such as that shouldn't live.” His hand tightened on the reins making the horse jerk its head to the side.

“I know,” was Setiar's only reply. He hung his head as if the thought disturbed him but he wouldn't argue the point.

They trotted further down the path, unable to go at a full run. The darkness made the surface tree roots too hard to see. Vincent didn't want to risk his horse's leg, not as much for the horse, as the fear he wouldn't be able to get Anne out of here without him.

The woods grew thicker, not so much with vegetation as with dead tree limbs poking at them and bristles clawing their legs. They followed the curve in the path, single file, slowing to a walk.

Shadows held over everything, thicker than the night. Setiar's eyes glowed fiercely but it wasn't enough to light more than his face. He spoke warnings of things he saw ahead of them but Vincent doubted even Setiar could see clearly.

Around the path, they found a lump cast in darkness. At first Vincent thought it was a log then realized it was Liking. He was slumped against a tree staring into his ball of death with strange vacant eyes. Vincent pulled his gun and dropped from his horse,

nearly toppling Setiar who couldn't get out of the way fast enough. No one could see the rage in Vincent's face, but he was out of control. He'd never felt such anger in his life.

He grabbed Liking by the hair and forced his head back while resting the gun against his forehead. Liking was facing him, unable to protect himself from the bullet getting ready to fire into his brain. The events didn't seem to register with Liking. He simply looked up, following the direction his head was turned. Vincent looked at him with gun held tight, then stopped.

"Setiar, get down here." Vincent knelt next to Liking as Setiar joined them. "What's wrong with him?"

Liking was pale, even for a flyer. His hair had lost its black luster, looking like an old man's. His eyes were black with a sick gray glow fading. When his mouth fell open, the grin wasn't silver but a yellow white. His face had grown thin in the few hours since Vincent had seen him.

"We have to get him out of here," started Setiar. "Look at him. Look at what this place is doing to him."

"I can't risk him near Anne." Vincent held the gun on him again but hesitated to shoot.

"Even if you shoot him, the void will claim his body." Setiar looked at his friend. "No one deserves to die this way." He pointed to the bits of decay around them. "No one should rot like this. Remember your infected friend in the city. Liking didn't even have to touch it to start the rot in him. Please, Vincent. He is my oldest friend."

Vincent stared at the once vibrant man decaying before his eyes. He hated the beast who'd stolen Anne from him but Setiar spoke the truth. Even the worst fiend didn't deserve this death.

"Fine." He turned his head to the other horse. "Gill, he rides with you."

"I don't like this," protested Gill. "Just shoot him and be done with it."

"I said, he rides with you."

Setiar picked up Liking without any help from Vincent. He seemed sorry for his friend. Then he loaded Liking onto the front of Gill's horse. There was no reason to tie him. Liking couldn't attack if he wanted to.

"We need to find Anzele. She was more seriously hurt than Liking." Setiar, with some help, got back onto Vincent's horse. "The void could destroy her."

The group started forward when something fell from Liking and rolled onto the ground. Everyone stood still, as the glass orb filled with the void bounced then started rolling toward a tree. Each waited to see if the orb would break. It rolled until it stopped at a root. A single crack ran along one edge. Immediately the bit came to life, oozing out of the glass and attacked the tree root. The liquid didn't leach but corroded, pulling apart matter into basic components. They watched the pulp undo, come apart more than just being eaten away. It unraveled. Part of the bit sank deeper into the tree. Black veins ran up the bark. It happened too fast for anyone to react, only watch dumbfounded as the abomination went to the nearest branch. Blackness caressed the underside, then pooled along the edge where it met the tree.

"Move people," screamed Vincent. "Out of the way."

Vincent was the first one to realize what was happening. He grabbed the reins of Gill's horse and started pulling them both away from the infected tree. It was at that

moment everyone discovered the true secret to the void. It was not just undoing creation mindlessly. The void knew what it was doing and planned every move.

The limb creaked, broke off, then fell crashing to the ground, startling Gill's horse. It missed them by inches, nothing more. The small bit of death Liking had carried moved faster than anything they'd seen so far. Obviously gaining strength from the fallen flyer.

"It seeks to kill us," whispered Setiar. "The damn thing hates. It hates!" Setiar visibly shook. "We must get Anzele."

Both horses started at a full gallop. Vincent didn't urge his horse on. It ran on its own, stumbling once during its progression. Nothing belonged here. Even the animals knew when it was time to leave.

Setiar pointed ahead, leading Vincent to the area where he'd left Anzele. The geography had to have changed in the short amount of time since Setiar left her. In fact there was no way to reach her. Black pools surrounded and vibrated out in resonating tones against the earth undoing what had been done so long ago

"She's there." Setiar pointed to a large tree completely surrounded by void. The tree wasn't well, giving in a little at a time to its disease as bark rotted away. "I put her in the top. The void wasn't this far when I left her."

Vincent dismounted and started to the pools. "Nothing will keep me from saving Anne."

"Stop, Vincent. We don't know what that stuff will do to you." Setiar followed, but didn't dare come too close. "It could unmake you as easily as your friend and quicker than its taking Liking."

Vincent grabbed a long stick from the edge of the path and stuck it into the murk. Immediately black strands climbed it. When Vincent pulled it out, the bottom was mush and the black lines climbed toward his hand. He threw the stick back into the mire.

"There has to be a way." He looked at the tree, desperate. "There's nothing close enough to hook to and swing across." Vincent then considered his horse. "Maybe if I rode the horse in, it would last long enough for me to get to Anzele."

The mire grew as they watched. Vincent stepped to the horses as the black lines ran up the trunk of the tree closer to Anne. There wasn't much time. It would reach her soon and take her apart from the skin inward.

"You can't do that to the horse," argued Setiar. "Besides, it would kill the horse and strand you halfway up a tree. Watch how quickly it grows." Setiar touched a rope on the saddle. "Maybe we could hook the tree and pull it this way."

"I have an idea," "I don't think we have much time to try to pull the tree to our side." He looked at Setiar. "Can you feed from Gill again and get enough strength to pull Anne from the tree?"

"I can try." Setiar looked at Gill then back to the ooze. "When I feed, the void will also grow. Be ready." The pool eased towards them as he spoke.

"Feed from Gill?" Gill looked surprised as if this were the first time he'd been fed upon. "Wait a second."

Setiar took a step towards him but Gill tried to turn the horse away. "I'm too weak to lull him. I might need help to get him to hold still."

"Let the guy touch your face, Gill." Vincent came towards him. "There's no time for this foolishness. Let him touch your face." Vincent looked as Gill tried to move away again. "I don't want to wrestle you on the God forsaken ground."

Gill looked at the ground then back at Vincent. When Gill turned to reply, Setiar made his move, making contact with his face and feeding. It happened too fast for Gill to stop him. Setiar fed greedily causing more than a yawn. This time Gill fell across Liking in a deep sleep.

“He’s fine,” said Setiar turning his attention to the tree Anzele lay in. “May fate be with us.”

He wasted no time and spread his wings to gain altitude. The blackness seemed to also grow running up the tree containing Anzele much faster than before. It would be close. The blackness seemed to grow fingers, heading toward Anzele’s hand dangling over the side of the branch. Setiar swooped in as the blackness launched itself to her flesh.

“Anne,” cried Vincent.

Vincent couldn’t watch but the fate of his Anne forced him to see the abyss inching closer, faster, and hungrier than any creature he’d witnessed in the wild. It spotted its prey and moved in for the kill.

Setiar swooped in low, arms extended. For a moment Vincent thought he would chicken out. His face showed terror as the void raced to beat him, even claim him along with Anne.

Then Vincent realized something horrible. It could’ve claimed Anne before now. The void had spread out wide from the tree instead of heading up. If he didn’t know the thing could think, he would’ve thought the action was random, but the limb proved the beast knew what happened around it. If it waited to claim Anne, then it must’ve been using her as bait. They might both die with Vincent watching unable to stop it.

Setiar’s flight seemed too slow to reach Anne in time. Maybe he had realized the risk and was going to let her fall. The black snaked closer, reaching toward her unprotected skin. Just then Setiar made a motion with his hand, raising Anne’s leg, then he snatched her from the tree. The black puddle crept in where she’d been lying, but she’d escaped untouched.

“Let me take her back to our people.” Setiar hovered high above the forest calling down. “None of us are safe there.”

“No I want her with me,” cried Vincent. He reached his hands to the sky desperate but knowing he couldn’t reach Anne. “Please don’t steal her from me.”

“Keep heading east.” Setiar rose higher. “Join our clan, at least until she is well. They won’t harm you.”

Before Vincent could touch her hair or call her name again, Setiar was gone, flapping his wings against the stifling air and flying out of sight with Anne tucked safely into his arms and leaving a hollow place in Vincent’s heart. Never had he experienced such complete misery.

It was for the best, Vincent knew it, but his heart ached all the same. He kept watching the sky, even after they were out of sight. His Anne would have to wait for another day.

Vincent took the reins, steering his horse and leading the horse with its two passed-out riders around the black puddle. Their direction wasn’t entirely east but east would force them to walk through the rot. Vincent kept to the edge, watching his horse’s footing as they walked close to the line between existence and death.

When he'd headed home last night, he'd never imagined that he would be here chasing after a woman he barely knew. This place scared even the bravest soldiers. Then there were the flyers who were also feared by humans. Now he was riding through the void on his way to the flyer village.

"Please be okay, Anne." She kept replaying in his mind. It had been too long since he'd felt her touching his thoughts. "I miss you."

Vincent looked over. Gill was still fast asleep, lying across Liking. He supposed he could get rid of Liking here, before he had the chance to harm Anne again. No one would know.

He shook his head and kept going. Murder had never been something he'd developed a taste for. Besides, Liking didn't look like he could recover from his injuries. The void had drained him. He could die naturally enough without Vincent's interference.

Setiar hadn't allowed him a good look at Anne. He hoped she was in better shape than Liking. She'd been out here as long. Maybe the tree had offered her some protection from the drain Liking had faced.

The horse bowed, stopping in its tracks. Vincent looked down and saw a streamlet from the rot. It was no more than a foot wide but the horse seemed unwilling to cross it. It didn't take long to see why. The ooze bubbled up, trying to find something to grasp onto. The way it reached seemed almost desperate, as if it was losing energy.

They kept watching it as it shot up, then fell back, receding towards its origination point. The horse seemed to know when it was safe. When the stream eased down, the horse went over it, stepping high and wide.

Gill's horse went across easy enough also taking elongated steps. They continued along the path without new sign of the void spreading. As they bordered the lake of black mire, Vincent thought that its new lines were all fading. Maybe the center of the void stayed intact, but new growths seemed to be turning back.

Then a strange thing caught his eye. The black ooze stopped its attack on a tree that was immersed in it. Vincent dismounted and picked up another stick. This one longer than the first, then stuck it into the ooze. He waited and pulled it out. The bottom dripped with the wicked stuff but the lines didn't travel up toward his hand nor did the bottom become instantly rotted.

"Curious," he mumbled.

He mounted his horse again then started leading Gill and Liking out of the forest. The terrain was uneven, pitching the two sleeping passengers. Gill compensated. He was raised, riding so even in his sleep he moved with the horse. Liking on the other hand, slid to the side. His head started toward the ground. They'd been riding so close to the void that a fall would easily roll him into the murk.

It took Vincent a moment to react. He dismounted, and pulled Liking back, steadying him. Part of him still wanted to dump Liking off in that black death and let the rot take him, instead he used the section of rope he had left from Setiar and tied Liking to the saddle. There was still no sign of life from either, so he kept going, remounting his horse and leading the second.

A third flyer remained unaccounted for. The man who would be her fiancé was still roaming about somewhere. Vincent struggled to remember his name, Dahi, he thought, but wasn't sure.

That had to be the one they saw flying earlier from the cave line. He must've given up his quest and returned home. Of course with Anne there, the flyers would try to convince her to leave Vincent.

He didn't want to consider that. If there was any justice, he would have his bride. At least he hoped he would. If she chose to follow the whim of her people then he'd have to leave. Some things weren't meant to have a happy ending.

Worries continued to plague his mind as he rode, although he felt a little better. The air thinned. He could no longer see the black pool next to him and had found the main path east. With luck, he would find the sun come morning.

An hour or so passed before Gill stirred in his saddle. He struggled upward then looked down at the fellow he'd been using as a pillow all night. His expression became an amusing mix of shock and anger.

"What the..." started Gill. He started scooting back in the saddle. "What happened?" Gill scooted more to the back, coming out of the saddle and nearly falling off the back of the horse.

"You okay?" asked Vincent trying to hide the chuckle. His friend had ridden most of the night asleep on the horse but Gill's first moment conscious, he nearly fell to the ground.

"What happened?"

"Setiar fed on you which seems to make people sleepy but that's about all. You went to sleep on top of Liking."

"Is he contagious?" Gill looked down, holding his hands out towards Liking as if trying to protect himself from whatever Liking might carry.

"I don't think so." He looked over at Liking who hadn't regained consciousness. Occasionally his body would move in time with his breathing, but nothing else.

"Whatever this void is made of, used him up."

"Used him up?" Gill spoke to Vincent but his eyes stayed on Liking.

"Look at him. He seems drained, doesn't he? Another thing, when Setiar and Anne left the area, the void stopped growing. I think it feeds off those who feed on us. Weird huh?"

"Not my first choice of words, but it will do." Gill rode along behind him in silence for a few more minutes before speaking again. "Where are we going?" He scratched his head and looked around, trying to get his bearings.

"To take Liking to the flyers and retrieve Anne." Vincent waited. Poor Gill had been through a lot, and not even for love but for a friend who must seem, at least to Gill, as though he'd lost his senses.

"Have you lost your mind?" Gill nudged the horse pulling up to the side of Vincent. "They'll kill us if we go to the flyer village. Besides, it's far away and I can't be gone for that long." Gill mumbled a few curses. "Are you insane?"

"Most probably," laughed Vincent. He was close. "Probably."

Ahead the world seemed brighter. The sun started rising over the hills. It was pretty this early but soon it would blind them as they rode into it. It was nice to be out of the dense brambles and the dead scent of the void, no matter how bright the sun grew.

Vincent had no idea of where he was going or how long it would take to get there. Few mortal men had ever seen the flyer village. He was simply riding east. He figured he'd ride until he found the flyers or until he could ride no more.

His only hope was that Anne would wake and guide him to her location. Surely, no one could break the strange bond they'd developed. When she woke he would feel her and she could guide him easy enough.

"Are we going to stop to eat?" asked Gill. His large stomach grumbled loudly. Gill was an eater. It had probably been a strain going without his midnight snack. "I'm starving."

"Did you bring rations?" asked Vincent. In the rush he'd only thought of Anne, not their bellies.

"No," shrugged Gill. "I didn't realize I'd be gone this long."

"Then we keep riding." Vincent smiled at his friend who still looked at Liking like he held toxins. "When the sun is high, I'll hunt us up something. I won't let you starve." Vincent laughed a little. "Besides, it might do you some good to miss a meal or two."

"Not funny." Gill patted his stomach. "All this is pure muscle."

"Sure it is."

The sun rose steadily, clearing the mountains and glaring at them from the sky. A bit farther, Vincent's stomach began rumbling too. As if in answer, Vincent saw a berry bush from the side of the road.

"Gill, look here." Vincent pointed to the red berries, a beautiful contrast on the deep green leaves.

"Wonderful." Gill salivated. "I'm starved."

Gill slid off his horse and began picking berries. He filled his mouth and started filling his pockets while he ate. Vincent joined him, although not as enthusiastically. They were red berries, ripe and fat. Both were too involved in eating to notice the shadows circling above them.

When Vincent felt a breeze from something moving too close, he looked up. Flyers, a half a dozen, were above them. Vincent wasn't sure if he should wave or continue on his way. He hadn't felt Anne yet and if Setiar hadn't told them the truth about their misfortunes, these creatures might mistake them for a threat. If they knew nothing about the situation, the sight of a down flyer might also cause an attack.

Before his decision was made, one of the creatures dropped from the sky. His decent was quick at first, slowing a few feet from the ground, and then landing. This one had black hair with purple highlights as if someone had been painting him in his sleep.

"I am Cordin of Duhees. Is there a Vincent among you?" His voice was deep like churned gravel.

"I am he." Vincent stopped eating and fully turned to face his visitor. "Did Setiar send you?"

"He did and apprised us of the situation. How is Liking?" Cordin stepped forward but didn't approach.

"Not well. Check him." Vincent looked at the horse with Liking draped across. "He will need attention soon. He is tied but only enough to prevent his fall from the horse."

"Vincent, Anzele will need to stay with the flyers a bit longer. I have been informed that she is to be your wife. You may come with us to the village or we can take Liking off your hands and return Anzele to you when she is well." He made a motion between a curtsy and a bow. "The choice is yours."

“Did Setiar tell you what happened?” Vincent’s voice raised and he didn’t have the will to control it. “Did he tell you that he helped Dahi and Liking kidnap her from my home?”

“There was some mention but I was not informed of the details.” Cordin’s gaze shifted and Vincent was convinced he lied.

“Please understand that I wish to be with my wife and have her return with me as soon as she is able.” He looked back at Liking. “I wish no trouble from the flyers.”

“Vincent,” said Gill as he crept next to him. “I think of you as my brother but I can’t stay from town forever. Perhaps I could return home with the horses?”

“Excellent idea,” Cordin chimed in. “We will carry Vincent and Liking to our home.” Cordin untied Liking.

Vincent looked at Gill. He’d prefer a bit of human company in the strange place where he was being taken, but Gill had gone beyond the limits of friendship. Vincent couldn’t ask him for more.

“Very well. Thank you for all your help, Gill. I would appreciate you taking care of my horse until I return.” Vincent took his bag from the horse. “Let us be off.”

Two more flyers dropped from the sky. They didn’t attempt to land, only lowered themselves enough to pluck Vincent and Liking from the ground. This made Vincent feel more than a little awkward. He wasn’t used to flight or having a man’s arms wrapped around him while the earth blurred beneath his feet.

The one who carried him had wings similar to Setiar’s. He was very strong, able to carry Vincent, who was far from a skinny weakling, without any trouble. The male flyer didn’t speak at all, simply did his task as Cordin had instructed.

A winged male also carried Liking. A woman flew close to the pair looking at Liking every so often. She was beautiful, especially in her attention to Liking. She had to be his wife. A few times Vincent caught her watching the ground, sighing. Perhaps she had heard of Liking’s awful plans for another woman.

They flew over a tall set of mountains, close enough for Vincent to feel a few limbs brushing against his legs. On the other side, the landscape changed. Instead of the forests he’d gotten used to, the trees changed to things with broader leaves. More fruits than he’d ever seen, hung from their limbs. Beyond that was a body of water larger than any he’d ever swam in. The wind blew the water, gathering it and crashing it against a soft shoreline.

“What is that?” Vincent asked Cordin, who stayed close.

“The Ocean of Light. The waves bring us kelp and sea plants. The water, we dry for seasonings. It has worn the shoreline creating a sand beach. From there we take the only meat we eat, crab. The water comes high twice per day. When it goes back out, some crawlers get left behind.”

“Do you eat fish?”

“No. Well, a few do, but we are not swimmers so most of us avoid being close to the deep rough water. I have heard of one or two spearing fish when the tide comes in but most of us will only get in the fresh streams a little farther inland. When you go to bathe, I will show you the falls where the men go.”

“How long do you think Anne and I will be here?” Vincent was curious about the flyer world but the longer they stayed, the harder he feared it would be for Anne to leave her kind.

“Anne?” Cordin laughed at the name. “Forever if Anzele’s mother has her way.” Cordin’s tone grew serious when he looked at Vincent. “It will be a week before she can travel.”

The group descended and as they came closer, Vincent could see their village. Most lived in strange cloth homes with thick fabric strung tight against trees or sticks in the ground to create walls. There was a large stone building to the side. This is where the group landed, to Vincent’s relief.

“This is our refuge from storms. It is a little higher in the wood line than most of the homes and the rocks make it strong. It is a hospital right now. We have a small area set up for childbirth and such. We are using this to care for Anzele.”

The flyer carrying Liking hurried along with the woman who’d kept so close. Someone at the doorway motioned them inside. Grief planted itself on the woman’s face. She had to have heard about Liking’s plans for Anne. In fact, from the way people stared at them, Vincent was sure everyone knew what had happened.

It felt good to have the ground beneath his feet. Vincent felt like dropping and kissing the very earth but didn’t want to make a scene. Instead, he looked back at the beach. It was three hundred or so yards away with the most beautiful water falling in foamy waves.

Several homes were near the water. A section of rock jutting above the water line seemed to be the favorite spot for building, if he really could consider cloth a form of a structure.

“I guess cloth doesn’t make a good roof.” He surveyed the rest of their town. Their beds looked to be nests of sorts, and there was little else in their homes.

“That cloth is stronger than some wood. We spin it from bark with magic and sand. It is quite waterproof. The homes near the shelter are sparse. Most have more than one room. Maybe Anzele will show you where she grew up. It is lovely. She used pigments to create designs in the walls.

“Can I see Anne now?” Vincent looked to the stone building wanting to run inside. “I want to make sure she’s okay

“Of course.”

Vincent followed Cordin inside the big building. To the side was a set of winding stairs. The opening was wider than the stairs and seemed to accommodate flyers not wishing to walk up. Cordin was kind enough to walk Vincent up these steps, stopping at the second floor. The place was surprisingly well lit. Colorful glass was set in huge windows creating a kaleidoscope on the floors and walls.

“Amazing,” said Vincent as they went up.

The second floor held a balcony overlooking the huge room below. From there he could see the medley of color created a picture. The images came together to show a winged woman following a rainbow across the mountains. From the bottom, the details were lost in the light but up here, he could see the woman’s eyes, even strands of hair.

“The image is of Nona. She was supposed to have started our village when the world went mad and the humans called for our deaths.”

“Went mad?” Vincent had never heard of such a tale. “When was this supposed to have happened?”

“A story for another time. Through here is Anzele.”

Vincent followed down a small hallway. There on a thick leaf bed, lay Anne. He pushed by Cordin to be with her. She looked too pale but her chest rose and fell in regular rhythms.

“Anne,” he took her hand in his. “Please wake up.” He kissed to back of her hand softly. “Please.”

“She will soon.” Cordin sat on the foot of her bed. “She is getting good care although no one is sure what happened to her. Setiar seems to think the void is feeding on flyers.”

“He’s correct. You should’ve seen the change in the void after he left with Anne. It stopped growing altogether and just after being incredibly aggressive.” He kept his eyes on Anne. “I know this sounds strange, but the void is becoming a thinking entity. As it grows, it will get worse.”

“His story was the same. Never in nature has something fed from flyers but it would explain its rapid growth after being dormant for so long.”

He wished Anne would wake up. The void didn’t concern him. As long as flyers stayed on their side of the world, the void wouldn’t grow at all. He could take Anne to his farmhouse. It was far enough where the void couldn’t touch her and neither could the flyers. She would be safe with him.

“Is there a way Anne could feed off me or something to make her better?” He touched her hair. “There has to be something I can do.”

“Maybe in time, but she needs to be conscious to feed.” Cordin patted him on the shoulder in a friendly gesture.

“How long before she wakes?” Waiting for her to be a part of his mind was growing torturous.

“Don’t know for sure. We’re hoping she will wake tonight. The moon will be truly full and that’s when the magic is the strongest.”

“Tonight,” he repeated assuring himself, hoping to make it true.

“May I give you a tour of the village?” offered Cordin.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I’d rather stay here with Anne.” He touched her, trying to gain some reaction, something to prove she was still in there and still wanted him.

“Very well. How about I bring you some food? It is beyond lunch. You must be hungry.”

“That would be very kind.”

Vincent watched Cordin walk away then turned his attention back to Anne. She looked so frail in bed. Her hair was blacker than anything he’d ever seen. He touched it again feeling the silky texture.

“Why did I fall for you? I hardly know you?”

His life had been so simple before she’d walked into it. He was going to finish with his mother’s home and be done with it. After that, he could go home to his little farm. There were a thousand chores that needed to be done. He didn’t need a woman to walk in the picture and complicate things.

Life had grown too complex. One day he’s on his way to see his friend examining the void and the next he’s in a flyer village hoping like hell they don’t kill him and will let him have the woman who’d won his heart.

There was so much he didn’t know. What was her favorite color? What was her favorite food? Did she really care about him or just needed an out from a forced

marriage? Worse, why couldn't he get her out of his mind? She was with her kind. She'd be fine here. Why couldn't he leave?

He rested his head in his hands. This was madness. He wanted to be home but home for what? He'd been a bachelor too long. Well, forever. He'd had one serious girlfriend but she'd died from a snake. No one else had touched his heart since, and that had been five years ago. It was shameful, but he'd never felt anything like what he felt for Anne, not with Sarah, not with anyone.

He'd courted Sarah for years, since he was old enough to run the old farm alone. Anne he'd known less than a day but he couldn't imagine the pain if he lost Anne or Anzele or whatever she wanted to be called. Even if he had to stay here among people who thought of him as a low creature, he'd do it. He could stand their glances, their whispers when he walked past, at least until he could speak with Anne. If she chose staying here, then he would leave. Anne probably needed to be with her kind and not bound to some human.

"Are you okay?" Cordin sat on the edge of the bed next to him. Vincent hadn't heard him come back into the room. In fact, he'd barely registered that he'd gone.

Vincent looked up and was handed a silver plate covered in a variety of fruits and vegetables. "Thank you." He looked down at the food. "Are there any other humans here?"

"No." Cordin gave him a half grin. "Missing your own kind already?"

"Not really." He let out a troubled breath. "Everything just became difficult. In my home, with the world locked outside, life made sense. Now I'm not so sure of anything."

"You mean between you and Anzele."

"Yes," Vincent finally admitted. "I really do love her. We are very different. Maybe our worlds are too different. I just don't know if I can make her happy."

"You mean out in the human world," Cordin raised an eyebrow studying Vincent with intense eyes that made him nervous.

"I don't expect you to understand." He reached with his finger and traced her jaw line. "I know everybody here wishes I'd leave and never speak to Anne, I mean Anzele, again."

"I don't wish that." Cordin laughed. "There are many half breeds. Anzele's own father was a mortal man. I know of at least two in the village. Not many mortal men hang around here, though. Most take their families to the wilderness."

Vincent took a few bites, never letting his eyes leave Anzele. With everything that had happened, he was afraid she'd disappear or he'd wake and find all this was a dream. He didn't want to go back to his old life, not without her.

"The wilderness, huh?" He supposed that could be an option if he thought Anzele could be happy there. "Is it far?"

"Don't worry yourself with that now." Cordin rose and walked to the other side of the bed. "There was an incident here, when Anzele's father died. Many felt his fall wasn't an accident." Cordin reached over and checked Anzele's pulse. "It made everyone worry to keep a human here."

He noticed the deliberate choice in words. It made humans sound more like pets than people. "Was it an accident?"

"I don't know. I have my suspicions it wasn't. Times were troubled then. I think even Anzele's mother regretted her choice in men. She went a little crazy after he died. I

guess that is why she was so determined to have Anzele marry a flyer. It would just make her life easier.”

“Oh.” Vincent set his plate on a crude table next to him. “That’s something to consider.”

“I’m not saying you should end things with her.” Cordin rubbed his eyes. “In fact, I’d like to show you around. You might like it here.”

“And end up in a nasty accident.” Vincent cut his gaze at Cordin.

“Anzele’s father stuck out. You don’t. You might even have a little flyer in your blood. In fact, I’m willing to be that you do.” He winked at Vincent. “Tonight, after Anzele wakes up, we will have counsel together. I will come here for you. Don’t mention any of your doubts to Anzele. Just be supportive. We have much to talk about. Many things I think will interest you.”

“Really?” Vincent didn’t trust this man, although Cordin did remind him a little of Gill. It was in the jovial expression both seemed to carry no matter what the conversation, as if life were only entertainment and not real at all.

“Tell me, is it true as Setiar said?” Cordin leaned across Anzele and caught Vincent’s eye. “Do you feel unta?”

“I thought I did but since she passed out, I feel nothing. She was in my mind such a short period of time but being apart from her feels like dying.” He turned his face away. “Men shouldn’t talk so, I know. It is weak.”

“Men in love talk so.” Cordin stood, looking too pleased with himself. “I will have a decent chair brought in for you to relax in. Eat and make yourself comfortable. Tonight we will discuss these matters.”

He watched Cordin leave, happy to have a few moments of peace. Cordin seemed like a strange man but it was nice to have someone act friendly to him in this place. No one had been outwardly rude, it was just the sense of not fitting in.

“Anne, I mean Anzele. Will you love me when you wake or will all this be a foolish game?”

“Here is the chair you requested,” came a voice from the doorway.

Vincent had expected Cordin to come back but he’d sent someone else. This man had smaller wings than Setiar, black with silver highlights. He wore a leather vest with matching pants.

“Thank you.”

The man set the chair in the corner, nodded briefly at Vincent, then left without further response. Vincent pulled the chair next to Anzele’s bed and sat. It was comfortable and made Vincent glad to be out of the saddle.

There was one thing Vincent found odd. If they didn’t hunt or eat meat, why were their clothes made from leather. He touched the hem of Anzele’s skirt. It was thick like leather but a bit softer. Perhaps it was a mix of magic and fabric, like their houses of cloth.

He was too worn down for these thoughts. The cushions on the chair eased him deeper into the seat. He leaned back and stretched out. It was the first time since he’d met Anzele that he was able to relax.

Chapter Six

Day turned to night while Vincent dozed in the large chair. It wasn't until he felt a light touch on his arm did he jerk awake. For a moment, he didn't know where he was, then he looked in the bed next to him. Anzele was awake and smiling.

"Anzele?" He smiled then kissed her hand. At first he thought he was dreaming then he felt the stiffness in his neck. "You're awake."

She nodded. "What happened?"

What had happened? There was too much to explain. "Setiar and I found you in the woods. He brought you back here then sent some other guys to get me. They flew me here to be with you." He massaged his neck gently.

She leaned up and looked around. "I'm home?" After trying to get up, she slumped back into the bed.

"I didn't know what else to do. You were hurt pretty bad. The void was feeding off you and Liking." Vincent felt his stomach knot at the thought of her caught in the tree with the void climbing.

"What happened to him?"

"I brought that asshole back too. Setiar took you first then I rode out of the void's area with him half dead and slumped over a horse. A search group found us near a pasture beyond the dark forests." He swallowed hard, not wanting to tell her about Liking. She had cared for him at one time. He hoped knowing Liking's interests wouldn't rekindle anything but she should be told regardless. "Liking wants you for himself. He was going to poison you. Maybe I should've let him die out in the void but it seemed wrong. I think they're treating him nearby."

The thought of Anzele being reduced to a sex slave, sickened him. It was more the lack of emotion than another man touching his woman. In the short amount of time he'd known Anzele, her emotions, her life and touched him deeply.

"Poison me?" She touched her throat then locked eyes with Vincent. "You're incredible."

She reached to him, tugging on the front of his shirt and pulling him to her. Their lips touched, softly at first then harder as Vincent let her fill his senses. He had to possess her. He leaned against the bed, devouring her with his mouth, probing with his tongue.

"I missed you so much," she whispered into his lips. "I was afraid I'd never see you again."

Vincent kissed her again. He was feeling too much to express in words. His mouth followed to her cheeks, and neck. Every inch of her flesh seemed to beckon him to touch.

"Excuse me," spoke Cordin from the door. "She will still need a few days to recover."

"Cordin," said Anzele in happy surprise. "Dear, sweet Cordin."

"It's been a long time, Anzele."

Vincent moved out of the way while Anzele hugged him. He looked at her with pure affection. Vincent felt a twinge of jealousy. Anzele must've picked up on it because she looked at him and waved one finger as if chastising a naughty boy. There were some disadvantages to the unta.

He felt his cheeks heat and lowered his head. There she was with him, not invading his mind but just there close and real. It reminded him of holding hands without actually touching.

"Cordin and I are old friends." Then she looked at Cordin. "I guess you have met Vincent." Anzele's face beamed as she looked at Vincent. It eased away his woes.

"Yes, I have met Vincent." Cordin glanced over his shoulder. "In fact, I was hoping to have counsel with him tonight while you rest."

"Please not yet," pleaded Anzele. "We have so much to discuss. I need him."

"I will give you an hour," conceded Cordin. "Then we really should talk. Hopefully you two will have an eternity to worry with your discussions."

Anzele looked at Cordin suspiciously. "Wait. What do you need to speak with him about?"

"Your wedding plans of course." Cordin made a half bow then started to the door, stopping at the opening.

"Wedding?" She looked quizzically at Vincent. "Here?"

"Anzele and I need to talk." Vincent didn't know how to respond. He hadn't considered a wedding here. "Please excuse us."

"Certainly, Vincent. Don't forget about my advice. I will be back in an hour."

Vincent waited until he was sure Cordin had left the area. Then he looked back at Anzele, kissing her again. He didn't want her out of his arms, not for a moment. She was like a drug, wonderful and wicked all at once.

"Vincent," Anzele stopped him. "What's going on?"

"I don't know." Vincent kissed her again. "Cordin just said that he wanted to speak with me. I didn't think you'd mind." He took her hand and kissed each finger.

"No, but I didn't think you were really interested in marrying me, either. What's going on? Why is Cordin planning our wedding?"

He hadn't fully considered marriage. He'd spoken of it as a cover in front of the flyers but never really asked Anne. He supposed it would only be proper to marry her. He'd wanted to commit relations. Honestly, he couldn't imagine a day without holding her.

"I love you." He looked completely surprised not only by his emotions but by the words coming out of his mouth.

"I love you too."

Vincent honestly didn't want to marry here, but the look on Anzele's face when Cordin mentioned it, changed his longing for a hasty return home. Deep inside he knew her desires.

