

# **All Wrapped Up: Tainted Kisses**

## **Kate Hill**

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## Prologue

### Land of the Scots, 797

Closing his eyes, Aru drew a deep breath, relishing the scent of death. Too long had he waited for this moment. In the beginning, there had been no worldly creature with the power to destroy him. Then *they* had arrived. Sent by the Spirit of Good, a new breed of blood drinker that hunted and killed his kind. One in particular had been thwarting him for centuries, following so close at his heels that he scarcely had time to indulge in destruction, but left the deadliest deeds to his offspring. Today's bloodbath had been his first real taste of utter violence in longer than he cared to remember. The excitement of crushing the life from hundreds of feeble mortals, feeling their tender flesh tear beneath his fangs and gulping their rich blood almost overwhelmed him.

What he couldn't drink, he and his army spilled, dousing the dry ground until it turned to burgundy mud beneath their boots. Their amusement was over now. The village lay in ruins. No man, woman, or child had survived his army's attack.

Already most of his men had ridden off. Only Kedar, his most favored son, remained with him among the rubble and broken bodies.

Then he heard it.

So faint it was almost indiscernible even to immortal ears.

A human heartbeat. But from where?

"I thought they were all dead," Aru growled.

"They are, Master."

"Listen! Can you not hear it?"

Kedar's brow furrowed as he strained to listen. Being only an offspring of a true blood drinker, his senses were not as sharp as his Creator's. Aru had been made by the Spirit of Evil itself, sent to walk the earth spreading horror and pain. Though his gift

could be passed on to mortals through his bite, his offspring didn't possess all his otherworldly abilities.

Finally a faint smile touched Kedar's lips. "Yes. A heartbeat."

Grunting in reply, Aru strode among the bodies, seeking the mortal who dared live after such a marvelous attack. He paused beside a woman splattered with blood. Using his foot, he rolled her onto her back, revealing a very pregnant belly.

Aru drew a sharp breath, his own heartbeat quickening in time with that of the mortal. "Kedar. Come here. Quickly."

"Did you find the survivor, my Master?"

"Yes." Aru nodded toward the woman.

With a snarl, Kedar drew his sword and raised it for the death blow, but Aru caught his arm in a savage grip. "No. Carefully."

"But..."

"Do you not understand? *She* isn't alive. It's the creature in her womb."

"The child has survived?"

"You know what this means." Aru could scarcely contain his rapturous grin. Again he closed his eyes and spoke silently to the Evil One. *Thank you, Master of Wickedness. Since the beginning I have awaited this moment. It was not something I could take, but something that had to be given.* Opening his eyes, he continued, "The creature in her womb has been sent to me. Unlike the other blood drinkers I have created, he will be mine to shape from the beginning. A creature born in the midst of death. His life will be one of rage and torture. His heart will be cold and merciless. He will be flawlessly wicked, made in the image of the Evil One. Remove him from her womb. Be cautious. I don't want him harmed. Yet."

Kedar did as his Master bid, then placed the squalling, bloody infant in Aru's waiting hands. Staring at it, Aru murmured, "Excellent. A male child. We must find a woman to provide him with milk. It will be taken from her and fed through a bladder, for he must never know a mother's touch. The revolting emotions these mortals revel in will not taint him. No kindness, gentleness, and most important of all, no love. He must

never, never be loved. When he is old enough, I will Change him and he will be the perfect living demon." Aru glanced at Kedar with a taunting look. "Yes, my son, even more perfect than you."

Kedar's jaw clenched visibly and he stared at the screaming infant with hatred.

*Excellent. Let the rivalry start now.* Kedar would no doubt make this child's life even more miserable than Aru had first imagined. Raised in fury. Born in death. He would become the most faithful of Aru's minions. "He will be called Etlu."

The warrior.

## Chapter One

**Mercia, 830 AD**

Smoke from burning cottages stung Niabi's eyes, the scent of it burning her nostrils. Her arms, tightly bound behind her back, ached not only from their uncomfortable position, but from fighting the band of warriors that had attacked the village she had called home for the past five years.

