



EYES OF THE WOLF

By

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Kaila's heart pounded as she approached the barbarian encampment. Campfires flickered amidst the deer-hide tents. Men sat around them, laughing, eating haunches of roast meat, and slopping ale from tankards. It was dark. None of them had seen her yet. She had the sudden urge to turn and bolt ... but she suppressed it. She had to do this. She could not allow her people to suffer any longer. If her father would not give Chief Garou what he demanded, then Kaila would take matters into her own hands.

One by one, the men fell silent and turned to look at her. They were huge and muscular, wearing the skins of wolves or bobcats, and most had thick, bushy beards.

"Where is your chief?" she called, with as much authority as she could muster. Still, she trembled beneath her heavy, fur-lined cloak. These men were brutes. For the past few months, they had been attacking the city, carrying off plunder. They lived like foxes, attacking, thieving, and vanishing into the night.

One man wiped grease from his beard with the back of one hand, then stood, grinning widely. "Bold little thing, aren't you?"

He started forward, but was stopped by a sharp, "Don't touch her!" from the largest tent.

The man froze as the chief pushed the tent flap aside and stepped out. He was tall, and surprisingly young. He was also one of the few men in camp without a beard. Three scars, like claw-marks, marred each cheek. He wore a dark wolf-hide, the wolf's head perched over his own, and dark leather gloves and boots. At his belt was a glittering sword, no doubt stolen, like all their weapons. He drew the blade from its gem-encrusted scabbard and pressed the tip to the man's stomach. The man gulped, his eyes widening. "No one is to touch her, save me," said the chief. "If anyone lays a hand on her, I'll cut off his sack and hang it out to dry in the sun."

Kaila stood frozen, like a frightened rabbit, as the chief approached. He moved like the wolf for which he was named, his strides smooth and graceful. Well-defined muscles shifted beneath the bronze skin in his arms and legs. With a gloved hand, he gripped her chin and turned her face from side to side, studying her. She noticed, with a shock, that his eyes were yellow-gold, like a wolf's. "Strange, that you come here alone, without a carriage or guards," he remarked. His gloved thumb traced her chin, and then ran lightly over her full lips. "One would think your father would send that much, at least, to see off his beloved daughter. I wonder ... did your father send you at all, or did you come of your own free will?"

She swallowed, keeping her eyes downcast. "My father sent me." Garou might not consider it a gift if he knew she'd come on her own. "He is willing to make the sacrifice for his people."

"Very wise of him." He smiled, showing a glint of white teeth. With

the tip of his sword, he pulled her cloak open to reveal the soft, pink silk dress beneath. He studied the pearly buttons ... then slid his sword-tip beneath one and popped it off, so delicately that he didn't even graze the skin beneath. A few of his men hooted, but he paid no attention. His eyes were fixed on her heaving chest. He popped off another button, then another, exposing more of her breasts, until at last, they burst out of the dress.

Kaila gritted her teeth, cheeks burning. Would he have her out in the open, in front of all these leering pigs?

No matter what happened, she was determined to endure it stoically. It was the only honor left to her.

The cold tip of the sword touched her breast, almost gently, and her breath caught in her throat. She watched, stone-still, as it circled her nipple, which quickly hardened at the coldness of the steel. He did the same to the other nipple, then returned to the first, until both were jutting stiffly, aching hard and tight. Then, with the tip of his sword, he lifted her dress. One hand reached beneath it.

Kaila swatted his hand away. The men all gasped in shock and stared at their leader, wondering what he would do.

He raised one eyebrow. "I'd advise you to remember where you are and who your new master is. At a word from me, I could have one of these men end your life ... or do worse things to you."

She glared at him, cheeks flushed. It occurred to her, even through

her anger and embarrassment, that he didn't *speak* like a barbarian. He had a city-dweller's accent. Highborn, no less. It puzzled her, but at the moment, it was the least of her concerns.

"Come with me to my tent," he said. His men began hooting again, and Kaila shook with anger. She would rather die than be this barbarian's whore ... but there was more than her own life at stake.

Head held high, eyes staring straight ahead, she followed Garou into the tent. It was huge, easily three times as large as any of the other tents in the barbarian campsite. Garou pushed the tent-flap aside. "After you, my lady."

She entered, trying to remain cool and regal despite the fact that her heart was racing.

Inside the tent, the ground was covered with animal -hides from wolves, snow-foxes, and rabbits. In the center, a small fire burned. Smoke rose through a hole in the tent's ceiling, and a pot of soup hung over the fire, bubbling. Garou ladled some into a small bowl, shaped like the bottom half of an egg, and handed it to her. She blinked in surprise, staring at it. "Go on," he said. "Eat."

Hesitantly, she took the bowl from him and sipped the dark broth, eyes watching him warily over the bowl's rim.

"I haven't drugged it, if that's what you're afraid of. I prefer my women awake and aware, able to enjoy the experience."

"You're fooling yourself if you think I'll enjoy it," she said.

Garou chuckled. "You think so? Perhaps I can change your mind." He crouched, watching her intently. His golden eyes shone in the firelight, seeming almost to glow. "You are very beautiful."

She took another sip of her soup, not looking at him. "I'm not interested in flattery."

"I don't flatter. I only state facts." He leaned closer. "I must know the truth. Did your father send you here, or did you come on your own?"

"What does it matter? I'm here. My father's part of the bargain has been fulfilled. Now you must honor your promise to leave our people in peace."

"Look at me when you speak to me, Kaila."

When she didn't look up, he gripped her chin and tilted his face upward. She swallowed as his yellow gaze met hers. "You have beautiful eyes," he said. "Blue-green, like water pierced by sunlight."

She shivered lightly. She might have enjoyed those words, coming from another man ... but she knew that this man's heart held no tenderness. He was simply admiring her as he would any object of value. To him, she was just another piece of loot.

"I can see why you keep them downcast most of the time, though," he continued, running his thumb slowly over her lips. "They hide nothing. It's like looking straight into your heart." His thumb continued to run back and forth across her lips, very lightly. "Tell me, now. What makes you think that your coming here will change anything? Who's to say I won't just keep

attacking your people?”

“You gave your word,” she said.

“And what good is the word of a barbarian?”

“They say you are a man of your word. Despite everything else you’ve done, you always honor your promises.”

“They speak true. Starting tomorrow morning, I will lead my men away from your city.”

She exhaled softly with relief.

He raised an eyebrow. “You care for your people that much? That you would be willing to give yourself over to a man you hated, a man who has been looting and terrorizing your city for months?”

“It has nothing to do with my feelings. It’s my duty,” Kaila said. She narrowed her eyes. “Not that a man like you would understand that.”

He chuckled. “Drink your soup. It’s beginning to cool.”

“I don’t want it,” she said, and set it down.

He picked it up. “Suit yourself. But sooner or later you’ll have to eat. Practicality always outweighs pride, in the long run.” He drained the bowl in a single gulp, then set it aside. “In the meantime, take off your dress. I want to look at you.”

She nodded stiffly and unbuttoned her dress. She kept her eyes fixed on the tent wall, kept her face impassive. She would not give him the pleasure of showing her fear ... but she could not control the tremor in her hands as she undid the last button and let the dress slip to the floor.

“Lie down on your back,” he said.

She obeyed, praying he would be quick about it, praying it wouldn't hurt too much. She'd heard that it always hurt the first time, for women. She closed her eyes, tears welling behind them. There was no sense in feeling regret. She had always known there would be no love for her. She was a princess, expected to marry a man of her father's choosing. She braced herself for the pain of his hard sex tearing through her virginity ... but it didn't come. Uncertain, she opened her eyes.

He was looking down at her breasts, slowly sliding off one glove. His breathing had grown slightly, almost imperceptibly heavier. “Exquisite,” he murmured. He began to massage one nipple, and Kaila was shocked to feel it responding, hardening to an aching point beneath his warm fingertips. “Your breasts are very sensitive. And beautifully formed, I might add.”

She felt another moment's disorientation at his strange speech. He sounded like a noble from her father's court. The accent was unmistakable. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“I am Garou, Chief of the Wolf Clan. Who else would I be?” He molded her other nipple into a sensitive peak.

Kaila felt her breath quickening, and not entirely with fear. What was wrong with her? He was a monster. She should be repulsed at his touch. She closed her eyes and felt those warm fingers brush her stomach.

“So soft,” he whispered. “It's been so long since I've touched skin

like this.” There was desire in that voice, but something else, as well-- something wistful, almost gentle. She was growing more confused by the moment. She had come here expecting to be brutally raped, but this ... this was somehow worse. Brutality, she could endure, but she had no defense against gentleness.

When his fingers brushed the downy curls between her legs, she gasped and pressed her thighs tightly together.

“Open your legs,” he whispered. And then added, so softly she almost didn’t hear it, “Please.”

Slowly, she parted her thighs.

He touched her mound lightly, then cupped it possessively with one broad, rough hand. “Have you ever been touched like this?” he asked, his eyes focused on hers.