"The few hours we were together made me believe you were everything. I would like you to be my wife. Is that crazy?"

"No. It's unta." Anzele smiled broadly.

"I guess." He kissed her forehead. "You don't have to marry me if you don't want to. Hell you don't have to stay here or go back with me if you don't want to. I just want you happy."

She kissed him. "I would love to marry here. There's a special place on the hill I'd always dreamed of having my binding. Where we live after that is up to you."

She agreed to marry me. The entire trip here, he'd feared she would decide on being with Liking or at the least wanting to stay with her own kind. She hadn't. His heart fluttered. He'd never experienced joy like he felt at that moment.

"Then that's where we'll have it." He kissed her again. "I must be mad."

"Why?"

"I've fallen in love with a woman I don't even know." He almost told her his worries about staying, his fears for making her leave, then shut the thoughts from his mind. His mental withdraw wasn't fast enough. She sensed something was wrong.

"Love can happen fast. Please don't doubt my feelings for you. They're true."

"I trekked through rot and ooze. Let a stranger pick me up and fly me to you. I don't doubt love can happen fast. I just don't want to disappoint you. This place is very different from my farm." His gaze went to the floor. "I worry it won't please you."

"Let's not talk about it now." She took a deep breath. "I just want to be with you. I'll be happy wherever we go."

Vincent's gaze met hers. She was beautiful and deserving of the world not of hard chores on a run down farm. His world was nothing compared to hers. Food didn't grow freely from the trees. There were a few but not enough to support a village. Most of the food he had to plant, and tend. Many times he'd start working before sunrise and not finish until darkness had fallen.

He didn't belong here, though. Everything was strange. Even the beds bothered him, the way they were filled with broad leaves for padding. In his heart he knew he belonged to a tougher place, but she didn't.

She looked tired. He touched her again, softly grazing his fingers over her cheek. This could be considered paradise to some. There was certainly nothing wrong with spending time with a beautiful woman.

"You look so pale. Are you okay?"

She sighed softly. "Just weak. I'll be fine in a few days."

"Do you need to feed?"

Vincent leaned close while Anzele put her hands on his face. He felt a tingle, soft and strange over his skin then a sudden fatigue. When she pulled her hands away, he rested against her pillow.

"Oh Anzele," he whispered her name like a sacred prayer. "My wife, Anzele." He smiled at her.

"Thank you," she relaxed as if very full from a good meal. "I am starting to feel better." She petted his hair. "Why have you started calling me Anzele instead of Anne?"

"I guess because everyone else did. Besides, Anne is a human name, Anzele a flyer. I don't want to deny one part of you just because I don't understand it." He yawned.

"Anzele is pretty."

"You are trying. Don't overdo. I don't expect you to change your life to please me." She kissed his forehead. "Everything will come in time."

He hadn't thought of it as changing but that's what he was doing. Everything spun out of control and even as Anzele rested against his chest, he wondered if he could really see this thing through. It was too much too fast but what a great rush. There was nothing sweeter than feeling her in his arms.

"Anzele, what takes place in a binding?" It sounded like some sort of torture. "I mean is it like a regular wedding?"

“Let’s talk about the details later. You have too much on you. I can feel the stress bubbling in your mind. You need to learn to enjoy the moment.” She nuzzled against him. “Enjoy times like these when the world is calm and it feels good just to be.”

“So it does.”

He tried to enjoy the scent of her. Enjoy the feeling of being whole as he held her in his arms. The nagging thoughts kept running back, *she might be better off with someone else. Someone like her.*

“Are you ready?” Cordin appeared at the door with his horribly jovial expression. It made Vincent wonder if he always looked like that, some fixed deformity. “Vincent?”

“I suppose.” Vincent hadn’t realized an hour had passed. He held on to Anzele a moment longer. “I’m ready.”

“Do you have to go?” asked Anzele. Her eyes looked big and dark as the void itself.

“I’ll be back as soon as we are finished. Get some rest.”

She leaned up and let him off the bed. As soon as they broke contact, he resented the fact he had to leave. She felt so good next to him. Surely any other woman would never feel as right.

Vincent crossed the room and lingered at the door. Anzele looked at him with pure love. Everything was worth it. There was no denying his feelings for her. It felt like a sin to try.

He followed Cordin to the steps and down to the main floor. Neither spoke until they were outside in the cool night with the moon shining down on them. Cordin walked him in the direction of the ocean.

“To understand Anzele, you need to see where she comes from.”

Cordin smiled showing off his world. He was proud of this place, as well he should be. Vincent had never seen a world more lovely. It lacked some of the modern conveniences town had, but the soft sand and gentle breeze made electricity seem unimportant. And who would need a large house here? The entire reason people built houses was to shelter them from their neighbors and the outside world. There was no need here.

The moonlight shone on the ocean and the waves crashing onto the shore. A stray cloud drifted across the sky hazing away a few stars. It was the most beautiful thing Vincent had ever seen.

“This is where our tour will begin. This is the Ocean of Light. It is called so because of the glow fish that swim through here. There are also star showers every season or so. It is quite beautiful.”

Vincent strained his eyes. “I can’t see any glow fish.” All he could see were dark waves of pristine water crowned in white as they tumbled toward land. “What do they look like?”

“You have to see them from the air,” replied Cordin. “I will give you a lift if you like.”

“No thanks.” He’d had enough of flying for one day.

“Let’s walk in this direction.” He pointed away from the beach. “There’s more to show you.”

Cordin started back towards the village. A few fires dotted the beach. Couples cuddled near them, some protecting their privacy through a spread of wings. Children

were being ushered into their homes. A few girls were dancing in the moonlight while their older peers wove cloth on strange bamboo like looms.

"There seems to be more activity at night than during the day."

"Yes. Flyers can see very well at night. They will stay awake until a few hours before sunrise then sleep through the morning hours until the early afternoon. Of course they alter this for rescue missions." Cordin nudged him.

That would've explained the distant demeanor of the rescuers from this morning. They were sleepy and probably angry at being up so early. It hadn't occurred to him that these people wouldn't sleep at night like everyone else.

"Ahead is the heart of the village." Cordin took lead on a slender path. "I think you'll be surprised."

Vincent was. The path snaked up the hill. As the grade grew steeper, steps had been cut into the mountain. They went through a trellis tunnel with vines growing across; beyond that was the main part of the village. Some homes with cloth like walls were erected in trees similar to a child's tree house. Others had ornate paintings depicting fairy birds and moonlit trees and were constructed at ground level.

A small stream ran through the center of the village, making music as it ran over the rocks. It created a pool that overflowed and joined the ocean somewhere below them. A few women were gathered near it singing the most beautiful melody.

Even with his average eyesight, he could maneuver here. The moonlight helped but they'd also constructed a type of lantern. Vincent moved close to one and touched it. It was very thin like paper made of many colors but when he felt it, the light seemed to be made of glass like the panes in the stone building.

"You see, we are not barbarians." Cordin pointed to the steps. "We fly but still have stairs for those weak or injured. At one time I suppose the stairs were made for non-flying visitors. Most of our world has these small integrations implying humans were not such an uncommon thing at one time. We maintain them even if the needs aren't truly pronounced." He pointed to a purple lantern. "We even have light, although our eyesight is exceptional at night. I think the children like these more than the adults."

"I never said you were barbarians." Vincent had thought it on many occasions, but never allowed the comment to leave his lips.

"I know but most humans seem to share that notion. It's a believed or possible lie, a rumor. We call those things a gossa."

"How come some of your words sound so foreign?" Vincent watched a pair of children fly by with a third chasing them in some form of tag.

"Come."

Cordin took him up the trail farther, beyond the village. There a small fire pit had been constructed. Fresh logs lay in it. Around the pit were more lanterns: red, blue, yellow, and purple.

They walked around the pit. There were some stones situated like chairs. Cordin motioned for Vincent to sit. The pit was cold without a spark of flame until Cordin reached his hand to it. Immediately it came to life roaring.

"You asked me about the words." Cordin waited for Vincent to nod. "It is legend, don't know if it's true, but our legend is that our kind came before man. It took time for our minds and bodies to develop. They say we were like man in the beginning days. Our

language was different than it is now. Most of the old words have been lost to English man's."

"Are you saying that back then you couldn't fly or light fires?"

"Yes. We grew with the spirit who some say mated with a bird and some say was gifted with power for a good life. Those of us who dwell here are called flyers. There are other types of night creatures many men have never seen but that story is for another time. Anyway, man came from the east, so the story is told. He wasn't very developed so the flyers helped him. More humans came, then more. They ran from the cold or plagues or any number of things. They brought with them language. Our people were gifted and picked it up in order to school them."

Vincent had been raised in the belief that man was first of the bipeds. The rest were off shoots from Lilith's romps with demons cast down from God. Flyers seemed to be brought up in the opposite. Vincent had always believed people pretended God was just like them in order to feel a closer connection. There never seemed any harm in it, until he considered mixing two peoples who both believed they were chosen and special.

He'd been in homes where the son was depicted as very white to brown to black. In each of those homes the best way to start an argument was to discuss the true form and color of the son. It seemed strange to fight over who's image God more closely resembled. These people probably believed he had wings, glowing eyes and pointed teeth.

"Why did the two groups separate? Was it religion? Why did you forget your own language?" A million questions buzzed through Vincent's head.

"First things first. Many liked the ways of man but it was a bad choice. Men make wars. If they had no enemy then they invented one." He sighed and for the first time Cordin didn't look happy. "Soon they dubbed us demons and wanted to wipe us from the earth. Many from each side were slaughtered. Finally an elder gathered great magic and put men to sleep. They slept for a hundred years and when they woke, they built the cities over the mountains. Many flyers feared another war and sent spies to watch the men. Many of our kind can fit in well with yours. The only thing that gave them away was the accent of our native tongue. Soon English became imperative. Everyone was schooled until it became a standard. The young ones took to it easier than their native tongue. That's why so few words exist."

"Your people are immortal. Doesn't anyone remember a first hand account?"

"No. That's why I leave it as legend. Flyers are immortal under most circumstances. We can be killed, though. Perhaps too few survived the first onslaught of mortals and eventually died after passing the story. Perhaps it is a child's bedtime story. There is really no way to be sure. Some even say that men and flyers were the same, just one de-evolved." Cordin grinned at his little dig.

Vincent paid no attention to the disrespect implied. His thoughts were on one thing. "Immortal?" The word hung in the air. If Anzele was immortal then she had no business being with a mortal man. He would grow old and whither while she was trapped in her vows.

"You worry for your bride?" Cordin touched Vincent's arm to get his attention.

"Don't. There are ways."

"Ways. What ways can help a mortal man in love with an immortal woman?"

"I believe there is a little flyer blood in you." Cordin said the words slowly seeming to relish the sound. "I am almost certain of it." He touched Cordin's hair, then turned his face, examining him. "There has to be."

Vincent jerked at the thought. He was told horror stories as a child about the flyers and them coming to steal children, drinking them dry in order to continue their lives.

"I don't think that's possible. My father was a man, at least from what I can remember." Vincent struggled but his father's face wasn't left in his memory if it had ever been there. "Mom said he ran off when I was young but he ran, didn't fly."

"It's not that. It's not even your dark hair and pale features, although the resemblance is remarkable." Cordin touched Vincent's hair again and this time Vincent leaned away. "It's the unta. I don't believe a mortal man can truly have unta with a flyer."

"I thought you said there were many half breeds in the village." Vincent scooted away, uncomfortable.

"Many married what they thought were mortal men, but I have never seen a flyer with a little old man. Some said it was our land. There is power here, so much we don't require feedings but few mixed marriages stayed here, yet no old spouses with much younger. Not even when they moved from this place to the wilderness where little exists easily." He rubbed his temple. "I take it back. I have seen one man age, but I don't believe he had the unta. It was Anzele's father. He found his unta a bit later."

"I don't understand. He didn't have the bond with Anzele's mother?"

"Things are complicated with Anzele's mother, Betrev." Cordin sighed. "Let's start with the simplest. The flyer blood is dominant but it can sleep." Cordin study Vincent again. "Half breeds usually look like the flyer side. Once the blood is watered down further, it sleeps."

"So children Anzele and I have might be human." Vincent wasn't sure if the thought was reassuring or not. *What if Anzele hadn't considered that aspect of their relationship?*

"It is possible. There's more to it, though."

"I don't know why Anzele wants me," conceded Vincent. "I really don't know."

"With mixed marriages, it is possible having the unta kindles their blood enough to keep them young but not enough to allow them to belong. Therein lies the problem. A man feeling like he can't truly please his mate and a mate wishing for more for her husband." Cordin winked as if reading Vincent's mind, knowing the conflict he was under. "I am proposing two things. One I need a favor of you and two I will return it."

Vincent had suspected the real reason Cordin brought him here was to ask him a favor. He'd feared it was a request to leave Anzele and this world but there was more behind the humorous expression. He wondered just how much more.

"What is the favor?"

Cordin eyed him steadily. "I need something retrieved from the void. In return, I will awaken your flyer blood. Anzele won't feel like she married beneath her and the earth will heal itself."

"Your gift to me would be unfounded. I have no flyer blood." Vincent looked at the ground and kicked a stone at his feet.

"If I am wrong about the blood then I will at least get the elders to bless your marriage. It may not sound like much to you but an elder has never blessed a mixed marriage. Something like that would make Anzele elated."

He looked at Cordin. Truly the void needed to be stopped regardless of his relationship with Anzele and it would be nice to gain this blessing if that were the custom.

“What do you want from the void?”

“Again, this is just a legend but one I feel to be true.”

Cordin waved a hand at the fire and a strange scene started unfolding like pages in a picture book. Locked into the flames was a battle of winged men and mortals. The details were lost, but black shapes filled the orange flames enough for Vincent to see men locked in combat.

“During one great battle,” began Cordin, “the creator was angered that his children were fighting. He sent a splinter from a star as a sign of peace glowing brightly from the ground. The flyers and men used it as a weapon mixing their blood and hate upon it. The shard grew a life of its own feeding off of the hatred between the two.”

The fire scene showed a bright shoot, landing in the logs, and then blackness grew with the bodies landing around. The blood pooled and set in deep roots as it gave birth to the void. At first the black lines were no more than small veins setting in. As Cordin spoke, the blackness grew encompassing the base of the fire.

“I’m hoping if the star was removed from the center of the void, the world could heal itself.”

“No way.” Vincent thought of the stick turning into mush. “That stuff would eat me alive.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You see we make some remarkable things here, especially very strong cloth. I could have a glove of sorts made for you. Since you are not a real flyer, you wouldn’t energize the muck. The glove might give you enough protection to reach into the center and retrieve the star.”

It sounded like a crazy idea to Vincent. He didn’t want to go near the forest surrounding that muck, much less stick his hands into it. There wasn’t even a way to reach the center. He couldn’t fly over the thing.

The image of Louis filled his head. He’d seen the old man who’d stepped into the void while on a walk looking for mushrooms. They’d found him, dragging himself back into town, screaming for a doctor. His leg was half eaten with a bubbling mass of black climbing higher.

“I don’t even know where the center would be or how to reach it. There’s no way I could succeed at the task you mention.” Vincent raised his eyebrow. “Unless that is your intention. It would be a quick way to eliminate the problem of Anzele being with me.”

“I have no wish to part you from Anzele. The details of your quest I have gone over a million times. In fact, I was going to attempt the job myself but being a flyer I would surely die and give the void more strength in the process.” Cordin looked at the flame and the scene that had been frozen of the void filling the base. It vanished into the dancing flames as he looked into it. “I don’t know what else to do. I can’t just sit back and watch the world come apart. Unfortunately, this is a job for a human.”

“I don’t know.”

Vincent had worried about the void many times. The day he’d met Anzele, he was on his way to study to void to help find a cure. Even as it quit eating away Louis, everyone knew that it would take the whole city in time. It might even take the entire world.

“Don’t decide now.” Cordin’s face truly looked troubled. “Decide before you wed, though. Anzele might be happier married to her own kind instead of worrying for your life or being miserable in the dangers of your world.”

Vincent’s paranoia kept nagging at him. “How do I know you haven’t concocted this plan in order to rid Anzele of me?”

“If that were true, we would’ve thrown you in the ocean.”

There was no denying that. They could’ve easily murdered him and told Anzele that he’d died before they could reach him. She was unconscious. Not even the unta would’ve told her a dead man’s tale.

“What if I can’t find this star? It may not even exist.”

“If you are true in this quest, I will honor our arrangement and turn you or gain blessing. Besides, I fear if someone doesn’t try to stop the void, then both our worlds are finished. It’s only a matter of time. You saw it first hand. You know what it’s capable of.”

Vincent considered this. Truly the world could be undone from such a thing but he had more personal matters to worry with. “Have you turned others of mixed blood?”

“Only one. My sister married a human who took her to the wilderness despite my gift.” Cordin nearly spat the words. “He became a true flyer and still ran with her.”

“He had flyer blood in him?” Vincent couldn’t imagine a flyer wanting to leave this remarkable place.

“Yes. I can’t turn one who doesn’t. It’s very dangerous even when one is of our lineage.”

“What about those you don’t turn? They still don’t age. Explain that.”

“I think just being with their mate, maybe the unta, I don’t know but something makes them remember enough to be young. Maybe not fly or cast magic winds but stay young. So don’t do this for eternal youth. If you take this quest, do it for Anzele.”

“She would be the only reason I’d take such a foolhardy mission.” He looked up at the moon as he spoke. It was the same moon gliding above his house in the country but it felt like a completely different thing. “I’d better get back to her. I will consider your offer.”

“I’ll find you tomorrow and hear your answer.” Cordin looked into the stars.

“Where will we meet?” Vincent ran his fingers through his hair, wondering what madness he’d fallen into this time.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find you.” When Cordin’s eyes looked at him again, Vincent saw pain. Either the void, or making this request, troubled him deeply.

Vincent walked back down the hill, leaving Cordin alone. These people seemed to be perfectly at peace with the world. This could very well be considered a paradise. They didn’t toil the same way he had on the farm, but he liked hard work. It made him feel worthy, accomplished. Life here may not be as satisfying.

It took a few minutes to get through the village. Many people gathered, singing and laughing. A few men at the side played music. The instruments were similar to a guitar and one man blew into a gadget like a flute but made of seashell. It looked like a grand party. A few still performed minor chores, weaving and such but it seemed to be labors of love and not work at all.

Eventually he saw the stone building rising against the dark sky. Many of the rooms held lanterns blinking out and filling the building with as much color as the stained glass gave it during the day.

He could feel her. She seemed happy but something was different. Someone was with her in the hospital room. He stopped walking and just felt. The night had clogged his mind with his own emotions and he'd been ignoring Anzele. Now something was bothering her, regret.

"My Anne." The regret had something to do with him but he couldn't pick up what the specifics were.

He walked up the steps to Anzele's room. Knowing someone was close, he stayed quiet, listening. As he topped the second story, he heard voices. One was Anzele, the other Liking. The bastard had recovered.

"You had no right to do that to me." Anzele's voice was loud and angry.

"I know. I'm sorry. I've always liked you, Anzele. I didn't marry for the right reasons and now Charsta is leaving me. It's you I always wanted. I know that now." He groaned. "I married for power. It was foolish but I confess it. You are truly the one I want."

"Then you shouldn't have pushed me onto Dahi or caused me to be banished, or kidnapped me." Anzele's screamed at him. "You treated me like a pet. What would've happened if you'd brought the void back? Would you force me into your bed like a mindless whore? Would you've risked the whole village for your selfish desires?"

"Please, Anzele," begged Liking.

Vincent crept closer, peering into the room from the doorway. Anzele had her back to Liking. Her small hands were curled into fists. Vincent almost walked inside and demanded Liking leave but Liking moved quickly. He pulled Anzele into his arms, turning her and then putting his mouth on hers.

Jealousy raged through his veins. He should've left the bastard to die in the void. Vincent started into the room and stopped. Anzele was feeling more than rage but a twinge of pleasure in it. Anzele liked the kiss.

Finally it broke with Anzele standing stunned in the room. Liking kept his hands on her, petting her hair, soothing her.

"You need to be with your own kind, Anzele. I know I haven't been a good man but I'm better for you than him." Liking sounded desperate. "I can be good. You can change me. Wouldn't it feel nicer to be with a flyer, to fly into the sky, to understand each other, and have the same lines?"

"Vincent and I have unta." Anzele pushed him away.

"Love on any level is beautiful. It doesn't answer all the problems in life. He'll never really understand you." Liking tried unsuccessfully to pull her back into his arms. "I wasn't going to tell you this but I know who killed your father."

"Who?"

"Your mother. She realized she'd made a mistake. It's true your father slipped but your mother never made a move to save him. She watched him fall." Liking stepped closer, making her retreat.

"No. You're lying." Anzele raised her hand to slap him but Liking caught her wrist and held it. "Take it back."

"I'm sorry." Liking released her. "I wish I could. The fact is, Betrev, realized that love wasn't enough. She wanted a man who was her equal. She wanted a flyer."

"Then why hasn't she remarried?" Anzele's eyes flared brightly. "Answer me that."

"No flyer will have her once she'd mated with a human." Liking kept his voice low.

"No." Anzele covered her mouth.

"I'm not that way." Liking reached to touch her again, making contact with her shoulder. "I don't care if you've been with the human or not. I just want you. Whatever you've done doesn't matter."

Anzele took a troubled breath. "Somewhere exists your true love. You'll find her. When you do, you'll understand what I'm feeling."

"I want you and you deserve better than a human. I see the look in your eyes. You wish you could leave him behind."

"No. He is my everything but..." Anzele looked at Liking. "I do wish we were the same."

"See. He is beneath you."

Vincent felt his heart break. He slumped against the door frame then turned back to the hallway. If her mother had watched her father die then maybe no hope existed for Anzele and him. She already regretted their bond. Vincent turned and went back down the stairs. Maybe there was nothing for him here. It was time to go home.

* * * *

"Liking, don't insult Vincent." In the middle of her words, Anzele stood upright, her heart caught in her throat. She felt Vincent and he was mourning their love, giving up on it completely. He'd heard her conversation with Liking.

"I didn't mean an insult." Liking reached to touch her again. "I am just speaking the truth."

"You planned this didn't you?" Anzele spun around and started to the door. "That was very low, Liking. I was starting to believe that you were sorry for your mistakes."

"I didn't plan anything. Where are you going?" Liking started after her. "You can't leave. You're sick."

"Vincent heard us." Anzele whiled around, eyes blazing. "He thinks he isn't good enough for me and it's because of you."

Ignoring Liking's objections, Anzele went downstairs in a single leap sending unpleasant shivers through her weakened body. She needed Vincent and used the unta to search for him. Her senses picked him up. There was the sound of water and the smell salt. He walked along the ocean or did he?

She ran out of the building and into the night. Tears filled her eyes. There was nothing about Vincent she regretted but that damned Liking made her mind go places it didn't belong. It would be better if they were the same, but that didn't mean she didn't want Vincent.

"Wait Vincent," she tried to speak over the distance. "Please wait."

The sand slowed her progression. She looked up and down the beach for Vincent, not finding him but something more startling, his shoes. A few feet more she found his shirt.

She ran to the water's edge. At first she couldn't see him. Then, like a fish, he rose out of the water, gasping for oxygen. The air was warm and she supposed perfectly suited for swimming but she had never seen one do it.

"Vincent," she called. "Come back."

Her heart raced as she watched him in the churning water. She'd grown up next to the ocean but it petrified her with its whipping motion and angry waves toppling onto the beach.

For a moment Vincent stared at her, as the waves bobbed him up and down. Then he blew her a kiss. "You're better off without me," he shouted back and dove back under the water.

"Vincent?"

She stepped into the waves. Her feet had been in the ocean before but never above the knees. This wasn't anything like the place she chose to bathe. Here the water crashed against the land violently, and it scared her. The sand pulled back into the water, as if the ocean were a hungry beast trying to pull her in.

"Vincent?"

When the water reached her waist it was chilly, strange. The waves kept coming. She could see Vincent in the distance, swimming away along the shoreline, probably trying to find a way out of here without hiking over the mountain range that blocked her world from his.

"This is stupid." She fussed at herself. She was handling this problem like a human. Perhaps she had lived near them for too long.

She flexed and levitated above the water, then flew across the moonlit ocean. Her skirt felt cold as the wind blew against it. Soon she saw him coming out of the water for air. This was her chance. She swooped down much like the birds she'd seen feeding on fish. Her hands reached, feeling his shoulders beneath the water. She dunked her upper body in the process, and grabbed Vincent.

Lifting him proved harder than she'd anticipated. Her fingers dug into his shoulder but he pulled her down. She wasn't letting go. Again she reached, finding his arms. He was heavy, crashing her back into the water as she tried to hoist him up. Salt water filled her face, stinging her eyes. She finally got a good hold around his waist and pulled him

"Let me go Anzele. You're too weak."

Vincent was right, she was weak. Everything in her body began to ache but she wasn't letting him go. Nothing in the universe would make her drop him. So she held on until they made the beach then both dropped from the sky, landing heavily in the sand.

"I'm sorry about Liking. You're the one I love." She felt exhausted. "You have to believe me."

"Anzele." Vincent kissed her softly, almost apologetically. "You need to be with someone who can make you happy. You'll regret a life with me."

"I am with the only man who can make me happy." Tears filled her eyes, running down her cheeks while a sweet misery filled her soul. "You can't leave me now. Please, Vincent. I've never loved before."

"Oh, you don't make things easy." He brushed the sand from her face. "We have to get you back to the hospital. Can you fly?"

Anzele tried to lift herself but nothing would move. "No. I'm too weak."

“Feed off me.” Vincent pulled her into his arms. “Come on. We have to make you better.”

She lifted her hand to his face but felt too weak to attempt feeding. All she wanted was sleep. “I can’t. Give me a little while.”

“Damn.” Vincent looked at the ocean. “We don’t have many options. I’m afraid we’re stuck.”

“What? We can walk back.” Anzele rested on the beach, looking up at the stars.

“No we can’t. I was swimming around the large reef and hoping to clear the mountain line.” Vincent pointed to the dark masses surrounding them. “I made it around the reef. The mountains are steep and that reef impassable. The only way back is in the water.”

“In the water?” Anzele felt panicked. She didn’t want to feel that surf on her again. The foaming stuff would pull her under next time. She knew it. “I can’t swim in that.”

“I’m starting to think you’re more trouble than you’re worth.” He didn’t sound serious, in fact, he laughed while shaking his head. “You are a wonderfully strange woman.”

He kissed her again, and she melted. Nothing felt better than being in his arms. Whatever bit of sorrow she felt for their differences was forgotten when he held her. She would never want another. It didn’t matter what Vincent was physically, it was his soul, his being, that she loved.

His hand caressed her hair, sending sweet thrills down her back. She shivered making him pull her tighter against his body. Alone in this place, they were supposed to be together. She felt it every time she looked at him. They were equal here, away from everyone else’s opinions.

“Anzele, I felt it when Liking kissed you.” Vincent swallowed hard. “I know you liked it.”

“I’m sorry.” She couldn’t lie to him. Perhaps the unta was as much of a curse as a blessing. “Back when I lived here, I had a crush on Liking. I guess I did like it on some levels.” She lowered her head. The kiss wasn’t something she fully understood but for a brief moment, she had participated in it. “I like kissing you better.” Her eyes locked with his. “It won’t happen again. Please forgive me.”

“Anzele, there’s something I need to tell you.” Vincent looked remorseful. “Maybe this will make a difference. Seeing you with Liking, I didn’t think it would but you’re here with me, so maybe there’s a chance.”

“What are you talking about?” She feared where this was going. “I swear I don’t want Liking. Please believe me.”

“I spoke with Cordin. He wants me to do a favor for him. If I do it, then he will get the elders to bless our marriage.” Vincent swallowed hard. “He might also be able to make it to where we’re more equal and I won’t bring you shame.”

“I never said I was ashamed of you.” Anzele felt tears fill her eyes again. She had been remorseful. There was no way to hide it from Vincent.

“No, but I heard you and Liking. Shame colored your words and regret filled your emotions.” He kissed her forehead. “Be honest with me. You wished we were the same.”

“I didn’t mean I wanted you to leave. I just thought things would be easier if I’d been born human or you a flyer. Let’s face it, when we go back to the human world, they would as soon kill me as have us wed.”

"I can't deny that." He hung his head. "I'm going to leave you here for a short while. There's an errand I need to do. After the errand, I will come back and we will be properly bound. If something happens and I don't return, marry Liking or Dahi or whoever you fancy."

"What is this errand?" Her eyes narrowed. Vincent was trying to hide something from her.

"Nothing much. I'm just going to go save the world." He laughed again but this time the sound was tinged with pain. "Someone has to."

"You don't think you will be able to come back?" Anzele looked into his eyes hoping for some answers hidden inside. "Even the unta wouldn't reveal his errand's purpose."

"This errand needs to be done." Vincent touched her cheek, tracing the line down to her throat. "If I return, then it will be a good omen for our binding and you will get blessings from the elders to be with me."

"No. Don't do it. I don't need anyone's blessing if you're going to risk your life. I want you here with me. I don't care if you're human. Please. I don't need the elders blessing."

"My mind is made up." Vincent's jaw clenched. "If you don't let me go, then I will wait until you sleep and then I will go."

"What should I do? I only want you but you're telling me we can't be together until you do this errand. Damn it Vincent. I've known you just more than a day. I don't need a flyer's life and I certainly don't need a flyer. Who are you to decide what would make me happy?" She got off of his lap, preferring to face the ocean. "I know what pleases me. Becoming a widow does not."

"Why don't you talk to your mother?" Vincent stood and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his body. "Get her take on things. Find out what to expect."

Anzele hung her head. "I'm sure Liking was lying."

"No you're not." He put her mouth close to her ear. "You forget about our unta. You can't hide uncertainty from me." He turned her to face him. "We can't hide anything from each other. An ability like that might breed hate."

"No. I love feeling you in my head." She sniffled and wiped away her tears. "It is a little annoying sometimes."

"Like when you're kissing another man?"

"Vincent, I don't like him." Anzele's eyes flared. She tried to pull away but Vincent held her to his body. "Damn it. Let me go."

"You're beautiful when you're angry," laughed Vincent. "Absolutely beautiful." Vincent covered her mouth again, making his kisses deeper than before, delving his tongue against hers.

"Oh, Vincent," she moaned as his kisses trailed down her throat. "Does this mean I'm forgiven?"

"There's nothing to forgive, however," Vincent grinned mischievously. "you know every time I get in trouble, I'm going to bring up Liking just to win."

"That's dirty." She played at punching him. "You wouldn't."

"It depends how much trouble I'm in." Vincent ran his hands over her shoulders, toying at the laces holding her top on.

"Running off and risking your life will put you in a lot of trouble."

He kissed her again and she felt her knees tremble. His chest was bare. The water that remained on him glistened in the moonlight. When she looked at him that strange hunger grew. She wanted him.

"Please stay with me or take me with you. Don't part us again."

If he left her, this might be their last night together and there wasn't anything she could do to change it. The thought made her heart break. It wasn't fair. Wanting true love had gotten her banished and sent to him. Now the same people had shamed him into risking his life.

"Let me do this one thing." Vincent whispered into her ear. "It's important. I wouldn't leave you for a moment if it wasn't."

"Fine." She cut her gaze over, taking in his form. Something primal in her stirred. She couldn't let him leave without knowing him. "I'll let you leave if you make love to me tonight."

"I don't think you're well enough." Vincent touched her again, toying with those laces.

She lifted her hand to his face and tried again to feed. His skin was soft, still no facial hair, which she thought was a little strange among mortals. She was sure he hadn't had time to shave.

This time when her fingers made contact with his flesh, she managed to take the energy. The combination of feeding on her home land was curative. It was hard at first but his essence came and she grew stronger feeling him flowing into her. He belonged to her, ebbing throughout her life form. He gasped a little as she released him.

"What are you taking from me when you feed?" His eyes were half-closed, sleepy but there was a smile on his face.

"A little of your essence, your life force." She kissed his cheeks then his forehead.

"How often can you feed off me?"

"I don't know. It is innumerable. Humans are a wellspring. It would be like trying to catch all the rain in the world with a teaspoon. No matter how many drops you took, it would never take it all. It wouldn't be possible."

"It feels strange when you feed." He rubbed one cheek where her hand had made contact.

"Bad?" Anzele started to feel self-conscious again. "I didn't mean for it to feel bad."

"No." He held her but she felt the fatigue in his arms. "It doesn't feel bad. Just strange. It tickles."

She hugged him tightly. "Tickles huh?"

He nodded then shut his eyes completely and leaned on her. "And you make me sleepy. How am I suppose to properly impress you when I'm sleepy."

"Maybe I will find a way to wake you up."

"I bet you could." He kissed her, not quite as passionately as before but still with desire.

"There's someplace I want to show you." She kissed him softly, relishing the feeling of his lips. "Somewhere not so sandy."

"Can you fly?"

"I can now."

They stood and she wrapped her arms around him. Together they went above the reef. She seemed to turn close to the mountains taking him to an uninhabited wooded

section. There, they landed next to a small crystal-clear pond surrounded by steep rocks and lush vegetation. A waterfall splashed into one side of the pond making gentle waves across the water.

"It's beautiful," whispered Vincent.

"No one comes here. I used to come here as a little girl when I was troubled. I think you'll find the water surprisingly warm." She started taking off her clothes, first her top, undoing the laces while he watched.

"I thought you couldn't swim." Vincent lay on the rocks, watching her. Using his arms for pillows, he let his head rest as he lazily watched her undo the lacings holding her clothes in place.

"Not in the ocean." She couldn't understand why he would so easily attempt it.

"Flyers never swim in the ocean. It's scary."

"Is the ocean the only thing you're afraid of?" He yawned as the tops of her breasts came visible.