Viking attacks had already destroyed more friends than she cared to remember. Mortal raiders were difficult enough to defend against, but this ruthless fellowship of warriors who had just destroyed her people were different. Even before they reached the village she had caught their scent on the wind -- the scent of blood drinkers. Unlike her and the blood drinker who had created her, this band of warriors used their otherworldly powers to terrorize mankind.

Though she had trained the villagers for battle, they were no match for these monsters, and she was but one against a small army. During the fight she had sought out the one who appeared to be their leader, hoping if she defeated him she might be able to take his army, or at least drive them off. With centuries of experience as a warrior, she had brought many men, both mortal and blood drinker, to their knees, but she hadn't been prepared for this chieftain's power, both in body and mind. By his adeptness at blocking his thoughts from her attempts at mind control, she assumed he must be quite old. He set a new standard for ferocity, even among their kind.

"Faster, boy!" growled the auburn-haired warrior walking behind her, shoving her hard in the back. She staggered, but remained standing.

His addressing her as "boy" didn't surprise her in the least. Much of her life had been spent in male dress, mimicking the voices and mannerisms of men since her femininity might discredit her considerable abilities in a male dominated world. Niabi

had arrived in this village as a male warrior interested in helping them defend themselves and had remained as such. With her skill and courage, the people had unanimously decided to look upon her as their leader. She had never failed them -- until now.

After a grueling battle, the chieftain had disarmed her. Her heart still raced at the recent memory of the point of his bloodied sword hovering over her heart as she lay sprawled on the ground. All she could see of his face through his dome-shaped helmet was his eyes. Slanted and silver-gray, they stared at her with unfathomable coldness.

Moments after her defeat, the Viking chieftain claimed the village. He ordered his men to herd the few survivors to what was left of the village square and chain them up. He planned to take them to his homeland as slaves.

She overheard enough to know he had another plan for her. The Blood Eagle. While her people watched, he would execute her -- by ripping out her lungs.

Niabi approached the villagers who huddled together, mostly women and children, their bloodstained faces terrified. The Viking chieftain stood off to the side, flanked by several of his warriors. Tall and lean, he exuded evil like no one she had ever met. He removed his helmet and she stared at his face, wanting to see the bastard who caused so much destruction without the slightest remorse.

She found his rugged features -- a hawkish nose, strong chin, and those cruel gray eyes -- oddly captivating. His pale skin was smeared with dirt, blood, and sweat. A faded scar ran down the length of one sharp cheekbone. Tufts of unkempt black hair hung past his broad shoulders.

"On your knees, insolent whelp!" snarled the auburn-haired warrior, kicking Niabi in the back of her knee. She dropped to the ground in front of the chieftain, but lifted her chin so she met his gaze with all the rage burning inside her.

"There will one day be a price to pay for your evil," she warned.

A wicked smile twisted his slender lips. "There is nothing you can tell me about evil."

He motioned for the auburn-haired warrior to release her bonds. When her hands were free, she flexed her numb fingers but resisted the urge to rub her chafed wrists. The chieftain stepped behind her and in a swift motion tore off her armor and shirt beneath.

A collective gasp rose from the villagers and the Viking warriors at the sight of her sleekly muscled though undoubtedly female form.

Crossing her arms over her breasts, Niabi shivered with fury. Terror rippled down her spine. Glancing defiantly over her shoulder at the chieftain, she said, "Get on with it."

A slightly sick feeling rolled through her when she felt his gloved hand brush across her shoulder blades.

"Anxious to die, are you?" he asked, wrapping her hair around his hand until his fist pressed against the back of her neck. He stooped and spoke into her ear, his deep voice scarcely a whisper. "You realize the Blood Eagle destroys our kind as permanently as piercing the heart or burning to ashes."

"I have lived a long, fulfilling life and I don't fear death. Can you say the same?"

He laughed, a vicious, throaty sound. His hand still tight in her hair, he rose, taking her with him, and guided her through the village.

"Etlu, what are you doing?" called the auburn-haired warrior.

"Don't do anything until I return," the chieftain replied.

So, he was called Etlu. A Sumerian name. Apparently he must be as old as she had suspected.