“N-no.” Her body was burning up like a torch. She wanted him to stop--but she wanted even more for him to keep going. She bit her lower lip as his finger invaded her moist furrow.

“You’re very wet,” he whispered. He leaned down, his lips brushing the curve of one full, heaving breast. His tongue collected a few drops of sweat as his rough cheek rubbed lightly against her protruding nipple. Meanwhile, his finger continued its exploration of her wet folds and found the tightly -lodged barrier of her virginity. He pressed lightly, and she tensed at the pain, shutting her eyes tightly in anticipation of the tearing agony she knew would come ... but Garou withdrew his hand. “No,” he

murmured. “Not yet.”

“You mean ... you will just ... stop?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you want me to finish you?”

“F-finish? I don’t understand.”

“Then let me show you.” One thick finger slid slowly along the length of her furrow ... and pressed a spot so sensitive that her eyes flew wide open in surprise. He circled the spot, teasing it until it throbbed with need, then dragged his callused thumb across it slowly. She gasped, and her hips arched upward as the pleasure grew unbearably sharp for a brief, burning moment ... then the aching pressure was gone, and she went limp, bathed in sweat and panting softly.

Garou kissed her, very softly, on the lips. “You are a treasure,” he whispered.

Kaila turned her face to one side, blinking away tears. She had no idea how to feel. She’d never been more confused in all her life.

Garou stood, looking down at her flushed, naked body. She felt a flash of fear. Now, he was through toying with her. He would sate his lust. She tensed, pulling away.

“I’m not going to rape you,” said Garou.

She stared at him, more confused than ever. “Then why did you want me here? What are you planning to do with me?”

“Oh, I do intend to take your virginity. Never doubt it.” His words--and his husky tone--sent a shiver up her spine ... of fear or something else,

she couldn't be sure. "But when I enter you, I want you to be willing. More than willing." His smile widened. "I want you to beg for my seed."

Her jaw dropped. "You think I would come to you willingly, after everything you and the rest of your vicious brutes have done?" she burst out, all restraint gone. "Are you really so deluded by arrogance?"

He raised his eyebrows. "You did not seem so adverse to my touch a moment ago."

Her mouth snapped shut, and her cheeks flushed so hotly that she felt a moment's dizziness. "You forced me," she said. "It was rape, just as surely as if you'd pierced my maidenhead." Even as she said that, she wondered if she believed it. She had not once attempted to push him away or stop him. Why?

"Well, I am a barbarian," said Garou. "What did you expect?"

She looked away. "Nothing less."

"But you *will* come to me willingly, when the time comes," he said. "There isn't a woman born who could resist me forever."

"You're a fool," she said coldly. "A woman submits to you out of fear and you think you've won her? You know very little about women."

"And you know very little about me," he said. His voice had gone soft and husky again.

She swallowed, her heartbeat quickening. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Perhaps you'd feel differently about me if you knew more," he said.

“Or perhaps not.”

Those eyes. They unsettled her. She had the feeling they could somehow see into the private depths of her heart, where her hidden feelings lay. Even spent, as she was, Kaila felt her body stirring to life once again. Damn it. Why did he affect her so? Had he slipped some potion into her soup?

That had to be it, she decided. There were drugs which could make a person more susceptible, more sensitive to touch. That was why she'd reacted as she had. Well, he would find out that she wasn't an easy conquest. Now that she knew what was going on, she could resist her desires.

Garou turned away from her and pushed the tent-flap aside.

“You're leaving?” she said in surprise.

He looked over one shoulder. “Yes. I don't stay in my tent all the time, you know.”

“Then you'll trust me to stay put?”

“I don't think you're stupid enough to try anything. This tent is surrounded by my men. If you try to escape, you'll only embarrass yourself.”

“What if I have to ... relieve myself?”

“Here,” he said, and set the empty soup pot on the floor. “Unless, of course, you'd prefer to go outside, with everyone watching.”

She flushed. “No thank you,” she said, with as much dignity as she

could muster.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said, and left the tent.

Kaila sighed and stretched out across the soft furs. She’d begun to wish that she’d eaten a little more soup. Her stomach was rumbling, but she wouldn’t ask him for more. She would not ask this dog for anything.

She closed her eyes. It had been a long, exhausting day, and even as she wondered if she would be able to sleep in such a strange place, she felt herself drifting off.

* * * *

Garou looked around the camp, at his men. “Get your things ready,” he said. “We leave tomorrow morning and travel west.”

“But Chief,” one of them said, “there’s still plenty of plunder to be had in this city.”

“No matter. I promised the king that if he gave me his daughter, I would leave his people alone. I must honor my word. I’ll hear no argument. Understood?”

Dispirited nods and mutters met this pronouncement.

“I’m going hunting,” he said, and picked up his bow--which was as tall as a ten-year-old child, and carved from sturdy, dark oak--and his full quiver, which he slung over one shoulder. He walked out of the camp and into the moon-silvered grass of the plains.

* * * *

Kaila woke slowly and stretched. What a strange dream she’d had,

about a man with golden eyes, who frightened and enticed her at the same time. She opened her eyes, and blinked in puzzlement. Why wasn't she in her bedroom?

The memories came crashing back into place. It had been no dream. She was a prisoner of the Wolf Clan, and their chief had taken her for his concubine.

She wondered if she'd ever see her home or her father again.

She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes and looking around, but there was no sign of Garou. The fire had died down to a few embers, and the tent was chilly. She shivered, rubbing her arms.

She remembered the way he had touched her last night--so gently--and the look in his eyes had been so strange. He had seemed hungry for something besides her body ... but what, she could not guess. Perhaps it was all just some strange trick, a way of toying with her mind.

She heard footsteps outside the tent, and sat up straighter. "Garou?"

A low chuckle was the reply. Her skin crawled. That didn't sound like Garou. Kaila scooted backwards, heart pounding. "Who are you?"

A hairy hand pushed the tent flap aside, revealing a broad, bearded face. The man was bald, and his nose looked oddly squashed, as if it had been broken more than once. A silver earring glinted in one ear. His thick lips glistened with saliva as his small, dim blue eyes stared at her hungrily. "Oh, Chief Garou has found himself a prize this time," he whispered hoarsely, and licked his lips. He reached out. "I'll not hurt you, pretty

thing. Just let me touch you.”

“Go away,” she said, summoning the calmest tone she could muster, “or Garou will kill you. You remember what he said, don’t you?”

“The chief don’t have to know.” He licked his lips again and crawled toward her, eyes shining, face split in a wide grin. “You got the ripest set of tits I ever seen. Just a quick squeeze, that’s all I ask.”

She tensed. “For the last time. I’m warning you....”

He lunged toward her. She scrambled backwards, behind the remains of the fire. He crawled toward her, panting. In his haste to get to her, he put his hand in the embers, and howled, clutching it. Kaila dashed toward the tent-flap, but he grabbed her ankle, pulling her to the ground, and dragged her back toward him. She opened her mouth to scream, but a hand clamped across it. His other hand gripped her breast and squeezed it, hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. She bit down hard on his hand, sinking her teeth into the meat. “Nice try, sweetheart,” he said through gritted teeth, still framed by a smile, “but I’m used to pain.”

Frantic, Kaila clawed at him, her nails leaving long, red scratch-marks down his arms and chest, but he ignored the assault and forced her to the ground, onto her back. His knee rammed between her thighs, forcing them apart. “I was only going to touch you,” he said, panting, “but now, you made me angry. You’re going to regret that, my silky little princess.”

* * * *

Garou crouched on the stream bank, splashing cold water onto his

face and letting it drip from his long, dark hair. He growled softly.

It had been a mistake to ask the king for such a sacrifice. He should have known that even if the king refused, the girl would come here to save her people. And he'd known from the beginning that his desire was too intense to be trusted. This was no ordinary lust, to be sated with a quick rut.

He'd first seen her during a raid, when she stood on a balcony overlooking the city. Her eyes had been wide, her long, dark hair rippling in the wind, and she'd had an arrow drawn. She'd been aiming for him.

He had stopped and stood beneath the balcony, hands on his hips, chest exposed, just to see what she would do. "Do you know how to handle that weapon?" he'd called up mockingly.

Her eyes had widened, and then narrowed. She had pulled the arrow back ... but she hadn't released it. He'd seen the flash of anger in her face. Not anger at him, but at herself, for not being able to kill him.

Just then, a deep voice from within the palace had said, "Princess, what are you doing out here?" and a large hand--probably a guard's--had dragged her back inside.

But he did not forget. He didn't forget the wild, frightened look in her eyes, or the way her full lips had trembled with anger, the way her breasts heaved, straining against her dress. From that moment on, he had ached to possess her. He had dreamt of having her beneath him, her mouth open in pleasure, and her breasts taut and glistening with sweat. He had dreamed of the moment when his cock tore through the sheath of her

virginity and buried itself deep in her tight, hot core.