"I don't want to lose you." She dropped her top onto the rocks and stood for a moment on display for him. "Maybe I can convince you to stay. I've heard women have ways of convincing their mates."

"Anzele, you don't have to do this." He leaned up, never taking his eyes off of her.

"Are you too tired? Perhaps you'd like to doze a bit first." Then she watched him sit fully upright, regaining his strength faster than she'd expected. After feeding on him, she'd fantasized about teasing him until he'd recharged. Vincent was very surprising and very strong.

"I'm feeling better." He stood and walked over to her. "I just want you to be sure before giving yourself to me."

"Do you not want me?" She started to reach for her top, feeling too exposed.

"I think you know better than that." He pulled it from her hand and tossed it away. Vincent reached towards her breasts but she backed just beyond his reach. "Don't you always know what I'm feeling?" he asked.

"Sometimes." She took another step back. "I'd intended on teasing you while you were tired, but I don't really know what I'm doing."

She pulled at the tabs holding her skirt. It fell to the ground. Next she slid off her undergarments. There she stood in the moonlight enjoying the way his eyes went over her body. She felt his want. In fact she could see it in his pants.

"Can't slide in the water with your pants on." She turned and stepped into the clear pool. "Come on. Don't be shy."

Vincent quickly undressed. He was very muscular, very pleasing to the eye with a tight chest and stomach muscles making her want to run her tongue across each sweet line. She'd never seen a human as beautiful or maybe all unta partners think so.

Anzele moved to the other side of the pond, careful not to go through the center where it was deepest. She wanted Vincent to come after to her. Everything felt exciting as she raced away. Things she didn't understand rushed through her as she watched his body. There was nothing she wanted more than to join with him, but she wanted him to take charge of it.

In a flash he swam through the center. For a moment she lost him in the water. As clear as it was, his splashes hid his exact location until she felt Vincent's mouth on her thighs. His lips hid gentle nibbles, working toward the inside. Vincent's hands separated

her legs as his tongue flicked in ways she'd never imagined. Oh, he had a wicked tongue, sending shivers of delight through her as he corrupted her center. His fingers spread her wider and the sensitive numb she toyed with when she'd been alone was the next victim to his suckling lips. Her head fell back as tremors grew through her body. She couldn't hide her disappointment when he surfaced for air.

"Vincent?"

"Shh."

He kissed her throat then nibbled his way to her lips, kissing her with a fury that stole her breath. Their tongues entwined, tasting and feeling. He pulled away, lowering himself to her breasts. His touches were soft almost ticklish in the way he traced each globe then brought one into his mouth suckling hungrily against her nipple.

Pleasure raced through her. Never before had she felt so much and craved so much more. She wanted him in ways she didn't understand. He wasn't close enough. His body rubbing against hers wasn't enough. She was incomplete and didn't know how to feed the hunger.

He took her other breast. She looked down, watching his tongue circle then his lips pulled her nipple into his mouth. Teeth grazed, gently but tantalizing as he continued his trail.

Every nerve ending in her body pulsed in time with his mouth. She liked watching him, loved his hard shaft pressing against her leg and it made her wonder how it would feel inside. The intense way he went over her breasts, drove her mad. Then his lips went to her belly, lifting her a bit out of the water, then dunking himself as his mouth went back to work beneath the surface.

So many things went through her mind. She had no idea making love felt like this. Then his tongue dove into her, creeping along, flicking. She called out, body tingling and wanting all at once. Then his mouth went outward, licking upward back to her belly.

"Please Vincent."

He smiled evilly then dropped one hand beneath the water and stroked small circles in the place that sent her reeling. His eyes stayed on her, watching her body react. She tried to hold still, tried to be quiet but he controlled her with that hand. Then one finger went deeper, sliding not against her but inside her hot mound. That was what she needed, him inside.

Unsure, she reached down and touched his shaft. He was larger than she'd thought, much larger than the other times she'd seen him. Her body ached to have him while his mouth returned to her breasts. Every inch of her skin tingled, even as he switched breasts making her moan and moan again. He probed her allowing his thumb to work the circles while his fingers plunged deeper.

"Please Vincent." She didn't know what she begged for. "Oh, please."

He raised her, wrapping his arms around her, and lifted. She was pinned between him and the smooth rock ledge. He opened her legs and very slowly put that part of him she most admired inside. At first a touch of pain swept through. Then he let her weight come down further and the pain exploded into pleasure, making her bend backwards, driving her hips down, sheathing him with her body.

"Yes, Vincent."

With strong arms, he pumped her up and down joining them tightly only to pull away and do it again. The world spun out of control as the feeling inside grew.

Something was building. It scared her a little but she couldn't stop it, didn't want to. Then her body exploded with pleasure and relief.

She looked at her lover's face. He seemed to concentrate then started lifting her out of the water and onto her back where the rock edge leveled out. His eyes drank her in.

"I don't want this to end," he whispered softly. His breath was fast. "Please not yet."

His hand caressed her inner thighs making her spread them open again. This time the feeling of flesh on flesh was finer without the water. She rolled her head back exhilarated in his attentions as he slid back into her body.

Immediately she felt those wild sensations building again. This time his body wasn't gentle and she was glad. An animal instinct filled her. She reached around him, encouraging his body to take what belonged to him. The pressure became too intense as he pulled her legs higher on his body and stretched her, filling her crazed body. Every nerve felt alive and throbbed. The pleasure grew, possessed her as Vincent pushed harder and faster until she cried out. His voice joined hers in a single moan, and then he collapsed on her.

"I love you, Anzele," he whispered in her ear, still trembling. "I really love you."

"I love you too."

He eased off of her, rolling over, and pulling her on top. She felt his arms wrap around her and never before had she felt so protected, so loved. There they slept under the stars. The two held each other in the moonlight, naked and at peace.

Chapter Seven

When Anzele woke from her sleep, the sun was high above her, making her wince from the brightness. She was alone, lying on the rock. Next to her a variety of fruit was stacked in a little pile. Vincent must've gathered them for her breakfast.

Vincent was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was gathering more fruit. He was so sweet. She couldn't wait to see him walking out of the woods. The thought made her smile as she bit into the first piece of fruit. Everything seemed brighter this morning.

Anzele stretched, feeling her stiff muscles work. It was a beautiful day. She stood and looked around for Vincent, finding only a message written in berry juice against the smooth stone.

'Back in 7 days. Love you.'

Her heart fell. After everything they'd shared last night, he'd gone out on this fools' quest. *Blessing from the elders was wonderful but not worth risking his life over. It wasn't like he intended to stay here, did he?*

She smiled at the possibility. After being gone for so long, she missed home. Everything here seemed better. Some fruits didn't grow on the human side of the mountains, and the water here was sweeter. Also, she wasn't living like a refugee.

Living here was hardly a compromise. Vincent would be the outsider, the refugee. He looked close enough to a flyer to blend, but the rumors would travel. Soon anywhere he went, Vincent would hear whispers.

Anzele dunked herself in the pond, rinsing the last of the sand from her hair. She still felt tired, probably a side effect from her injuries. She would have to take it easy for a few more days.

There in the water, she floated and thought of Vincent. It was nice touching his mind and it helped ease the sting of waking up alone. His thoughts filled with her and their night together. She could feel him. *He was a part of her, the two became one.*

Air rushed around him and the land beneath him. He was flying. *That couldn't be right. No, someone was carrying him back over the mountains.* They traveled fast and low, to a specific location. She let her mind drift, but couldn't see who held him. Then in a flash it came to her, Cordin.

Why would Cordin help him?

Vincent seemed afraid of nothing but she sensed fear in him now. Whatever quest Cordin had put him on terrified him but other things also clouded his mind. There was concern for being so far from home and worries of her safety in the human world but mostly he feared disappointing her. It was amazingly sweet. One man was willing to give up everything for her, although she'd never asked him to.

She climbed out of the water and let the sun warm her. The sky was clear and lovely. She lay on the rock feeling her skin dry and wondering what to do next. There were many options. She supposed she could fly and help Vincent in whatever task he had to do. They wouldn't have to come back to this world. It might even relieve the woes he felt.

Deep inside, she knew Vincent didn't want her with him right now. Even as the untied them, it showed his need to be alone. She had to respect his choice, even if she disagreed.

She pulled her garments back on, tying the laces. Touching the fabric made her think of Vincent watching her. Surely making love was the most magical thing that existed. Nothing could be more powerful than joining.

Living on his farm might be nice. She'd never been on a farm before. They would sleep indoors on a human bed. It was a little lumpy last time but not bad. Most farms had animals. She could learn to ride a horse by herself or maybe help plant crops. It might be nice to put a seed in the dirt and watch it grow.

In her world, things grew wild. A few would tend large flowers or try to grow certain berries out of season but for the most part gardens were foreign things humans had. There were many foreign things about humans.

She sighed and leaned over the rock, staring into the clear water. Her reflection was barely visible, although she could see enough to tell her hair was a mess. She cast a bit of magic and worked her fingers through the strands, until they cascaded onto her shoulders.

Mortal women used brushes. She didn't even own one. In his world, someone could just catch her getting ready in the morning and have her killed. She shuddered at the thought.

There were children to consider too. What if she gave birth to a winged child? There would be no way to live in the mortal world, even if Vincent delivered the child himself. Someone would come by, someone would see. It could end her life and the life of a child. If only things weren't so complicated.

She went over to the waterfall side and scooped up water into her hands. She liked getting drinks this way much better than waiting for a metal pipe to bring it from the ground. That didn't seem healthy, but it was their way.

Being banished had made her appreciate home. It would be nice to stay here but it wasn't a practical idea. Maybe she was doomed to walk among the humans forever fearing they would discover what she was. She'd do it for Vincent. He'd keep her safe wherever they chose to live.

Vincent seemed more concerned with keeping her happy. In the end that thinking would make him miserable. She had to leave this place. If they chose to stay, Vincent would regret it the rest of his life. Being an outsider wasn't a pleasant feeling and one he shouldn't come to accept.

Of course, if Liking was correct, her father hadn't been able to keep her mother happy, even among her own kind. *Was it possible Betrev killed her own husband? Was life as a mixed couple so hard?*

She had to free her mind. It wasn't healthy to dwell on what ifs. She had chosen Vincent. Everything else would fall into place. Where they lived, the children they bore, all of it would come in time.

Perhaps she had some chores to do while Vincent was away. The first would be to get some answers. If a mixed marriage was truly difficult, then she had to find out from someone who had lived it. There was no way to plan for the future yet, but she could at least prepare herself for what could come.

It had been months since she'd seen her mother. The woman had given her hand time and again without Anzele's consent. Absolution of these sins would surely be enough to trade for information.

Anzele rose, although it wasn't without difficulty. Her body ached. She couldn't achieve a good height above the ocean. Several times her lower body dragged into the water, forcing her to rise only to slip again. Finally, exhausted, she reached shore.

She managed to stay on her feet as she landed on the beach. The sand felt good on her toes. She walked along the shoreline, trying to relax and planning what to say to her mother, Betrev.

The last time she seen Betrev, an elder was delivering the message that Anzele was to marry or leave their world. Instead of defending her, Betrev had turned her back to the rebellious offspring, without so much as a word in protest.

There was only one woman who had defended her, Iana and she hadn't seen her since her return to the village. Of course she hadn't seen Betrev either. A mother should wonder about her offspring. Anzele was certain the news had traveled to Betrev. The elders alone would've notified her of Anzele's injuries.

Betrev was probably upset that her plans to marry Anzele off had failed. Anzele was doing the exact thing her mother always feared, marrying a mortal. This made Anzele smile.

It served Betrev right to have Anzele marry this way. Everything would be even better if Anzele and Vincent could gain an elder's blessings for their wedding. That was a luxury no other mixed union had been granted.

Part of Anzele hated her mother for everything that had happened. For some reason she thought a mother's love wouldn't vary. Betrev had shown her differently. She'd assumed it had been because Betrev had wanted only the best for her daughter, but after living away from home for so long, she couldn't imagine it to be true. Betrev was willing to risk her daughter's life over a choice in husbands.

Then again, if her marriage to a mortal was so terrible, she might do anything to make her daughter marry early to a flyer. So far Anzele couldn't imagine anything terrible about human's married life, except for the food and water.

She smiled when she thought of her night with Vincent. It had been wonderful. Secretly she hoped he would hurry back so they could share more of those nights in each other's arms.

"I miss you, Vincent," she whispered.

Anzele came up the bank to the first grove of trees. There, sweet orish grew. She didn't have the strength to fly so soon after her trip over the ocean. Instead of the better fruit on the branches, she picked a few from the ground. They were bruised in places, but still tasty.

She kept walking as she bit into the meaty fruit. If she hesitated on seeing her mother, then she'd chicken out completely. So she went through the middle of the village and onto a path leading up the hill to the west.

More than a few people stared at her. Most of those waved, but a few turned their heads as if they weren't sure if speaking to her would be a wise thing. They grabbed the sides of their slim skirts and went back to their chores.

Betrev had gone through the same. She remembered times when the women would turn their faces away as they walked past. Some would whisper little comments just loud enough for Betrev to catch her name. It was a difficult time.

Ahead the path grew more narrow and the trees denser. Some were large, bending over the path as if to guard it from the world. Brown moss dripped from their branches, dangling in the breeze.

Her mother lived on the outskirts of the village. Hers was a self-imposed exile. The flyer women had long since forgiven her of mating with a human. Many apologized profusely the day of her father's burning ceremony. Some even spoke fondly of him, noting the strange way he had fit into the flyer world.

Anzele smiled at this. Over time the memories of her father had begun to fade. He'd passed when she was small, making her wonder about the man she'd never gotten to know. He might've approved of Vincent.

Ahead, she saw the white walls appear from a mix of trees. Betrev was very talented at painting with black dye. The scenes she painted on the walls were detailed, down to the number of eyelashes on some of the figures. There were scenes of Betrev with a rendering of old script surrounding her image. There were scenes of the legends, some from battles, some flying. There were no images of Anzele or her father. Betrev never found the energy to paint those.

Some walls held pictures of black roses, with others showing a wicked moon. The moon painting was new. Several things were new, including a fence made of short sections of builder's cloth. The fence was only waist high with bamboo anchoring it into the ground.

"Anzele?" Betrev came up from behind toting a bucket of water. "What are you doing here?"

At first, Anzele wanted to run to her and hug her. They had been close once. Anzele took a step forward, wanting, needing to feel her mother's love again but the look in Betrev's eyes stopped her. Her mother didn't seem pleased with Anzele's visit. Anger filled her eyes. She set the bucket down and put both hands on her hips as if ready to scold Anzele.

Immediately, Anzele felt defensive. There would be no hugs here. "I wanted to see the woman who turned me out, then sent kidnappers to take me from my future husband."

"So the rumor is true." Betrev shook her head, holding a disgusted look. "You have chosen a mortal man against everything I wanted and believed in."

"You chose a mortal." Anzele wanted more than a lecture. She wanted her mother, but if all she'd be allowed was an argument then so be it. "Why shouldn't I be allowed the same?"

"I learned from my mistakes." She turned her gaze and Anzele never felt more hated. "We are not like the humans. They hunt, kill, and make war. They don't understand peace or even love. A mortal is not an acceptable mate."

"My father wasn't acceptable? You thought he was long enough to take him into your bed." Anzele felt her temper rising. This was more than an argument. This was defense of her right to choose a husband and her right to live her life. "Were your morals just lacking that day?"

"I was young and foolish." Betrev kept an even tone. "Why can't you learn from my mistakes?"

The two women stood five feet apart, both with hands on their hips. Anzele still looked younger. She had several more years to age before maturity, but the resemblance between the two was remarkable.

“Was my father a mistake?” Anzele felt tears coming but these weren’t from hurt. These were in anger. “Was I a mistake?”

“Yes, Anzele. Everything about your father was a mistake. I regret ever marrying him.”

Anzele took a step back. Perhaps there was truth in Liking’s story. Betrev didn’t seem to miss father or even regret sending her daughter away. Anzele must’ve been a reminder of him.

“A mistake?” Anzele held a crooked smile, trying to hide her anger. “I was nothing more than a mistake, some little regret you couldn’t make go away. I’m surprised you didn’t kill me along with him?”

Betrev went pale. Her eyes grew wide as she covered her mouth with one hand. Tears filled her eyes. “I never.” Her body shook, lips drew tight, as she raised a fist in anger. “Never!”

Anzele had her. There was no denying the look of guilt. Betrev was angry over being caught, over being forced to raise a half-breed daughter, but not over anything else. There was no love between mother and daughter. Only a reminder of a mistake Betrev had made when she was barely old enough to breed.

The truth hit Anzele hard. Feelings, cruel and hurtful rolled through her heart as she faced what she’d ignored all these years. There were reasons why her education had been lacking. The times at night when she wanted to kiss her mother goodnight but couldn’t find her. Everything could be explained in the look of hate towards a daughter that only wanted love, so Anzele retaliated.

“That’s not what I heard. I heard you killed him. In fact, the whole village knows.”

“Get away from my home.” Betrev’s eyes flared, readying to send a fireball through her daughter’s chest. “You are a nasty ungrateful child and you are not welcome here any longer.”

“After turning me out into the mortal world, you owe me the truth.” Anzele needed to hear the confession. She wanted the lies to be over. “Did you murder my father?”

“I owe you nothing.” Betrev picked up her bucket. “You are raised and grown. Be gone.”

“As you wish. Just don’t interfere with my life again.”

Anzele turned and went back down the hill. Her knees shook while her heart thudded. She listened, hoping her mother would stop her. Not even a hug or a kind word had passed between the two and certainly no apologies.

“So let it be,” she mumbled to herself. “As fate would have it Betrev, it will be done.”

She should’ve known better than to come back here. A mother who really loved their child wouldn’t be so willing to give her away at the first chance. Betrev had probably been waiting for Anzele to reach marrying age this entire time.

Anzele was almost at the bottom of the path when Elder Kartin met her. He was walking up as she was coming down. At first her emotions clouded her thoughts, so she didn’t register his presence until he spoke.

“Anzele, have you been to see your mother?” His eyes were kind pools of blue black.

“Yes, I have seen Betrev. Now it is time for me to go.” She tried to steady her voice but the emotion broke it. “Tonight when the moon rises, I will leave. There’s no reason for me to stay here longer.”

“Why child?” Kartin put his hands on her shoulder in a half hug. “I was hoping you’d stay with us a while. I heard Vincent would be back in a week. There’s no reason for you to leave.”

Anzele looked at Kartin. If anyone knew the truth about this world, it would be an elder. “May I ask you something, elder?”

“Certainly.” He smiled as if he expected the question to be on positive terms. “What is it?”

Anzele tried to speak but the words wouldn’t come. There was no easy way to ask someone about murder much less the murder of a mortal man in a flyer world. So many accusations had been made back then, at least she thought she could remember them. *Maybe no one had questioned his death. If Liking knew about Betrev then how many others knew? Why hadn’t she been brought to justice at the ridge?*

She had to know the extent of the hatred in her village, if not for her own sake, then for that of Vincent. After all, a life shouldn’t be built on such unstable grounds. It was time to know the truth.

“Did Betrev kill her husband?” Anzele shut her eyes and waited for the reply. The pause was long and horrible. When she looked at Kartin again, he looked troubled as if the truth were too horrible to speak.

“Who told you?”

“Liking.” She bit her bottom lip to stop its childish tremble. “So the story is true?”

“Come with me.” Kartin put his arm around her and started leading her back up the path. “We shall both go see Betrev.”

“Elder, I don’t think it’s wise.” Anzele didn’t want to face her mother again. The hatred in her was too much to bear. “She wants me away and I am not fit for a battle. My injuries will need another day or so.”

“Come,” was his counter to her objection and one she didn’t argue with. He was, after all, an elder. “There are things you are old enough to learn.”

Anzele followed Kartin back up the path. Betrev was inside the fence hanging laundry to dry. At first Betrev didn’t see them. When she looked up and saw Kartin coming up the path her face brighten then saddened when she saw Anzele following.

“You are welcome here, Kartin, but that child is not.” Betrev sloshed the last few items on her line, not bothering to straighten them then poured the water on the ground on the walkway to her home.

Kartin looked down at the puddle blocking the entrance to Betrev’s home. “Would you not welcome me and my guest to your home? Are you really denying the request of an elder?”

“You may come inside but Anzele is not welcome. She doesn’t belong here anymore. I smell human on her,” Betrev snarled.

“I insist.” Kartin opened the gate. With a wave of his hand, he cleared the puddle from the walkway. “She is my guest and surely you won’t deny the request of an elder.” He turned to Anzele. “Come.”

Betrev turned and went inside followed by Kartin and Anzele. The inside of the builder’s cloth was lightly decorated. There was a stuffed chair, similar to Vincent’s couch except the flyer version had no true wood. It consisted of pillows framed together with bamboo, large enough for three to sit without touching. There was also a large table. The base was crafted of bamboo with the top made from a tightly drawn section of

builder's cloth. There was another larger table in the center of the room. It was made from flat colored glass on a wooden base, standing only a foot and a half from the floor. It was here the three sat, all on the floor cross-legged.

Kartin looked at the women. It was custom that the elder begin speaking first, bringing forth the topics in question. All discussions with elders went this way, even if it were at dinner.

"Betrev," he began while looking over both the women. "I know things have been trying but we have a serious problem here and one that needs to be addressed with an open heart."

"The only problem I see is with an ungrateful daughter." Betrev glared at Anzele then lowered her eyes at the motion of Kartin. "She is of age to be alone. Let her be. I am tired of dealing with her."

"Hush Betrev. A mother's responsibility doesn't end when her daughter grows. This is one of the most important times in your child's life. You need to speak with her honestly."

"What would you have me tell her?" Betrev voice was raised. "There is nothing this girl will listen to."

"Let's start with her first concern." Kartin patted Betrev's hand. "Tell her what happened to her father. That is a good place to begin."

Betrev rolled her eyes. "There's not much to tell." She shook a little but Anzele wasn't sure if it was from anger or remorse. "He was gathering fruit. Night was coming." Betrev's eyes shot around the room, avoiding direct contact with either of them. "He climbed up a tree to get the sweetest fruits, then he fell. The fall killed him." She shrugged as if she could care less.

"Were you there?" asked Anzele. She already knew the answer but she wanted to hear Betrev say it.

"Yes." Betrev's face lowered. "He went out too far on the limb. Mortals can't see well when the light leaves." She seemed to watch her hands, folding on each other at the table. "It wasn't the first time he risked his neck. He was foolish that way. He was foolish with a lot of things." She looked at Kartin but wouldn't meet Anzele's gaze. "I was there and watched him fall."

"Could you have saved him?" Anzele felt the unshed tears building. She wouldn't cry here. There was no way she'd show weakness in front of that woman.

Betrev looked up but it wasn't Anzele she spoke to but Kartin. "Being married to a mortal wasn't easy. I'd heard of the unta. When I was with him, I thought that's what we had." She shook her head sadly. "There are many kinds of love. Some feels all consuming but in the end, true love is with a friend."

"Are you saying you killed my father?" Anzele raised her voice hoping to gain some attention.

"I let him fall." The tears came harder. Betrev got up from her place in the floor and ran into her bedroom.

"Mother!" Anzele didn't follow her. She sat at the table shaking, tears streaming from her eyes.

"May we speak for a moment," asked Kartin. He put his arm back around her, squeezing her tightly then wiped a tear from her cheek. "There's more to this story. Will you hear it?"

“Yes elder.” Anzele dried her eyes. “What more do I need to know?”

Kartin looked around the room as if hoping to find the words hidden somewhere among the art. “Do you remember what life was like with your father?”

“No.” Anzele was ashamed. She remembered very little. Most of her memories were tainted with stories from her mother more than by anything she could personally recall. “I remember bits but not much.”

“Let me tell you a story.”

“Is it gossa or truth?”

“Maybe both. You decide.” Kartin smiled mischievously at her. “Betrev was a rebellious girl, much like someone else I know.” He looked at her then winked. “She had a crush on a boy named Garsh. When the time came for Garsh to marry, he chose what he called his unta. This woman you’ve met in the village. Her name is Shana.”

“She is very beautiful and a talented weaver.” Anzele looked at him quizzically. “I thought her husband was Rous.”

“Yes, she wasn’t Garsh’s unta. He’d confused lust with the binding love. The two are quite different. Like most bindings built with lust and not much else, things weren’t very strong between them. But I get ahead of myself. This story is about your mother.”

He stood and went to a bucket of fresh water Betrev had brought inside. He scooped a handful and drank deeply. After another sip, he returned to the table, wiping his mouth and trying to find his place.

“Let’s see.” He wiped his mouth again, knocking a drop from his chin. “Your mother, was upset and left us for a time. That’s when she met your father. She brought him back, and said he was her unta.”

“You mean they weren’t really in love?”

“Exactly. Betrev was so busy mourning Garsh’s binding that she was desperate to fill the emptiness in her life. The strange turn came when your father found his unta here. Your father was a tie to another flyer, not Betrev.” He shook his head. “Sometimes people are so desperate to want the connection, they confuse it with something else entirely.”

“Was Garsh supposed to be with my mother?”

“I believe so, child.” He touched Anzele’s hand the same way he’d done Betrev’s. “Shana began to take up with your father. The unta pulled them outside of their bindings. Anyway, Betrev caught them. Your father and mother would’ve parted ways but Betrev was pregnant with you and terrified no other would want her. Your father was an honorable man, and said he would stay to father you.”

“What happened to Garsh? I do not know him.” She’d never even heard the name before.

“He heard of the affair and went to Betrev. That’s when the two realized their mistake. They were supposed to be unta but with her pregnant with a mortal’s child, Garsh went crazy. No one knows exactly what happened but rumor has it that he drown himself in the ocean.”

“And what of my father?”

“Betrev was very upset. She caught your father in a tree with Shana. The two began fighting and your father fell to his death. Some say Betrev let it happen because she felt he’d ruined her life. Some say she pushed him so Shana would be denied the unta just as she was. Others say it was an accident.”

"I remember the women being upset with my mother over being with a mortal." Anzele could see the women turning and whispering whenever Betrev would go into the village. "It was horrible."

"No child. Your memories are confused. Very few had a problem with your father. They were upset because many felt Betrev had killed him but without proof, no one could be tried for the crime, if one truly took place." He looked around the room. "Many called for her to be taken to the ridge and a full inquest held."

"Kartin, how do you know if the feeling is true? How do you know if the unta is real?"

"Only you will know for certain." He smiled and it warmed Anzele. "Some say you can only find your unta when you stop looking."

"I certainly wasn't looking when I found Vincent." She tilted her head back, remembering how Setiar and Liking dropped from the sky. "The last thing on my mind was unta or a binding." She couldn't tell him that she'd hadn't even really been asked, it was more of an agreement they'd both come to. "I never would've returned here if it hadn't been for Liking's interference."

"Many feel a mortal man has no place here among the flyers. Others feel differently." Kartin withdrew his hand and looked at the bedroom where Betrev had retreated. "I do not think you should be forced to marry a flyer if it isn't what you desire. In fact, that's why I came up to your mother's home. I wanted to speak with her about these private dealings she's had with Dahi and Liking. Charges may be in order. Setiar was very detailed in his depiction of the crime."

"May I ask you something else?" Anzele also looked at the bedroom wondering if Betrev was listening.

"Go ahead," answered Kartin.

"Love without the unta is a hard concept for me. Tell me, is Shana happy with Rous?"

"Yes." Kartin raised his voice to make sure Betrev could hear. "There are many forms of love and she found a wonderful one in Rous. I wish your mother could understand that, maybe she would find love too."

"I do love Vincent." Anzele smiled at the thought of him. "I didn't find him out of jealousy or anything else."

"I believe you. I also believe Vincent loves you." He stood and took a few steps towards Betrev's bedroom door. "Why else would he risk so much to please you?"

"Do you know what his errand is?" It hadn't occurred to her to ask Kartin about the quest but anything like this would've been cleared by at least one of the elders. "Please tell me."

"He didn't tell you." Kartin tilted his head as if considering it. "He is wiser than I'd given him credit."

"Please." Anzele went to him, grabbing him with both hands. "What is his errand?"

"Cordin talked him into fixing the world in exchange for equality." Kartin raised an eyebrow. "He is a very brave man to take on such an adventure. The void is not gentle."

"Equality." She didn't consider them unequal. He was her unta, her world. Being a flyer wouldn't matter. "He told me that an elder would bless our union."

"He told you true." Kartin grinned. "At least half of it. At the least an elder will bless your union. Mind you an elder has never blessed a mixed marriage and I don't intend to this time." His smile broadened. "Cordin has a theory and proven it to be true to me."

“What is this theory?” Anne had never heard of a blessing for a mixed pair but she didn’t want Vincent on an errand with no reward.

“He believes many mortals have dormant flyer blood. He believes your Vincent is one of them. You know, maybe a descendant from one that had been turned out or perhaps from our original tribe.”

“He’s mortal.” Anzele’s heart sank. They had sent him on a fool’s quest, probably just to get him killed. “Believe me, he’s just a human. In fact I think flying scares him.”

“Yes, but many mortals are our distant cousins. Look at him. Does he not have our features? Have you seen a mortal with those eyes?”

“A flyer? It’s not possible.”

“Not ordinarily. Cordin has found a way to waken the small amounts of flyer blood that exists in some mortals. I’ve seen him do it once before. It is very painful but it could make him your equal.”

“What if he has no flyer blood in him?” Her heart sank. “What if he really is just a mortal?”

“Then the process might kill him. Of course he runs that risk either way. If he’s human, it certainly won’t turn him to a flyer, but I don’t think that will happen. He looks too much like us. There is something special in Vincent. In fact, Cordin believes he is the only one to stop the void. One of his visions or something, I suppose.”

“I’m not willing to risk it. He means too much to me.”

“It doesn’t matter Anzele. You can’t go to him and stop him. His quest is dangerous.” Kartin took a troubled breath. “He is trying to heal the void. I’m afraid only a human can do it.”

“Then I should go help him.”

“No.” Kartin grew serious, holding her and looking into her eyes. “The void feeds from flyer energy. If you go, then the void will have the strength to kill you both.”

“It feeds from us?” She’d never heard of anything feeding from flyers. It didn’t seem possible.

“Yes. This is no gossa. The void grew because we sent you out. It grew larger because more flyers followed. It has to be dealt with quickly before it gets too large to stop.”

Anzele hung her head. “I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“Then prepare for your wedding. Perhaps Vincent will be successful. If he’s not consider Liking. He’d be a fine mate.”

“Never.” Anzele pulled away from Kartin. “I despise him for all he’s done to me. He’s only tried to harm me and he’s the main reason I was turned out. I will never allow him to touch me.”

“Never?” Kartin grew that irritating smile again. “I remember you a year ago longing for him.”

“That was before Vincent. I love him, truly. Liking was a silly crush. Something for a child. I’m not a child any longer.” She took a deep breath and held her head high. “I know who I belong with.”

“Fine.” Kartin raised an eyebrow. “Anzele, please forgive the directness of this question but have you slept with Vincent?”

Anzele grinned and dropped her gaze to the floor. “I don’t see what business...”

"I see," he quickly interrupted. "It's okay, not ideal, but okay. Now, tell me Anzele, was he everything you expected?"

She nodded and felt her cheeks run hot. "If I could change anything, it would be that he left me to do this foolish quest. He has already won my affections."

"Then believe you are meant to be with him and leave well enough alone. He has a job to do. Be flattered he would risk his life to please you. As badly as the world needs saving, I don't think he would've gone out to save land or city."

"I guess I don't have a choice." She looked back to the side of the house where her room used to be. It had been taken down. "It isn't fair."

"Plan your wedding. If he fails in his quest or if he turns out to not be our kind, then I will personally bless your union regardless of his bloodline. Vincent has earned my respect and many others."

Anzele looked at him carefully. She wanted the blessings of the elders. It was sacred and special. "Do you promise to bless us?"

"Yes. I promise. When I look into your eyes, I see something beautiful. If it isn't the unta, it is something finer still."

Anzele looked back to her mother's room. "What about her?"

"Leave her. Bitterness is killing the woman inside. It isn't your fault. I think each day, she goes a little more over the edge." He touched Anzele's cheek, as a father should. "I should tell you that Betrev has been visiting the place where your father died."

"Do you think she misses him or just regrets everything?"

"Both." He stood and lifted the flap at the entrance. "Come. You need to leave her now. I still have some unfinished business." He looked back to the room. "I hate to charge her with these crimes but I see few other options. These are matters to worry with after your unta returns."

"Go easy on her, Kartin. If I'd lost my unta, I might be a little crazy too." She kissed his hand. "Thank you again, elder."

Anzele lowered her head in respect then went back out to the world. Betrev had been dealt a hard blow. It didn't justify letting her father die or letting her only daughter be banished but at least she seemed like less of a monster.

She started walking down the path. A few people still stared at her but she only waved. Her mate was risking his life, to make their union a perfect one. No one else here could claim the same. For once she had a reason to be proud.

Kartin told her to plan a wedding. Perhaps that's what she would do. It would get her mind off the task Vincent had taken on. For a little while she could pretend to be a normal bride preparing for her binding.

She looked down at her clothes. The skirt and top were the only things she owned. They weren't suitable for a wedding. Her first task would be to make a dress. That alone would take her until Vincent came back, as long as she wove it by hand.

There was a meadow not far from the village where silver score grew. She would gather it to make her dress. Perhaps she would trim it with pink ribbon or something from the mortal world. Vincent might like that. It would be a little touch from both their lines.

She deserved to be wed properly, especially with her binding being blessed by Kartin. Perhaps she would start a new trend. The flyers wouldn't turn up their noses at a mixed union. They couldn't if it were blessed.

First she would rest her weary body. She went back to the hospital. It was the only place she had to sleep. Hopefully Liking would be gone. The last thing she needed was his pessimistic attitude or any more of his kisses.