"But --"

The chieftain stopped abruptly and turned to the man. Though Niabi wouldn't have thought it possible, his glacial eyes turned even colder. "Are you questioning my orders, Horik?"

"No."

"Good." Etlu continued walking out of the village to the nearby woods. There he released his hold on her hair.



She spun, glaring at him. "If you intend to rape me, wouldn't it have made more of an impact to do so in front of my people?"

"They are no longer your people, but my slaves."

Niabi's fists clenched and her teeth ground. She would fight this bastard to the last. He might kill her, but she would take a good chunk of his manhood in the process.

"What would you do to buy their freedom and their lives?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"What would you do?"

"This is a pointless discussion. You have no intention of freeing them."

"I didn't, until a few moments ago. You can give me something I want, but the only way I can think of to get it will be to set your mortals free."

"It seems you can take whatever you want without my approval." She hated to admit that fact, yet it was the undeniable truth.

"I want you to come to me freely."

"I don't understand. You want me to let you kill me and be happy about it?"

He shook his head slightly. "I want you to freely come to my bed."

This request stunned her so completely that for a moment she simply stared at him. A man like this took what he wanted without regard for the woman. Even if by the remote chance he didn't care for rape, there was a type of woman who would willingly go to his bed. He was rather handsome, undoubtedly powerful, and most likely rich from years of raiding.

"Do you mean for me to believe you cannot find a woman to come to your bed?" she sneered.

His lip curled and his silver-gray eyes flashed. "I won't even dignify that with an answer. I am saying I want *you* to come to my bed without being forced. Agree to this, and I will free the villagers."

"And leave them alive?"

"Yes."

"And with the means to rebuild?"

He flung her a scathing look. "Do not press your luck."

"Then no. I will not."

"The Blood Eagle is excruciating," he said, circling her like a wolf preparing for the kill.

"If you're seeking a companion, this isn't the best way to win one over."

"I'm an impatient man," he growled. "I'm also being more than fair by offering your life as well as the lives of your people."

"What lives? You've destroyed their homes, their crops, and their livestock, not to mention killing members of their families. If you want me to willingly come to your bed, you had better provide more incentive than what you just offered."

A slight smile touched his lips. "I like your spirit. Too bad you have to die. Now your people will, too."

"What do you mean?" she snapped. "You said you were taking them as slaves?"

"I was, but you've annoyed me."

"Loathsome bastard!" She spat at him, her hands clenched so tightly her knuckles threatened to tear through the flesh.

"You want to fight me again. I can feel it. Unfortunately you will lose."

He was probably right. She was unarmed and half naked while he was still in full armor and carrying his sword.

"All right," she said, the words leaving a bitter taste on her tongue. "I'll bed you. Just release my people, if I can trust you to be true to your word."

"My army is leaving for our homeland tonight. I will send them ahead while we remain with your people until the village is empty, then we will follow."

"That is... acceptable," she said with as much dignity as she could muster for a woman who had just made a bargain with the devil.

"Good. Now come."

"Would you give me something to wear?"

His gaze swept her, lingering over the tops of her breasts. "No."

Nodding slightly, she began walking toward the village. One day she would make this bastard pay for what he'd done. For now she would simply play his game to gain freedom for her mortal companions.

\* \* \*

No sooner had they reached the village than Etlu ordered his men to return to their ships, leaving the mortals behind.

Most of the warriors knew better than to question him. Only Horik approached and asked, "Why leave the slaves behind?"

"Because I said so," Etlu replied, leveling his fiercest look upon Horik who nodded curtly and walked away. Turning back to Niabi, the chieftain gestured toward a tree that had been knocked down during the attack. "Sit and watch me keep my word."

He knew by the anger flashing in her dark eyes that she wanted to tell him to burn in hell, yet she silently did as he ordered, still covering her bosom. He almost demanded that she drop her arms and provide a better view of the finest breasts he'd ever seen. Small yet firm and perfectly shaped, they were smooth as silk and tipped with reddish brown nipples.