In his dreams, the sex had always been violent and passionate. But he knew that if he took her that way, she would hate him, and he didn't want that. He didn't know why he should care. She already hated him ... but he couldn't bring himself to hurt her. She represented everything he'd given up when he left home--beauty, softness. Warmth. He'd tried to tell himself that he didn't miss those things, but he could only fool himself for so long.

If only she hadn't been so damned noble, so self-sacrificing. If only she'd been a spoiled brat, like every other princess he'd encountered. Princesses, with their cold, virginal beauty, had never held much appeal for him before he met Kaila. He liked women whose sexual appetites matched his own, and who demanded no more from him than an evening in his tent. Nervous virgins only tried his patience.

So what was it about Kaila that made her different?

He heard a faint rustle in the tall grass nearby. In one swift, smooth movement, he pulled an arrow from his quiver and shot it. He was rewarded by the muffled *thud* of the arrow hitting flesh. He slung his bow over one shoulder, walked over and pulled a fat quail from the grass. The arrow had buried itself in the heart beneath its thick, downy breast-feathers, killing it instantly. "You'll make a fine stew," he said. Gripping the bird by its legs, he headed back into camp.

Immediately, he sensed something amiss. The men were all sitting at their campfires, as usual, but they were all being very careful not to look at

him, and their laughter was strained.

He frowned. “What’s going on?” he demanded, raising his voice to be heard above their chatter.

The men fell silent and stared at him.

“Well?” asked Garou. “I asked you a question.”

“Uh-it’s the girl, Chief,” one of them said.

Sudden fear seized his heart. “Kaila? What’s happened to her?”

One man pointed a short, thick finger at Garou’s tent. “Well, Turlog went in there, and....”

Garou needed to hear no more. He dropped the pheasant, along with his bow and quiver, grabbed his knife, ran to the tent and threw aside the flap.

Turlog was atop a struggling Kaila, covering her mouth with one dirty hand while his other hand fondled her breasts. “Don’t struggle, my pretty,” he whispered. He was grinning, revealing his broken, yellowed teeth. “And don’t you tell the chief about this, or I’ll cut out your sweet little tongue. This’ll be our secret.” He heard the tent-flap open, and looked up. His jaw dropped, and his eyes widened. “Chief! Wait! I...”

Garou didn’t wait for an explanation. He lunged, burying his dagger deep in Turlog’s thigh. Turlog howled, eyes bulging in pain, cords standing out in his thick neck. Garou yanked the dagger free, then grabbed Turlog by his shirt-collar and hauled him out of the tent. Turlog lay on the ground, sobbing like an oversized, vulgar child, his face wet with tears and snot.

“Don’t kill me, Chief, I wasn’t really gonna hurt her, I swear, I just....”

“Shut up!” Garou kicked him in the side. “Get out of my campsite, you bastard! I don’t care where you go, just leave!”

“B-but Chief ... I’m wounded. The wolves....”

Garou seized his collar and hoisted him off the ground. “You don’t even deserve the chance I’m giving you, you scum. If you’re not out of this camp within one minute, I might change my mind about sparing your worthless hide. Now get out!” He flung Turlog to the ground.

Still sobbing, the man crawled away, then climbed shakily to his feet and broke into a limping run. His trouser-leg was soaked through with blood. There was a huge, dark patch of it on the ground where he’d lain, and a long smear of it nearby, marking the distance he’d crawled. The wolves would probably smell his blood and finish him off before the night was over. Garou didn’t much care.

He opened the tent-flap and entered. His heart clenched at the sight of Kaila huddled, trembling, in a corner of the tent. Her eyes were wide and wet with tears, and her dress was in tatters. She clutched a piece of it to her chest in an attempt to cover herself. “Kaila,” he said, “Kaila, it’s all right. He’s gone. I sent him away where he can’t reach you.” He reached a hand out to her, and Kaila broke down into tears.

Garou froze ... then looked away, his jaw tightening. Of course. Why should she be glad to see him? He was her captor. He was probably just as repulsive to her as the pig who’d been pawing her a moment ago. He

could do nothing to comfort her, except leave her alone.

Slowly, he withdrew from the tent and stood outside, fists clenched, chest tight.

His men were all staring at him, their faces white as wax. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” said Garou, his voice dangerously soft. “The girl is to be left alone. Next time, I will not be so merciful. Anyone who dares to harm her will wind up dead ... after I’ve sliced off every part of him that has touched her.” He turned to a large, bearded man with a scar across his throat. “Brumo.”

The man stood.

“Guard her. I’m going for a walk.”

Brumo nodded and stood in front of the tent flap. He was mute, but fiercely loyal, one of the few men Garou would trust with his life ... or Kaila’s.

Garou picked up his bow and quiver and walked away.

* * * *

Kaila huddled in a corner of the tent, still shaking. She could see a large shadow through the tent, the man Garou had left to guard her.

Her breasts still ached where the other man had grabbed her, and his smell still hung in the tent, a thick, sour odor, like that of a sick animal. Being alone with that smell was torture.

She supposed she should be grateful that Garou had left her alone. He might not be so rough with her, but he was no different from Turlog. He,

too, had touched her against her will.

Yet, she wanted him here. When she'd seen him, she had burst into tears of relief--tears which he had mistaken for fear.

He *was* different, she decided. A man like Turlog would not have left her alone when he thought she wanted solitude. A man like that wouldn't have cared.

She wiped her tears away, stood and slipped into her cloak, lacing it shut with trembling fingers. Taking a deep breath, she pushed aside the tent flap. The guard turned to her in surprise. He was huge, with heavy, bristly brows over his dark eyes, and pale scars marked his arms and chest ... yet somehow, he did not strike her as dangerous. "I need to talk to Garou," she said. "Which way did he go?"

The man shook his head and pointed back into the tent. She tried to walk past him, and he restrained her with two huge, blunt-fingered hands on her shoulders. Again, he pointed into the tent.

"Please," she said. "He left because he thought I wanted him to go, but I didn't. I need to tell him that. I want him to know that I appreciate him saving me from that brute." She wondered if she was losing her mind. She wouldn't be here in the first place if not for Garou. She had no reason to feel grateful to him ... but right now, he was her only protection against the rest of these men. She supposed it was in her best interest to stay on friendly terms with him.

The man was silent, studying her with those small, dark eyes. At last,

he let out a small, hoarse grunt, turned, and beckoned her with one meaty hand. She followed him across the camp, clutching her cloak tightly around herself as she looked nervously around. None of the other men even looked at her. After the incident with Turlog, she supposed, they would avoid her like the plague.

The huge man led her into the grassy hills surrounding the camp, and pointed. Garou was sitting with his back against a tree, staring up at the sky. He looked strangely, and unexpectedly vulnerable. “Thank you,” she said. Steeling herself, she walked through the waist-high, yellow grass, toward Garou. The guard did not follow, but turned and headed back to camp.

As she approached, Garou’s eyes snapped open, and he stood, drawing his knife so quickly that it seemed to appear by magic in his hand. When he saw it was her, he exhaled and sheathed the blade. “Kaila. You shouldn’t sneak up on me.”

“I wasn’t trying to,” she said.

“Next time, call out my name when you approach. I could easily have killed you. I tend to assume that anyone who approaches in silence is an enemy. My men know better.” He scowled suddenly. “How did you get past Brumo?”

“I didn’t,” she said. “He led me to you. Please don’t punish him. I told him that I needed to talk to you.”

He stared at her for a long moment, still frowning. “And what is it you wish to discuss?”

“I wanted to thank you. For protecting me.”

He grunted softly, looking away, and sat down again. “You shouldn’t thank me. Protecting you is my responsibility, and I faltered. I thought my men respected me enough not to touch you when I ordered them to stay away, but apparently, I was wrong.”

Kaila sat down across from him. “Still, you have my thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he murmured, almost too quiet to be heard.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. “Was that all you came here for?” asked Garou.

She bit her lip. “No. I wanted to ask you some questions.”

“Ask, then. But I won’t promise to answer them.”

She picked a blade of grass and began to pull it apart with the tips of her nails. She was tense. She felt as if she were trying to pet a wild animal, one which could take her hand off in one bite, if it wanted. “I know you weren’t born to the Wolf Clan,” she said. “Your accent is different.”

“So it is.”

She waited for him to speak, but he didn’t seem inclined to say anything else. Kaila took a deep breath. “You were born a noble, weren’t you?”

He looked up, yellow eyes meeting hers. “Not quite. I was the bastard son of a noble. I have no title to claim as my own. As you probably know, bastards are not held in very high regard, especially ones with abnormalities like these.” He touched the corner of his left eye. “Ever since

I was a child, I heard it whispered that I was marked. The mark of the wolf. Even my parents were afraid of me.” His hands curled slowly into fists, and he stared at the ground. Kaila didn’t push him, only waited. At last, he began to talk again. “People are cowards. They never outright told my parents that they wanted me out of the city, but they scrawled messages on our doors, or smeared chicken blood on our windows. They left dead animals on our property. One afternoon, I was walking in the city alone and was dragged into an alley by three men in black masks. One of them had a knife. He tried to cut my throat.” His eyes had lost focus. They stared off into another time and place. Kaila could see his pulse beneath his jaw. “I killed all three. I don’t even remember what I did. My first clear memory is of seeing them dead on the ground, their throats ripped open. There was blood everywhere, on my clothes, my skin and hair. I could even taste it in my mouth. After that, I knew the people had been right about me all along. I was a monster. A marked one. The taint of evil ran in my blood. So I left the city.”