It felt good to reject him after longing for him. Liking had thought she was beneath him, now the roles had been switched. Perhaps there was a little justice in the world.

“Anzele?”

She turned at the sound of her name and saw Iana coming up the path. Anzele couldn't help smiling at her old friend. When the woman approached, she immediately reached to hug Anzele.

“It's been too long child,” said Iana with her deep voice. “I've missed you.”

“I've missed you too.” Anzele hugged her again, glad that someone was happy to see her.

“Are the rumors true?”

“You mean about my binding to a mortal?” Anzele grinned proudly. “They are. He's wonderful. When he returns, I'll bring him to meet you.”

“Anzele,” called another voice, “when do you expect your husband to come back?” This time Gerta spoke.

“In a week.” Anzele noticed a small group of women gathering. The news had spread about her husband. Many of the women hugged her, others just wanted some detailed information.

“Come see me later,” said Iana as she flew away.

Anzele was left as the center of attention. Ten women gathered wanting to know about her heroic mate. It took her an hour to tell her story before she could continue on her way, but it was a proud hour.

Chapter Eight

Cordin dropped Vincent off a mile from the edge of the void leaving him a few supplies. As Cordin flew away, Vincent started going through the knapsack. Cordin had stocked it well. There were smaller bundles inside with fruit, a good length of rope, a blanket, gloves, leather wrap, and some flint. Cordin said the flint was the hardest to find because flyers never used it.

Vincent had one week to accomplish his deed and head back to the berry patch where Cordin had found him the first time. In theory his task wouldn't take so long. Deep inside Vincent feared the week was so he would have time to think about the binding. A man could do a lot of thinking, alone in the woods.

Right now all he could think about was the sound of Anzele climaxing. When he got back to her, he'd make love to her until she couldn't walk. He longed to fill her body, that tight mound, watch her lovely breasts bouncing back and forth with each thrust of his body.

His cock stiffened in his pants and he grew light headed. He wanted to bend her over, bring her ass in the air and take her the way animals mated. Anzele's back would be so soft as he curled against her. Every thrust would drive away the outside world and the problems it presented.

"You will be my wife." His libido couldn't hide the one doubt that plagued him. "If you'll still have me."

He started walking, checking the position of the sun in the sky. He hoped to be in the void and finished by dark. It was a tight schedule but he didn't want to sleep a night in these woods so close to the blackness that ate at the world.

Anzele was busying herself with binding plans. He could feel that she was worried whenever he focused on her. It was good she had chores to occupy her time. He kept seeing images of a dress but couldn't make out the details. He knew it would be a silvery-white but that was all.

A binding? He couldn't imagine what that ceremony entailed. He'd only witnessed Christian weddings. If they moved to the mortal world, he'd insist on a standard wedding, if nothing else, to give her a proper name.

Mrs. Vincent Deloroy or Anzele Deloroy had a nice ring to it. *Oh shit, a ring.* He had no ring to give her. *Did flyers even wear rings?* He hadn't seen Anzele wearing rings or any jewelry for that matter.

The name Anzele would never work in his world either. Even in the privacy of their farmhouse, he couldn't use it. The habit would grow until he slipped up when there was a visitor or during a trip to town. One little mistake and she would be taken from him and killed. In his world she would have to be called Anne.

Then there was the problem of her eyes. They were so beautiful but one flare at night and her secret would be revealed. Returning her to his world might not be worth the risk.

Deep inside, he also knew she didn't really want to go back with him, although Anzele would never admit it. He could feel her discomfort and fear at the thought of flying back over the mountains. If what Cordin said was true, then maybe he could join her village.

The idea seemed ludicrous. There was no way he had any flyer blood. His prejudices crept into his thinking. It was wrong, but he didn't believe his mother would have relations with someone outside of her species. She had never favored any men. No one had turned her head no matter how they looked or how much money they had. She'd kept to herself, running her little store and raising her son.

It might explain why his father had left them. Perhaps he'd felt a mixed marriage would be too hard on her, although raising a son alone certainly wasn't easy, especially in the heavily religious town.

His grandparents died when Vincent was no more than a boy but as soon as he was able to run the farm, he'd gladly moved to get away from the city folk. The young women liked him fine, but the rest of them had to be taught to respect him. A few men had earned scars along with their lessons.

So much was happening in his world. It would be nice to have his mother to talk with. She'd been a hard woman at times, but Vincent never felt a lack of love. No matter what they went through, they loved each other.

She would've made Anzele a difficult mother-in-law, though. One of his mother's highest respected talents was cooking. Anzele had never even seen a stove before coming into his house. In time they would've gotten along. It would've taken a long time but they would've managed.

The flyer world was wonderful. If he stayed, he'd build a boat, maybe put glass in the bottom so he could see the glow fish. He could talk Anzele into joining him. She was very athletic so it wouldn't take much to teach her to swim.

The forest grew thicker, with dark tangles of vines and tired trees, sagging against each other. The air grew humid and heavy as he walked. It was a nasty feeling, holding onto his skin like old sweat.

This place was evil. He'd known it the first time he saw the dead puddle at the bottom of the gully. It had never occurred to him that the evil would grow. In his lifetime it had remained inactive, only changing in the last few months. Some say it hadn't changed in a hundred years.

Even if he weren't madly in love with Anzele, this was a quest that had to be completed. Cordin's worries had been justified. Anything that could reach from the ground and poison the air had to be stopped. He'd just never expected the task to fall to him.

A perfume clung to the air mixed with the scent of rot. Something was wrong. The smell wasn't natural but that of a woman. There was someone or something close. Instinctively he slid behind a tree and waited.

Ahead he saw movement. He stayed low and heard the sound of female laughter. There were at least two of them. Their voices were low and strange for females. It worried him.

"We have enough for now. We'll come back tomorrow and gather more of the night flit," spoke one woman. From Vincent's hiding place it looked like they carried vials of mud although he'd heard the term night flit in reference to the void.

"Do you think it's wise to carry something so dangerous?" asked the second as she lifted her vial to the light as they cleared the densest of the trees. Light flowed down in columns between the branches making the mud in the orbs more visible.

"We have a new world to make and this is the only stuff powerful enough to do it."

Vincent raised his head enough to see the women. Both had dark red hair. Their clothes consisted of little more than black gauze held against very pale skin. They wore nothing else, giving Vincent more than an eyeful, down to the red tufts between their legs and small beautiful breasts with tan nipples.

“Sister, do you smell it?” One stopped walking and began scanning the woods. Vincent ducked down. “The scent comes heavy.”

“Yes there is a man nearby and he watches us.” One lady let out a sound like a growl.

“Should we take him?”

“No. We have more pressing matters. We must get back.”

One woman turned her head as they went past, then she smiled. Her eyes were pure black without a trace of the whites. These women couldn’t be human but he hadn’t heard of such a breed in the forest. Of course the void called to many types he’d never knew existed. At least Cordin had warned him of such.

Vincent hurried down the path in the direction the women had come. Hopefully, he would be gone before they returned with more glass balls to fill. The way they mentioned taking him, made him want to run.

It wasn’t long before he entered the section where the air grew heavier. The smell of rot nearly gagged him as he approached forest. It was even darker despite the sun still being high in the sky.

The void hadn’t grown much since his last visit here, although it didn’t feel any less dangerous. The few veins that traveled out this far seemed to hold steady as if waiting for the opportunity to stretch out into the world again. They reminded him of a predator crouching, waiting for a victim to get too close.

He walked on, stepping over or going around the lines of blackness that had reached this far from the base. A few things not yet taken by the void managed to grow but they’d still been affected. The night blossoms were blooming in the middle of the day and wild vines that usually ran across the ground encompassing everything, turned away from the black strands. The dripping mosses wrapped themselves around tree limbs instead of cascading down like flowing hair. Even the trees seemed to turn away from the void as if they longed for legs to run away.

There were some birds, but fewer than would be normal. There were owls white and black flying in the afternoon. A few tree frogs sang but those were closer to the edge of the forest. Most creatures were staying clear of the area. He wished he could do the same.

Still he traveled on. Sounds grew fewer and fewer as he walked. Soon there was nothing to cover his steady footfalls. The path wound further ahead, leading him deeper in the mess.

As he rounded a turn, he found the strangest thing. A black raven stood in the middle of the path. As Vincent approached, it didn’t budge. It’s eyes were open, black beads reflecting light but showing no life inside the bird.

“Well little bird, why do you not fly from me?” Vincent smiled at it. Birds were lovely animals and this one had a particularly luxurious sheen to its feathers. “You are a pretty bird, but I’m afraid I must be going.”

The raven didn’t move. Vincent started around it. At that moment it stepped to the side, blocking his path again. He started in another direction and again it walked over to keep in front of him.

“Come little bird, I have business here. There is no time for dancing.”

He decided to step over the bird. Just as his foot raised, the bird fluttered and went to him, pecking him soundly in the leg. Vincent jumped back, startled, and rubbed his shin. The bird hadn't done much damage, but made a small hole in his pants.

“Damn it. I mean you no harm bird but I have to pass.” He considered wringing the bird's neck. He'd done so several times on the farm but it seemed wrong to treat this creature in such a way. “I have a duty to perform, pretty bird.”

He stepped forward, trying to shoo the bird. Again the bird didn't move, just resumed its position in the middle of the path. Vincent considered this strange new bird. It was a lovely thing, a little too lovely to be an average animal. Birds never challenged humans in this way either.

“I wonder what master left you to block the path?” Vincent knelt down and looked closer at the animal. There were no markings on its legs that he could see. “Surely someone set you here for a purpose. Well, I guess I will be going. Please bid your master farewell for me.”

Fearing this was a bird of magic, Vincent retraced his steps to just around the curve, out of the bird's sight and then went through the woods. Being off the path, the bird might hear him but never see him. In this way he hoped to bypass the confrontation.

He went through some thick brush then stopped cold. Resting on a low limb of a tree was the raven. This time the bird appeared much larger, nearly the size of a calf. Vincent froze.

“Be gone beast.” Vincent took a step forward. Cordin had left him no weapons. He could only hope to find a stout stick to drive the bird away. “I have a duty here. Be gone.”

“What is your duty?” asked the raven.

“Witch!” Vincent ran back to the path, unsure of any plan only knowing he wanted away from the thing in the tree.

Above him flew the raven. Vincent had nowhere to run. If he were going to get through to the center of the void, then he had to handle the problem of the shape-shifting beast.

“Damn you witch,” he called.

The bird dropped from the sky. Its body elongated during the descent, spilling itself into a new shape. By the time it reached the ground, it had changed into a woman with black hair and a body just as dark. She had no clothes on that he could tell, but didn't have cause for shame. Her body held few details of a woman, as if she'd been encased in colored wax. There was the shape of breasts and other things but clear details were lost in the thick black skin.

“If I let you pass, you may be the one who's damned.” She put her black hands on her hips, as if immovable.

“What are you?” Vincent looked again for a weapon but there wasn't even a decent sized stone.

“A shape shifter. My name is Lynn. I was sent to keep people from passing this way.” She lowered her head in a sign of respect. “I mean you no harm. I am only protecting the world from the evil here.”

“I would say you're doing a poor job of it. I saw two women leaving with vials of some sort of evil from this place.”

"I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. They are witches. I didn't want a confrontation so I simply shifted dirt to make it appear as the black ooze and let them fill their vials full. Only when they open the vials to use the matter will they discover the deception."

"They will be back then." Vincent didn't need to upset witches to add to his trouble.

"Eventually. I will worry about that when it happens." She set her shoulder back as a warrior preparing for combat. "I've dealt with worse."

"Then I must hurry."

Vincent started by the woman but she again stepped in his path. She seemed like a small creature no more than five feet high and couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds at most. He was tempted to hoist her into a tree and leave her there, but this woman was clearly not human or flyer and he wasn't sure what dangers she posed, other than pecking him in the leg.

"Please Lynn." He would try to reason with her, although he had grown tired of talking. Cordin filled him with more instructions and legends than Vincent could stomach. "I have a task I must perform before my binding. I must go this way to complete it."

"Binding?" She looked at him carefully, stepping around him like a circling predator. One hand touched his shoulders as she went around. As she came back to face him, her hand landed on his chest. "Are you flyer?"

"Human. I am taking a flyer for a wife. I have to do this task to get the blessings of the elders."

Lynn smiled and looked him over again with very intense eyes. "A task for a human? Why do the flyers not do it themselves? They don't usually enlist the help of mortal men."

Vincent rolled his eyes. "These details aren't important. I need to hurry before the sun sets."

Lynn crossed her arms across her chest and planted her heels in the ground. There was no way she was going to let him pass without a long explanation. Part of him still wanted to pick her up and tie her to the nearest tree or set her on the path behind him, although, a peaceful solution was best.

"Flyer energy feeds the void." Vincent watched, but her body didn't relax. "If they come, it will grow. It is my mission to stop it, if it is possible."

"How do you propose to do this task?"

"I do not know you woman." Time and patience was wearing thin with him. "I have no need of you. Let me pass and finish my business."

"Stopping the void." She touched his chest again, following the laces of his shirt. "You must be very brave to take on such a task." Her hand went to his arm. "And very strong indeed." She stood there, touching him and letting her eyes travel over his body. "If what you say is true, then I will help you on your task."

"Then come," he knocked her hand away, "but leave the details of my business to me."

"What is your destination?"

"The center of the void. There is a place in the blackness where life ebbs, the very life of the void. That's where I need to go."

He started walking. This time Lynn didn't block his path but stopped him with her hand and the very confused look on her face. *Still his travels couldn't begin for explanations on his business.*

"You cannot stab the void and end it or poison it, or any sort of magic I can find." She looked around, searching for answers. "I've tried many things. What do you propose to do?"

"That is my business woman." Vincent started walking again, only to have her reach over and stop him once more.

"Stop calling me that. My name is Lynn."

"My apologies for the lack of introductions. Time is short and I must hurry. My name is Vincent."

"Vincent?" She considered this and smiled. "Let us go then, Vincent. We have until dusk. The witches will find my lie out by then. They are sisters and will be much trouble when they return."

The two walked a piece down the trail. The void grew denser as did the air, while the wildlife thinned then went away to nothing. The area still held the scent of death, rotting in damp air and cold earth.

More spindles of the void made their way from the main body. Many times the two of them left the path entirely, trying to find ways around the muck. Amidst all this, the sun was lowering in the sky, making the hazards harder to see. It made him wonder how they were going to get out of this place, if he succeeded.

"Who sent you to guard the path?" asked Vincent.

"I am one of the cave dwellers. We are commonly called shape-shifters. Our practice surrounds meditation, and learning the old arts. During one of these meditations my lady felt the world weaken." She looked at the sky as if judging their distance. "We are all in tune with the earth but the eldest noticed the discrepancies. Anyway, it was the void growing. I was sent to watch over it and keep trespassers from helping the thing unmake creation." She turned to him as they walked.

"Your kind felt the world weaken?" Vincent couldn't imagine the ability. "How did she feel it?"

"It was as if the world got tired. The boundless energies were gone. My lady said it was like watching a vital man change into an old one."

That was a strange analogy. He'd thought of the void as unmaking not a natural end of things. He supposed the effect was the same, a withering of something vital. It had to be stopped.

"You said it fed from flyers," continued Lynn. "How?"

"I'm not sure. If there are any flyers in the area, the thing grows and the flyer weakens. The void was no more than a mud hole, then they banished a flyer to human lands and it started growing. More flyers came to retrieve the first and the damn thing grew in size to that of a lake. They sent me because humans don't seem to cause a change in it."

"Perhaps the two worlds should never cross then." Lynn raised her eyebrows then touched him on the shoulder. "Flyers and humans weren't meant to mix. Even the earth says so. Why else would such a thing grow for one and not the other and be placed between them?"

Vincent didn't reply. She might have a point. Such an evil thing was placed between the two worlds but he felt it was more from accident than any divine intervention. Still the point didn't require an argument.

The two continued walking. Vincent didn't mind the company. It helped ease the trouble in his stomach and the fears growing in his mind. He didn't know for certain how he was going to pull the things heart out, but he had to try. Cordin said it was called a star but would feel more like a dagger in his hand. At least that was the legend.

He'd never cared much for legends. He'd found most came from men trying to make their lives sound like something important instead of a waste. The stories he'd checked out had been lies, nothing more. He hoped the star wasn't just a lie, something simple to explain a black nothing to children. Surely every monster had a weakness. Why not a star be this thing's?

"Do you know the story of how the void came to be?" Vincent had heard Cordin's version but wondered as to its authenticity.

"Let's see what I can remember. The shape shifters tribes were called demons many centuries ago. In fact the story wasn't far from the truth. My ancestors were blood thirsty savages." She raised her hand and extended five claws sharper and larger than any cat's Vincent had seen. "We were very good at war and mischief. We drank blood and corrupted the minds of mortals." She smiled as if reminiscing. "Humans were considered lowly but they were protected by a higher order."

"Higher order?" Vincent wondered if she meant God.

"Anyway, there were some flyers that taught the mortal men and protected them from our attacks. These were far more powerful than the flyers today." She laughed a little. "Much more powerful. Anyway, my kind wanted to feed on the humans but this caused them harm and the flyers wouldn't stand for it. The first demons cast a spell to shift their shape into that of a flyer in order to cause a war. The powers-to-be were distressed by this and sent a holy weapon to wipe demons from the earth. It was a dagger formed by a piece of star. Instead of killing the demons, the flyers and the mortals killed each other, spilling blood of brethren into the ground around the powerful weapon. From this, the void was birthed."

"I see. Is that why humans and flyers hate each other?"

"No. They hate each other because they are weak and stupid." Lynn spat at the ground to show her contempt. "They should give up their ways. The flyers still feed from humans when they get the chance. Their powers have become weak from this act. True life force comes from the earth itself."

"So you fancy your kind better than all those on the earth?" Vincent looked at the tiny woman with a spirit five times in size.

"Of course. Don't you fancy yours?" She looked at him as if he'd just proposed the most absurd question she'd ever heard.

He shrugged. "I suppose I do."

The two walked farther, finally reaching the edge of the black lake. It seemed quiet, like the veins creeping from it. Its size hadn't changed but it didn't seem any weaker either.

"Now what?" asked Lynn.

"I have to get to the center." He looked to the sun. It was starting to set. "I need to hurry. Night here will be too dangerous."

“My brave man afraid?” She cut her eyes up at him. In other circumstances he would think she was flirting but the face looked too foreign to be sure.

“Bravery and stupidity are close cousins, but not the same.”

He looked at the ooze everywhere. At night it would be too easy to misstep and end up under the mire. He doubted anything could survive in such a soup. It would pull one under like quicksand.

Vincent looked around for a solid tree he could climb to pinpoint the center. There were none suitable. Anything close to the muck looked too decomposed to be of any use. Absolutely nothing survived in the main part of the void, so he couldn't use his rope to latch onto a structure.

“Damn.” Vincent opened his bag and looked inside. There was nothing to help him get across. The problem looked hopeless. He supposed he could go back through the forest and gather wood and such to build stepping stones or even a boat but that would take more time than he'd wanted. “Now what.” He looked around for options.

“Wait. I will take you to the center.” She stood at the edge, surveying the mess. “That will be your only chance.”

“Can you?” He couldn't imagine a raven, even one as big as a calf, being able to support his weight. “At this point, I'll try anything.”

Lynn looked at him and as soon as he nodded approval, the change started. She grew what looked to be insect wings. Her body changed, thinning into a very large version of a dragonfly.

Vincent reached into his bag and took out the special gloves Cordin had given him. He slid on both gloves then set his knapsack on the ground. Next he took a small length of leather and tied his hair back.

“Okay.” The strange black insect stared at him. He wasn't sure if he trusted being held by Lynn, but he had no other choice. “Please, don't drop me in. I need to get to the center and reach into the muck.”

“I've seen the veins from it come fast,” she warned. “If the void starts taking you, I will drop you.”

“I know. I don't expect you to risk your survival for my quest, however, remember that we share the same world that it is undoing.” He'd suspected if things became difficult she'd let him die just as he had longed to do to Liking. The thought churned his stomach. “Let fate be merciful. Let's go.”

Lynn started her wings then picked Vincent up with her insect legs. It was a strange feeling, being cradled by a huge insect. She held him securely though and seemed strong enough to carry his weight.

Soon they hovered above the muck. He reached down with his gloved hands, scooting his upper body between the legs and dangling upside down to get closer. Lynn lowered herself slowly.

“Wait.” Vincent reached one glove into the blackness then pulled it back out. The void didn't eat at him or consume the glove. “Further to the left,” he shouted.

Just ahead there was a strange pin of black light emanating from the ooze. That had to be the center. Vincent pointed to it and Lynn flew, positioning them next to the black light, seemingly unwilling to let the light touch her.

Vincent's face held about ten inches from the blackness. He reached into the ooze. He expected it to feel like mud but it didn't. The texture was like a heavy silk, trying to suck him into its warm depths.

It had a hypnotic quality, teasing his eyes in waves of dark rippling below. He forced himself to concentrate. There was no telling how deep the thing was. It could be more than the length of five men before he found the star. Still he had to try.

"Could you lower me a few more inches?"

Lynn did as he asked. His face was nearly touching the void. His arm was sunk in as far as the gloves would allow and he still couldn't feel anything. It was just too deep.

Louis's leg came back to mind. He had no way of knowing if the rot had taken hold because of Anzele being in the area or if the void just liked the taste of flesh. A chill went through him.

He pulled at the edge of the glove, making sure it covered his shirtsleeve, then tucked the glove from the other hand into the space at the opening of the first. It was a long shot, but he stretched his body, letting his gloved hand sink further into the void, over the top of the glove and onto his shoulder. Still, he could feel nothing, except for the black wet rot touching his hair.

The sun was setting too fast. Already the first stars were poking through the sky, making themselves known as the last bit of the sun faded. In the void it didn't seem much darker. Light didn't make its down that far anyway.

He tried to stay on task and not think about the smell of decomposition wafting from the black pool below him. The void had grown to a decent sized lake and nothing that had touched it looked healthy.

Still he stretched his hand, pivoting his body dangerously close. He was doing this for love and for existence itself. He couldn't quit. Failing so close to his goal wasn't an option.

Above him he heard the wings whirring then another sound came but he focused on the star. He paid little attention to the shrieks of the witches returning. He stretched his fingers, hoping something would stick up enough for him to grab hold.

If he had registered the sound of the women then perhaps he would've pulled up. Instead the witches flew by, turning Lynn. From the precarious position, it was easy for her to lose her grip.

There was enough time to register the void was too close and the feeling of insect legs had gone. He managed a breath then thought maybe Lynn would catch him. The feeling of falling had to stop. He was the hero. In legends, the heroes won. The flyers were suppose to pass the story of the mortal man who'd saved the world, not the crazy one that died trying.

The inches between him and the void closed with the black muck heading for his face. His arms flailed wildly searching for Lynn to grab him and save him from the horror below. There wasn't time though. He'd been so close to it that the void could've reached up and grabbed him. Of course that wasn't necessary when he was falling head first into the rotted liquid.

Blackness thick and awful filled his nose and mouth as he plunged through. The silken mix felt almost solid as he tried to right himself. It sucked him down, licking at his body while the earth and what it had once been swallowed him whole.

The burning began. The undoing started with his exposed hand and face changing from burning to an exquisite pain. He reeled as his clothes became sodden, helping the void drink him down.

As he sank, his thoughts went back to Anzele. She'd marry Liking and forget him. In the end, the unta didn't matter. It wouldn't sprout wings and carry him out of hell.

I love you, Anzele, he thought as he sank lower.

Chapter Nine

Anzele stood in the middle of a meadow filled with thick green plants growing shoulder high. Each plant was covered in silver wispy flowers with a center puffy and ready to be spun into thread.

She'd borrowed the basket from Iana, who used to watch Anzele when she was small. In many ways, she'd become more of a mother to her than Betrev ever could have been. It was nice to spend a few minutes with her, rekindling a friendship she'd missed during her banishment.

For years she idolized Iana. She was beautiful with wings the darkest purple. Anzele was still a little jealous. It wasn't logical but she always hoped to grow up looking like Iana.

In the field Anzele thought about her and her childhood as she picked the silver score. Growing up here had been nice, even with the sideways glances the others gave her. Of course according to Kartin, those looks hadn't been from her mixed blood but from rumors of murder.

In a small village rumors spread fast and each time they circulated the intensity of the story grew. A tale of murder in a mixed marriage would still be popular, warning the evils of being with a man outside their kind. Even the tortures of living with a mortal man could've driven Betrev to push her father. There was no telling what the current version had become.

The story of Anzele's exile had traveled far. Most of the village had been at the meeting when she was sent out with nothing more than the clothes on her back. She was almost certain many of the villagers sided with her desire to choose her own husband, although none openly vocalized it. Betrev's unwillingness to defend Anzele caused the banishment.

Children shouldn't be abandoned the way she had. It wasn't right. No matter what her offspring chose to do or not to do, she would support them. A mother's love should be the unconditional kind.

She had to wonder about children she would have with Vincent. With her being a mixed marrying a mortal, the flyer blood would be diminished. The children probably couldn't fly at all. In fact, they'd probably be mortals.

Never knowing the joys of soaring in the air would be horrible. Staying here among the flyers with that weakness would make a child's life difficult. They couldn't play games with the other kids. The cliffs would be too dangerous. A worse thought came to her, *what if they aged and could catch diseases?*

If by some miracle the children became flyers, then living in the mortal world would be impossible. She sighed, not seeing an easy way out of any of it. Being a full-blood flyer marrying a mortal was one thing. A half-breed made the union seem insane.

Anzele wasn't sure she cared. It might be wrong but she still wanted Vincent. There was no way to know if life would be heaven or hell with him. All that matter was that she loved Vincent. Somehow that love would protect their offspring. If they turned mortal and the flyers wanted them turned out, then a mortal life they would all share. Then again

Vincent might only want a mortal's life. He hadn't agreed to stay here. Her own desires forced the possibility.

She filled the basket to the rim with silver score, deciding it would make the best wedding dress. A very bright puff caught her attention. It was almost too beautiful to pick. She fingered it lightly, then a strange feeling settled in her stomach. She dropped the basket. Her precious silver score tumbled onto the ground.

"Vincent?"

The connection between her and Vincent was gone. Suddenly she couldn't feel him at all. *Perhaps he'd been knocked unconscious. No, that wasn't right.* Something heavier dug into her heart.

Tears filled her eyes. She took flight, turning away from the sun, which hadn't started setting yet, and to the village. Cordin had some explaining to do. If he'd sent Vincent to get him killed she'd take Cordin's head off.

She flew to the stone building, then circled once above. Sure enough, she found him sitting on the rocky ledge near the side of the beach. He was resting, sunning himself.

"What have you done?" she shrieked at him. "Tell me Cordin."

Anzele landed next to him. She crouched down on her haunches, unsure of what to do but feeling like attacking. There she sat, watching him, and waiting for his answer.

"Well?" She'd toss him into the middle of the ocean if he'd done this thing on purpose. "Answer me."

Cordin looked at her, then shut his eyes before looking her direction again. "What are you talking about Anzele?"

"I can't feel Vincent." He knew why she was upset. He'd taken away the only person she cared about, without giving her a choice or say in the decision. "Did you have him killed?"

"No. Calm down." Cordin rose. "Tell me, did you feel any great pain or suffering before the connection was severed?"

"No." She'd been so consumed with keeping busy, she wasn't sure exactly when the connection had broken. "He was afraid. That's all."

"Then it's probably the void cutting off the link. It seems to consume everything else. Just relax and have faith." He sat back on the ledge. "Quit being so paranoid. Sit and join me."

She relaxed, falling back to a sitting position. There were tears in her eyes. She fought them, but they wouldn't stop so she buried her face in her hands. So many tears had been shed over the last few days. She was tired of crying, tired of worrying.

"Child. He'll be back."

"So you say. This place seems to be plagued by tragic love stories. I don't want mine to end the same."

"Who told you such tales?"

"Kartin." She looked at Cordin with more disgust than she'd felt in her entire life. Not even when she'd been turned out had she felt such complete hatred eating at her.

"Why did you give him that fool's errand? Are you trying to get him killed?"

"No Anzele. In fact, I'm trying to save us all." He reached over and petted her hair. "Even the humans are concerned with the void. Their life span is nothing but they too feel the world coming undone. We flyers are eternal. Shouldn't we do something to save our way of existence?"

“Not if it means sacrificing my husband.” It might be selfish when she considered the entire world and all that lived in it, but in her honest heart she wouldn’t give him up for anything.

“Let’s hope no real sacrifice is made.” Cordin focused on the sun, falling slowly in the late afternoon. “Never have I wished harm to your Vincent.”

“I will hold you personally responsible if something happens to him.” Hate filled her voice, her heart, but she didn’t care. “I’m serious, Cordin.”

“Then we both have something to lose.”

Anzele looked at him again. She’d misread the situation. He wasn’t happily staring into the sky. His body was tight, face filled with tension. He was worried about Vincent, too.

“I’m sorry, Cordin. It’s just easy for me to blame you for this circumstance. You’re the one that made the promises to Vincent. I know it was you that took him over the mountain.”

“Please understand, I do this for everyone. I would never jeopardize you or any you care for if there were no other way. I’m afraid that this is a task that needs to be finished.”

“Do you think he can succeed?” She scooted closer and let her head rest on his shoulder. “Be truthful.”

“Yes. I honestly do.” He petted her hair again. “If anyone can accomplish this, it is Vincent.”

She took a deep breath then looked into the sky. “I visited my mother today. It didn’t go well.”

“Not the loving reunion you expected.” He seemed to have known as much.

“I thought she was going to attack me.” She sighed. “Betrev never even taught me how to defend myself. I think she kept me dumb on the powers so I would have to rely on another.”

“It is unfortunate. You have great strength in you Anzele. Even Betrev has to see it. Perhaps that’s why she never taught you.” He looked at her carefully. “Do you know the basics?”

“I can light fires and direct force but that’s about all. I practiced moving things alone. Everything else seemed to require instruction.”

“Can you harness the blue flame?”

Anzele couldn’t, although she didn’t want to admit it. Small flames of concentration were easy for children. It was one of their first lessons and being less talented than a child embarrassed her.

Lacking the words to admit her failures she simply shook her head no. Making fire was an art she had limited control of. The display in Vincent’s fireplace was the best she could do. Thankfully, Cordin didn’t laugh at her. Instead, he took her hand and smiled.

“The power comes from the quiet place. You don’t think, there will be fire. It’s like flexing your finger. It is beyond conscious thought. Just hold out your hand and believe there is a flame there.”

Anzele tried. Once she’d used her building skill to put fire in her hand. The burns had been quite severe. This time she held her hand as instructed, with palm facing up.

“Don’t think about it on the conversation level. Go deeper. It’s in that quiet realm.”

At first nothing appeared. She realized her error and took her mind a level deeper, close to the hole between wake and sleep. In that place thinking about fire wasn't possible, but she could see it.

"Now look," said Cordin softly.

When she opened her eyes, there was the flame dancing in her hand. She only got a glimpse of it before the flame extinguished. She couldn't support it for long but it was a start.

"Very good."

"No it wasn't," replied Anzele. "I still have so much to learn."

"True, but this first skill is where all fire abilities come from. Tonight when the power is stronger and you can feel it clearer, we will practice. If you like I will merge with your mind to help you learn faster."

"You'll instruct me?" Anzele never had someone willing to teach her anything much less link minds.

"Certainly." He held her hand again. "It would be my pleasure."

She looked at the sun, traveling lower in the sky. "I have to go back to the meadow. I was gathering silver score for a wedding dress." She laughed and realized the sound was too much like crying.

"Anzele?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes."

"May I help you? I don't wish to be alone and some chores would set my mind right."

"I'd love the company."

Anzele set out with Cordin following. They landed in the field. She found her overturned basket, set it right, and went back to her task of picking. The stack of flowers grew as the sun lowered itself in the sky.

"Do you think he's at the void now? I mean, has he had time to make it there?" She watched the sun and hoped she would feel Vincent's presence soon. Being trapped near the void after dark would be horrible.

"He should be at the void. I don't know how long it will take to accomplish his task. I told him I'd pick him up in a week." Cordin looked at the score and touched a few, letting his fingers caress the puffy fibers.

"A week?" She didn't want to be without him for a week. "Why so long?"

"His task won't be an easy one. He might have to devise a way to reach the center. I'm afraid the plan I offered him was imperfect at best. The star he needs to retrieve is in the center of the void. I'm not even certain it can be reached. I was also hoping you'd be able to tell me when he was successful. We could always get him sooner than the week, as long as he's cleared the area of the void."

"And if?" There was no reply although she hadn't really expected one. "What if he fails?"

"Don't worry. I will try to turn him either way. His heart is true. Although I don't believe he really wants to be a flyer." His face held a quizzical expression. "He does want you to be proud of your choice. What better way than this?"

Risking so much for her was stupid. Love didn't require this. All she wanted was her Vincent back. If he'd just get far enough from the void so she could feel him again, things would be better. As it was, she felt like she was going crazy without him.

“Cordin?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever found your unta?” She knew he had never been married but there was a strangeness to him as if his was another love story gone bad.

“Yes. I know who my unta is.” Cordin stripped off his shirt and made a sort of sack with it then picked the score. “I met her a few years ago in the woods.” He smiled a little. “Not too many know about her.

“Why don’t you bind with her?” Anzele couldn’t imagine knowing your unta and not wanting to be with them.

“She isn’t a good person.” He picked more score, taking handfuls and loading them into his shirt. “Not even close to good.”

“Who is it?” There were flyers who she didn’t particularly care for but none so bad as to deny the unta.

“You don’t know her.” He managed a smile. “She is different.”

There was an odd look to his face, guilt. It was possible he understood first hand the problems to a mixed binding. He was a man of position too. Everyone knew Cordin was respected enough to become elder when the time of change came unless he married outside their breed.