Normally he didn't waste time ogling women. When the urge took him, he grabbed the nearest available female, flung up her skirt, and satisfied himself with a few swift thrusts. Blood taking was the same. When thirsty, he drank. It didn't matter when, where, or from whom. Mortals were made to serve his kind, and his kind were made to spread the power of evil.

His entire life had been one of pain, both giving and receiving. With his early years spent at the mercy of Kedar, his Creator's most favored son, he learned quickly to endure torture in all its most brutal forms. Master Aru told him many times that in order to fully appreciate pain, one had to know it intimately. Kedar and the other members of Master Aru's household had been more than willing to see that Etlu learned all the lessons pain had to offer.

A woman approached, her wary gaze fixed on Etlú. She clutched a ragged, filthy shirt that she offered to the warrior woman. Etlú growled, an animal sound that sent the villager scurrying off.

The warrior woman slipped on the shirt, providing another brief glimpse of her breasts. The nipples were hard from the cold, little bumps creating patterns on the tender skin.

"I didn't give you permission to dress," he said.

The woman stared hard at him, her square jaw visibly tight. "If you expect me to travel with you, I need clothing or else I'll freeze."

"It won't kill you. Or don't you realize our kind cannot freeze to death?"

"If comfort isn't a concern, why don't you undress and freeze along with me?"

He tossed her a leering grin. "Is that an offer, woman? It's good to see you're eager to fulfill your end of the bargain, but unfortunately you must wait for my convenience."

"You know that's not what I meant."

The spirited gleam in her dark eyes excited him more than he wanted to admit. Beneath the cover of his leather armor, his cock twitched and for the first time in his life he repressed the urge to take what he wanted.

It was only since leaving Master Aru that he had gained this strange fascination with a heretofore unknown reality called love. Aru had sheltered him from everything weak and gentle just as most mortal parents try to shelter their children from brutality.

Several years ago, on a rare night when he and his men were not engaged in battle, Etlú had taken a walk through a recently conquered village. Most of the mortals were asleep and the few who did see him paid little attention since he was dressed in everyday clothes, his face half hidden in the folds of his cloak. Glancing inside windows, he saw interactions between men, women, and children he had never noticed before. Parents had laughed with their children and touched them with gentleness Etlú had never imagined possible. He'd seen men and women wrapped naked in each other's arms, whispering endearments that he found both revolting and compelling.

What did these strange words and actions mean and why did mortals seem to relish them? When he'd used his mind powers to touch their thoughts, he had felt their contentment that surpassed any pleasure he had ever experienced.

At first he'd tried to forget what he'd seen, bury it beneath bloodlust, but something compelled him to continue his secret observations. Something began to fester inside him, a sensation he didn't quite recognize. These people were *happy*. Without slaughter. Without torture.

Unfathomable.

Horik approached astride his shaggy gray war horse, leading Etlu's black mare behind him. "Everyone has cleared out."

Etlu nodded, grasped the warrior woman by her upper arm, and tugged her to her feet. He mounted his horse and offered her an arm up. The woman sat behind him on the saddle, but didn't so much as place a hand on his waist to steady herself. Still, he felt her body pressed close to his and another thrill of desire shot through him like a flaming arrow.

He kicked his horse forward. Several of the mortals watched as they rode out of the village. A couple even mustered the courage to wave goodbye to their fallen leader. Etlu reached out briefly with his mind, wondering how the woman felt about leaving these people she so foolishly tried to protect. He could sense nothing from her and this frustrated him. He had spent his life perfecting mind control, had surpassed much older and more experienced of his kind in the art of reading and blocking thoughts, but this woman was able to shut him out with shocking ease.

Everything about her intrigued him, which was why he had chosen her for this test of companionship.

The night grew colder and by the time they reached the shore where his fleet waited, the woman was shivering violently. Why did that bother him? Why did he have the urge to warm her? Many times in his life he had been cold and no one had cared.

*Compassion is for the weak, Aru had told him, and mercy useless.*

A short time later, they had boarded his ship and the fleet headed toward home.