Kaila couldn’t speak. She stared at him, eyes wide and mouth dry.

“For awhile,” he said, “I lived off the land, or stole food from farms. One night, a group of barbarians found my camp and tried to take my food. I killed four of them. I have been their leader ever since.” His eyes locked onto hers. “You are the first person I have told my story to,” he said quietly. “Are you afraid of me?”

“A little,” she whispered.

He leaned toward her, so close that she could see her reflection in his golden eyes. “Only a little?”

Kaila’s mouth was suddenly dry, and her heartbeat seemed to fill her body, but she struggled to hold her voice steady. “You only hurt those who attacked you. You have no reason to hurt me.”

He smiled thinly, without humor. “You know nothing about me. I am the most unpredictable and violent person you’ll ever meet. There is a darkness in my soul that can never be cleansed. Even my parents saw it. My mother ... she was bewitched by a wolf-demon. He made her come to him, and planted his seed in her. That’s how I was born.”

“A demon? But that’s superstition. I didn’t think anyone believed in demons except old farm-wives.”

He grabbed her wrists, pulling her against him, and snarled. “Then how do you explain my eyes? Or the fact that I was able to kill three men with my bare hands when I was only thirteen?”

She squirmed. “Garou, you’re hurting me.”

He loosened his grip, but didn’t release her. “You’d be wise to fear me, Kaila. Hell, I’m afraid of myself, sometimes. The life of a barbarian suits me.” Bitterness had crept into his voice--and Kaila’s eyes widened in a flash of revelation.

“You hate this life, don’t you?” she asked.

He narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“A man like you wasn’t made to be a thief or a looter.”

“A man like me? And what do you mean by that? I’m not a man at all. I’m a ... a creature.”

“That isn’t true. I know you desire me, Garou. An animal would have had his way with me by now.”

“Perhaps that’s just what I intend to do.”

“Garou...”

He grabbed her hair and kissed her, hard. Her eyes widened as his tongue invaded her mouth. His big hands pulled off her cloak and slid beneath her buttocks, kneading the round, firm cheeks ... then his long fingers pressed between her thighs, into her moist folds. Her heart was pounding so hard it made her dizzy. She clutched handfuls of his rough-woven shirt, panting as she tried to gather her thoughts. “Garou,” she whispered again ... but before she could say another word, he found that sensitive nub of flesh. He caressed it lightly, and then pressed so hard that sparks danced behind her eyes. She moaned, eyes rolling back as her body seemed to liquefy in his arms. He had her helpless, trapped by her own passion--nothing in the world could have made her pull away from him in that moment.

“Please,” she whispered

“Please what?” His lips moved close to her ear. She could feel his hot, heavy breathing on her neck. “Please stop? Please take you?”

“I don’t know,” she moaned. “I-I can’t think ... when you touch me like that.”

His fingers left her sex, and she had to choke back a cry of dismay. Her mind and heart might still be undecided, but her body certainly wanted him to continue.

Garou pushed her to the ground, onto her back, and straddled her. “Tell me,” he said, his voice a deep rasp. “Tell me to take you.” His erection pressed against her thigh, separated from her flesh only by the worn deer-skin of his trousers.

Sudden fear stabbed through Kaila’s heart. In her mind, she saw Turlog pinning her down in the tent, leering as he ripped her dress. The all too fresh memories were like a bucket of cold water dumped over the fire of her need. “No!” She pulled away.

A strange, unreadable look flickered over his face. He stood, fists clenched, and drew in a shuddering breath. “Damn it.” He pressed the knuckles of one hand to his forehead. “Do you see me for what I am, now?” He looked at her, his eyes weary and pained. “Go back to the campsite, and stay in my tent. Stay there until I return.”

She gathered her cloak around herself, shivering. The heat that had filled her body a moment ago had fled. “Even if you are half-demon,” she said quietly, “it doesn’t make you a monster. You’re forcing this life on yourself. But it’s not too late. You can still choose.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” he said, avoiding her eyes.

“I know what I can see. And I can see you’re struggling with yourself. If you hate yourself for choosing this life, why don’t you find

another way to live?”

“And where would I go? Back to the city? My name is infamous, now. Garou, the barbarian chief of the Wolf Clan. They’d all recognize me by my eyes.” He turned away. “Just go.”

Slowly, reluctantly, she stood and walked back in the direction of the campsite. Brumo waited for her at the edge of the camp. He led her back to her tent, glaring at the men around them, as if daring them to put a hand anywhere near the chief’s concubine. None of them did.

* * * *

It was almost dawn by the time Garou returned to his tent. He pushed the flap to one side and stood in the entrance, staring at Kaila.

She was asleep, curled up beneath a blanket patched together from rabbit furs, her eyes closed, her lashes dark crescents against her pale cheeks. He could see her eyes moving in small flickers beneath the delicate lids as she dreamed. He knelt and watched her for a few minutes. Gently, he brushed a curl of dark hair from her cheek. Then he left the tent.

The clan would be leaving, soon. There were preparations to make. Garou wasn’t worried about missing sleep. He’d learned, long ago, that he could go for three or four days at a time without sleep and remain alert and clear-headed. Another gift of his heritage, he supposed.

Just as well. When he *did* sleep, he was often troubled by dark dreams.

* * * *

When Kaila woke, Garou was nowhere to be found--again. She sighed. Did that man ever sleep in his own tent?

She noticed some clothes laid out for her: A soft deerskin shirt, trousers which laced up the sides, and soft, leather shoes which looked like slippers. She took off her ragged dress and put on the clothes. They were a little big--she had to roll up the sleeves and tuck the baggy ends of the trousers into her shoes--but very comfortable. Pushing the tent-flap aside, she peered out.

Most of the tents had been taken down, and the campfires extinguished, leaving piles of charred kindling scattered across the beaten-down grass. The men were busy gathering up their few possessions. A few dozen horses stood nearby, grazing and swishing their tails. They were all colors--chestnut, gray, spotted and black--and well-groomed. They wore bridles, but no saddles.

Garou approached. "Can you ride?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. Where did those horses come from?" No sooner had she asked when realization dawned, and her eyes widened. She whirled to face Garou. "You stole them! After you promised you wouldn't take anything else from my people! What about our bargain? What about...."

"Easy," he said. "We didn't take them. We bought them."

"With stolen money!"

He shrugged. "We already had the money. I never promised to return what we'd stolen."

She frowned. He was right, but that didn't stop her from resenting him. These people were thieves, no better than vultures--she would do well to remember that, the next time she started to melt at Garou's touch.

"Where are their saddles?"

"A real horseman doesn't need a saddle." He mounted one of the mares, leaping onto her back with the grace of a dancer. The mare snorted and stamped her hooves as he took the reins.

"You will ride with me," said Garou. He offered a hand to her.

"Why can't I have my own?"

"Do you think I'm a fool? You'll turn and gallop away the moment you see an opportunity. Not that we couldn't catch you, but it's a bother I could do without."

She sighed. "Why would I try to escape? I came here voluntarily, to save my people, remember? If I left, the bargain would be destroyed and you would start attacking them again."

He grinned. "Ah, so you admit it. You weren't sent by your father."

"Very well. I admit it. Not that it makes much difference. I asked him to send me, but he said it would be an insult to the ghosts of the kings before him to give in to the demands of barbarians. So I left."

"You're very brave."

"I don't want your flattery."

"As I said, I don't flatter. I only state facts." His hand was still extended toward her. "Come on."

She looked around. The men had already taken down Garou's tent, packed it up, and mounted their horses. Every horse either had a rider or was laden with rolled-up tents. Reluctantly, Kaila grasped his hand, and he pulled her onto the saddle in front of him. His warm, salty-sweet smell enveloped her, and she felt the hardness of his muscles against her back.

He kicked the horse into a canter.

She gasped at the sudden lurch and clutched the horse's mane. She wasn't used to riding bareback. The horse's back felt far more narrow and slippery than it looked. "How do you stand this?" she asked.

"You just need to get used to it. Then it will feel like the most natural thing in the world." A warm, strong arm slipped around her waist, steadying her. Her heartbeat quickened.

"You don't need to do that," she said.

"I want to make sure you don't fall. I don't want you hurting yourself."

"I doubt your motives are really so pure," she said ... but, truth be told, she was grateful for the warm pressure of that arm. She didn't feel at all steady. The horse's bony spine seemed to slip to one side, then the other, as it galloped across the grassy plain.

Kaila looked over her shoulder. She couldn't see her city from here, but she still felt a wrenching pain in her chest at the thought that they were leaving it behind for good. She hoped her father would understand her choice, and accept that it was the only thing she could have done.