“Your unta isn’t a flyer either, is she?”

“No.” He hung his head. “I don’t think she can be changed either, at least not the way she behaves.”

“Are you so set against humans?”

He laughed. “You think things are so simple.” He laughed again and tossed more score into his shirt. “My unta isn’t a human either.”

“What is she?” She had only heard of humans marrying into the flyer kind, no others.

“A witch of the old blood. She has the darkest eyes I’ve ever seen and red hair.” He bundled his score, leveling the mess out. “I mean her hair is so bright. I doubt even humans have such.”

“Is that why you are not with her?”

“No. Somehow, I love everything about her. Even the things I would consider unattractive on another become beautiful on her. I wished I could run my hands through that hair right now.” He held out his hand as if imagining it. “It doesn’t bother me that she’s different from me.”

“Then what’s the problem? Is it position?”

“She’s wicked.” He picked one puff score and pulled at the fiber spreading it out and showing its dark center. “Her heart isn’t good. Even the unta is wrong with someone like that.”

“Can’t you change her? Teach her our ways?”

“Anzele, you can’t change someone who doesn’t want to be changed.” His eyes looked hurt. “All the magic in the world can’t change someone’s heart. It’s just best to leave her be. There are other kinds of love.”

“Do you still feel her?”

“Not anymore. She’s a powerful witch.” He sighed. “She cast a spell to block our tie. It fades sometimes and I sense a little something then she fixes it.”

“That must be hell.”

"No. Hell would be enduring a bad relationship with someone unworthy." He smiled, his eyes lightened as if he'd made peace with this long ago. "I'm sure one day I will take a wife. I doubt it will be Marabeth."

"Marabeth? It's a pretty name."

"She is beautiful. My witch Marabeth is the most beautiful creature. Eyes so black you can see yourself in them." He smiled. "She's slim with pale skin. There isn't a blemish on her body, not a single freckle. If only her heart were as pretty as she." He bit his lip. "You wouldn't believe the dresses she wore, black wisps like gauze."

"How did you two meet?"

"I was gathering exotic woods about a mile from the mountains edge and she was getting herbs for a potion when I saw her. At first we didn't say a word only stared at each other. Then I went to her and kissed her."

"You just kissed her?"

"Yes." His cheeks burned red. "I didn't say anything, just grabbed Marabeth and kissed her. It took her by surprise. That's when the unta hit and I began to sense her evil. We were together for several weeks, camping on the edge of the mountain. Then we went our separate ways."

"I had no idea."

"Being alone is better than being with the wrong person, even if you're in love with them."

"Do you think I should marry Vincent?" She left off the "if he comes back" part.

"It isn't for me to know."

They gathered their silver score and took it back to the village. Many women were already weaving. Once again Iana came to her rescue with a loom and yarn puller she could use. There she began pulling apart the silver score and looping it through the metal eyes of the machine. As she pumped the foot pedal, it pulled the fluff thin and into a reflective yarn. Cordin helped by getting more score ready and attaching it to the end of the first.

"I think I know where there are a few gems. It would look nice to sew some around the neckline."

"That would be lovely."

Cordin rose into the sky while Anzele continued pulling her thread. A little at a time, the spool grew. Once she filled one spool, she took a second and pulled the thread. She'd gone through the pile Cordin had gathered and the top part of her basket when the second spool was finished.

It was slow work. She glanced at the sky a few times, watching the sun continue its descent. She pulled more and more score into a workable form. *How many women before her had done the same things?* Each one created a wedding dress with hopes and expectations for the future bouncing around in her mind.

"Please come back to me, Vincent," she whispered.

There had been too much stress on her these past few days. The story of her mother and father kept replaying in awful nightmarish detail. It was as if the unta was a curse and not a blessing at all.

It must've driven Betrev insane. That had to be the reason for her insistence on marrying off Anzele. She'd seen the power of unta and the damage it caused. Those years

knowing her unta had died because Betrev had made a poor decision, would've been the hardest years of her life.

Anzele took another handful of score and started pulling it thin. Her dress would be beautiful if Vincent ever got to see it. She wished she could feel him again, if only to make sure he still lived.

Maybe it would be best to lose him now instead of forcing a child to endure his loss later. The loss of her own father had been a terrible thing. She'd been no more than knee high, if that. Whether he was Betrev's unta or not, she wished she'd had him in her life. Too many things needed a father's guiding hand. She'd love to speak with him now and find out his opinion of Vincent.

"Anzele, look what I've brought." Cordin returned carrying a small string closed pouch. "I think you'll be pleased."

"Did you find some gems?" Anzele smiled and stared at the little bag with its treasures waiting to be seen. "Pretty ones?"

"Wonderful ones."

He opened the bag and poured the contents into Anzele's hands. Glimmers of clear stones, purple, and red filled her hands. They sparkled as the last rays of the sun faded. When she held one to the sky, what light was left filled it, creating a line of color.

"They will be perfect, so much nicer than the glass we weave. Thank you so much Cordin." Anzele hugged him, and held on a little too long.

"You look troubled." He pulled back enough to see her face. "Still thinking of Vincent?"

"I'm trying not to." She looked up at the sky. "It would be nice if there was family I could talk to. Someone besides Mom to tell me if I was truly shaming them. I don't know. I've heard Kartin's tale but never my father's side. It might be nice to know his take on a mortal living in a flyer world, but he's not here and all the humans have gone."

"Hmm." He looked at her as if considering it. "Maybe there is a way you can contact someone."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's finish making your thread. Then we can try an experiment."

Cordin helped her wind the last of the score as the sun disappeared. Anzele wound the yarn on the spool then tucked a leader into a notch. The spools were ready for weaving. She stuck them to the side of the loom and covered them with burlap. Iana told her she could use her machine for as long as it took to make her dress, so she left her yarn and followed Cordin up the hill to the sacred fires.

This place held great power for the flyer people. She wasn't sure where he was going with this. The places of power amplified their abilities but not to the extent that she could reach Vincent. The void seemed more powerful than any force that had existed after creation.

They walked up a small section then flew the last few yards. The place was designed in this way. The path couldn't be clearly seen from the air but the last few feet went vertical, making it impossible to reach from the ground. They lifted then ducked beneath the trees. When they dove beneath the branches, the sacred fires were there.

The name itself was misleading. A bowl sat on a center platform. A series of blue flames danced with seemingly no source. The bowl was never consumed and there was

nothing inside the bowl to feed the flame, therefore it couldn't truly be fire. Something more powerful lurked in the flashes of blue tinged in orange.

She stood on one side while Cordin stood on the opposite. Cordin was old and powerful, despite his youthful appearance. Anzele watched with great interest as he held his hands to the flame and mumbled words too low for her to hear. The blue flame sparkled, changed from blue to a deep purple.

"Anzele," Cordin walked behind her and lifted her arms with his. "Try thinking of your father. Keep your arms out. I'll stay behind you to direct your actions."

"Okay."

Betrev never taught Anzele the old ways. In fact her training on magic had been limited to the skills she picked up on her own. Mom had said training Anzele was pointless because of her half-breed blood. The label haunted her from the moment she'd been born, when in fact, it was a lie. If flyer blood dominated, then she was a flyer. Betrev was just a bitch.

Anzele took a nervous breath and tried to think of her father. It was hard. She didn't remember what he'd looked like. It was shameful but she couldn't even remember his voice. There were times in her life when she imagined conversations with him. In this pretend game, her father had a voice. It may not have been his true one but it was the one that played in her head when she was lonely.

This was absurd. She didn't have basic skills, much less the ones strong enough to contact the nether realm. There was no way for her to gather this power. Still, she tried. Part of her had to wonder what Vincent would think of her trying to conjure up her dead father in order to ask him marital advice.

That was all it took, a few moments for her mind to wonder and she could see Vincent, the way he looked before he left her. She missed him so much. It was maddening, the thought of him seemed all consuming.

"I don't think this is going to work." Just as the words left her mouth, something started happening.

In front of her an image started. The purple flame turned black, swirling before her eyes. Then out of the blackness came a face. Instead of her father's, she saw Vincent reaching out from the nothing, trying desperately for help. His face became clear, as one arm seemed to escape the blackness. He reached for her. There was no sound except for the insects in the woods and a few birds, but she saw him mouth her name.

She reached out for him. It looked as if she could pull him to her if she could just get a hold of his hand. So she reached inside. It was close. Her hand nearly grazed his as the blackness pulled him back, swallowing him before her eyes in layers of abyss.

"Vincent!" She kept watching as the black faded and the blue flame returned. "Cordin, what's happened? It was Vincent. Is he dead?" Anzele turned. "Please, tell me something."

"I don't know. I guess you couldn't focus on your father." He looked into the flame. "We need to work on your skills."

His gaze dropped to the ground with eyes wide and shock coloring his features. It was the look of pure terror. He took a few steps back as if trying to put distance between him and the magic in the flame.

"What was that? What did I see?" She reached to the blue flame again but couldn't force it to show her Vincent. "What happened?"

“I don’t know.” He shook his head in quiet revulsion.

“Is he dead?”

“I don’t know, Anzele. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

The strength drained from Anzele. Her knees buckled and she dropped to the stone. They’d been trying to contact the nether world, where the dead existed before their spirit returned to an infant. Did that mean Vincent was dead?

“Please come back to me,” she asked the flames. “Please.”

Chapter Ten

Vincent couldn't breathe. His body craved air but the muck held him beneath its heavy layers. He started to panic, flailing wildly. Then something calmed him. He must've been hallucinating because he'd seen Anzele.

This entire mess was for her and the flyers. He didn't care about saving the world. Any world that would separate two people in love wasn't worth saving unless it was for a better generation.

Maybe that's why I should finish this, he thought. *Even if it decomposes my body, I will not quiet.*

There could be a better generation. Anzele and he could be the start of one. They could make children of a new understanding, people without prejudice. As impossible as it sounded, it could be up to two people to make a perfect world.

When it all became pure, without fear, he knew he had a job to do. Life couldn't exist with this blight growing over the land. He wanted the star, so he would have it. It was his choice.

Instead of pushing to the top, he went lower, diving deeper into the muck. He couldn't see anything but black. Still he went deeper, hands reaching wildly. His body was dying for air.

It had to be here. There had to be a star. He pushed lower, reaching what had to be the bottom. It was thicker, like mud or quicksand. He dug his hands into it. There had to be something.

Please let me find it, he thought.

Just then his hand came upon something solid. He couldn't see enough to tell what it was but surely any rock or stick would be decomposed by this rot. With both hands he grabbed at it, wrenching it free from the muck. When it was out, he started pushing to the surface.

Immediately the pain coursing through his body subsided. Even in the muck, his skin tingled from the tips of his toes to the end of his nose. It didn't help him breathe, though.

The void was too thick and heavy. The layers fought against him and with only one hand there was no way to free himself. For every inch he pushed up the muck drug him back another. He kept going, lungs screaming for air. He was ready to give up but dying here would surely lead him to hell.

Finally, he found something else in the muck. He grabbed it trying to use it to pull himself up. Then he realized he'd found a rope and someone else helped him, pulling him to the surface.

His head felt woozy. The surface seemed too far away. He might still die here in the rotted black magic. Something so basic, so easy to come by on the surface was denied, oxygen. He longed to take a breath, just a breath. His grip was slipping. Soon he'd have to breathe in the void.

Then like a newborn child, he was released into the world. The rope got him above the ooze. Then he was dropped, somewhere on solid land. He still couldn't see but he managed a few breaths spitting out black liquid with every exhale.

From somewhere above, water came running over his body. He managed to open his eyes. Above him was a huge bird. It opened its mouth and dumped another large amount of water, washing away bits of the void.

He coughed, gagged and spit. With his face clear of debris, he looked in his left hand. There it was, a small glass-looking shard no bigger than a knife with edges decorated in gold.

"Lynn," he managed to say as he held his trophy towards the sky. "Look Lynn. I did it." He fell back on the land. "I did it."

The large bird came down, shifting as it went. Lynn stopped several feet away in her womanly form, apparently too afraid of the blackness covering the ground around Vincent to approach.

He didn't blame her for her fear. Any moment, he expected to feel the abyss attack his flesh. It didn't though, maybe because he had the star. He had ripped the heart from the beast.

"What say you?" She was smiling.

"I did it." He held up the star. "Thank you, Lynn. I owe you my life." He coughed again. What came out looked like water but he feared the void was still in him, swimming and undoing his body as it went. Oh, he wanted this stuff off. "Where may I bathe?"

He smelled like rotting matter from a week old goat. His stomach churned, then released. Lynn took a few more steps away then turned her head. Vincent couldn't help it. He lurched twice more before getting himself under control.

"Just a minute," she replied. Lynn looked at her hand, then changed it to a razor claw. The rope she'd used to bring him from the surface still lay on the ground between them. She cut it short, well away from the blackness coating it. "Grab one side and I will carry you, just don't touch me with that shit on you."

"Many thanks."

He held the rope in one hand with the star cradled against his body in the other. Lynn switched again to a large bird and launched herself into the air, dragging Vincent along. The void and the forest blurred beneath him as she flapped along the edge. Soon a blue lake came into view. Lynn lowered and dropped him completely into the water a few feet from shore.

"Thank you, Lynn," he waved then swam into the water.

"You are welcome sir." She landed on the bank and watched him in the water.

He swam closer then climbed to the shoreline, dripping in his clothes. "Sweet Lynn, may I ask another favor of you?"

"What?" She put both hands on her hips as if he had run out of favors.

"Please turn your back so that I may wash out my clothes."

"There's some burn root nearby. I will bring it for you. It works better than mortal soap. Maybe it will help with that stench." She held her nose and shook her head disapprovingly.

"Thank you."

Vincent removed his shirt. His chest was still covered with black slime but his skin appeared whole. Its heaviness seemed to dissipate or maybe the star had healed him. He wondered if the void was dying in the same way as the muck on his body. With the star in his possession, maybe the world could heal itself, although he couldn't imagine the void just disappearing.

He put the star into the water, rinsing it, then set it on the bank next to his shirt. Above, he saw Lynn as she dropped to the ground. He'd never seen a shifter before. Watching the change mesmerized him. The way her body contorted to suit her whim was remarkable.

"Here," she tossed him the root. "I also have the sack you'd been carrying." She tossed it on the bank but not so close to the water.

"What happened up there?" He touched the root. It felt strange, like soap but the scent was heavier.

"The witches attacked me." She stayed several feet away, watching, always watching with those dark eyes. "Sorry about the spill. I tried to help."

"You did more than help. You saved my life." He looked around still feeling a little amazed at being alive. "What happened to the witches?"

"I made them believe I'd flown to the east. They're probably still looking for me. After I lost them, I doubled back and used the rope from your sack. I tied a rock to it to get it to sink." She smiled and it was strangely pleasant. "I'm glad you made it back."

"Me too." He lathered the root into foam and ran his fingers through his hair making the lather darken to a gray before rinsing away.

"I will leave you to your bathing."

Lynn turned and went into the wood line. Vincent wiped his face and saw her walking away. She was strangely beautiful in an exotic sense. Not anything like his Anzele, but intriguing.

Vincent waited until she was out of sight then stripped off his shoes and pants. When he was naked, he started washing away the awful stuff. It covered everything, making him scrub until his hands were sore. After the third or fourth lathering, he felt clean, next were his clothes.

Each item seemed filled with the muck. He picked the first and started scrubbing, rinsing, scrubbing, and rinsing again. After he'd cleaned the last item, he set his clothes to dry on the rocks near the edge of the lake. The star, he washed again, then wrapped it in some burlap the fruit had once been stored in, and stuck it into the bag.

He'd done it. Never truly thinking his goal was possible, but he had done it nonetheless. Now the flyers would consider him an equal and he could marry Anzele. She could marry without worrying that she'd settled for less than she deserved, although he never imagined her believing this.

When everything was clean, he lay next to his clothes on the rocks and let his body dry in the night air. It was surprisingly warm here, closer to the climate of the flyer world than his own. The wind blew just enough to make him comfortable. There he dozed, dreaming of Anzele and the future they could have. It was peaceful nodding in and out under a clear sky.

It was during one of these dozes he got the distinct impression someone watched him. He jerked up, and looked around but there was no one there. The bank was empty as well as the lake, although he couldn't see clearly. Even the bright moon couldn't offer enough light to reach beyond the wooded edge.

Vincent rolled over on his stomach. He pushed his long black hair off his back trying to finish drying out. Then the feeling returned. Someone was nearby looking at him.

He looked around again. Still seeing no one, he checked his clothes, turning them over to help them dry out. There was no one around him. Then he noticed something fluttering above. It was a black butterfly, one fluttering a little too close.

"Lynn", he said as he rolled back over to his stomach, "what are you doing?"

The butterfly elongated. As he caught a glimpse through his peripheral vision, the curves became pronounced, the legs long, and the hair became defined. It had been Lynn watching the entire time.

"Just enjoying the view." She lay down next to him. "Bashful?"

"No." He turned his head to look at her. "I'm just waiting for my clothes to dry. It's a long way back to the flyer village."

"And your bride?" She spoke the words like a curse. "Your precious little bride."

"Yes, my bride."

"Have you made love to her yet?" Lynn arched her back displaying her strange covered, but bare, breasts for him to see.

"Yes, we've made love." He smiled at Lynn. "I'm not an innocent for you to lure."

"Have you ever been with a shifter before?" Lynn cocked her head to the side. Her black eyes looked intriguing. "We are a little different. Something a little special."

"I've never even seen a shifter before but that's really unimportant." He looked over her again. Her body was intriguing. "Anzele is the only woman who interests me."

"Are you so sure?"

Lynn looked at him and shifted again. This time her body turned pale. The black hair stayed the same, thick and silky. The skin changed to that of a normal female, down to every detail. She stayed next to him, naked and unashamed.

Vincent wasn't used to women throwing themselves at him. There had been a few ladies in town who'd taken a definite interest but nothing so forward. It was arousing. After a moment too long, he turned his head to look at the lake instead of the woman next to him.

"Does this form not please you? I can be anything, you know." Her breasts enlarged. With a delicate touch she explored them, as he turned again to watch her index finger toy with the pebbled nipple. "Tell me your fantasy." She let her fingers trail down the new form. "There are many pleasures I can show you."

His back chilled, while the rest throbbed, but he had to maintain control. "You are truly beautiful but I am to be bound to another. I can't disrespect her by enjoying the pleasures you offer."

"Are you sure?"

She crawled over to him, letting one breast rub against his arm. It was an exquisite sensation. Then she put one leg over his backside, letting him feel her moist center pressed against him. It was soft and hot and maddening. With soft lips and light breath, she sighed against his neck.

"There's so much you haven't felt. So much I could show you."

Part of him rose to the occasion, but he had to concentrate on Anzele. A moment with Lynn wasn't worth losing a lifetime with Anzele. Then Lynn let her mouth touch his back with a tongue wicked enough to make him reconsider.

"Anzele," he whispered, "I miss you." Then the strength he needed came. He felt her mind touch his the way it had before he'd entered the void. He was no longer alone.

“You can call me Anzele if you want.” She let her tongue run across his back, with her lips following to finish the kiss.

“No, Lynn. I can feel her again. We are connected. She called it the unta.” He smiled broadly. “She was worried about me. Now she’s relieved. I think she was weaving a wedding dress.”

“How nice.” Lynn shifted to her usual form. She did this, still touching his skin causing a feeling of thick silk not unlike the void itself. “I guess I will be leaving.”

“Don’t be upset with me. You are wonderful in any form you take but if the situations were reversed, and I had made a promise to you, although another tempted me, wouldn’t you want me to refuse?”

“I suppose.” She looked at the sky with a pout. “I suppose I could take you back to the flyer village.”

“Would you?” Vincent felt his gut tighten. There was something wrong. “I wouldn’t want you to go out of your way.”

Then above them came a shriek from the sky so fierce it made the water ripple. Lynn immediately shifted into a war bird with thick claws and a razor sharp beak. Vincent grabbed his clothes, managing to get his pants on as two women came from the sky riding on enchanted birch limbs.

“The witches,” spoke the bird Lynn. “They’ve returned.”

Vincent finished dressing as the two came down on Lynn. They swooped in an attack dive. Lynn was ready, turning her beak on one and talon on the other. She broke the birch limbs forcing the women to the ground. One landed hard, missing the rocks by mere inches. The second landed in the lake.

“Tara,” screamed the one in the water. She went down then righted herself. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Marabeth.” The one on the bank looked up at the awesome bird. “I believe we’ve found her. Attack!”

“Wait,” started Vincent. He raised his hands trying to get the women’s attention. “Everyone calm down. What’s going on?”

“That is no bird. She’s a nasty shifter and she glammed us into believing we were collecting power, instead when we got home, we had vials of mud.” Tara brushed off her dress.

Tara and Marabeth were the two women Vincent had seen leaving the area. There was no mistaking that red hair or the lack of clothing. Even their voices replayed in his head like a bad dream.

“Well just go back to the void and collect what you need. She’s here with me. Leave us in peace.”

“Peace? There can be no peace as long as a shifter lives.” Tara closed her eyes and conjured stones from the ground to rise and fly towards Lynn.

Lynn squawked then flew high into the air. The stones followed, finally raining back down when they couldn’t connect with the bird. By this time Marabeth had swam to the shore from the lake. Vincent and the two women had to run to keep from being stoned to death as the rocks pelted the ground and lake.

“Damned shifter,” screamed Tara.

Then both women looked at Vincent. Marabeth and Tara shared a single evil smile that made Vincent want to run. His knees felt weak, but he had to hide his woes although

there was no way to defend himself. He'd been brought up to not raise a hand to a woman but these weren't ordinary women. They were witches.

"So you are in league with the shifter."

"I am but a mortal man fulfilling a quest so that I may marry. The shifter saved me from the void and that is all, but it is enough." Vincent gripped his knapsack tighter as it hung from his shoulder. "What are your names?"

"I am the witch Marabeth and this is my sister Tara." The younger of the two sisters spoke while wrapping a strand of long red hair around her finger.

"I am Vincent Deloroy. I have come from the city. Please leave in peace. Neither Lynn nor I mean you any harm. The shifter is about to return me home and away from causing you any grief. Please allow my passage."

"Perhaps we take our vengeance out on you." The one called Marabeth looked him over and raised her hands causing Vincent to rise from the ground hung between earth and sky.

"What was your quest mortal?" asked Tara.

"It doesn't matter. If you plan to kill me, knowing my business would be of no use." Vincent felt like a rag doll hung too high for him to reach the ground but too low to grab on to a tree branch. "Mayhap you tell me yours."

"We have to cure the void." Marabeth dropped him painfully to the ground. "Enough playing. Let's go to the void and collect what we need."

"What if the void cures itself?" Vincent stood, holding the sack tighter. It wasn't wise to trust witches.

"What?" started Marabeth.

"Anything is possible, just not likely." Tara spoke, hushing her sister with a look. "The void could unmake the world, if left alone. Shifters want the world destroyed. They don't believe anyone is worth living but shifters."

"Don't listen to them," spoke Lynn from a tree. "They want its power. They are evil."

"Liar," screamed Marabeth. "It's your kind that wish to remake the world in your image. You care not for the woes of others."

"Stupid shifter," remarked Tara as she made the tree bend beneath the bird. "Maybe you need a birdhouse." With that she touched the base of the tree, causing its branches to turn inward.

The branches grew into human type limbs, turning on Lynn. One branch reached around her then she shifted smaller. The wood splayed itself like fingers, trying to grab. The branch nearly trapped her. She shifted smaller, squeezing under the coming limb.

"I will get you, witch," cried Lynn.

Lynn dove, shifting large as she swooped toward the witches. Her claws were wide, shining even in the moonlight. Marabeth launched an attack of wind, sticks, and debris, blinding Lynn before she could make contact with Tara. It was close. The elder witch ducked, rolling on the ground to avoid being skewered.

"Let's try that again." Marabeth pulled two trees inward, trying to cage the bird. "I think you need some manners."

The trees moved, bent inward making a wall. Lynn flew towards the lake but the water jutted upward in another obstacle. The witches froze the water into a solid block of ice. There was nowhere to go but up. As she climbed higher in the sky, clouds grouped.

“You won’t catch me so quickly,” called Lynn who circled back towards the sky and flew between the clouds.

“Ladies, please.” Vincent approached Marabeth, who seemed like the more reasonable of the two. “Fighting will accomplish nothing. Let’s pass ways without further conflict, please.”

“We have no time for revenge.” Marabeth swirled the air, following the bird a few feet more. “Come on sister. Let’s end this and finish our business.”

“Hush,” said Tara. Her eyes gleamed in anger. She raised her hand to cast another spell, but Vincent grabbed her before harm could be done. “Release me, you human fool.”

“It is night. Waste no more on this.” He locked eyes with Tara. For a moment he feared her witches fury would be unleashed on him. “Surely your witch heart can let this pass.”

Tara pulled her hand away, eyes filled with fresh hate. “You were right, Marabeth. Let’s go. We’re wasting precious time.”

The two women held hands, causing a single branch to fall from a nearby tree where it stood on end and walked to them. From there, they mounted it, riding high into the air. Once they were out of sight the water fell and trees took their former shape.

Lynn came down muttering curses under her breath the entire time. Her black eyes looked a little too wide. The body that shifted so easily, trembled out of control. Apparently even shifters knew fear.

“Shall we leave?” asked Lynn, while checking the woods anxiously. “They may come back when they sense the void has been altered.”

“You will take me to the flyers?”

“Most certainly.” Lynn smiled and it was curiously similar to the look the witches had when they were considering his fate.

“You don’t have to. You have helped me more than I could’ve expected or hoped.”

He considered the beautiful shifter that had most certainly saved his life. Surely she wouldn’t end it after risking so much. It didn’t settle the unease in his stomach though. Their adventures together wouldn’t end simply. He could bet on it.

“I want to help you. Haven’t I proven that by now?”

The wicked smile appeared again on very black lips. In fact her entire body was solid, without variation in tone except for a silver blue outline around her eyes and her very white teeth.

“Why do you want to help me?” Vincent didn’t trust help without a known purpose.

She didn’t answer, just changed the subject. “Since we are going to the flyers, perhaps I’ll look like the creatures you fancy.”

Lynn shrugged her shoulders a few times then large black wings formed behind her. Her skin paled again and took on the look of a normal woman. Vincent watched in awe and was rewarded with seeing her naked once again, down to dark brown nipples and patch of black hair where her legs joined. She flexed her wings and looked at him seductively.

“Last chance.” She touched her breast and let out a slow breath. “I can become anything.”

“Please do not torture me in this way.” Vincent tried to look at the ground but it was hard. “You know I cannot indulge this fantasy.”

“As you wish.”

She ran her fingers over her flesh. This time what looked like cloth appeared. In a moment she was wearing a shirt, cut low in the front. As her hand trailed below, black pants appeared. The front made a V below her belly button.

“Are you satisfied?” she asked.

“As much as I can be right now.” He adjusted himself. “I think we should be going.”

“Then hold on tight.”

Lynn went to him, wrapping her arms and legs around Vincent’s body. She flapped once then twice. When nothing happened, Vincent noticed her wings enlarge. He hugged her tightly as the earth dropped from under his feet.

It may have been wrong but he enjoyed touching her. Another thought entered his mind. She really wasn’t wearing clothes. It was only an illusion. Those were still naked breasts pressed against him. He was still between bare open thighs and he swore he smelled the sweet scent of a wanting woman.

“You do like me,” she purred in his ear.

Vincent tried to turn his body away from her. She wouldn’t permit it, holding him against her during the flight and allowing her body to rub against his. Her arms were wrapped around his chest, her thighs open, wrapping long legs around his waist, pulling him to her. It seemed to give her great pleasure to torment him. Her mouth brushed against his neck. She said something but he could only feel it against his flesh in hot wet breath.

“Lynn, have mercy.” Vincent wanted to feel Anzele’s mind to ease away the temptation, but all he could think of was the body pressed against him. “You are sinful and delightful.”

“What’s wrong?” Lynn asked, leaving hot breath in his ear. “Don’t you want to ride?”

Lynn gyrated her hips slowly against him. The friction created unbelievably erotic surges through his body. Perhaps the ride to the flyer village wasn’t worth it. He tried to maintain his senses, figuring their proximity from the flyer’s mountain range when he realized her performance wasn’t for sexual pleasure. She’d been distracting him. When he looked at the moon, they weren’t traveling towards the east. They were headed to the caves on the western point. Lynn was taking him to the shifters.

“Take me to the flyers.” He squirmed feeling the first sense of panic. “Lynn, you need to take me to the flyers.”

“Oh, no my sweet.” Lynn licked his neck. “I have plans for you.”

Chapter Eleven

Marabeth and Tara returned to the void, flying low while dodging in and out of trees. The blackness looked different this time. Marabeth noticed but didn't want to tell Tara. The vibrancy had left it. Still it was best not to question.

Tara hovered close, examining it while Marabeth stood on the shore gathering clear vials of the muck. This was the main ingredient in their brew. Nasty stuff shouldn't be collected, or so Marabeth thought. Her sister disagreed, so she gathered the stuff.

"Don't get too close," shouted Marabeth from the bank. "That stuff could swallow you whole."

"You don't feel it, do you?" Tara eased closer to the surface. "I think you lost your brains as well as your heart when you met that Cordin."

"What's bothering you now?" Marabeth had grown used to Tara's abuses but today they'd become especially tiresome. With Tara older, it gave her the position of authority, so Marabeth tried not to complain.

"The power has left this place." Tara tossed her red hair over her shoulder and pulled closer to examine it.

"The star?" Marabeth hadn't realized it before, but power no longer ebbed from the void. In fact, it appeared to be dying. "But how?"

"You are brain dead." Tara flew over to the shore and jerked Marabeth from the bank. "The shifter is responsible, and that mortal she toted."

"But how was it retrieved? This isn't possible." Marabeth wrung her pale hands together. "To gain such of thing from the stench of death couldn't be done?"

"It's possible. I didn't believe anyone had to courage to face death or the luck to find the star, but it is possible."

Marabeth looked at the blackness while Tara leaned over, sticking her hand into the ooze. It was risky, but Tara pulled her hand from the muck and slung off the residue with no harm to her flesh. Their powerful pool had been reduced to the equivalent of mud.

"You shouldn't do that, sister," started Marabeth. "There could still be pockets of power in the midst."

"Please. What do you know?" Tara pushed by Marabeth. "You realize what we have to do now?"

"I think we should go home and be content." Marabeth sat on the ground and looked at her older sister. The desire for power had warped Tara, although she had never had a pure heart. "There is no point in risking anything more for power."

"You've never had your goals in order, sister."

Marabeth shot her eyes up at Tara. "Perhaps you've been too obsessed by them."

"Are you questioning me?" Tara raised her hands, preparing to hurt Marabeth.

"Of course not. Relax. I just think that our business here is finished. We should go home." Marabeth rolled her eyes, knowing this wouldn't end well.

"No, we have business with the human and the shifter." Tara's eyes gleamed. "I will not be made a fool of."

"Tara, do we have to attack them again?" Marabeth rubbed her eyes. She'd grown tired of her sister ranting. "Let's go home."

“Do you fear the shifter?”

“Only a fool wouldn’t.” Marabeth regretted her words immediately. “Shifters are a powerful foe. Underestimating anyone could be a costly error.”

“A fool am I?” Tara’s cheeks grew pink while her jaw clenched between words.

Tara raised her hands again and this time Marabeth saw the rocks and sticks flying towards her. She could’ve moved or levitated above the onslaught. It would’ve made matters worse though, so she let them rain down on her. The pain was immense as rocks struck her head and shoulders but she never cried out, only sat there silently.

Marabeth was used to Tara’s fits of temper. They came whenever she thought Marabeth was questioning her. The worse had come the night she’d told Tara she was leaving. Marabeth had never made that mistake again.

“Are you finished?” asked Marabeth as the last stones hit the dirt around her. She felt a few drops of blood trickle from a wound on her head.

“Only if you’ve learned your lesson.”

“I have, Tara.”

The night Marabeth threatened to leave had been terrible. She’d found the love of her life just a week before but Cordin had rejected her. For love, she thought she could turn over a new leaf. Most of the darkness in her heart had been put there by Tara, still when the moment came to leave, Marabeth couldn’t do it. Even when Tara felt she was losing control, she knew how to affect Marabeth. Her threats had been clear from the first time. If Marabeth left, Tara would kill Cordin.

It sounded like an idol threat but Marabeth knew better. Witches were tricky animals. Many a man had been poisoned by invisible hands sliding powder into his drink or come to an unfortunate accident when no one was around to see.

Not many would tolerate a witch anyway. Even if she seduced Cordin and took him as a mate, soon he’d grow to hate her too. It was a nasty curse of sorts. Everyone feared and hated witches, no amount of magic would change that.

Marabeth realized that she would live out her life without a mate. For an immortal creature the thought easily depressed her. At least she had Tara. Her sister may not be the most pleasant person, but at least she’d never leave her.

“Come. I have the taste for murder.” Tara looked excited. Battle always influenced her so.

“Yes, sister.”

Chapter Twelve

Lynn reached down and fondled Vincent, causing his cock to engorge. Vincent tried to control himself but Lynn was a difficult woman and they would be at her home shortly.

“Please take me back?” Vincent tried to turn his attention from his rising urges. “This isn’t the way to the flyers.”

“Shh. Don’t worry.” The wicked mouth went back to his ear. “I’ll take good care of you.”

He had no doubt that she would take care of him but he had to consider Anzele, although she was hard to picture at the moment. “I need to get to my bride.”

“Then hope you’re a good boy so I can return you to her.” She let out a low laugh. “You’re good, right?”

Their flight path lowered. Vincent knew he only had a minute to do something before she was near the caves and the jagged rocks. He loosened his grip, then turned Lynn’s face to meet his.