The woman sat close to the side, her arms wrapped around her for warmth. Annoyed by his preoccupation with her, he tossed her his cloak then went about his business. The sun would be rising soon and he, along with several of his warriors, would wait out the day in a space sheltered by planks, designed specifically for that purpose. Other members of his band -- the ones with the ability to endure sunlight -- would keep the ship on course throughout the daylight hours.

His inability to endure sunlight frustrated Etlú, but no matter how he tried to condition himself to the day, his flesh continue to burn and his eyes went blind until moonrise.

Before retiring, he approached the woman and asked, "Can you face the daylight?"

"Yes."

He felt a twinge of envy at her ability to do what he could not.

"Come with me anyway," he stated. She had his cloak and he wasn't about to spend the day cold as well as bored, trapped beneath planks in a space scarcely large enough for him to move.

She followed him across the ship, past the men rowing, and crawled after him into the dim space. The other night creatures had already piled in, many of them sound asleep.

"Take off the cloak," he ordered.

"I'm not going to freeze --"

Growling, he began removing it himself, but she shoved his hands away, tore off the heavy wool garment and flung it in his face. The urge to toss her overboard almost overwhelmed him, but that would defeat the purpose of this test. Instead he grasped her by the wrist, tugged her beside him, and covered them both with the cloak. This seemed to please her because she edged a bit closer, her firm backside wiggling provocatively against him. His cock swelled, trapped between their bodies.

Perhaps asking her to sleep beside him was a bad idea. Even her slightest touch seemed to rob him of his self-control. Finally she found a comfortable position and lay

motionless, except for each slow, steady breath. Etlu closed his eyes, though he doubted he would sleep. Not with this sleekly muscled goddess pressed so close, her thick, soft hair brushing his face and her wild yet feminine scent enfolding him in a silken embrace.

Daylight shone through several cracks in the planks and Etlu wondered what the world looked like bathed in sunlight. Though his Creator had waited until he reached manhood to make him a blood drinker, Etlu had been hidden from the day all his life. As a child, he recalled being locked in a dark, rat-infested hole below his Master's house.

*We were made to rule the night, Aru had said. Do not be tempted by the light. If you think you've endured pain, boy, it is nothing compared to the agonies suffered by those who bow to the Spirit of Good. Beware of blood drinkers who walk by day, unless they prove themselves loyal to darkness. Even then, trust no one of this world. Not offspring, brother, or servant. Believe only in the Evil One. He is the strongest power in existence. Hate. Vengeance. Pain. All else is useless.*

Etlu's experiences had taught him to believe his Master's words. Hate and pain had given him strength. They had earned him land, wealth, and the allegiance of the finest warriors to whom he had given the gift of immortality.

Still, he couldn't fathom why so many people hadn't learned this. Why did they waste their time with laughter and conversation unrelated to battle plans? How could they derive pleasure from a mere touch when there was so much blood to be shed?

Slowly his thoughts faded and sleep took its hold. His eyes slipped shut and unconsciously he let his arm drop over the woman. When his hand curved around her warm breast, he growled, a sound of arousal rather than warning. He squeezed the soft mound and ran his thumb over her nipple.

She grasped his wrist and pulled his hand away.

Again he growled, this time in annoyance. He pushed her onto her back and loomed above her. In the cramped space, they lay almost nose to nose.

*We had a bargain, did we not?* He spoke to her through pure thought, wondering if she would reply since she seemed bent on keeping him completely out of her mind.

*Our bargain was that I would come to you willingly,* she replied, her spirit voice like a caress on his mind. His stomach tightened at the sensation. *I am not willing to let you fondle me on a ship full of men.*

*I could take what I want.* He thrust his pelvis rather hard against her. She drew a sharp breath and he caught the scent of her fear, yet she continued holding his gaze steadily.

*If rape is what you want, you wouldn't have wasted time bargaining and losing potential slaves. For some reason I have yet to fathom, you seek a willing partner. By the very little I know about you, I'm probably your only chance of getting one.*

Etlu had slaughtered people for saying less, but for some reason she aroused him more than any woman he had ever encountered. Was this why Aru had warned him to beware of those who walked by day? Perhaps he should kill her and be done with it. He could find another woman to satisfy his nagging curiosity about love.