They rode for the rest of the morning, stopping at noon to stretch and eat a lunch of mutton stew. Kaila knew all too well where they'd gotten that mutton. Many farmers had lost sheep and cattle to the Wolf Clan. She'd lost count of the number of people who came to the palace seeking aid because they'd lost so much livestock. She thought of those poor families, reminding herself of the suffering these barbarians had caused, trying to harden her heart against Garou. Last night, she'd been clay in his hands. She was determined not to react so foolishly the next time he took liberties with her.

Yet as much as she tried, she could not bring herself to hate him. She kept imagining what it must have been like for him to grow up feared and despised by everyone around him, just because of the color of his eyes ... how it must have felt to leave his family and everything he knew, to live alone, on the plains, like an animal. It made her heart ache.

Night fell. Kaila dismounted, wincing. She wasn't used to riding for so many hours at a time. Her legs were stiff and sore. When she slid off the mare's back, the muscles in her thighs cramped, making her cry out.

"Are you all right?" asked Garou.

"Fine," she said. "Just a little stiff."

Garou lifted her into his arms, and she gasped. "Brumo," he called, "see to my horse."

Kaila's face was hot. "I'm fine," she said. "Really. You don't have to make a fuss."

“I’ll make a fuss if I wish. I don’t want you too sore to ride tomorrow.”

“You want your property in good shape, you mean?”

He looked at her sharply, and she was immediately sorry she’d said it. The flash of pain in his yellow eyes was impossible to miss. “That’s right,” he said. “You’re beginning to understand your place.” He avoided her gaze. The words were a performance for the benefit of his men ... or perhaps for himself.

He waited until the other Wolves had set up his tent, then carried Kaila inside and lay her down on a leopard-skin blanket. He began to unlace her trousers, and she tensed. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to massage your legs,” he said, pulling her trousers down.

“Must you take my pants off?”

“Yes. If you find it so distasteful, just think of it as punishment for your impudence.” His eyes locked with hers. “But I think you’ll enjoy it.” His hands settled on her bare calves and kneaded them slowly. She closed her eyes and swallowed a moan of pleasure as the tight muscles began to loosen beneath his touch. He moved higher, massaging her thighs.

Kaila felt her skin growing warmer. “Garou...”

“Shhh.” His fingers rubbed in slow circles on her soft thighs. She could feel his gaze on her mound, and she knew he hungered to touch it, to claim it--but he did not.

Spirits help her, she wanted him to.

His hands continued to move slowly up and down her legs. “Roll over,” he said. “Onto your stomach.”

Heart pounding, she obeyed, and he began to massage her buttocks. Slowly, she felt herself relaxing under his touch. She didn’t know how it was possible to be so relaxed and so aroused at the same time.

“Tell me the truth, Kaila,” he said. “Do you hate me?”

“No,” she murmured drowsily. “I did at first, but....”

“But what?”

“You’re not really cruel. You only pretend to be, to hide how sad you are.”

His hands stopped moving. Then, after a moment, he resumed the massage. “You haven’t known me long enough to say such a thing about me. For all you know, the sadness could be a mask, and the cruelty what lies beneath.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be trying so hard to convince me you’re cruel.”

He picked up one of her feet and began to massage it with his thumbs. “I would not assume too much, if I were you. You’ve seen what I’m capable of. I’ve done things that would make your blood run cold.”

She looked over her shoulder. “Have you ever raped someone?”

“No. I told you, women always come to me willingly, in the end.” A small grin crept from the corners of his mouth. “Any woman cold-blooded enough not to be interested in me is not to my tastes.”

Irritated, she pulled her foot out of his grip. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Trying to distract me by being arrogant.”

“Maybe arrogance is just my natural state of being. If you think I’m only trying to impress you, then you think too highly of your....”

Kaila gripped a lock of his hair, pulling his head downward, and silenced him with a kiss. Garou’s eyes widened. When their lips separated, he continued to stare at her, stunned. “Why did you do that?”

“I wanted to catch you off-balance.” Kaila picked up her trousers and slid her legs into them, then laced them up. “It worked, didn’t it? You’re still gaping at me like a fish.”

His mouth snapped shut, and Kaila was astonished to see his cheeks reddening.

“Goodnight, Garou,” she said, and turned away, lying down on her side. “I’m going to sleep.”

“Goodnight,” he murmured, still sounding a bit bewildered. Kaila couldn’t help but smile.

* * * *

Long after Kaila had fallen asleep, Garou lay awake, listening to her soft breathing. He could still feel the warm imprint of her soft, full lips on his mouth.

He had kissed more women than he could count ... so why had that affected him so? Why did she make him feel like this?

He closed his eyes, but did not sleep. When he heard her moving, his eyes opened. He lay still, listening as she scooted closer. His breath caught in his throat when she pressed against him.

“I’m cold,” she whispered.

Slowly, his arms slipped around her. Her body was soft, young and supple. He ran one hand down her thick hair, combing his fingers through those silky, dark curls. The stiff peaks of her nipples pressed against his chest, and he felt his cock hardening.

Looking back on it, neither would remember who had made the first move, but the next thing they knew, their mouths were locked together in a kiss. Kaila let out a tiny moan, and the sound made Garou’s pulse race. His hand slid beneath her shirt and cupped her round, firm breast, squeezing lightly ... then slid lower, over her firm, smooth abdomen. Spirits, she was exquisite. He slipped a hand into her loose trousers and combed his fingers through the tight, springy curls between her thighs, then pushed through them, seeking the wet, silken heat beyond.

She panted softly as her trembling hands found the lacing of his trousers and began to undo them. Her soft fingers closed around his hard cock, but did no more than that. She remained still, just holding him in her hand, as if she weren’t sure what to do. Garou’s hand closed over hers and began to slide it slowly up and down. “Like this,” he whispered. He released her hand, and she continued, her strokes growing slowly bolder.

At last, he could stand it no longer. He grabbed her shoulders and

pushed her onto her back, making her gasp. “Let me inside you,” he whispered hoarsely. “Please, Kaila.”

Slowly, she pulled down her trousers, exposing the dark triangle of hair between her thighs, and spread them wide.

“I will go gently,” he whispered. With one hand, he guided his cock to her opening and pressed it slowly, carefully into her wetness. He felt her virginity beginning to give way, and she stiffened with a small gasp. He didn’t stop. He pushed forward, through the resistance and slid into her tight, virgin body. Her wetness engulfed him.

He forced himself to stop, and for a few moments, he remained motionless, straddling her body, just letting her get used to the feel of his cock inside her. Then, slowly, he began to move, pulling back, then pushing forward again, making her moan with the delicious friction of his hard organ against her soft, slick walls.

Kaila panted softly, her eyes closed, her mouth open. Sweat glistened on her full breasts. Her hips moved beneath him, tentatively at first, then more boldly, pushing forward to meet his thrusts.

When Garou felt himself nearing his climax, he slowed, wanting to make it last--wanting her to experience that sweet feeling, as well. He waited until he felt Kaila’s walls clenching around him, her hips pressing urgently forward, then thrust one last time, releasing his seed deep inside her.

Afterwards, they lay together, limp and damp with sweat. Kaila’s

body was warm and pliant in his arms. Garou stroked her hair as her small hands clutched his shoulders. Neither spoke.

Kaila soon drifted off in his arms, but Garou lay awake for a long time, staring into the darkness.

He didn't know what was happening to him. There were changes taking place inside his heart, feelings he didn't understand. He had never regarded sex as a binding act. The women he'd had in the past occupied no place in his heart, nor he in theirs. Why, then, did he now feel this connection to Kaila? It unsettled him.

He started to stand, but Kaila's arms tightened around him, and she murmured softly in her sleep. He lay back down.

In the darkness, there was only the feel of her warm, soft skin against his, and the lingering, musky smell of spent desire.

* * * *

Kaila woke slowly, to a dull ache between her thighs. At first, it puzzled her--then the memories rushed back with a jolt that shook her to her core. Tentatively, she reached between her legs and touched the dried, sticky blood on her thigh. "Dear spirits," she whispered.

She looked up and saw Garou crouched nearby. "Here," he said quietly. He pushed a bowl toward her. It was filled with water, and a cloth floated within. "If you want to wash up."

Blushing, she took the cloth, wrung it out, and began to clean the blood from her thighs. "Garou?" she said, unsettled by his expressionless

face.

“I had no right to take your virginity last night,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “But I gave you permission!”

“I still coerced you. I tempted you until you couldn’t say no.”

She made a sound of exasperation in her throat. “Are you really so arrogant, to think you’re so irresistible that I’m robbed of my free will when I’m around you?”

He looked away. “Why not? It’s how I feel around you. I’m never quite in control of myself. But that’s no excuse for what I did.”

“What *we* did, you mean. Garou...” She reached out and gripped his arm. “I don’t regret what we did last night.”

Yellow-gold eyes met Kaila’s blue-green ones. Then, slowly, they leaned toward each other until their lips met. Garou cupped her face with one broad, rough palm as his lips moved against hers, tasting her. At last, their mouths, parted, and they shared a long look.