“Do you want me that much?” Vincent steadied himself, managing to gain a little space between their bodies.

“I want you. My people want what you carry.”

So that had been her intention. She’d saved him because the shifters wanted the star. They would surely kill him on arrival or turn him into some kind of toy for this creature.

“If that’s your plan, don’t go to the caves yet,” whispered Vincent. “They won’t give us time alone once you get me there. Let’s take some time now. It would be better to know each other first.”

“What about your betrothed?”

“If I’m so tempted by you, maybe she isn’t the right one for me.” He pressed his hardness against her. “I am very tempted. Can’t you tell?”

She smiled with eager eyes. “Very well.” She stopped flying and glided to the forest below. “I know you are trying to escape me. It’s a poor plan. I can be any creature and easily out maneuver you.” She landed and took a step from him, taking him in with her eyes.

“So you saved me from the void to get the star for your people. Why didn’t you just steal it from me?”

“Shifters can’t touch the star. It is rumored to kill us.” She let the appearance of clothes fade to bare skin. “Surely you don’t intend to kill me with that thing in your bag.”

“Of course not. You saved my life, I can’t very well take yours.” Vincent doubted he could get the star out before one of her bird creatures snapped him up. “Can you lose the wings too?” asked Vincent.

“But I thought flyers pleased you.” She flapped her wings.

“No. You please me.” He smiled and looked her over. “Couldn’t you tell when you were carrying me?”

She stepped closer, letting her naked body touch his clothed one. The wings vanished, leaving smooth skin where they had begun. He reached around her, taking her into his arms.

To hold her, she felt no different than any other woman. She was very different though, and dangerous. If he tried to escape too soon, then she'd shift into a beast he couldn't escape from.

In the back of his mind, he could feel Anzele. She was jealous, in fact, she was furious. Something else was happening. There was wind and height. She flew with Cordin, Setiar, and Liking. They were coming to his rescue.

"Lynn, can you change into anything?" Vincent couldn't imagine that ability. One day he could be a horse or an eagle. He tried to focus on that, focus on anything but the woman touching him.

"Yes," she licked her lips wickedly. "Do you have a fantasy? I don't mind contorting into anything you desire."

"No fantasy. I was just curious. You seem so delicate now, then you turn vicious in a heartbeat." He slid his hands down her back, then eased the sack off his shoulder. "So very dangerous."

He dropped the sack containing the star into the bushes. The star was what each of them was after. He'd come too far to lose it now. The fate of the world stayed in his hands, not to mention Anzele's hopes.

"Are you afraid of me?" Her body moved against his again.

"A little."

She kissed him, and he let her. Her lips were soft, the softest things he'd ever felt and when she darted her tongue into his mouth, he responded in kind. It was so hard not to enjoy the feeling of Lynn against him. The very taste of her was intoxicating.

Please hurry Anzele, he thought.

Lynn pulled his shirt away, tossing it to the ground. "That's better." She pressed her body against his, letting him feel her body before her mouth followed, kissing his chest and stopping at the edge of his pants.

"Wait," he said breathless. "How do I know you're not just doing this to get the star?"

"You want proof that you excite me." She took his hand and slipped it between her thighs, pushing one finger into her part. "Can you feel? Besides, I might take the bag from you this close to the cave."

His consciousness screamed against it but he let her slide his finger inside anyway. It exhilarated his senses. Her muscles moved against his finger, tightening, then relaxing. She moved one side of her vaginal wall, petting, stroking, then moved the entire muscle in a massage.

"I can give you much pleasure. Imagine the sensations I could provide." She tightened against his finger. "Think about it."

She reached to his pants and fondled him, then let her lower muscles roll against his finger. The muscles gripped, pulling. It amazed him. Without realizing, he slid another finger inside, moving it just enough to make her moan.

"How would that feel against the real you?" She pulled his fingers away. "I'm not finger food. I require more substance."

She unfastened his pants while Vincent checked the sky. With no sign of them, he wasn't sure how long he could stall. Her mouth was on his abdomen while she unzipped his pants. It drove him crazy. He couldn't let her mouth go any farther south or Anzele would never forgive him.

Vincent pulled her to her feet, put her back to a tree, and kissed her. Her body relaxed in his arms. He was in control again and Lynn seemed to appreciate his aggressive behavior.

His hand went to her breasts. It was just too easy to give in to touching. A guilty little pleasure he indulged, as he caressed the soft flesh and let his fingers toy with her more delicate tips. He wanted to kiss them, taste them, but the thought of Anzele kept his behavior in check.

Everything about her instantly reacted to his body. As his fingers traced her nipples, her breathing grew faster. She lifted one leg, wrapping it around his body and bringing him closer.

“Why do you tease me so?” she asked.

“I want to learn what pleases you. That takes time and makes for better love making.”

When he looked again, four shapes drew closer against the moonlit sky, hardly more than black dots. He lifted one arm, and waved behind Lynn’s back. She turned noting his distraction. Before she could get a clear look, he pressed his mouth to hers again then reached between her thighs, searching for her little button.

“Take me,” she breathed against his mouth.

“Not yet.”

He stroked her mercilessly, hearing her breathing rise. Her head tilted back against the tree with eyes closed. It happened faster than he’d expected. She gave in so easily to his touch.

As her back arched against him, he kissed her again. Those delightful nipples beckoned him and he dropped his mouth to her breasts. The tender flesh was irresistible. He was surprised at the sweetness of her, like honey candy. The taste was exhilarating as he filled his mouth with one breast, then the other. Her hand slid to the back of his head, urging him to continue. Even her nipples responded like a real woman’s hardening with each flick of his tongue. Soon her legs shook, and then a small moan came.

“Oh Vincent,” she breathed her body rocking against him.

The flyers came in fast with Anzele in the lead. He pulled his finger away when the flyers landed. Lynn reached for him again, hunger in her eyes. Three flyers surrounded her, as Vincent stepped back.

“What is this?” she screamed, finally coming out of her sex induced stupor.

“Me getting away,” replied Vincent.

Standing a few feet away was Anzele. Her eyes looked glassy. She was angry but relieved and a million other things Vincent could barely understand. He approached slowly, wondering which emotion she would ultimately choose.

“Can you forgive me?” Vincent asked.

Anzele wrapped her arms around him. “I’m just glad you made it back to me. Don’t ever do anything like that again.” She cut her eyes at him. “I also know you enjoyed that.”

“I tried not to let things go too far.” His cheeks felt hot. “Surely, you could feel how hard I fought it.”

“I also know how much you enjoyed it.” Anzele let out a low growl. “You know those creatures are all females. They take mates to get impregnated.”

“Please forgive me.” He got down on both knees and kissed her hand. “I was only trying to find a way back to you.” He kissed each knuckle on her hand. “I didn’t have sex with her.”

“I know what you did. Believe me, I know everything you did.” She smiled a little. “No more remarks about Liking, deal?”

“Deal. I won’t mention the kiss with Liking again.”

Liking turned at the mention of his name and so did Setiar, and Cordin. It was just enough distraction to give Lynn her edge. When their attention lapsed, she altered herself. Vincent caught sight of her body shifting, flexing in that strange way.

“Lookout,” called Vincent, but the warning came too late.

Lynn shrieked. Her body changed and the men couldn’t hold her. First Setiar was thrown. Liking held on a bit longer than Cordin, who was tossed into the air like a ball, but Liking, too, was thrown to the ground as Lynn changed to a war bird. To make matters worse, another cry came from the sky. The witches, Marabeth and Tara, had found them.

“The star has been stolen,” screamed Tara. “The void has lost its power. Return the star to us.”

Tara turned looking for her sister who had been beside her. Marabeth floated in midair on an enchanted limb above Cordin. No one could mistake the strange way those two stared at each other. Vincent didn’t understand what was happening between them but it was clear they had unfinished business.

There was more trouble in the sky than the witches. A shadow took Vincent’s attention from Cordin and Marabeth. He watched all this as the war bird, Lynn, flew high into the air, readying for attack.

“Give us the star and we’ll let you live,” spoke Tara. She glanced back at her sister who looked enchanted. “Marabeth? Would you forget him and help me here?” Tara swirled rocks and started pelting Lynn. “Please Marabeth. Cordin doesn’t love you anymore.”

Lynn swooped down, dodging most of the rocks. The few that struck her seemed to do no damage. Lynn raised her claws. She cried out loudly as she came closer to Tara. A rock hit her between the eyes but couldn’t slow her attack. Tara realized too late what was happening. She turned to run but Lynn’s razor claws hooked Tara in the back, causing a long gouge to run her length. As Tara folded on the ground in agony, Lynn turned her attentions to Marabeth.

Cordin pulled Marabeth to the ground and out of Lynn’s immediate range. Tara was still alive, but blood ran heavily out of the gouges and onto the dirt. Lynn circled for another attack with eyes gleaming.

“Get out of here, Anzele,” called Vincent

“Hell no.” Her eyes looked intense, nearly as dangerous as Lynn’s had been. “This isn’t finished.”

Anzele went around Vincent and helped Liking up. The flyers got into attack position. Liking and Setiar had their hands out, with Anzele stepping into place behind them. Cordin positioned himself between Lynn and Marabeth. He seemed to be more interested in protecting Marabeth than fighting.

In an instant, Lynn plunged down. Her wings heaved wind around them as she swooped through, slicing the air above Marabeth. Cordin raised fire, followed by a

gripping force to hold her in place. Lynn was too strong dodging the fire and pulling free as Liking and Setiar also sent fire trying to consume the bird. One flap of her wings forced the flames back to the ground making all of them duck or risk being roasted.

Never had Vincent raised a hand against a woman but he'd seen what Lynn was capable of. He ran to the bushes where he'd deposited the star, opened the bag and pulled it out. It was still wrapped in cloth. He unwound it then went to Lynn.

"Leave them be, Lynn. I've never killed a woman and I don't want today to be the first time." He held the star up. Its double-edged blade shined in the bright moonlight. "I will destroy you if you do not let us leave."

"Would you really harm me?" She shifted back to the beautiful woman he'd been with. "I think you'll find my body more pleasing than any flyers. So much more pleasing." She cut her gaze at Anzele.

Liking and Cordin took a step forward hoping to catch Lynn in a moment of weakness. She started shifting again making them rethink their position. Neither attacked, as wicked claws appeared. Lynn had already proven herself a greater adversary than they'd imagined. Anzele came forward but Liking grabbed her, stopping her advance.

"Lynn, things don't have to be this way." Vincent held the star like a knife but couldn't help thinking of the taste of honey candy when he looked at her. "Please Lynn." He pushed the thought away. "I don't want to kill you, but I will."

"Vincent, look out," called Liking.

The flyers moved in to help him but the shifters were too fast. There was more than Lynn to contend with now. Three other women appeared behind Vincent, forming from nothing more than gnats in the air. Vincent whirled around in time to see their bodies grow long and expand beyond that of the shifters to something more dangerous. One changed into a dragon while the second became another war bird, and the third a giant insect.

Anzele flared, then let out a fireball. Lynn moved out of the way but another shifter took the brunt, getting nailed in the head. Wind whirled around them. Vincent wasn't sure if it was the flyers or the witch that caused the windstorm.

He turned back to Lynn meaning to use her as a hostage but he couldn't keep his eyes on all of them at once. Liking swooped in but the dragon flattened him. Vincent slashed the star at the insect. One long skinny leg jerked out of the way in time, then moved strange mandibles clipping the air in front of Vincent. The insect held his attention while the dragon turned and hit Vincent soundly in the head. The scenery whirled around him. He gripped the star tightly, swung once then passed out.

* * * *

"Vincent," screamed Anzele as the dragon gripped him in a scaly hand and started into the air. The two war birds followed. The insects trailed last, flying backwards a long distance while watching them. "Vincent," she said again then realized no one was following the shifters. "We have to do something. We have to save Vincent." Anzele started to take off after them but Liking grabbed her.

"They are too powerful for us." Liking pulled her close, forcing her to look into his eyes. "They will kill you then where will your unta be?"

"I have to do something. They can't have him." Anzele started to rise in the air but Liking grabbed her around the waist. "Let me go."

“We’ll do much,” said Cordin. “We need to go to our land where we are stronger. There we can raise great magic.”

“Where are they taking Vincent?” Anzele struggled against Liking.

“They’re taking him back to their caves.” Liking pulled her to the ground. “They won’t kill him. At least not yet.”

Cordin looked at Marabeth then at Tara lying on the ground. “We just need a little help. What say you? Together, our magic with yours, we could stop them.”

“You want me to help you start a war with the shifters.” Marabeth looked at her sister, still lying in the dirt with blood pouring from her back. “Are you mad?”

“No. I’m afraid I’ve been too sane for too long.” He came closer to Marabeth. “Vincent risked his life to get the star, not to win Anzele’s affections. She loved him regardless of what or who he was. He did it just because he didn’t want her to marry beneath her. They have the unta, same as us. They managed to find a way to work through the differences.”

Marabeth looked at Cordin then to Anzele. When her eyes focused on Cordin again, they were sad, even glassy. She took a deep breath, putting her hands at her chest as if praying.

“I’m not asking you to love me, Marabeth. You’ve spent too long trying to block me from your life. All I’m asking is for you to do the right thing. If we merge our powers, then the shifters don’t have a chance. We could gather our energies on home soil then return for battle.”

“If not for you, then why should I help these strangers.” She twirled one long red strand around her finger. “Give me a reason.”

Cordin took another step forward. Without warning he pulled Marabeth into his arms, pinning one hand against her body and the other behind her. With his free hand, he pulled her hair, forcing her head back. Her face turned up to him. He licked his lips and kissed her. Everyone saw her knees weaken as Cordin held her in his arms.

“Do it for love?” Cordin whispered as he broke the kiss. “If not for ours, then for the hope that it still exists in others.”

When he released her, she looked pale. Cordin held her just enough to steady her. She seemed to lean against him, heavier than before, as if there were no muscle left in her body.

“I will do as you ask,” she finally murmured. “I will do it for you, not for the love of people I care nothing for.”

“Thank you, Marabeth.” Cordin brushed the hair from her face. “Thank you.”

“Will you help me tend to my sister, first?” Marabeth looked over at her sister lying in the dirt. “She won’t make it unless she receives help.”

“Of course we’ll help her.”

The group took to the air, each of the flyers soared easily. Marabeth rose on her tree branch. Cordin carried Tara over the mountains. She draped across his arms lifelessly. There was no sign of the shifters. They’d already gone home.

Anzele helped Cordin and Marabeth take Tara to the hospital the flyers had constructed in the village. They took her to a small room near Anzele’s and set her on a bed of leaves. There several more flyers began caring for her injuries, cleaning then bandaging them.

“She will heal if it’s possible.” Cordin watched the flyers tending her. “If infection sets in...”

“I know. She could die.” Marabeth looked at Cordin. “I know you don’t care for my sister. I felt your hatred of her when we parted ways.”

“If you care for her, then so do I.” Cordin put his arm around Marabeth. “Don’t fear for Tara’s safety here. My people would never harm the injured.” He smiled softly.

“There’s an extra bed here if you want to stay with your sister but you know you’re welcome in my home.”

Marabeth looked at Cordin. Unshed tears filled her eyes. She leaned in to him as he wrapped both arms around her. Something seemed to pass between them, as if their unta rekindled.

“Do we even have a chance?” asked Marabeth.

“That is up to you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Vincent's head ached. He looked around. Rock walls surrounded him. There was a small fire in the center, with an opening in the top of the cave to vent the smoke. No door was visible or any exit point for that matter. The opening in the top was too small for anything more than bugs to fly in and out of. He'd been placed on a blanket with a pillow under his head. Whatever had knocked him out had to be hard, because blood dotted the pillow's surface.

"Hello," his voice echoed back at him.

He was only partially dressed. His shirt long lost from Lynn's little excursion. Somehow he'd held onto the star. It was lying next to him shimmering in the firelight. There was beauty in its sleek design with brilliant silver blue blade. It had a knife handle, but he couldn't decide what it was made from. The handle felt smooth and light but wasn't wood or bone. The blade came to a point with double sides running its length.

"Anzele," he whispered into the cave.

There was no response. In fact there was no sound at all. He couldn't feel her either. It felt as if they'd been cut off from each other. Perhaps she was sleeping. He wished he knew for sure.

Vincent tried to stand but it made his head hurt more. He couldn't recall exactly what had happened. The last thing he remembered was being surrounded by shifters and the flyers readying an attack. It made him wonder who had won the battle.

"Are you awake?" Anzele came in, swinging a stone wall that seemed to move on a pivot in the center. "Wonderful."

"Anzele?" He managed to stand, with great difficulty, and went to her. He couldn't believe it. "Where are we? Are you okay?" He held her tightly, kissing her head.

"I'm fine. We're at a little hide out spot. We need to stay here until Cordin comes up with a way to destroy the star."

"Destroy it? I thought he was going to use it to help the world heal." Vincent touched his head again. Thinking hurt. "Can I speak to Cordin?"

"Did you like the shifters, Vincent?" Anzele looked up at him with so much tenderness, the concerns vanished from his mind. "Be honest with me. I won't be upset."

"Don't be jealous, Anzele. You know there's no one else for me. From the moment I saw you in the woods, I was in love. Your sweet face was looking desperately for help. I'm just glad I was there to claim you as mine."

Anzele cocked her head at her him and held a quizzical expression. "Why did you do it?"

"The thought of you being forced to marry against your will sounded awful. If a little lie about us could save you, then what was the harm. I fell in love with you." Vincent pulled her tightly against his body. "Besides, you are going to marry me, right?"

"Of course." Anzele led him back to the fire. She laid down on his blanket and motioned for him to join her. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay. A little sore but fine." He touched his head again. Parts of his hair were wet with blood, but the wound didn't seem too bad. The blood wasn't flowing. "What happened?"

“Let’s not worry about that now.” She rolled onto her side, saw the star sitting where Vincent had dropped it, then scooted away a few inches. “The star scares me a little. Vincent, would you mind putting it somewhere else.”

“Sure.” He picked it up and set it on a rock ledge towards the top of the wall. “How’s that?”

“Great.” She rolled her finger for him to come closer. “Will you lay with me?” She stretched her arms to him.

“Gladly.” His arousal grew. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Vincent eased onto the blanket next to her. She was so beautiful in the firelight. They were finally together and soon married. Things would be fine. Deep down inside Vincent had known they would be. The good guys were always supposed to win.

“I’ve missed you so much.” She pressed her lips to his. “So very much.” She kissed him again letting her tongue dart into his mouth.

The kiss was exquisite but there was something different about it. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but the taste of her or something was unusual. It didn’t matter. His head still hurt. It was probably making things a little off. He had the woman he loved in his arms and after his run in with Lynn, he was happy to entertain Anzele’s advances.

“I have missed you.” He kissed her again. “So very much.”

He felt hungry, pulling her closer to him and consuming her with kisses. Never in his life had he wanted someone so much. His hands ran over her body, taking in her curves, feeling the cloth on her skin. Vincent reached to unfasten her top but she stopped him.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered into his ear. “You’ve been injured. Let me please you this time.”

That sounded fine to him. He let her cover his eyes with her hand. In an instant she was naked, rubbing her body on his. He opened his eyes and watched her touch him.

He pulled her down, parting her legs so that she straddled him. The feeling of her wrapped around him was enchanting. With soft kisses he pulled her against him, rolling her to the side and sliding first one breast then the other into his mouth. Her fingers laced into his hair, urging him on.

His hands slid lower to her ass, pressing her body against his. Then he started going down, wanting, needing to taste her core again. He kissed her navel, letting his tongue and lips bring her to a fever pitch. Every inch was explored as his lips grazed her hips. She squirmed when he slid between her thighs. Just as he was going to be rewarded by the first lick of her tasty clit, she stopped him.

“No. I really want to please you.” She pulled away, guiding him back as she slid between his thighs. Slowly, she licked her lips and started to unfasten his pants. “Will you let me?”

Vincent nodded. He knew Anzele had never tried this before. He wasn’t sure what to expect but wasn’t about to stop her, either. It was nice to know that she was open to pleasing him in every way. Perhaps she had picked up Lynn’s intentions from earlier.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” He reached down trying to touch the soft breasts dangling against his leather covered legs.

“I think I can manage.” She looked up at him. “Tell me if I do something wrong.”

She pulled his pants down to his mid thighs and shoved him onto his back. It prevented him from getting up but he didn’t see any reason to move. Then she went to his abdomen, kissing and licking. She explored each hipbone as he had done to her, then let

her interests fall below. Her mouth was gentle, her tongue so warm as she traced the outline of his cock.

“Oh, Anzele,” he moaned against the warm wet sensation. “You’re very surprising.”

His body tingled as her mouth took part of him, suckling gently only to pull away and lick again. Her mouth went low, to the sensitive skin making him moan again as she lapped at him.

That’s when he noticed something very wrong. Not only did she act like she knew what she was doing, but when she looked up at him, her eyes flared silver not the purple color Anzele’s eyes had done before.

“Anzele? Your eyes?”

That’s when she took him fully into her mouth. He gasped as she managed the entirety of him between those soft lips. Her tongue seemed incredibly long, sliding down and lapping, wrapping around his balls, dipping beneath in erotic teases nearly to his anus, much farther that normal tongue couldn’t reach. He tried again to protest but she started working up and down causing a friction that swallowed his words.

“Stop,” he finally said. “Please.” His mind whirled, his breath came in hard rasps. He was unable to find the will to pull her off. It felt too good. “Please.”

“Are you ready to give me a ride?” She looked up grinning and hungry with desire.

Her voice sounded like Anzele’s but the words weren’t things Anzele would say. He also couldn’t imagine Anzele knowing how to manipulate a man in such ways. It had to be Lynn. Still, in this cave, part of him wondered what harm there would be if he gave in to temptation. He couldn’t feel Anzele, so she may never know.

“Lynn, get up from there.”

“How dare you call me that name?” She looked upset but Vincent knew it was from being discovered. “Do you long for her?” She slid her tongue down his length again.

“Oh Lynn,” he moaned. “Damn, that feels good.” He felt his body pulsing. This had to be stopped before he lost it. “Please Lynn.”

“Stop calling me that.”

Her temporary protest caused enough of a gap in the sensations for Vincent to protest again. Even then his words were weak. He shut his eyes from the graphic display hoping his ability to think would return.

“Sweet, sweet Lynn,” he gasped then forced himself out of the stupor. “Lynn, your disguise is almost perfect except Anzele’s eyes flare differently and I don’t believe she knows the same art you do.” He sucked in his breath while she took him in her mouth again. This time she didn’t bother going slow. Her wet tongue wrapped around his base and began an amazing rolling massage. “Please Lynn.”

He reached down not truly wanting the encounter to end but knowing it had to. Even as he pushed Lynn off and the wet tongue left him, he regretted the decision. It took a full minute before he could hoist his pants back into place.

“Fine.” She stood in the cave. “What’s the harm?” Her fake exterior faded to the solid black lady she truly was. “Did I not feel good? Were you not wanting me to finish even after you realized I wasn’t Anzele?”

Vincent looked at her for a long moment. These creatures were marvelous things. He had to wonder how many times Lynn had seduced a lone traveler. In any form she was exquisite.

He took a deep breath. "Is it true there are no men here?" He didn't care but he felt awkward and any conversation would help him get his mind off her mouth.

"None. Just me and my sisters." She took a step forward and came towards him. "Don't get any ideas. I'm not sharing you." She knelt next to him and reached one dark hand across his thigh.

"So you find a lonesome man for propagation?" He felt hot. The cave felt too stuffy, too closed in.

"There aren't many of us left. I suppose it would be good if I were to be impregnated." She smiled and found him through his pants. "Sometimes it takes several tries.

"How many are left?" His breath hitched as her hand swept across his lap again pushing his resolve to the breaking point.

"Ten. Just four of us are in the mating cycle." She crawled into his lap. "The cycle comes every five years. It's a little like madness. Very hard for us to control our urges."

"How many times have you mated?" Vincent grabbed her hands before she could start with her torments again.

"Twice before. One resulted in pregnancy. It was a boy so he was turned out to the world." Sorrow filled Lynn's eyes and Vincent wished he could ease her pain.

"Why not keep a male among you?"

"The boys are strange. They grow looking human but more times than not, they go insane by their twentieth year. The boys we find dead, self inflicted. They do not come to happy ends."

"Why don't you try keeping a mate? You might find it more satisfying than brief encounters."

"Are you offering to stay here with me?" She smiled running her hand over his chest.

"No. You know I am taken, but there are many men out there. Maybe one could give you a daughter."

"I'm sorry you find me so unappealing." She jerked her hand away. "I could easily hate you, Vincent."

Lynn got off his lap and started walking away. He was being stupid again. She was his way out. If she was willing to use him for a child then he could use her for an escape route.

"Wait. Can Anzele feel what I'm doing in here?" Vincent felt a pang of guilt.

"No. That's why I brought you here. There are several places bonds can't be felt. This is one of them." She smiled. "I couldn't very well please you if you could feel her a hundred miles away."

"Let me leave here with the star, and I will make you a deal." He pulled her back into his lap, putting his hand between her thighs. "I believe we can work something out."

"What sort of deal?" She guided his hand higher, placing it where it pleased her most.

"Will you help me sneak away?" He extended his finger again. "I have to sneak away." The one finger circled inside her.

She bit her bottom lip and looked at him. "If the terms of our arrangement are right, then I will help you."

“Then let us discuss them.” He added a second finger. “Will you do that for me?” There was no reply. “I want you to promise me, Lynn.” He found her spot and watched her body tremble. “Promise me.”

Lynn arched against his touch. “Please me first and I will decide.” She brought her hips lower. “Take my pleasures or leave them, but I cannot think.” She started to morph into a human female again.

“No. I want to watch you the way you are, in your shifter form. You are beautiful.” He kissed the side of her face. “So very beautiful.” He touched the black breasts. This time they didn’t feel like human skin but heavy silk. “And so very soft.”

“Do anything you like to me, Vincent. You know I want you but I won’t tempt you again.”

She raised her back, positioning her breasts higher. He couldn’t resist tasting them in this form. The flavor of honey was heavier, almost overwhelming as he indulged on her body. The feeling against his tongue reminded him of cloth covered skin.

He started moving his fingers harder within her, letting her bow and squirm in his lap. He moved his hand faster until she moaned and her body shuddered. She buried her head against his chest.

“Now do something for me.” He said and wiped his mouth. Part of him wished he could have her at least once, but he knew doing anymore would destroy his hopes to be with Anzele.

“I will do anything you wish,” she breathed. “What form would you have me take?”

Chapter Fourteen

The churning of the old magic was hard to do. Cordin and Marabeth sat in the pit of the sacred fires, working to raise enough power to defeat the shifters. Liking, Setiar and Anzele sat to the side, watching and waiting.

“Do you have any idea what they’ll do to Vincent?” whispered Liking. He sat a little too close to Anzele. “I’ve heard tales of their abilities.” His giggles raked Anzele’s nerves. “They pursue their desires with determination and can do the most wicked things with their tongue.”

“Shut up, Liking,” remarked Setiar. “Anzele’s suffered enough without hearing your wild tales.”

“It’s the truth. I’ve heard their lips are softer than anything. Never mind the rest of their anatomy.” He leaned to Anzele again. “I wonder what he’s doing right now. Do you think Lynn kept him for herself or do you think the brood is taking turns with him?”

“Liking,” warned Setiar. “You should be focusing on gathering strength not tormenting Anzele.”

“He will be faithful if he can.” Anzele looked to the sky. She still couldn’t feel him. Maybe the shifters were disrupting their connection. “If he cannot, he will still return to me and we will be bound.”

“How can you be so sure? When we attack to retrieve the star, he may fight for their side.” Liking’s eyes flared at this thought. “I’ve heard they can manipulate every part of their bodies. How can you possibly satisfy a man after that?”

“You repulse me, Liking.”

Anzele tried to find her center and ignore Liking. Cordin told her to use every available moment to harness her strength. Magic came from the inner force and she had yet to truly tap it. It ebbed and flowed in her core, locked behind a door she didn’t have access to.

Concentration wasn’t easy with so many troubles plaguing her mind. Even when she managed to center her being, only a trickle of magic came out. She sensed something holding her back, something more than half-breed status.

She needed to gain control of her powers. Cordin had taught her much, but the essence of magic was left for her to discover. Besides, if there were a battle, Lynn would not survive it. Anzele was sure she knew enough to destroy her.

“I might not repulse you after Vincent comes back, if he comes back. Will you still want him after spending many nights with so many different lovers?” He sneered. “I’ve heard they take turns. How civilized?”

“He will remain faithful, if he can. If not, then I still want him.”

“Faithful often loses against so much pleasure.” He looked at Anzele a long time. “Did Vincent please you, Anzele? Was he able to give you pleasure or did he come up short?”

This made her smile but her cheeks didn’t burn red. She wanted Liking to know she’d slept with Vincent. He was to be her husband and there was nothing obscene about making love to your husband.

“I enjoyed him very much. He’s the perfect man for me.”

“How do you know what is truly pleasurable if you’d not been with one of your own kind?”

“I know what I liked, and I like Vincent.” Her smile broadened and she looked Liking in the eyes. “We are unta and it makes for an incredible union.” She tossed her head back and let out a low moan. “He is incredible.”

“Unta, huh? Then what is he doing right now?” Liking studied her. “Do you sense his pleasure, taste the woman he’s with? How close are you and Vincent now? Are you excited?”

“Shut up, Liking.” Setiar’d had enough and walked to the other side of the fires.

“Get away from me, Liking.” Anzele looked back to the sky. “Besides, something is blocking our tie. I can’t feel Vincent at all.”

“The shifters do that before mating. They’ve broken untas before. I’ve heard they can shift into any form. Vincent might be making love to a whole new version of Anzele right now. One he might grow to want more than the original.”

“You are a worm, Liking.”

“Anzele, Liking, Setiar, let’s sleep now. Tomorrow we will be refreshed enough for attack.” Cordin stretched, working tired muscles in his back. “We should go toward evening for the best chance of success. When the moon rises, we will be ready.”

“As you wish,” said Liking sarcastically. “Waiting another night might be a good idea. So much can happen in a night.”

He winked at Anzele who shot out a single dart of fire, catching the seat of his pants on fire. Liking jumped around then began scooting across the ground on his butt like a dirty animal.

“Save it, you two. We will need all our power tomorrow.” Cordin looked at Marabeth and smiled. “Tomorrow, we will have success.”

Anzele looked back at Cordin and Marabeth. They didn’t make a move to leave. Perhaps the two were rekindling a spark of their love. That would be a sweet ending, if Cordin could finally trust Marabeth enough to bind with her. Maybe after all this time, her heart had changed.

She sighed at the thought. True love needed to work out. Believing otherwise hurt her sense of right and wrong. Anzele tried to put it out of her mind. Wanting others to love, so her sense of loneliness would fade, couldn’t help matters.

Setiar was the first down the path. He seemed more annoyed with Liking than usual. Their friendship had been strong at one time but this turmoil over her had strained them to the breaking point.

She felt a little guilty over being the center of such a rift between friends, but Liking had made his choices. Surely Setiar could see that the man he’d once called friend wasn’t the same one that taunted her.

Anzele would have her own trust issues to deal with when Vincent returned. She had to think of it as when, instead of if. Although, she had heard tales of shifter’s skills when it came to mating. Surely Vincent would come back to her no matter what tempted him.

Vincent would probably sleep with at least one of the shifters. She didn’t like the thought, but there was little she could do about it. As long as he lived, she supposed she could forgive whatever transgression he’d committed.

As she walked along the path toward the stone hospital, something strange came to her. It was Vincent. She could feel him again. It was a beautiful feeling, like hearing an

old friend's voice or a soft touch between lovers. He was on his way back to her and he was close.

Her heart leapt in her throat. *Could he really be coming back?* She'd feared a thousand things, and even more after Liking had teased her. Her unta was coming back though and so was he.

She looked up into the sky. The sun was starting to rise, not showing its colors yet, but making the night a slightly brighter shade of black. Anzele found Vincent coming toward her. A war bird, no doubt Lynn, carried him. She held him gently in her claws, nearly cradling him.

The two landed, with Anzele watching. Vincent was dropped to the ground then Lynn lowered herself, transforming as she went into her normal form. *Had the two come to tell Anzele that Vincent would be with her? If he was staying in the village, then what deal had he made in order to get transportation here?*

"Vincent?"

Anzele looked at him hopeful and terrified all at once. There was too much emotion for her to feel him clearly. She'd have to wait until he spoke his intentions on life with her or the shifter.

"Yes, my love." Vincent started walking to her. He wore no shirt and had the star tucked into the back of his pants. "Lynn was good enough to bring me back to you. I told her that no one would harm her if she brought me."

Lynn approached quietly behind. "Please forgive me, Anzele." She lowered her head.

"Have you two been together?" Anzele didn't like the arrangement. Her temper flared along with her eyes. She wanted to send fire through this things head and watch Lynn's body explode. "Well?"

Vincent smiled. "I think I like to see you jealous." He hugged her, then turned his sights back to Lynn. "Thank you my dear. You saved my life twice. May you accomplish your goals."

"And I thank you for all your help. Perhaps my good deeds will be rewarded." Lynn looked at Anzele then down the beach. "Is it this way?"

"You didn't answer me," interrupted Anzele. "I have the right to know."

"I will answer in time. There's one thing I need to know first." Vincent started looking around.

"What?" Anzele didn't like these games.

"Where is Liking?" asked Vincent with a mischievous edge.

"On his way to his home. His family built him one near the beach since his binding has been broken." Anzele crossed her arms across her chest and cut her eyes at Lynn.

"I will take Anzele from here. You do as you please, just remember Anzele's eyes flare purple."

"I will." She stepped forward and kissed Vincent on the cheek whispering something in his ear. "Thank you."