## Chapter Two

Niabi stared into Etlu's eyes and for the first time noticed many heated emotions churning beneath their frigid surface. For a moment she thought he was going to change his mind about taking her to his homeland and kill her instead. Then with a flash of fangs, he rolled off her and positioned himself on his side again. Except for when his body brushed hers due to the limited space, he refrained from touching her.

Tugging the cloak a bit so that it covered her more completely, she released a pent-up breath and closed her eyes. Was it possible that there was more to this cold, cunning warrior than she had first suspected? Why had he struck such an odd bargain? Though she knew by his scent he was attracted to her, he must have a deeper reason for giving up control of a village he conquered than to have her in his bed. If it was simply her body he was after, he could have taken it, as she was certain he and the thieving pigs in his fellowship often did to women in the villages they raided.

Though she was tired, sleep eluded her. How could she possibly relax beside this beast who relished devastation?

Eventually she drifted off and awakened at dusk to a hand roughly shaking her shoulder.

"Up," Etlu said. She crawled out of the space, tugging the cloak around her, and drew a deep breath of fresh sea air.

Etlu and the day sleepers emerged behind her for shift change.

Niabi noted the men who had been rowing wore odd, trance-like expressions that slowly faded as the rested warriors took their place rowing. Reaching out with her mind, she felt nothing from them except the desire to reach their homeland.

Etlu approached with food to break their fast and she said, "Who is controlling their minds and why?"

"I am, and if the reason isn't obvious you're more of a fool than I thought."

"You are? Didn't you sleep?"

"I've mastered the fine art of light sleeping while at the same time keeping control of their thoughts."

"That's a rare talent."

"And a useful one."

"But being a fool, I still don't understand why." She wondered if he recognized the sarcasm in her voice.

His gray eyes swept her with a condescending look. "To avoid the possibility of mutiny. Because I do not walk by day, I am --"

"Vulnerable?" A smile flirted with her lips, achieving her desired reaction. Rage glistened in his eyes. "Don't you trust your own men?"

"Only a fool trusts anyone."

If she hadn't loathed him so much she might have pitied him. She couldn't imagine spending her entire life in such utter loneliness. She wondered why he'd chosen this path. "You can't have rested well if, even in sleep, your thoughts were guiding theirs."

He grasped a handful of hair at the back of her neck and leaned closer, his voice a husky whisper in her ear. "If you think the precautions I've taken have weakened me in any way, rest assured that I'm accustomed to surviving for months aboard ship. Except for my Master I have never met a blood drinker who can challenge my powers and skills."

"I believe you," she said. "I wonder why such a strong man isn't more comfortable with his own power."

"Complacency is the first step in a leader's decline and I intend to rule for many years to come." He nuzzled her neck and ran his tongue along the side of it.

Niabi tensed at the sensation of his fangs resting against her flesh. Her heartbeat quickened and she waited for his bite, but it never came.

Shoving her away, he turned and walked to the bow of the ship.

The days and nights fell into a familiar pattern. Other than brief orders, Etlu avoided speaking to Niabi. Several times she tried to initiate conversation with him and her other shipmates, but no one seemed interested in so much as knowing her name, let alone talking with her. Etlu had made it clear from the first that she was to be ignored and as she quickly learned, his word was always obeyed. Only Horik, on occasion, questioned him. The auburn-haired warrior seemed to be Etlu's second-in-command.

Many nights later, they docked on their home shore in the land of the Danes. Etlu left Horik in charge of unloading cargo, then he and Niabi mounted his horse and rode to his home deep in the frozen countryside.

Overhearing bits of conversation aboard the ship, she had learned that Etlu ruled a large portion of land on the coastline as well as farther inland. Feared by all except a few fools who had already lost their lives, Etlu had conquered many chieftains.

He dismounted outside a longhouse and strode in, leaving her to follow behind. Inside, a fire burned in the hearth and servants went about their work, cooking, cleaning, and making clothes. Several warriors sat at a wooden table, but their conversation ceased as Etlu approached and spoke to them briefly. Satisfied that nothing significant had occurred while he had been away, he summoned a young female slave and told her to provide Niabi with clothing more appropriate for the weather.