“You must go back to your people,” Garou said.

Kaila stared at him in confusion. “What? But ... why?”

“Because I can’t live like this any longer. I can’t exist knowing you’re only here to protect your countrymen, that you’re bound here by chains of duty. I can’t go on wondering every time you kiss me whether you’re doing it because you want to or because you’re afraid of what I’ll do if you don’t please me. I want you to go back. I’ll give you a horse and provisions. They’re already waiting for you outside. And don’t worry about

your countrymen. Neither I nor any of my Wolves will trouble them again.”

She stared at him, eyes wide. “Garou.... I...”

“I’m not offering you a choice,” he said. “I’m telling you that you are not welcome here anymore. Get dressed and go.”

Kaila couldn’t move. A storm of emotions raged in her heart.

“Go!” he shouted.

She hastily slipped into her clothes. “Give me something to remember you by, at least,” she said.

Without looking at her, Garou pulled off one of his gloves and tossed it to her. She caught it and slipped it into her pocket. Uncertainly, she looked at Garou, but he refused to meet her eyes.

She left the tent. A gray mare stood outside, tethered to a post, and a full pack sat nearby. Kaila strapped on the back, untied the mare’s tether rope, and mounted. With a kick, she was off, cantering across the plains.

She was free. This was what she had wanted ... to go back to her people, to her home and father. So why was she crying?

* * * *

King Davren sat on his enormous throne, staring out the window, at the people moving in the streets. It was a bright, warm day. The sky was clear ... but the king’s mind was filled with dark, stormy thoughts.

His kingdom was the strongest in the North. The royal army was his greatest pride. Yet they were held in terror by a group of primitive ruffians. If the cowards would face him in a fair fight, he could crush them like

insects ... but they struck in the night, when nobody expected it, carrying off plunder, and then vanishing like mist. And now, they had taken Kaila! The mere thought made Davren's blood run hot with rage. The barbarian chief had stolen what rightfully belonged to Davren himself ... and after he'd just finished arranging Kaila's marriage to the prince of Nalia! Now, the treaty with Nalia would be jeopardized, as well.

He curled one gnarled, trembling hand into a fist and pounded it against the arm of his throne. "Damn them," he said through gritted teeth. "Damn those stinking barbarians!"

A vision of the Wolf Clan chief burned in his mind. He would hunt down that bastard if it was the last thing he did.

"Sire," said a voice, and he looked up. A guard stood in the doorway. "Your daughter has returned."

"Kaila?" He sat up straighter. Was this some trick? Or had she escaped? Surely, the barbarian would not have released her. "Send her in at once."

The guard bowed and left.

A moment later, Kaila entered the throne room. She wore dirt-stained traveling clothes, but she carried herself, as always, with the dignity befitting a princess. Holding her arms at her sides, she bowed. "I am home, Father."

"So you are." He stood. "Are you unharmed?"

"Yes. I ... I missed you, Father." Kaila looked up, blinking tears

from her eyes. She ran to him and embraced him tightly. Davren stood, stiff and uneasy. He disliked displays of emotion. His own child, he thought, should know better. Royalty should be above such maudlin sentiments.

Kaila straightened with an embarrassed look. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Quite all right." She didn't seem to be hurt. He had feared the barbarian might disfigure her. Perhaps the marriage and the treaty could yet be salvaged. Unless....

He gripped her shoulders. "Did he take your virginity?"

Kaila blinked. "Wh-what?"

The king's grip tightened. "Did he or didn't he?"

"Yes. But...."

"Damn him!" The king released her and began to pace. "Is this his way of taunting me? To send you back sullied in this manner?"

"But ... I'm home. Isn't that enough? Don't you care that I'm alive?"

"Alive, but dishonored! Dirtied! Killing you would have been less of an insult. He must die for this!"

"No!" she cried, clutching Davren's arm. "His clan won't bother us anymore. Just let him go!"

The king scowled. "Why would you defend this scoundrel?"

"I don't want to see any of our soldiers lose their lives in a pointless revenge for what happened to me. And I don't want him hurt. He isn't a bad person, Father."

"The hell he isn't! Garou and his thugs have been robbing our people

and terrorizing us for months. They stole you! They stole what was mine!”

“But he didn’t hurt me.”

“I don’t care. He’ll suffer for what he did.”

“Father, I went to them myself! I gave myself up willingly!”

“Because he threatened our people! You only did it to save them. You were forced, as surely as if he’d stormed our castle and taken you himself. I will not let this dishonor go unpunished. Garou will die.”

Kaila took a step back, eyes wide. “Father,” she whispered, “you mustn’t do this.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Who are you concerned for, Kaila? Our soldiers, or the barbarian?”

“I don’t want anyone to die!”

“They must.”

“This isn’t right! I beg you, Father....”

“Go to your room, Kaila.”

Her cheeks colored. He had not ordered her to her room since she was a little girl. “Yes, Father,” she said, and bowed stiffly. Turning, she walked from the throne room.

* * * *

Kaila shut the door to her room, tears stinging her eyes.

Her father had never been an especially loving man. He was a king, and his kingship came first, even before his children. That was something she had always known and accepted ... but she’d never imagined he saw her

as a mere piece of property. She was worthless to him now, because she was no longer a virgin, no longer a thing of value in the marriage market. It tore at her heart. Garou, a barbarian invader, had treated her more like a person than her own father. And she had left him.

She knew what she had to do.

Kaila threw together a travel-pack, filled it with her most practical clothes and headed down to the kitchen. Luckily, there was no one there, at the moment. She took some jerky and dried fruit from the pantry, stuffed it into her pack, then headed out to the stables.

Her horse, a slim, white mare, whinnied softly in greeting. Kaila rubbed her soft nose and saddled her up.

A large, shaggy white dog approached her, wagging its tail, and woofed. Kaila crouched in front of it and ruffled its ears. "Shay," she whispered, "I'll need your help." She pulled something from her trouser-pocket, one of the soft, leather gloves that Garou had given her. She held it out to Shay, and the dog sniffed it intently. "I need to find him. Can you find him for me?"

A soft woof.

"Good girl." She mounted her horse and rode out of the stables, Shay bounding along beside her. Two guards stood stiffly in front of the main gates. "Let me through," she said.

"But Princess...."

"Let me through!" Her voice rang with authority, and she couldn't

help but be pleased at the way the guards scrambled to open the gates.

Once they were open, she cantered through, the horse's mane and tail streaming through the air like silk banners. She rode hard through the streets, ignoring the startled cries of the people around her.

She had no time to lose.

* * * *

"I'm leaving," said Garou, and mounted his horse.

"What do you mean, you're leaving, Chief?" asked one of his men.

"I mean, I can no longer be your chief."

"But you can't do that!" another said, glaring at him. "A chief's leadership isn't over 'til he either dies or is bested in a fight by a challenger."

Garou raised an eyebrow. "Would any of you care to challenge me?"

No one spoke.

"As I thought." He picked up the reins. "Choose another," he said.

"I can no longer be your leader."

"But where are you going?"

He stared into the distance. "I don't know."

"It's because of that girl, isn't it?" The man scowled. "Don't tell me you're going back to find her, after you let her go."

Garou's heart ached. "No," he said. "I'm not." He turned his horse and gave it a hard kick. Dust spurted from under its hooves as they galloped away.

Later, Garou sat, warming his hands in front of his small, solitary fire as the orange light of sunset died on the horizon. The plains seemed as vast as an ocean. Garou sighed, staring at the sky, where the first, faint stars had appeared.

He could not live as a plunderer any longer, but he could not return to the civilized world, either. There was no place for him. He would build a place of his own, in the forest, and quietly live out the rest of his days.

He looked up at the sound of a dog barking, and his jaw dropped.

An enormous white dog was bounding toward him across the plains. Close behind it was a white mare. And the cloaked figure atop it....

“Kaila?” he whispered.

She slowed the horse to a halt, then dismounted, pulling back the hood of her cloak to reveal the familiar green-blue eyes and raven-dark curls. She ran toward him, wide-eyed, and tackled him in a hug.

“K-Kaila, what....”

“Oh, thank the spirits I found you,” she said, panting. “He’s coming after you, Garou! He’ll send his soldiers to hunt you down. I ... I tried to talk him out of it, but his mind won’t be changed.”

“And you came back to warn me?”

“How could I not?”

He stared at her, unable to find his voice. “This is insane,” he said at last. “You have to go back.”

“I won’t leave you,” she said.

“Kaila....” He stared at her for a long moment, then leaned down to kiss her deeply. When they separated, he whispered, “I don’t understand. I don’t....” He broke off, shaking his head. “This is madness. You have to leave. Now. Or I’ll tie you up and take you back to the castle myself.”

“But they would kill you!”

His face twisted in a humorless smile. “You think I would let them? Are you forgetting who I am? *What* I am?”

Kaila bit her lower lip. “This is the king’s royal army. My father has hundreds of men. You think you could stand up to all of them?”