Lynn started off down the beach. Vincent turned his sights back to Anzele. She didn't like the relationship those two seemed to have. Perhaps Liking had been right about shifters.

"What is all this about?" Anzele had never felt so furious.

“Come here my sweet.” He pulled Anzele into his arms. “Can you and I go away from here?”

“Where would you wish to go?” Anger filled her, but the thought of being with Vincent sounded good enough for her to put the emotion aside.

“Let’s go back to that waterfall.”

“Why is that woman going to Liking’s home?” As Anzele watched, it began to make sense. The early light showed Lynn shift into an identical version of Anzele. “Why is she doing that? Why does she look like me?”

“Take me to the waterfall and I will explain everything to you.”

Anzele didn’t like being given ultimatums but curiosity got the better of her. She lifted her and Vincent into the air. In a few minutes they were flying back to the place where they’d made love. It was deserted and beautiful.

As they landed, she felt Vincent’s arms grip her especially tight. It felt like tree branches wrapped around her. He had missed her. Whatever his indiscretions had been, she had been on his mind.

“Now tell me what’s going on.” Anzele felt her anger ease but didn’t want to show it yet. “Did you sleep with her?”

“I had to make a deal with Lynn. In exchange for certain things, she agreed to bring me and the star safely here.”

“What things?” Anzele crossed her arms and waited.

“She wants a child, a girl. I wanted freedom but because of our impending marriage, I couldn’t father one. She did, however, do a great impersonation of you so I had an idea of a better way to make us both happy.”

“You sent her to Liking as me so he’d mate with her.” Anzele wasn’t sure how to feel about it. Part of her was disgusted with the idea, the other found it rather humorous after putting up with his taunting all day.

Vincent grinned wickedly. “Yes. I don’t like him. I don’t like the fact that he wants you or tried to take you from me. What’s the harm if he spends a night with what he thinks is you?”

Anzele raised an eyebrow. “Tomorrow he will want me again. Things could get very complicated if he thinks we’ve made love the night before.”

“No.” He squeezed her again. “I’ve thought of that, too. I couldn’t very well have Liking wanting you and thinking you two could be together. Lynn promised to reveal her identity when they were through.”

Anzele breathed a sigh of relief. “You really didn’t sleep with her?”

“No, I didn’t, although I have to confess, it was pretty close. I woke in a cave and she came to me looking like you. She even sounded like you.” Vincent shook his head in disbelief. “The resemblance was amazing.”

“How did you know it wasn’t me?” Anzele sat on the rock with Vincent sliding next to her.

“I’d rather not say.” He looked at the water. “Something did happen in the cave.” He swallowed hard. “I also convinced her of my plan on leaving, in a sexual way.” He looked at her. “I repeated what happened when I distracted her from your arrival the first time.”

“Oh,” she had felt his enjoyment at watching Lynn. “Tell me what happened in the cave.” She touched his face. “I want to know how you knew it wasn’t me.”

"Her eyes flared silver. I remember the lovely purple yours were." He sighed. "You do have the most wonderful eyes."

"There's something else. What is it?" Anzele sensed him hiding something, trying to put it in the back of his mind.

"She did something to me I knew you didn't know how to do." Vincent looked at her and smiled. "It doesn't matter. I just want this part of our lives behind us." He looked concerned. "You still want to have a binding, right?"

"My feelings haven't changed."

"Good." He relaxed. "For a minute, I thought you didn't want me."

"What happened in the cave?" Anzele was more than a little curious. "I mean I understand the deal you made, but you haven't told me what I don't know how to do."

"Maybe I'll show you." Vincent kissed her cheek. "If you'll let me." He started kissing down her neck. "I've missed you so much. There's no way you'll understand how much I want you."

"You liked her better, didn't you?" She shrugged away from Vincent. "I've heard the stories. They are hard to refuse."

"No." Vincent pulled back and rolled his eyes. "Why do you think she took your form? It's because she knew it was the only form that could seduce me."

"And now she's with Liking."

"Does that bother you?" Vincent eyed her and took on a defensive air.

"A little because he thinks it's me. As long as he knows it's Lynn when they finish, I'll be fine." She shivered thinking about Liking looking down on her likeness, doing things to a version of herself.

"Then, if all is fine, I'd like to bathe." He seemed upset. "As long as it doesn't offend you."

He took the star from his waistband and placed it on the rocks, then stripped off his clothes and dove head first into the water. Anzele watched him. He was a beautiful male. She shouldn't be surprised another would want him. When he came up from the center of the pond, with water glistening on his flesh, she too wanted him.

"What did Lynn do?" Anzele put one foot into the pond and splashed Vincent with water. Hearing his adventures with another woman troubled her, but if there was something he found pleasing, then she also needed to know it.

"Come into the water." He bit his bottom lip and looked as if something serious was on his mind. "I've missed you."

He seemed to blush then dove beneath the water again. Vincent appeared to enjoy toying with her. Still she couldn't imagine what a shifter could do that she could not, unless Lynn opened up a new orifice.

Anzele watched him come up then back down. He was amazing in the water, propelling himself through it with precision. When he came up again with wet hair and radiant skin, she knew she had to have him. It didn't matter if he'd been with a hundred other women. He belonged to her now.

"Hmm," she said watching him. "Swim, coerce shifters, is there anything you can't do?" She looked at him, seeing each line in his body. Every muscle in his chest caught her eye down to his broad shoulders. "Tell me, what is it Lynn did?"

He shook a finger at her then dove beneath the water causing ripples to dance across the surface and splatter the rock. A little water made it high enough to hit her, splashing her legs.

There was nothing she wanted more than to be with him. Anzele stripped away her clothing. She didn't dive into the center but waded along the side avoiding the deepest parts. She watched Vincent's smooth outline rushing towards her. He popped above the water and kissed her deeply.

"You are avoiding the subject," she managed, when she'd caught her breath. "I want to know what she did."

"We are going to be married. You will learn everything, in time." His thumb traced her jaw line. "There's no one in the world that makes me happier than you."

She looked at him. Water ran down his chest in droplets. Part of her wanted to lean over and kiss a few away. Perhaps that was the secret of love making, doing what she'd desired. So she leaned over and touched her mouth to his chest, licking away a few drops as she kissed.

"Please teach me, Vincent." Her tongue danced across his chest. "Please." She noticed him poking her in the water and knew she would win this game.

"Fine. I will show you if you let me make love to you."

"I don't know if I want you to touch me after being with a shifter." She smiled coyly.

"I thought you'd say that." He came close, pressing his body against hers. She could feel the part beneath the water ready for action. "The problem is this, I have remained loyal to you throughout a great deal of temptation, almost died on a quest to please you, and have only one want. I want to make love to my wife."

She looked at him with cutting eyes but couldn't hide the grin or her own building desires. He was incredible. Feeling him pressed against her body made her forget the hell they'd been through.

"I guess I will have to seduce you," he said against her ear and she felt her breathing get faster and a spark of want surge of up her thighs.

"Teach me what pleasures you." She touched him and found it arousing. It amazed her how much she enjoyed the feeling of his skin beneath her fingertips. "A wife should know some things."

"Come." He took her to the rocks, then to the edge where softer moss padded the area. "Lay down." He whispered kissing her throat. "We will learn about pleasure together. That is what a husband and wife should do. When you like something, tell me. When you don't, tell me. Don't be shy. There's only you and me here and my only desire is to satisfy you."

"First show me what Lynn did. It seemed to please you."

"Very well." He kissed down her body, hesitating at her hips. "Let's imagine this special part of you, your sweet slit, is like the part of me, my cock." He opened her thighs, spreading the lips that hid her button. When his lips made contact with her aching clit, suckling ever so slightly, she groaned.

"I understand."

She started to get up, wanting to bring him the same joys Lynn had, but he wouldn't let her move. His hands kept her in place. An insistent tongue lapped at her. He stayed between her thighs until she thought she'd lose her mind. There was no way to stop or

control the sensations filling her. He ruled her body with his mouth, that tongue diving into her mound, flicking her clit, and making every inch of her body crave more.

"Vincent," she moaned. "Please make love to me."

She hardly got the words out when the explosion took her, forced her to call his name as pleasure throbbed through her in waves from her slit. He nipped at her button while pleasure ran down her thighs.

"Vincent."

He didn't stop with her acknowledgment but seemed to grow wilder. His nibbles didn't stay at her center, but moved to her thighs and back to her stomach.

When he finally let her have her turn, she was crazed, feeling desire burning out of control. If Lynn could lick his cock then she could, too. He rose from between her thighs, lying on his side. Anzele wasted no time sliding down and taking the stiff shaft into her mouth. A drop of liquid held over the top. With a flick of her tongue she tasted it, delighting in his emission.

"Help me," she asked.

She licked his hardened flesh from tip to base then tried again to bring the engorged rod into her mouth. It was too large to swallow but he did help, pressing her head against him until she offered resistance.

Tasting him, made her juices flow, with the need to be filled. She wanted more than oral play. She wanted his body locked into hers but she didn't know when to stop suckling him.

"I need you, Anzele." He pushed her onto her back. "I want to take you like the animals do."

He motioned for her to roll over. When she complied he hoisted her onto her hands and knees, raising her ass into the air. She felt his body, then that sinfully sweet flesh on her thighs.

Before she had time to question he was inside her. He took two small thrusts before grabbing her by the hips and bringing his entire length into her. Anzele groaned, cried out in the most wonderful pain she'd ever experienced.

Vincent hesitated, but her body was too hungry to wait for him. She needed him deeper, driving her over that delicious edge. She thrust back and it was all the encouragement he needed. At once he pounded into her, his balls slapping against her ass as wave after wave flowed through her.

Anzele tried to inch back down, but he'd have no part of it. She relished the way her efforts were thwarted as he brought her higher, making each pump deeper and harder than the one before.

The pressures made her head swim and she thought she'd pass out as he curved against her. His body buried into her, hips flush against her backside. She cried out and heard him do the same as his seed filled her.

"I love you, Vincent."

She felt him nod against her back as they collapsed, holding each other. The two played games loving and making love, until the afternoon when they slept in the shade of a tree. Anzele felt like life was perfect. She didn't know all hell was getting ready to break loose.

Chapter Fifteen

“Vincent,” roared Liking as he swooped down from the clouds. Vincent woke just in time to see Liking, head down, coming toward him. He’d just gotten to his feet when Liking made contact, ramming into him.

Both men tumbled, rolling down the embankment to the rocks. Liking was on top for a moment, then Vincent flipped him. Even with the air knocked from him, Vincent threw a series of punches, landing Liking hard onto the rocks. Liking’s lip split open, blood trickling down.

“Liking, stop it,” screamed Anzele. “Vincent!”

They stood. Liking centered himself, eyes flaring ready to send fire into Vincent. Anzele started to scream a warning, but Vincent felt her worries and moved fast. He struck Liking in the stomach, breaking the build. Liking doubled over.

“Please stop it,” she cried.

“No, that bastard sent a shifter to me.” Liking stopped yelling and looked at Anzele lying naked under the tree. The rage in him seemed to dissipate, making his jaw go slack. “You’re beautiful.”

“Here,” Vincent tossed Anzele her clothes then slid on his things. “I think our time together has been troubled.”

Anzele slid behind the tree and started dressing. It wasn’t adequate cover but at least she wasn’t out in the open. Vincent didn’t like the way Liking’s eyes moved over his woman. It reminded Vincent of a lover’s stare making him believe Liking imagined making love to her. Of course he would. He’d lived the fantasy last night.

“Why did you do that?” Liking stood a foot from his face yelling while Vincent fastened his pants. “What would make you do such a thing?”

“You want to know why. You idiot. Let’s see where to begin. First you try to force my bride to marry another, then you kidnap her, try to collect void to turn her into some kind of sex slave, almost get her killed, and then you kissed her. All I did was offer you a beautiful fantasy. I’m sure she pleased you.” Vincent crossed his arms over his chest. “From your plans with Dahi, sex was all you were interested in.”

“I thought it was Anzele.” There were tears in his eyes. “You know shifters only mate to breed. She only wanted my seed. He set me up to create a monster.”

“It’s not my fault she didn’t enjoy it.” Vincent glared at Liking, muscles tense ready for another round.

“For your information, she did enjoy it. As a matter of fact, she enjoyed it so much she told me a little secret.” Liking went over to Anzele, stepping behind her and touching her hair. “When you first took Anzele from us in the woods, she hadn’t yet consented to be your wife.”

“Liking,” Anzele stopped him. “No. I am going to be with Vincent. Don’t believe a shifter over me.” She went to Vincent, hugging up to his chest.

“He confessed it to Lynn when he thought she was you. Makes you wonder what they did when they were all alone.” He stepped back around to face Vincent, but spoke to Anzele. “She must’ve done something wonderful for him to spill his secrets.”

"I know what they did. He told me everything and it doesn't bother me." She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed Vincent. "We spent all morning making love. Why do you come here to disturb my mood?"

"Fine. I'll show you a disturbed mood. I'm going to have a talk with the elders. Once they hear that you two weren't readying for marriage when we first came for you, a challenge can be made." Liking grinned obscenely. "He can't survive a flyer dispute." Liking laughed. "I hope you like the smell of fire."

Vincent took a step closer. It would be better to kill him with his bare hands than let this cretin continue haunting their lives. If Anzele wasn't watching, he'd snap the bastard's neck.

"I've spoken with Dahi. He is happy for me. I believe he has taken interest in another." Anzele eased against Vincent, as if sensing his aggression. "Now leave us."

"It's not Dahi that will challenge Vincent for your hand. It's me. I am no longer bound to any therefore it is my right." Liking rose high above them. "Tell me mortal, what magic will save you when we fight one on one." He rose a little higher, staying out of reach. "I'll be able to see how Lynn and the real Anzele compare. Won't that be fun?"

They watched him fly away. Anzele looked at Vincent with so much love it hurt his heart. Everything he'd endured so far had been worth it for her hand. Surely she was worth a little tussle with Liking. In fact, he looked forward to it.

"You can't fight him." Anzele let her head rest against his chest. "You'll never win."

"I can beat him." Vincent was sure he could beat the crap out of that pompous jerk.

"Vincent, you can beat him in hand to hand maybe, but Liking is a flyer. He will send fire, churn the air, or do any number of vulgar things to you to win." She held his hands. "We have magic in our blood you wouldn't understand. It can be a terrible force."

It was true Liking had powers beyond Vincent. It wouldn't make winning impossible but, in a one-on-one fight, Vincent would be at a great disadvantage. If Vincent could get his hands on Liking then the battle would be easy, but Liking wouldn't go for a fair fight. He'd fly above Vincent trying to roast him like a pig.

He wasn't going to give up Anzele's hand so easily, though. Even as a mortal man, he'd try to defeat Liking but there might be a better way. It was time to make good on a debt.

"Then perhaps it is time we saw Cordin." It was time to finish this mess. He would not be denied, not by Liking, not by anyone.

"Why?" Anzele's emotions were running too high to feel him. That was for the best.

"Trust me." Vincent squared off his shoulder and wiped the dirt from his hands.

"Can you fly us to him?"

"Wouldn't you rather the two of us fly away from here. We could live in your little farmhouse." Her eyes were a little too shiny. "Please. I don't want to risk you again."

"And wait for Liking to kidnap you again." He pulled Anzele close, hoping he could make her understand. "No. You will be mine. Our bond will be acknowledged in both our worlds. That's the only way. Please take me to Cordin."

"Very well."

Anzele rose in the air, lifting Vincent. The two held on tightly, hugging in midair as they flew through the sky. Vincent loved the feel of her against his skin. The soft way her hair blew against him. There was something finer about holding her, something almost as sacred as making love.

At first Anzele flew over the village, apparently not seeing Cordin. Flyers seemed to have amazing eyesight. From the height they were at, Vincent could hardly tell man from woman, much less pick out a person.

Their next stop was a shadowy place where they took a path on foot for a short distance before gaining height and finding a sort of altar with a blue flame dancing in the center. There were two people below. Bodies still entangled from their own mid morning adventure. As Anzele and Vincent landed, he could see Cordin had met someone of his own. There on top of Cordin, lay Marabeth.

"Um, Cordin," started Anzele, "I hate to interrupt but we need to talk."

"Vincent?" Cordin spoke in disbelief. "My word, is it really you?"

Cordin looked up with a satisfied smile and didn't bother to cover himself. Slowly he rose, easing Marabeth to the side, and grabbed his pants. He seemed sleepy, still caught in the afterglow from his morning tryst.

"I found my way back early this morning." Vincent held Anzele. "Anzele and I had some things to discuss or I would've come to see you earlier."

Vincent was a little surprised to see the couple together. He'd only thought of Marabeth as the enemy. He supposed Cordin saw other qualities in her, although she didn't look anything like a flyer.

"Marabeth?" started Vincent with his head turned from the couple. "Have you joined our side?"

"Something like that," she giggled and it was the sweetest sound Vincent had ever heard. She didn't seem like the woman who'd conjured stones or cursed the ground.

"You can turn around now. I'm decent."

So she was. Her usual dress of gauze had been replaced by one like a flyer wore. It was solid, going below her knees. The top was tied with laces, the skirt gathered by a clasp on either side creating a slit on both sides.

"It's good to see you Vincent." Cordin wrapped his arms around Vincent and hugged him tight enough to take his breath. "I feared you were lost. This is truly a time for celebration."

"Vincent?" interrupted Marabeth. "How did you get back?"

Answering this was difficult. He hoped they didn't ask for as many details as Anzele had. Either way it didn't sound good that he'd helped a shifter mate with a flyer. He just hoped Cordin wouldn't back out of their agreement.

"I convinced Lynn to bring me here." Vincent looked at Anzele then back to Cordin.

"Convinced?" Cordin looked at Anzele as if he had suspicions on how Vincent had gained safe passage to their village. "Exactly how did you convince a shifter to help you?"

"Okay." It was confession time and Vincent knew there was no way out of it. "I did a bad thing. Liking has been bugging me so I set him up with Lynn only he didn't know it was Lynn. He found out a little while ago." Vincent realized how horrible his actions sounded although he didn't entirely regret them. "He thought it was Anzele. Anyway, he's a little upset. He is going to challenge me for Anzele's hand."

Cordin looked at him then shook his head. Vincent thought he was in serious trouble until Cordin cracked a smile and started laughing. Marabeth already had her hand to her mouth trying to stop the snicker.

"Where is the star, Vincent?" asked Cordin.

“Here.” Vincent pulled it from his waistband, then held it close to his chest as if it were a child. “I’ve fulfilled my part of the bargain. Maybe I didn’t do it in a preferred way, but the deed is done. Now, will you fulfill your part of the deal?”

Cordin reached for the star. At first Vincent didn’t want to hand it over just because it was the only bargaining tool he had. There was something in Cordin’s eyes, though. Vincent trusted the man, so he relinquished it.

“Anzele, tell me honestly, do you love this man?” Cordin lifted the star to the sky as he spoke as if authenticating it. “Don’t spare his feelings, because he’s about to go through hell for you.”

“I love him with all my heart, but I don’t want him to be harmed.” She went to Vincent, cuddling against his chest. “I’d be happy if we just ran away together. It’s a big world. We could go where no one would find us. You offered to take me to your farm once. Let’s go there.” A few tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’ve never even seen it. I want to go there.”

“You say that now but I’ve heard too many sobs from the wilderness, never mind the risks you’d take if you chose to live among mortal men.” Cordin turned to Vincent. “Are you sure you want Anzele? Once we do this, there’s no going back. There’s no way to give you back mortality or the human eyes you view the world with now.”

Vincent breathed deeply. He didn’t know what to expect. He’d given up more than his way of life for Anzele, he was about to give up himself. It was the biggest sacrifice he’d ever considered making.

He looked at Anzele then back at Cordin. In the city, flyers were monsters to be hated and feared but he’d fallen in love so quickly and completely. He’d gone beyond any emotion this time. There was something terrifying about surrender. He was going to entrust his body, maybe even his soul to Cordin, a flyer, and for the love of a female.

When he looked at them, Anzele, then back to Cordin, his words felt strong, “I’m sure. Help me if you can.”

“Then go work on your wedding dress, Anzele.” Cordin smiled and seemed pleased with Vincent’s decision. “We need to do this quickly. If a challenge is made, Vincent must protect himself. There’s also the possibility of shifters coming after the star. We’ll need every able bodied man.”

“Vincent, please don’t do this,” Anzele begged. Tears filled her eyes. “It’s not worth the risk. You’re my everything.”

“I have to.” He pushed her away enough to look into her eyes. “I don’t want you regretting any part of your life with me.” He squared his shoulders and looked at Cordin. “I am ready.”

“Please,” Anzele started.

“We don’t have time for this, Anzele.” Cordin turned to Marabeth. “Will you help me?”

“Of course,” she replied.

“I love you, Anzele.” Then Vincent turned his back to her, facing Cordin and whatever was about to happen.

* * * *

Anzele flew away. Cordin knew what was best. There was no time to second guess anything so she went back to her loom and her wedding dress. Her worries would be lost in work.

Everything she wanted stayed just out of reach, teasing and testing her in equal measure. Well, she'd waited while he went on the stupid quest. Now she'd weave and weave until the sun set. Then no one could tear them apart.

The shuttle traveled back and forth in a good rhythm. The lines were forming, smooth and tight. She didn't bother with magic. Most flyer woman could weave several yards in a small amount of time using will more than hands, but she needed to use her hands. If she just sat there, staring at a finished wedding dress, she'd go mad.

Several people stared at her as they passed. Their whispers weren't audible but she watched their lips move. The stories spread quickly. A mortal and a flyer were going to have a blessed wedding. She smiled with pride. Not only could they accept the wedding but surely no one would reject Vincent after he'd risked so much for her. They would have to accept him, no matter what his bloodline.

She watched the cloth forming, coming out the other side. It was stunning. She wanted to look lovely for Vincent. Perhaps she'd make her a new dress as well as a wedding dress. The only one she had was getting tattered from wear and wash.

"Anzele," spoke Betrev from behind.

Her voice made Anzele jump, dropping the shuttle to the ground. She turned and saw her mother there. Anzele's stomach turned. She had too much pressure on her to deal with Betrev's foolishness.

"How are you?" asked Betrev. There was a large white bundle next to her.

"Mother?" Anzele took a step back. "What are you doing here?"

"Liking came to me and told me what happened." Betrev looked smug. "He's calling for the elders to meet tonight. He's going to challenge the binding." A thin smile crept across her lips making Anzele cringe.

"I know." Anzele picked up the shuttle and knocked the dirt from the edge. "It doesn't matter. You'll see."

"If I'd never told Dahi he could have your hand, you'd never have met Vincent. Is that right?" Betrev studied her daughter. "Well, Anzele?"

Wouldn't answering that be playing into Betrev's hands? Now they only had the word of a shifter over that of a flyer. If she were to confess anything, Betrev would have another flyer to corroborate the testimony.

"I don't wish to discuss it with you." Anzele shook her head. "You might turn into a witness for Liking."

"You care for me so little." She lowered her head but there was no respect in it. "You don't trust your own mother." Betrev's eyes looked up and Anzele swore she saw something evil lurking just below the surface, a little gleam like a predator easing in for the kill. "I'm your blood."

Anzele set the shuttle down and turned to face the woman who had brought her into the world then done so much to ruin her. One minute Betrev wanted to make nice. Not likely a gesture of compassion or forgiveness. She'd always had her own agenda. As a child Anzele hadn't seen the corruption in her mother. Children tend think their parents were perfect but she wasn't a child any longer. Anzele's trust grew harder to earn.

"I am sorry you lost the love of your life but it doesn't mean you should turn into a bitter terrible woman." Anzele held out her hand and a small blue flame danced in the center of it. "This skill was one you should've taught me as a child. I've only recently learned it because of Cordin. He taught me how to lull others, as well as call the winds. You taught me nothing. Instead of helping me with anything, you just wanted to marry me off. You are a heartless woman and I pity you." She let the fire die in her hand.

"You should be with a flyer, Anzele." Betrev locked eyes with her daughter. "It's for your own good. I've been down the binding path with a mortal and it was hell. Don't make the same mistake."

"Don't worry about who I should be with." She turned her back to Betrev and continued weaving. "Have you not heard the rumors? My mate has earned his right to be with me. The elders won't deny that."

"Fine. I can't choose your mate." She turned and picked up the white wrapped bundle. "That will be up to the council to decide and believe me, they won't choose Vincent once they have the star." She smiled a little and it sent shivers down Anzele's spine. "Many of the elders hate mortals and would do anything to prevent a blessing for a mixed blasphemy. I do have a gift for you." She held out the bundle.

"I want nothing you have to offer." Anzele crossed her arms over her chest. "Leave me."

"This is special. This is beyond our differences and comes from my mother."

Betrev held out a bundle bound by string and cloth. Anzele took it and pulled away the string. As the cloth fell away she saw silvery white edged in lace. She held up the dress. It was backless with only a small series of ties running across the back to hold the dress on. The front was cut low with starling gems dotting the edges in the lace.

"It's perfect." Anzele smiled brightly. "But why?"

"It was your grandmothers." Betrev looked touched. Perhaps her heart wasn't completely dead. "You know grandma and grandpa died at the hands of humans. They were burned alive and had committed no crime."

"Yes. I know."

"I will give you this dress no matter who you choose to bind to because your grandmother would've wanted it that way. I never got to wear it. The elders wouldn't permit me to have a true binding. We had a mortal wedding, then private vows when we chose to live here." Betrev sighed and looked at the dress. "I was told that if Vincent accepts and finishes the challenge, they would not only permit your binding but also bless it. You should have a proper dress then." The last words hung in her throat, changing her voice to a hard rasp before she spat them out.

"Thank you mother. It's what I was trying to make."

"This one is special because of your grandma." She touched the fabric in Anzele's hands. "Think of her when you choose who you walk along the path with. You know the humans took your grandmother into a field and burned her alive. They killed grandpa when he tried to save her. The unta made him feel like his skin was burning along with hers, even before he joined her. They died together behind a wall of flame."

Anzele knew the stories, but that wasn't her Vincent. There was evil in every breed. Look at Liking, he was a flyer and willing to kidnap or lie or anything to get his way. She'd never seen Vincent do that.

"What time will the elders meet?" Anzele hugged the dress to her chest.

“At sunset. Others are looking for Vincent now to tell him. He’ll have to be there. If he doesn’t show then the elders will give you to Liking.” Betrev locked eyes with Anzele again.

“That’s not proper.” Liking would be the challenger not Vincent. “Why would they do that?”

“Because I have decided to give your hand to Liking. It is Vincent who will have to defend his honor in order to win your hand and Liking who gets it by default if Vincent doesn’t show.”

Again Betrev was trying to interfere with her life. “That is if they believe Liking’s story. It’s farfetched at best. Who would take the word of a shifter over a flyer?”

“It doesn’t matter if they believe it. I think it would please them not to have you wed a mortal. None of them are thrilled about blessing a mixed binding. It would set a strange precedence.” Betrev looked at the sky. “No one wants half-breeds to become standard.”

The slight was duly noted. Anzele didn’t hang her head though. She’d spent too much time being ashamed and all of it had been connected with Betrev, not some person in the village, not the elders. Every insult seemed to emanate from her and her mother’s own disgust with what she had bore in the world.

“So you would give me to the nearest available flyer.” Anzele shook her head. “I will accept the present of grandma’s dress because she loved me and I loved her. That is the only reason I accept it. As for you, be at the elder’s meeting.” Anzele felt her eyes flare. “I want you there when Vincent shows up. He’s done more for me than you or anyone else here has. He freed the star, and fought for me. Vincent will beat Liking. I want you there to see it but don’t come near my binding. You won’t be welcome there.” Anzele’s eyes flared again and she felt a rush of hate stronger than anything she’d felt before. Power burned behind her eyes, itching to come out and show this betrayer what she’d taken on. Betrev would never love her but one day the woman would learn to respect her.

“If you end up with Liking, I will attend the binding. You will walk down the path if I have to drag you down it.” Betrev’s eyes flared in response.

“I will slit your throat at my binding if you are in attendance.” Anzele took a step forward challenging Betrev.

“You aren’t strong enough child.”

“Don’t count on it. The next challenge you attend might be to face me.” Anzele summoned blue flame between them, burning in midair. “Cordin is a fine teacher and he has seen fit allow me to be his pupil.”

Betrev took to the air, flying back to her home. She looked back over her shoulder, locking eyes with Anzele. At first Anzele thought she would attack but Betrev didn’t stop.

Iana had let her store a few things in a box to the side of the loom. Anzele slid her wedding dress inside, along with the spare yarn, and a good section of cloth she’d just woven.

When she was sure her mother had gone, Anzele also took to the air, heading to the sacred fires. At the spot, she dropped and began walking. It was then she realized that she couldn’t feel Vincent. Their bond had been severed once again causing fear to ebb through her. The change must not be going well. Anzele started running up the path.

Ahead she heard something small rustling then a low moan. There Cordin and Marabeth were kissing on the edge where Anzele would've started flying. They were wrapped together, Marabeth in Cordin's lap.

Anzele lifted, starting to fly passed them when Cordin noticed her. She didn't say a word, only tried to go around. Without moving Marabeth, he grabbed Anzele's leg, pulling her back down.

"You can't see him now Anzele," started Cordin. "He's in great pain."

"I have to see him. Something's wrong." She tried to lift again, but Cordin pulled her to the wall. "Why can't I feel him?"

"I blocked your tie until his pain has passed." Marabeth spoke this time sliding off Cordin's lap but keeping one leg thrown over him with her arms wrapped around his chest. "I didn't want you to feel his pain. It is quite severe."

"Betrev will marry me to Liking if he's not at the elder meeting by sunset." Anzele felt tears fill her eyes. "If he's late then the council will give me to Liking. It will be too late for a challenge."

"The time will be close. Stall them if you can." Cordin looked at Marabeth. There was no missing the concern in his eyes. "We'll do all we can."

Just then a terrible shriek come from the center of the sacred fires. The sound was like a wounded cat changing to a human cry at the end. Both Cordin and Marabeth looked at the ground.

"Let me pass. I must go to him." Anzele jumped from the wall, looking for an alternate route inside the pit.

"No Anzele. This is something he must do alone." Marabeth jumped from the wall where they were perched and put her arm around Anzele. She was amazingly quick, stepping in the way. "I'm sorry. I know this is a hard thing for you."

"Tell me honestly, will he be able to beat Liking?" Anzele looked up at Cordin. "Even if you can waken his blood, will he be strong enough?"

"I don't know." Cordin leaned on the wall where he remained. "I don't know his lineage. I'm only guessing at his blood. It is time to be honest." Cordin breathed uneasily. "He may not even survive the process."

"Let me to him." Anzele tried to pull free of Marabeth. "I need to see him, now."

"No, Anzele. He knew the risks before we started the ceremony." Cordin glanced back as another cry of pain followed. "He made this choice. If he does die, then it will be with honor." There was pride in his voice and surely Cordin now held Vincent in high regard. It didn't ease Anzele's woes.

"I want him. Please." Anzele looked to the side. There was no way in with the way low branches clung to the wall.

"We're doing all we can." Cordin tried to offer sympathy. "Trust in your fate. Trust in him."

"Work on your dress," offered Marabeth. "Come. I'll help you." She pulled on Anzele's arm. "I used to be quite good at dress making. Maybe we could get it ready before sunset."

"No thank you." Anzele sniffled hard. "Betrev gave me my grandmother's dress. It is exactly what I wanted. Of course she gave it after I'd woven the cloth. I guess it's for the best because weaving kept me busy."

“Perhaps I can help you with something else.” Marabeth touched a tear on the shoulder of Anzele’s top. “I can’t produce the white of a wedding dress with magic but maybe I can do something.”

Marabeth picked up a handful of dirt, holding it out in front of her. With a small sigh the dirt levitated from her hand and started growing. In a moment the dirt churned together, looking like mud in the air. Next Marabeth took a stick and tossed it in the mix along with two flowers that grew on the wall. Everything moved, then joined, mingling and weaving in the air. The stick unfolded into its source fiber, spreading itself out.

“Hold out your hands, Anzele.”

Anzele did as she was directed. A new dress appeared in the air in front of her, folded itself and landed in her arms. Anzele looked at it a moment, not sure if she should trust a gift made from such basic things.

“How in the world?” Anzele stared at brown fabric lined with black and a tracing of flowers down the bodice. Flyers wove cloth with magic, too, but never anything so detailed. “Wow.”

“Why don’t you fix up for the elder’s meeting? When we get there with Vincent, you might want to look your best.” Marabeth grinned and wiped her hands. “Make Vincent glad he went through all this.”

“Thank you, Marabeth.”

Anzele started to leave. Marabeth sounded positive about Vincent arriving in time for the meeting. It gave her hope. She hugged the dress to her chest and looked back at the wall that separated her from Vincent. Cordin and Marabeth had been very kind.

“Would you too be in need of a binding dress?” Anzele smiled at them. “You can’t conjure white and I have a lot of white fabric ready.”

Marabeth’s cheeks burned bright red. “I don’t know. Perhaps you should save the cloth.”

“Cordin helped me gather the silver score and brought me gems for the neckline. He’s put almost as much work in on it as I have.” Anzele winked at Cordin. “It was as if he’d been making it for someone the whole time.”

“Would you save it for me? Maybe leave it in my home?” He looked at Marabeth and smiled. “I think I know someone it would be perfect for.”

Another scream came from the sacred fires. This one sounded more animal like than the first. It brought chills to Anzele’s spine and made her knees wobble. Cordin also looked concerned but tried to hide it behind a fake smile.

“Is there nothing I can do?” Anzele tensed and wrung her hands together.

“Have faith, dear,” said Cordin. “Let the fates work their wonder and the magic settle in his veins. Changing someone from the inside out, isn’t easy. The flyer blood attacks the mortal during this process. The magic has to make the flyer blood aggressive in order to wake it. That also makes it hurt.”