“I’ll damn well try, if I have to. Now, are you going to go back to the castle or not?”

Her jaw tightened.

“Kaila,” he said, more gently, “you can’t stop them. There’s no sense in putting yourself in danger for no good purpose. Go back. Forget me.”

“I could never do that.” She took his hand. “If I leave, I’ll never see you again. I can’t. Please, don’t ask me to do that. Not after ... after what we’ve shared.”

“A single night of rutting in a tent. That’s all.”

Her eyes flashed. “I don’t believe that for a moment. And neither do you. I’ve seen your real self. You’re not a barbarian at heart. That’s why you’re here alone, isn’t it? That’s why you left your clan.” She reached up to cup his face with one soft hand. “You became this way because you *had* to, not because you wanted to. But there is another way. Let me stay with

you, Garou, I beg. I can help you.”

“But what of your father?” he asked.

“My father....” She smiled bitterly. “I learned how he really feels about me. I am not a daughter to him. I’m just a princess.”

“I’m sorry,” Garou said quietly.

She wiped her eyes, looking away. “It’s all right. I have never been close to him. I just thought....” She sighed. “Never mind. It’s in the past, now. I won’t go back.”

“But surely, there are others who care about you. What of your kingdom? Your people?”

Kaila hung her head. “I ... must think on this,” she said at last, quietly. “Let me stay with you one night, at least.”

Garou pulled her close and buried his face in her hair, breathing in the scent. “Very well,” he murmured. “One night.”

* * * *

Kaila tethered her horse and sat down near the fire, Shay curled up at her side, while Garou went hunting. She kept glancing at the horizon, half-expecting to see her father’s soldiers galloping toward her. She didn’t know what she would do if they came.

A chill breeze gusted across the plains, making her shiver. She pulled her fur-lined cloak closer around her body. Her heart was a whirlwind of confusion. Could she really leave her people? Her responsibilities? She had been raised since early childhood to be a princess. It was all she knew.

To leave now would be like abandoning her destiny.

But had she been intended for that destiny to begin with? There was little joy for her in the thought of being a princess, only a sense of duty. Perhaps she was meant for an entirely different path.

Kaila closed her eyes. Her mother had taught her that when she was in doubt, she should seek the aid of the good spirits. Her father had later taught her to dismiss the advice as superstition, but what was the harm in trying?

She looked up at the stars, strewn like bright jewels across the dark velvet of the sky. “Good spirits,” she whispered, “if any of you are listening, send me a sign, I beg. Show me the path my life was meant to take.” She closed her eyes. At first, there was nothing. Then a gentle breeze caressed her face, and with it came a scent she recognized, a scent that reminded her of apples and springtime.

A voice spoke clearly in her head: *What does your heart desire, child? There, you will find your true path.*

Her eyes snapped open. “Mother?” she whispered. But the voice, and the scent, was gone.

Kaila took a deep breath. Her heart was beating rapidly.

A vision of Garou’s face, his golden eyes, filled her mind. There was no question about where her heart lay.

The good spirits had spoken. And Kaila’s decision had been made.

* * * *

Garou returned with a fat rabbit slung over one shoulder. “This should be enough to fill you, with enough left over for your friend, there,” he said, nodding to Shay, who was eyeing the rabbit with interest.

“What about you?” asked Kaila.

“I’ve already eaten.”

She watched as he laid the rabbit on the ground and began to skin it. He looked up. In the firelight, his gold eyes almost seemed to glow. “Is something the matter?”

“No. I’m just ... thinking.” Absently, she kneaded the thick fur of Shay’s ruff. “Do you believe in the good spirits?”

“Well, I believe in demons. I’d be a fool not to, with my heritage. I suppose spirits go hand-in-hand with that.”

“I spoke to one tonight.”

Garou froze. After a moment, he said quietly, “And what did this spirit tell you?”

“I asked for advice, and it ... she told me I should follow my heart’s desire.”

“Perhaps you heard only what you wished to,” he said.

“No. I know what I heard. And I know my heart’s desire.”

Garou was silent as he finished skinning and cleaning the rabbit, spitted it over the fire, and then washed his hands in the nearby streamlet. Then he turned to her, his face solemn. “I don’t think you understand what you would be getting into ... and how much you would have to give up. You

don't even know who I am. You think you do, but you don't."

"How can you be so sure of that?" she asked. "And even you must admit that what we feel for each other is more than mere desire."

He took a deep breath. She was surprised to see that his hands were trembling. "I'm not sure what I feel ... whether to call it desire, or obsession, or... all I know is that when I see you, I ache to possess you in every way. The thought of losing you makes me want to scream."

"Then why do you want me to go back?" she asked. "I don't understand."

"Because I would destroy you. I would consume you until there was nothing left." His hands bunched into tight fists. Veins stood out in his muscled forearms. "I'm half-demon. Nothing can change that. No matter what I do, there will always be a darkness inside me that I can't escape."

"Everyone has dark places inside them, Garou," she said quietly. "You may have demon blood, but you're a human man with a human soul." She stood and reached out to take his hand. "And you're desperately lonely. I, too, have been alone. Princesses are not allowed to love. We have only our duty. Once, I was resigned to that fate ... but that was before I met you."

Garou looked at her, but said nothing.

They sat in silence until the rabbit meat began to brown in the crackling fire, and the smell signaled that it was done. Garou lifted the spit and handed it to Kaila. "Careful. It's hot."

“Thank you.” She ate delicately, turning the spit to nibble at the meat. When she was full, she gave the rest to Shay, who snatched it eagerly and trotted off to eat it in privacy, as dogs were wont to do.

Kaila smiled slightly ... then her eyes drifted back to Garou, who sat nearby, staring into the fire. He looked every inch the barbarian, with his long hair and sleek, muscled body covered in hand-stitched deerskin clothes. But she knew there was more to him than that. There was a deep sadness in his heart which he struggled to hide, a yearning for love and companionship, forever at war with his dark, wild nature. “Garou?” she whispered, and he looked up. A small tremor went through her. Whenever he looked into her eyes like that, she felt like a doe caught in a cougar’s stare. She wet her lips, aware of the pulse fluttering in her throat. “Will you not even consider letting me stay by your side?”

“You’re a princess, Kaila. It’s not a question of what I want. It’s impossible.”

Tears prickled in her eyes, but she blinked them away. She would not be weak. “Then,” she whispered, “if this is to be our last night together, I would have it be a night to remember.”

Garou stared into her eyes. Then, slowly, he leaned down to kiss her. Kaila parted her lips and let his hot, wet tongue slide into her mouth. His hands framed her face, stroking her cheekbones with his thumbs ... then slid lower, over her shoulders and back, until they were cupping the small, firm cheeks of her bottom. Kaila moaned softly against his mouth. Her heart

hammered as he lightly nibbled her full lower lip then trailed kisses down her throat, over her collarbones, until she could feel his hot breath on her heaving breasts. “You are exquisite,” he whispered. “You set my blood on fire.” He squeezed her rump suddenly, hard, making her gasp. She could feel his hard maleness through his trousers, pressing against her thigh. His hands left her bottom. He undid the gold clasp of her cloak, letting it slip to the ground ... then gripped her shoulders and pushed her down to lie atop the makeshift blanket. His fingers deftly unbuttoned the top of her dress. She was wearing nothing beneath, since she’d dressed hastily before fleeing the castle. He stared down at the pale globes of her breasts, his eyes burning with need ... then lowered his head to flick his tongue against a jutting nipple. His mouth closed over it, sucking. Meanwhile, he undid the jeweled belt at her waist and slipped a hand into her dress. She gasped softly when he placed a large, rough-palmed hand over her womanhood. “You know,” he whispered, “when you’re aroused, I can smell it. You have no idea what it does to me. It drives me mad with need.” His lips were close to her ear, his hand still possessively cupping her plump mound. “I want to take you. I want to push myself into your tight, hot body and take you hard and deep, until you faint with pleasure.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Spirits, yes....”

With one knee, he pushed her thighs apart and lifted her dress, exposing her most intimate places to his hungry eyes. He undid his trousers and pulled them down, freeing his long, thick shaft. He entered her in one

swift, smooth thrust, stretching her, filling her. Kaila moaned, gasping for breath as he pulled back, then pushed into her again and again ... first slowly, his hips rocking against hers, then faster, harder, into the secret depths of her body, until she reached her peak, eyes rolling back in pleasure, mouth falling open. For a moment, she felt as if the world were going into free fall around her. Her sheath clenched tight around his hard flesh ... and his body stiffened atop hers as his hot seed spilled into her, filling her. For a moment, he lay atop her, panting softly ... then pulled free. Kaila lay, staring dazedly up at the sky. She could still feel his seed deep within her body. A part of him, inside her.

He kissed her sweat-damp, heaving breasts, one at a time. Kaila smiled and reached up to stroke a lock of wavy, dark hair from his face. He had loved her so hard that she was sore, but it was a wonderful soreness. “My wolf,” she whispered.

His arms surrounded her, pulling her close. Her eyelids drifted shut, and they fell asleep to the rhythm of each other’s breathing.

* * * *

Kaila awakened to the sound of hoof-beats. Lots of them. At first, she was confused ... then the realization of what it meant jolted her fully awake, and her stomach tightened with dread. She sat up, hastily buttoning her dress. Sure enough, she could see a group of her father’s soldiers in the distance. There were at least fifty, all on horseback, galloping toward them and trailing a cloud of dust.

“Damn,” she whispered. How had the soldiers found them so quickly? They had no way of knowing where Garou had gone. Then it dawned on her. They had followed her trail. She moaned softly in dismay. She had led them straight to Garou.

“Garou, wake up!” she whispered. “We’ve got to run.”

“I am awake,” he said. “And it’s too late to run. They’ve already seen us.” His cool, golden eyes met her wide, frightened ones. “You must return with them.”

“No!”

“You must, Kaila.” He kissed her, so hard that her lips tingled, and then pulled away.

Kaila touched her lips, tears welling in her eyes at the realization that this might be the last time he kissed her.

The soldiers were near, now. She saw, with a sinking feeling of dread in her stomach, that they were led by none other than the king himself. Her father.

The soldiers galloped to a halt in front of the campsite. Shay growled at them and began to bark.

Garou stood, staring at them without fear. King Davren flushed with anger at his impudence, then barked out the command: “Archers! Shoot him!”

Half a dozen soldiers readied their bows and aimed their arrows at Garou’s heart.

“No!” Kaila cried, and flung herself in front of him.

Davren’s eyes widened. “Wait! Don’t shoot!” he snapped, and then looked at her in disbelief. “Kaila, get out of the way!”

“No,” she said. “I won’t let you kill him.”

“What is the meaning of this? He is your kidnapper! This brute has been terrorizing our people! Has he put a spell on you?”

“Kaila,” whispered Garou. “Don’t.”

She looked over her shoulder. “I’m not going to just stand aside and let them kill you,” she said. Then, looking back up at her father, she said, “Garou is an honorable man. He did not kidnap me. I went to him of my own free will. And he never harmed me. Not once.”

“He’s a barbarian!” shouted Davren. His eyes blazed with anger. “A looter! Even if what you say is true, he must die for his crimes.”

“He’s not a barbarian anymore. He left his clan. He only joined the barbarians in the first place because he was driven out of the city by cruelty and injustice. All because of the color of his eyes.”

“And you believe everything this brute has been telling you? Don’t you see what he’s been doing? He lied, to gain your sympathy!”

“No!” Her jaw tightened. “Give him a chance, Father!”

“One last chance,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “Get out of the way.”

“Kaila,” whispered Garou, urgency in his voice. “You must do as he says.”

She shook her head. Tears stung her eyes. “I would sooner die. Do

you hear me? You will not lay a hand on him! Not while I live!”

For a long moment, Davren was silent, staring at her. There was something frighteningly cool in his gaze. “I see,” he said at last, quietly. “So this is where your heart lies. You have sided with the barbarian.” He narrowed his eyes. “It grieves me to do this--you are of my blood, after all--but you leave me no choice.” He nodded to his men, and they raised their arrows, aiming.

Straight at Kaila’s heart.

She stared in disbelief. “Father?” she whispered.

Garou snarled, the snarl of an animal. He drew his dagger. “Run, Kaila!” he shouted ... and charged. Arrows flew. One pierced Garou’s shoulder, another landed in his chest. He cried out in pain, but didn’t stop. In one fluid movement, seemingly unhindered by the arrow in his shoulder, he drew his sword. It arched through the air, moonlight flashing on the blade, knocking the bows from the hands of the archers. The horses whinnied and reared.

“Stop him!” shouted the king, as he pulled hard on the reins, struggling to control his own horse. The animals danced and tossed their heads, eyes rolling in panic ... as if, Kaila thought, it were a wolf attacking them, not a man.

“Run!” Garou shouted again.

Kaila snapped out of her trance. She turned and ran. Behind her, she heard the scream of a horse, and the cry of a man. Cold dread squeezed her

heart. “Don’t kill them, Garou,” she whispered, tears stinging her eyes. “Please ... I don’t want anyone to be hurt.”

She kept running until her legs gave out from under her and she sank to her knees, panting. Her mind whirled. Her own father had ordered her shot. A part of her was convinced this had to be some horrible dream.

She sat with her back against a tree, knees drawn up to her chest as she listened to the distant sounds of battle, as Garou faced her father’s men, completely alone. She wanted to run to him, to help him, but she knew there was nothing she could do against the soldiers.

The battle seemed to go on for hours, but at last, the screams and shouts died down and silence reigned. She waited, heart pounding ... and her heart leapt when she saw a lone figure walking toward her in the distance. Kaila stood, holding her breath.

It was Garou. He was covered with blood from head to foot. His sword, too, was stained with blood. A wave of weakness swept through Kaila. “Dear spirits,” she whispered.

Garou approached and sat down on the grass, wiping his brow. It was difficult to tell how much of the blood splashed onto his clothes and skin belonged to him, and how much to the soldiers. He was breathing heavily.

Kaila touched his shoulder. “Garou ... are you all right?”

“As well as can be expected,” he muttered. He emptied a water-skin over his head, washing away the worst of the blood from his face and hair.

Her heart pounded. She was afraid to ask, but she knew she had to.

“Did you....” Kaila took a deep breath. “I mean, are they....”

“I didn’t kill anyone. Wounded quite a few, and sent them home with their tails between their legs, but they’ll all live to tell the tale.” He drank the remainder of the water. His eyes were weary. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“About your father. I wish you hadn’t protected me like that. You’ve lost everything because of me.”

Kaila looked away, blinking back tears. “No. It wasn’t your fault. I did what I did because I had to. Though I never thought he would....” She shook her head, sighing. “Never mind. There’s no going back now.” She lightly touched the back of his hand. “I’ve made my choice.”

He looked up, meeting her eyes. There was a strange expression on his face.

“I will stay with you, my wolf,” she said, and smiled. “I’m afraid there’s no getting rid of me, now.”

“No....” He shook his head. “Kaila, you don’t understand. I-I’m not even human.”

“Yes you are. You just proved it. You could have killed all those men, but you didn’t. You spared them, even though they attacked you. An animal wouldn’t have done that. Only a man would.”

He opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. There was a stunned look in his eyes, as if he had just now realized the monumental choice he had made. “But....”

She pressed her lips to his, silencing him. “You are human,” she

whispered, “and I love you.”

* * * *

Sunlight shimmered on the clear brook running through the forest of towering, ancient pines. Beneath the pines’ sheltering branches stood a little cabin, smoke curling from its chimney. Goats grazed on the tender, new grass nearby, and chickens wandered about, scratching and pecking. Shay lay stretched out before the front door, napping in the sun. It was a warm, beautiful day, the sky a clear and cloudless blue, and wildflowers speckled the ground.

Kaila sprawled on the soft, green grass next to the stream, panting softly. The cool, morning air felt good on her naked skin. She smiled up at Garou, reaching up to stroke his sleek, muscled back. She could feel the ridges of scar-tissue beneath her fingertips. “That was wonderful.”

“I aim to please.” Garou leaned down and lightly, playfully bit her left nipple.

Kaila tilted her head back, gazing up at the sky. She’d never realized how unsatisfied she was, being a princess, until she met Garou. Where would she be now, if she’d never left the palace? Married to some callow, arrogant prince, or impotent old king, as part of a political arrangement? Consumed with the mundane duties of managing a castle? She had always buried herself in duties, it seemed. She’d rationalized it by saying she had an obligation to her people, but the truth was that she had been afraid of freedom ... afraid of her true destiny.

She wasn't afraid anymore.

"What are you thinking about, love?" Garou asked.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "Just that I never dreamed this would be the direction my life would take. I'm very happy, though. Happier than I ever imagined I would be."

"I'm glad." He leaned down to kiss her, his long, dark hair brushing her skin. One big, callused hand moved between her legs to gently squeeze her mound, and then carefully spread her lips to expose her folds and secrets. Though she'd thought she was completely spent, she felt fresh wetness seeping from her womanhood as he brushed a thumb across the achingly sensitive little nub of flesh near the top of her cleft.

"Mmm ... oh," Kaila breathed.

There was a little one-sided smile on Garou's face, a smile that said he had her exactly where he wanted her, held prisoner by the pleasure he gave.

"We can't lay here in the grass all day, you know," said Kaila. It was a struggle to concentrate on the words when he was doing such delicious things to her with his hand. "There are chores to do."

"I think they can wait a little longer. Don't you?" He lowered his head and ran his tongue slowly, deliciously along the furrow between her legs. His golden eyes glinted wickedly.

"A little longer," whispered Kaila.

He lifted his head, and a moment later, she felt his thick, hard cock

sliding slowly, carefully into her tight passage, filling her completely.

The afternoon melted away like warm butter, and when the sun set, tinting the stream a rich amber-gold, they were still lying on the grass, making love.

The End