“I will stay and wait for him. When he comes out of this, I will be ready and if he doesn’t change to a flyer, then we will run away together and live with mortals.”

Vincent cried out again in agony. The sound brought tears to her eyes. Cordin looked back and rose a few feet but didn’t approach the pit. She could tell from the look on Cordin’s face that things weren’t going well.

“You shouldn’t be here for this.” Cordin wouldn’t meet her gaze. “I don’t think he would want you here.” Cordin swallowed hard.

“But what if he asks for me?” Anzele started to rise, but Marabeth touched her shoulder and shook her head slowly.

“He will either recover or he’ll die.” Cordin’s voice grew grave. “There will be no in between. His mind will rage. Asking or even conscious thought is beyond him for now.”

“I will go away then. I’ll leave the cloth in your home then wait for the meeting at the beach. If there is news, please let me know.” They knew what was best. She shouldn’t interfere.

“If he doesn’t make it,” Marabeth dropped her voice. “I’m sure he will, but if he doesn’t, do you want to know before the meeting?”

“Marabeth, don’t say such things,” chastised Cordin.

“I suppose it needed to be said. I meant no ill will. Vincent will make it.” Marabeth looked up toward the rock wall. “I’m sure he’s strong enough to make it. He was strong enough to get the star.”

“Yes let me know. If he doesn’t make it then I will leave again. I do not wish to be touched by Liking. Living in the wilderness alone would be far better.” Anzele listened for Vincent but he’d grown quiet.

“Are you certain, Anzele?” asked Cordin. “Liking does love you, even if his love isn’t pure. Deep inside he isn’t evil.”

“I am certain I would never be happy with him.” The thought of Liking coming near turned her stomach. “In fact, I will blame Liking every day for the rest of my life. He’s a heartless bastard.”

“He wouldn’t be a bad husband.” Cordin came down from the rock, wrapping his arms around her. “He would dote on you for eternity and never look twice at another.”

Anzele didn’t like the way this sounded. “Don’t betray Vincent. He trusts you.”

“I’m not. I only worry for you. Things are very uncertain but I believe you should follow your heart. The unta binds you two. It’s just that this process is very risky. Things could go badly and I don’t want you to trade a lifetime of loneliness over a lost love.” Cordin hugged her tighter. “Don’t turn into Betrev.”

“I don’t think I could live without Vincent.” Anzele pulled away from Cordin’s embrace, wanting to look him in the eyes. “He’s my world.”

“Don’t be foolish and don’t repeat the mistakes you know to be true.” Cordin took her back in his arms and hugged her. This time she didn’t resist and felt his loving embrace calm her. “You are too young to forget about love.”

Anzele couldn’t be angry at Cordin. As he released her, she knew he only wanted her happy. He’d been her closest friend. She only hoped he was being a friend to Vincent. Waking up a new person would be hard, if he woke up at all.

She shuddered, hoping he wouldn’t hate her when this had ended. Sacrificing so much might turn him from her love. Unta may not be broken, but Anzele feared it could be tarnished.

“As you say,” she acquiesced. “I will be pondering my predicament at the beach.” Anzele rose. “Thank you.” Then she was in the sky.

Chapter Sixteen

Anzele was summoned to the council meeting as the sun's first rays turned orange in the sky. She hadn't heard from Cordin or felt Vincent's presence. Of course, if Vincent had died then she would never feel him again. She stood alone watching the waves crash on the shore when a messenger came for her. She'd simply nodded then waved him away without taking her stare from the water.

Home was a beautiful concept. The sound of the ocean, the wonderful fruits, and even her neighbors seemed delightful after her absence but none of it mattered without Vincent. Their laws certainly didn't mean anything to her.

Part of her didn't want to go to the meeting. If Vincent had died, then Cordin wouldn't tell her. He thought well of Liking and, as they all kept reminding her, he was a flyer.

Therefore, she decided that she would go to the meeting but if Cordin was there, and not Vincent, then she would leave before it started. Surely if Vincent lived, Cordin would stay by his side until his arrival.

Cordin had mentioned that the timing would be close. She would try to stall the meeting but if Liking won the elders favor, and there was still no Vincent, then she'd flee to the human world.

One thing remained certain in her mind, she would never allow Liking to touch her. She didn't want to grow strange as her mother had done, but Liking tried to ruin her life with Vincent. That sin was unforgivable.

Anzele fixed her hair and wore the dress Marabeth had made for her. It fit surprisingly well, although a bit tighter than she was used to. When Vincent arrived, she wanted to be beautiful. From her reflection in the glass at the hospital, she thought she'd gotten pretty close.

After a few more adjustments, she was ready to face them. Anzele rose in the air flying towards the mountains. A few other flyers glided ahead of her with more joining as they arrived at the meeting place. Below, the crowd gathered, each whispering about the mortal hero and about the rights of a flyer. She slid in with the mix, hoping to go unnoticed until the time was right.

The gathering was in the cove, an inset area up the mountain. The rock formations made a sort of cup with rocky ledges the flyers could sit on. The center turned level and a bit grassy. The sound was excellent acoustically. All could hear the smallest voice. The bottom grassy areas were also excellent for fighting and Anzele knew there would be plenty of fighting today.

Anzele arrived, flying over once, then taking her place in the crowd. Cordin was nowhere to be seen and neither was Vincent. Betrev arrived early, standing to the side of the center mound, waiting to make her speech. Liking stood there too, already speaking to the elders with his slick tongue.

Below she heard them call her name. She eased down, hoping not to be seen. There was no luck with this. They called again, one pointed from the mound. Still she didn't move. Only when Liking flew up, followed by the insistence of the elders, did she go to the base to wait her turn to speak.

"Is Vincent here?" called Kartin when Anzele approached the mound.

"He is coming soon," replied Anzele. She hoped it was true at least. "Cordin is bringing him." She pronounced the words slowly hoping Kartin would catch on. He knew about the magic Cordin could bring.

"Oh yes. I suppose it would be hard to walk up the steep terrain of the mountain." Quint spoke snidely but none seemed to oppose him. He was an elder who sided with Liking. It was obvious the way the two whispered to each other with faces turned.

"Very hard for a mortal to come up here," bellowed another elder. He smiled at the statement.

"Quite right," chimed in a third. "Poor earth bound things."

"If he doesn't arrive soon, then may I go unchallenged?" Liking looked at Anzele with lust and a victory that turned her stomach.

She was sure Liking had been working on this all day, visiting each elder and discussing his case. The meeting had to go through the formalities, but she was sure a majority of the elder would side with Liking.

"Wait, Liking." Kartin raised his hands to quiet the small crowd. "Hear me, flyers. We have business to begin."

"Stop." Anzele rushed the mound. "Give Vincent a chance. You should know what's happening."

Kartin touched her shoulder. "Child, I cannot break tradition. I must start the meeting." His eyes showed sorrow but he wasn't willing to do more than sympathize. "Please forgive me."

"Can't you wait a few more minutes? Please," she begged.

"No. It is time we finish this." Kartin looked at Liking then back at Anzele. "The entire village is on edge from these happenings."

"Nothing will help you Anzele." Liking crept closer, whispering in her ear. "I have a surprise waiting for Vincent if he tries to take you from me again. There are assassins along the trail coming in."

"Murderous bastard," roared Anzele. She slapped his face hard enough to make her hand sting.

"That's fine my dear." Liking rubbed his cheek. "They will only kill him if they can't subdue him. I'd rather him live to know you were my wife." He smiled again and she thought she'd go mad.

"I will never be your wife, Liking." Her heart hammered and she felt her limbs shake. "I'll never be in your bed."

She would run away if there were no other options. Besides, odds were slim that Vincent would be walking up the trail. Even if he couldn't become a flyer, Cordin would carry him in.

Unless Vincent was dead, the idea jolted her. He might've died there at the sacred fires with Cordin too ashamed to come to the meeting and face her. There might be no hope.

"I have enough people to force you down the path." Liking had been speaking but she didn't hear most of his threats. "Mark my words, you will be my wife. You will come to accept it, eventually." His demeanor softened. One hand rose, nearly touching her hair then he pulled away. "I'm hoping you will grow to love me."

“People please. Hear me,” Kartin raised his hands again and the meeting came to order. “I’m sure you have all heard and seen the mortal among us. He has completed an impossible task and retrieved the star from the void. Cordin is working on a way to help the land heal as we speak.” Throughout the crowd there were murmurs. Kartin raised his hands again to silence them. “There is also the matter of his pending binding to our Anzele. If you’ll remember we turned her out to the human world when she refused to follow through with the arranged marriage to Dahi. The human brought her back to us confessing his love and their pending binding. Liking has voiced concerns over the timing of their engagement. Given these concerns Betrev has given Anzele’s hand to Liking, if the engagement is proved to be invalid.” Kartin turned to Liking. “Liking you may take the floor.”

“Setiar and I went to retrieve Anzele after she’d been promised to Dahi. Upon arriving she denied her responsibility and respect to her family by lying and claiming to be marrying a mortal. A shifter Vincent sent to trick me, confessed as much.” The crowd came alive with gasps at the word shifter. “Yes, a shifter. He had her fool me into believing she was Anzele. In penance she told me what Vincent had confessed. Anzele and Vincent fell in love after her mother sent for her. They had no bond until Dahi tried to claim her hand for the second time.” Murmurs rose from the crowd. “After being disrespected twice, Dahi wants no more from Anzele. I have spoken to her mother and have agreed to take her hand after my binding ended. Her mother prefers a flyer binding to that of a mixed embarrassment. As per my rights, I am to be bound to Anzele barring a challenge. If Vincent be here, then let him take up my request.”

“Liking, that’s enough,” interrupted Kartin. “First we must decide if she lied when first asked about her pending marriage.”

Betrev stood up. “I heard my child confess as much to me.”

“Liar,” Anzele rose when she heard her mother’s claims. “I never said such to you. In fact you wouldn’t even speak to me when I first arrived. Kartin can attest to that.”

“It is true,” spoke Kartin. “Betrev denied her child in front of me, even when I brought Anzele to the home as my guest.”

“Betrev will not speak the truth. Those of you that know her, understand her dark heart.” Anzele had never addressed the crowd before, not even when they’d sent her away, but she couldn’t stand by and let this woman lie to them. Mother or not, she had to be exposed. “She is bitter from her own turmoil. Please don’t believe her when each of you sat there while she turned me out. Why do you now believe I should accept a man I don’t love? I would rather be turned out again, but Betrev has taken even that peace from me. She will only permit a forced binding. It is wrong.”

“Betrev speaks the truth.” Liking stood in defense. “Anzele has lived among humans too long. Her mind has been corrupted.”

“Just as you would’ve corrupted my mind with the void you’d try to sneak into our village. Just like the way you’d led Dahi on.” Anzele felt her eyes flare. “Tell these people the truth. Tell them. Tell them how you kidnapped me from my betrothed’s home and wanted to treat me like a whore.” Her body shook with anger. “Vincent and I share the unta. It is too sacred to break over Liking’s lies. Allow me true love. Love doesn’t care about races.”

Several in the crowd clapped, others yelled in contempt. The elders stood whispering, deciding her fate. It would end soon. The crowd's clamor rose as they voiced their opinions.

One or two elders listened to the groups' discussion. From Anzele's viewpoint, it seemed only one elder, Kartin, was arguing against Liking's request. The rest would prefer her to wed a flyer and would do anything to prevent a mixed binding from being blessed.

She couldn't blame them. Liking had given them an excuse and any excuse to push out a human was worthwhile when so many flyers had died at the hands of mortal men.

Anzele knew the elders had made a decision when Kartin didn't return to the mount. He hung back, unable to make eye contact. Quint approached the mound, grinning like a baboon.

"We have decided that since we believe the binding to be in question when Anzele was sent for, then we will honor the agreement made between Liking and Betrev. Betrev has agreed that the binding may be forced instead of turning Anzele out. The human may request a challenge of Liking if he comes forward. The elders have spoken."

"It comes down to a simple challenge." Liking rose higher than the others in order to be seen. "Our ways state that a pending binding can be challenged. According to Betrev, Anzele is mine unless someone steps up."

Anzele turned from the group and levitated, hoping to fly back to the humans. No matter what Cordin said, Liking wouldn't make a suitable anything much less a mate. Unfortunately, Liking saw her sliding away.

"Assistance please," said Liking.

Immediately five flyers came from behind the mound. Anzele tried to fly but they were on her too fast, forcing her to the ground. The more she squirmed, the tighter they held, digging fingers into the flesh on her arms. She wouldn't be able to make her hasty escape. As they landed, a flyer stayed on each arm with three others surrounding to prevent her flight.

"Without another to challenge me, the girl is mine." Liking raised his hands and the crowd applauded.

"Then perhaps I should step up."

Anzele's mouth dropped open. The men holding her arms released her. In the sky, flying into the cove were three people. There was Vincent, Cordin, and Marabeth. To everyone's shock no one was carrying Vincent. He was flying, landed gracefully near the mound.

"I accept your challenge. Anzele is mine. You know it."

Anzele looked over. Kartin's mouth was also agape as well as Betrev's. Anzele went over to Vincent and kissed him passionately in front of all who would look. He'd made the ultimate sacrifice for her. He'd lost his mortal body.

"You're a flyer." She looked into his eyes. They'd been as dark as night. Now they were darker and she detected the slightest flare as night settled. It was a brilliant blue. His body also changed slightly. The already sculpted muscles were more taught. "But how?"

Cordin came up behind them, putting a hand on their backs. "I told you he had flyer blood. Marabeth and I just woke it up. It really doesn't take much to waken it. Flyer blood is powerful. What's hard is living through the changing of the human blood, for the two are not the same."

“Will you marry me Anzele?” Vincent looked deep into her eyes and she knew they’d never be another for her.

“Yes, a thousand times yes.” She squeezed him tightly. “I love you.”

“No. First there are challenges to face.” Liking’s eyes flared brightly. “Let’s be done with this.”

“No Liking,” started Anzele. “I’ve been promised to Vincent. You cannot go against it.”

She stood in front of Vincent. Even if he’d become a flyer, harnessing the old magic wasn’t easy. The ordeal of changing had been hard enough on Vincent. Unless Cordin taught him, there was no way he could win against Liking.

“Then I will challenge him.” Liking face strained in anger. “I challenge Vincent.”

Cordin leaned over and whispered something to Vincent. Vincent nodded a reply then took his arms away from Anzele, kissing her lightly on the cheek as he did so. She felt a tingle, then their bond returned. They were one again.

“The challenge will begin.” Kartin waved everyone away from bottom section. “Please clear the area.”

“Wait. He’s not good at this stuff yet.” Anzele tried to run to him. “Let me help him.”

Cordin got on one side of Anzele, Marabeth on the other. Together they escorted her to the sidelines. Anzele protested until they turned her to face the pending fight. Neither let go when she tried again to join Vincent.

“He’s stronger than you think and a very fast learner.” Cordin spoke with pride. “His bloodline is good. Extremely good. Let him earn his respect and his place here for he has no other home now.”

Anzele looked at Cordin. Everything she ever wanted could finish on the field, and she had no choice. “Please win,” she whispered and clutched both Cordin’s and Marabeth’s arms.

“Begin now,” said Kartin then he lowered his arms for the signal.

Liking took his place at one end. Immediately he sent out a band of fire, changing into a ball as it approached Vincent. At first Anzele feared this would be the end of the battle. Vincent would be defeated and now more was on the line than their marriage. Vincent could never go home again unless he lived incognito until the end of his days, which would never come naturally.

The fireball came closer. Vincent looked ready for the end, closing his eyes as it approached, then he let out his breath. The fireball changed direction, turning and crystallizing into something like ice but it looked more like diamonds. Liking moved out of the way too late. He, too, seemed surprised by Vincent’s transformations and was mesmerized as he saw the ball coming towards him. When he moved, the ball still struck his side, finishing the turn his body had started and forcing Liking to the ground. The ball exploded into tiny shards, littering the ground in sparkles.

As Liking lay on the ground, Cordin motioned to Vincent. The signal must’ve meant fire because Vincent created his own band of fire that churned into a ball solid and fierce. It hit Liking at his center plowing back into the ground where he was trying to rise.

“You’re not a flyer,” screamed Liking. “How are you doing this?”

“I was a human with a flyer’s blood waiting to wake. I’ve given up everything for a woman. Liking, only you can understand it. Maybe only you can respect it. The lady chose me. Let me have my future.”

“Anzele belongs with me.”

Liking threw a series of fireballs followed by hail. Vincent returned each of these. Cordin raised his hand in a signal and Vincent shut his eyes tight, letting his hands become fists. All at once two bolts of lightning pummeled the ground barely missing Liking.

“Lightning?” asked Anzele. “I can’t do lightning.”

Cordin whispered in her ear. “I believe Vincent’s blood was from the earliest flyers. The ones lost when man and flyer fought. I’m guessing, but I think a thread of it existed, then either his mother or grandmother mated with a flyer.”

“Amazing.”

Liking rose and pulled a whirlwind, churning the world around Vincent. He countered late, letting the wind toss him into the crowds. As Vincent flew he sent out bursts, pushing Liking back and making him lose his concentration. With Liking’s attention broken, the wind stopped.

At first Vincent fell. Anzele watched as he found his center and harnessed flight, swooping down and landing back in position on one end of the field. Both built ready to attack when Liking motioned to the sky. Vincent turned seeing them at the same time Anzele did. War birds, eight of them, were coming across the sky with two shifters in true form leading the pack. Lynn flew in the head position, slightly in front of the other true form shifter.

* * * *

Vincent felt strange after the change. His eyes had grown sharper, even his sense of smell improved. When Liking first motioned to the sky, Vincent thought it was a trick to break his concentration. All of his new abilities required great amounts of concentration.

Curiosity got the better of him, making him turn his head. There was reason to fear. The shifters had come for the star. He had no idea where it was now. The last four hours had been filled with torment unlike anything he’d ever experienced. His veins felt full of fire then ice cold only to burn again. The muscles in his body, strained, some tore under the pressure. When he’d first awakened from the pain, Cordin had been there, telling him what had happened. Liking was after Anzele again. He’d pulled himself together as quickly as possible, allowing Cordin to link minds in order to teach him faster. Now everything was a blur and the shifters were coming.

“Liking, we finish this later.” Vincent watched the skies and felt new hatred for the shifters. It grew like a primal force, more than an unjust prejudice, but pure blood boiling hate.

“Agreed,” Liking growled apparently sharing Vincent’s sentiment.

The crowd above thinned. Children and the weaker went to the shore while the rest panned out readying for battle. Anzele went to Vincent. Liking joined them along with Kartin and a few other flyers.

“Today, there are no differences. We are all brothers.” Cordin looked at Liking and Vincent. Both nodded in agreement. “We can’t give up the star.”

“They can’t touch it,” said Vincent. His voice sounded strange to his own ears. It had grown deeper during the change. “Get it and we can destroy them.”

“I’ve sent Marabeth for it.” Cordin looked at the approaching shifters. “She’ll bring it soon.”

“Can she be trusted?” Liking voiced his concern first. “She’s of the witches blood.”

“Yes.” Cordin smiled and pride filled his face. “She is my unta.”

“There is great power in the star. I felt it even as a mortal. With power comes temptation.” Vincent glanced around not seeing Marabeth. “Where did you send her?”

“Over the hill.” Cordin pointed to the sky. “Here she comes now.”

They looked behind them and there was Marabeth. She glided down and handed the star to Cordin. Her red hair blew back and she looked more like a witch than all the storybooks read to Vincent as a child.

“Vincent,” spoke Lynn from the sky. “What has happened to you? I sense a change.” A pout touched her lips.

“I have taken the kind of my mate.” Vincent’s new form showed him the sharpness of the claws the danger in their beaks. Every detail came into focus. “Why are you here?”

“We come for the star.” Lynn’s smile widened. “Hi, Liking.” She blew him a kiss. “He wasn’t as much fun as I bet you would be Vincent. Maybe when you get tired of flyers, you can come to me in the caves.”

“He’s mine, Lynn,” interrupted Anzele. She looked ready for a fight, stepping forward with a gaze capable of drilling into Lynn’s head.

“Well, I guess you should give us what we’ve come for.” Lynn dropped to the ground next to them. She carried a black box. “Put the star in here and we’ll go in peace.”

“Lynn, don’t do this.” Vincent caught her eyes. “There will be blood shed today. Don’t let yours be part of it. Your numbers are too few. The entire shifter race could be wiped out. It is too much to risk over a trinket.”

“Why don’t you leave these and come play with me? I can do things this girl can’t even imagine.” She grinned at Liking. “Just ask him. He’s a thirty second wonder.” She laughed and Liking hung his head.

“The shifters will die today. Leave now and preserve your kind.” Vincent pointed to the sky. “No shape will save you from all of us. You saved my life, now let my advice save yours. Please leave.”

“Then it is war.” She went to the sky at the same instant the birds came down with claws splayed. “To war,” Lynn shouted.

Vincent took to the air along with Liking and the other male flyers. The warring parties met in the sky. Each flyer used their force to bring fire that plunged on the birds and kept them back enough to prevent their claws from making contact. Fire gripped several wounding them but not stopping the battle. The smell of charred feathers filled the air but not one was deterred.

“Be careful, Anzele,” yelled Vincent.

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Marabeth and Anzele came up from behind churning the air about the creatures’ wings making their flight difficult. Iana joined them along with Betrev and several other women. A small tornado started between them. Several birds fell back unable to hold flight under the stress.

One fell to the earth but righted itself and took flight again cutting through the air with widened claws. Vengeance was on the creature's mind as it sliced through the air, breaking their circle. Its razor beak opened with neck stretched trying for soft bodies. Anzele and Marabeth had to move quickly to keep from being skewered. As Anzele turned, the bird whirled passed. She felt the air off its wings. Some of the other women, held in place trying to drop more of the birds. There, Anzele saw her beloved Iana. The war bird rose, catching several flyers through their middles with its claws. Iana was caught on a talon, squirming then dying before Anzele could reach her.

"No," Anzele went to her, unable to catch up to the war bird until it had dropped Iana from its grasp. "Iana?" She let the lifeless body drop to the ground. There was no way to help Iana only avenge her death. "Die shifter," screamed Anzele.

The bird turned to face Anzele. Its wickedly sharp beak opened enough for a squawk. Iana's blood still dripped from its talons while the last gored body fell. Anzele watched the beak shift just enough for a smile to form.

"I will have your head," cried Anzele.

She was still new at using her force, but she summoned every bit along with her rage. These creatures had wronged her too many times. She sent fire so thick, it looked like a single stream igniting the bird's eyes. The shifter tried to get away, but Anzele was not fighting this one again. She took a deep breath then released force like nothing she'd known before. The thing shuddered then its head exploded. Bits of feathers drifted around her.

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Cordin, Kartin, and Setiar swooped in. Kartin and Setiar blocked as Cordin cut first one bird then another. When the star made contact, cutting the skin, the bird form disappeared and the women took normal shape, dropping from the sky and leaving heavy imprints of their bodies where they fell.

When the first shifter fell, it seemed to excite the birds. They spread their wings knocking flyers from their path. Two birds would battle while the rest plunged with claws spread, picking up as many flyers as they could catch. They raked the air inflicting damage on anyone in reach. There was no way to stop all the birds. Several shifters impaled the flyers on their claws before Cordin could reach them. Blood rained on the ground. More flyers were torn as the beaks shredded into the flyer bodies, making them no more.

Vincent summoned lightning, charring several, but these things were resilient. One he made implode but the concentration took his mind away from the fight and that was dangerous. He settled for fire, at least for a distraction as Cordin worked closer to the animals.

One by one, Cordin slit the birds. The cut didn't have to be lethal. As long as it drew blood, the shifters were harmed. The magic in the star infected them making each shriek in agony. A bright glare came from the incision then they started dying, falling to the earth like wet sacks of sand.

The shifters' bodies fell down with the flyers' dead. There were only ten to start and more than a hundred flyers attacking. When only three shifters could be seen in the sky, the flyers surrounded, keeping Cordin behind them, protected and waiting for an opening.

Liking hovered next to Vincent, both attacking the birds. Neither noticed a flyer slip behind them. Her eyes gleamed silver as she slid closer to Cordin who was busy watching for his opening.

It was Vincent who saw something strange, a familiar smile then a black box as the new flyer drifted by. He didn't know all the flyers in the village and this one seemed familiar but also very wrong. He turned and followed her. She looked back and let out a silver flare then plunged toward Cordin.

"Cordin, no." Vincent swooped in grabbing the flyer by the arm. "Lynn, damn you. Leave this place."

She turned dropping the box and producing a type of claw-knife from her hand. Her arm changed, becoming like a snake, and wrapped around Vincent. The hold was tight, so much he could barely breathe.

"I didn't want it to end like this." Lynn smiled again and gave him a kiss on the lips. "I wished you and I were back at the cave making love instead of me killing you. I know you would've preferred me." She licked her lips then brought her mouth to his. "You never should've betrayed me." Her grip tightened. "That wasn't nice."

"Please, Lynn." He needed air. Even in his new flyer body, the world began to swim. "Lynn," he gasped.

She raised the knife. There was nothing Vincent could do. His arms were pinned. He tried to concentrate but without airflow, he didn't know how. For the first time, he knew he would die. His end would at least be in battle and not lost in black abyss.

Vincent didn't see Liking grab her arm until she turned her head to face him. His enemy, the very man he would've gladly let die in the void was saving him. Vincent managed to smile.

"Drop the knife, Lynn." Liking held firm.

The distraction worked. Her other arm loosened enough to let Vincent breathe. He motioned to Liking. Both men began pulling in opposite directions, hoping Lynn couldn't hold them. When Lynn started to shift, raising feathers from her skin, Vincent thought they were both in trouble. No one could hold a war bird.

Just then, Anzele swooped down. Burning feathers followed her. She held her arms out in front of her. Murder was in her eyes and a hatred Vincent knew too well. In one single burst, Anzele sent fire. Lynn dropped both men as fire engulfed her middle, starting in a thin line then changing wider as the men were clear. Lynn gasped then fell to the ground with smoke following in a long trail.

Anzele watched her fall from the sky. It was disturbing seeing the change on Anzele's face, the darkened narrow eyes, the jaw clenched, the lips turned to a snarl. She'd gone from the most innocent creature, unable to even fend for herself to something wild and untamed.

The battle slowed around them. Cordin swooped past trying to get another war bird. It went up high as Cordin caught it. Another started in the other direction. Anzele followed only to have it escape.

The rest littered the ground along side the broken bodies of the flyers. As the victory was complete, each looked for their loved ones. Cordin quickly found Marabeth, Vincent found Anzele, and Liking watched alone.

"Marabeth, will you take the star and put it away?" Cordin handed over the weapon without ever showing doubt.

“Certainly,” Marabeth kissed Cordin, although a little too passionately, then flew down the mountain.

“Are you well, Vincent?” asked Cordin, although he watched Marabeth fly out of sight.

“Yes.” Vincent wrapped his arms around Anzele. She looked exhausted. “So what happens now?”

Liking stepped up. “I withdraw my challenge. You may go to your binding.” He shook Vincent’s hand. “Know this, if she ever feels you have done her wrong, I will be happy to take your place.” He looked at Anzele then turned from them with head hung low and shoulders slack.

“Then old business is done. Let us clean up and repair our world.” Kartin hugged many of the males. “Well done.”

Twenty flyers had been lost. Each body was taken to the burning place. It was a type of stone altar with symbols engraved on the sides. Vincent recognized a few of the symbols from the hospital. There was the woman who’d been rumored to have found their world and a rainbow on one side. Some of the other etchings seemed to be writing, but it was one he didn’t understand.

On the grooved top of the altar, wood was brought, then the bodies were rested ceremoniously with flowers and herbs placed around each of the departed. A layer of five bodies was cremated at a time with all the flyers in attendance. Most prayed, other sang as the silvery smolder curled into the sky.

The ceremony was clearly sacred as the dead returned to the air while friends and family blew kisses skyward. The last of the ashes were carried by the wind to ocean before the process was repeated for the rest of the dead.

The shifters were also gathered and burned, although not so ceremoniously. Their bodies were cremated, in a pile of wood while a few flyers mumbled prayers for their departed souls. Others spit into the flames as the oily smoke rose into the air. When the pile stopped flaming, they dumped the ashes onto the ground and covered the mess with more dirt.

There had been ten shifters, but only eight bodies were retrieved. Vincent knew Lynn was one of the two who’d survived. She’d never been struck with the knife, only burned. Lynn would recover from the injury. Vincent also had no doubts he would see her again. He just hoped he could recognize her.

Chapter Seventeen

Liking stayed in his home on the day of the binding. He could still hear the music playing despite the sound of the ocean. It racked his nerves, forcing him to wander along the beach trying to lose the sound.

It wasn't fair. He'd loved Anzele for so long. Somehow he had to accept the loss. He even started to like Vincent but it made things harder, not easier, as he'd hoped.

"Anzele," he whispered.

Anzele and Vincent agreed that Liking would be welcomed at the wedding. It would be too awkward, though. He had wronged Anzele, even if it was for the love burning in his heart. Instead he wanted as far away from the binding as possible.

He leapt over a stand of rocks, then continued walking. The sound of the music wasn't so bad from there. He sat on the sand and watched the ocean rolling in a vast expanse before him. So many flyers were terrified of the rough water. Liking wouldn't dare swim in it but he enjoyed looking out into the mix of blue. It comforted him.

As he sat there, a small sound caught his attention. It wasn't of the binding songs, but a girl crying, and he felt her pain. Liking followed the sound up the rocky line. There, tucked into a nook in the rocks, was Lynn.

He stood there for a minute, looking down at the woman who'd tricked him into making love to her and had then tried to kill him and his kind. Flyers should hate shifters. Everything in him screamed that he should bash her brains in for her sins. It seemed logical but he'd gone beyond hate. Lynn was a creature of loneliness and not so different from him, after all.

"Are you here to kill me?" She held her chest and scooted against the rock. Even through the thick black skin, Liking could tell she was badly burned.

"No, Lynn." Liking eased forward. "Some salve would make that better." Liking sighed. Lynn looked so vulnerable lying there in the rock and sand that it tore at his heart. "Wait here and I'll bring you some back."

Liking flew the short distance to his home, then returned with a jar of salve and some fruit. He set the items on the ground, then got on his knees and reached to her. It took a moment to coax Lynn out of her hiding place. She didn't seem to trust Liking or maybe she didn't trust the kindness he offered.

"Come on. I mean you no harm." Liking smiled and she responded with the same. "This isn't a safe place to hide. There are better in the forests. Once we have your wounds dressed, I'll fly you there."

Lynn crept out. In the sunshine, the wound looked much worse with bubbled blisters covering her upper body. In some places no skin covered her at all, leaving raw sores. It was a miracle she'd survived. Carefully, Liking applied the salve, then put a loose bandage, wrapping it around her.

"We should leave this place." Liking tucked the end of the bandage back into the wrap. "Hold on to my neck. I don't want to squeeze you too tightly and hurt you."

"Why are you helping me?" Lynn's eyes were glassy and full of fright.

“Because someone should.” He offered her the fruit then took to the air cradling her like a bride. Her head rested against his chest, causing a warm feeling to spread through him, and he smiled. “Let’s get you someplace safe.”

* * * *

“I can’t believe it,” Cordin came from the sky, landing near Vincent. His skin looked pale, lips pulled tight as he landed. “She’s gone.”

Vincent looked up from the log he sat upon. He was dressed as a flyer and had been fully accepted in their village. The mortal world was gone for him but he had to wonder what Gill thought about his absence. He might believe the flyers had killed him or that the void had taken his life.

“Who’s gone?” Vincent asked pulling back from his thoughts.

“Marabeth has left me again.”

Cordin sighed then sat on the log next to Vincent. It had a few flowered vines cascading in front. Most of the flowers were used to decorate the path with the largest congregation at the end where everyone waited the festivities.

“Are you sure? Maybe she’s visiting her sister.” Vincent fidgeted with his clothes then smoothed his hair back as he waited for Anzele to appear.

“I checked. Tara is no longer at the hospital. I guess you were right about the lure of the star.” Cordin touched a group of binding flowers marking the start of the path. “I’d really thought Marabeth had changed but I guess her tricks have just improved.”

“I think it was more Tara’s influence that caused Marabeth to steal the star than anything else.” Vincent touched Cordin’s shoulder. “You will find her again.”

“But will I ever trust her?” Cordin’s words were filled with sorrow.

“Of course you will. It’s the unta.” Vincent checked the sky for his bride. “Besides, I don’t think they mean to undo the world and even without the star’s power, the world will heal.”

“I’m sure you’re right. They only want to increase their power, not ruin the world.” Cordin pointed to the sky. “Let’s forget my woes. Today shall be one of celebration. Anzele has arrived.”

“Anzele,” Vincent whispered as she landed at the start of the binding path. The rest of the party was in a clearing at the end with an elder, but in that moment he was only aware of her. “You’re beautiful.”

Vincent went to her, pulling her close to his body. His lips found hers, trailing soft kisses while he felt the bare flesh at her back. Tonight the fabric would slip away, slinking down her body and allowing him to lay claim to his wife.

White flowers clung in her hair as tendrils cascaded down her shoulders framing her in a clean lily scent. She intoxicated his senses and he became filled with more want than he’d ever experienced.

Cordin took them by the hand. “Hold hands on the way up the path. I’ll lead you, then do what the elder says.”

“I love you Anzele,” whispered Vincent as they walked up the path.

“I love you too.”

The End

About the Author:

Jennifer Cloud was born in Asheville, North Carolina where she met her husband who encouraged her to write after finding a partial manuscript in the bottom of her armoire.

She now resides in Florida with her husband and two daughters. She writes romantic suspense, paranormals, and eroticas. Visit her website at jennifercloud.com or email her at jennifercloud1@aol.com

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