Niabi to follow her across the longhouse where she received a worn tunic-style dress of dark wool and a patched cloak. Though both were too short for her, at least they were warmer than the thin shirt she'd been wearing. After Niabi finished dressing, the woman brought her food. Several times Niabi tried to initiate conversation, but if possible the girl was even less talkative than the men aboard the ship had been.

While she ate, she observed the longhouse's inhabitants. The servants kept their gazes down and their lips silent. Some of the warriors spoke quietly among themselves, and no one so much as smiled, let alone laughed. From a couple of dark corners drifted the grunts and moans of men rutting slave women. Though the females revealed no

signs of protest, Niabi wondered exactly how many of them were willing participants in the loveless, animal act.

In spite of Etlu's wealth and power, he and his people seemed miserable.

No sooner had she finished eating than the chieftain strode over, his intense gaze fixed on her. For the past several days she had been noting signs of fatigue on his face. She didn't doubt the cause was lack of restful sleep. So many weeks of controlling his warriors' minds, even during daylight hours, had begun to take its toll.

"Come with me," he ordered.

"Should I bother to ask where, or are you going to keep ignoring me."

"Dawn will break soon. I'm going to sleep and you're going to fulfill your end of the bargain."

Niabi's stomach clenched. The moment she had been dreading had finally arrived. This sullen, brutal warrior was going to claim her body.

He grasped her wrist and led her away from the others. Though a tall woman, she had to hurry to keep up with his long strides. Dozens of emotions churned inside her. It sickened her that she would soon mate with the man who had destroyed the lives of so many people she cared about. A hint of fear also haunted her. Most likely his lovemaking was as rough as his other actions. Worst of all, she felt a nagging curiosity about his physical attributes. Was the body beneath the armor and layered clothing as striking as it seemed to be? Was his flesh smooth or hair-roughened? What did his cock look like?

Strangely, instead of guiding her to a private corner of the longhouse, he left the structure and led the way over the frosty ground toward the forest. He paused before they reached the cluster of trees and removed a dark strip of cloth from the pouch at his waist. He lifted it to her face, but she backed away and demanded, "What are you doing?"

"I do not sleep in the village. My quarters are private and no one knows their location. You will not be an exception."

"I'm not going to allow you to blindfold me."

"You have no choice. Either you intend to fulfill your end of the bargain, or you will die where you stand."

She could try to fight him, but doubted she could best him in another physical brawl.

Sighing, she turned so he could fasten the blindfold over her eyes. Once it was in place, she felt herself being lifted off her feet and into his arms. Her pulse quickened and instinctively she clutched his neck.

"I don't have time to waste while you stumble blindly after me," he stated, already moving swiftly over the ground. Though she knew her weight was insignificant to such a powerful male blood drinker, she couldn't help but appreciate the solidity of his body. As with humans, body type fluctuated among their species and he was extremely well proportioned.

They seemed to travel for miles up a gradual incline. Even when they finally stopped Etlu's breathing was only slightly labored. He placed her rather abruptly on her feet, the ground beneath them hard and rocky. She unfastened the blindfold and glanced at her surroundings. Trees stood thick and tall around them. To her right a brook trickled down from higher country and to her left a cave mouth gaped in a craggy mountainside partially hidden by vegetation.

Etlu removed his sheathed sword and began undressing. First he shrugged off his cloak, then a shirt of mail and a woolen tunic followed, baring a torso as magnificent as she'd imagined. Powerfully muscled with broad shoulders, a lean waist, and flat belly, his body was enough to make a woman, even one as old and experienced as Niabi, lose her breath. A mat of black hair covered the upper part of his chest and tapered to a thin line down his stomach. For the first time since meeting him, she felt a stirring of desire and the sudden urge to run her fingers over that sinfully gorgeous chest. She noted many faded scars marked his flesh from shoulder to waist. Only silver caused lasting damage to a blood drinker -- not that the scars detracted from his stunning good looks.

The chieftain's gaze flickered in her direction and she knew he must have caught the scent of her lust. The self-satisfied look that passed over his face confirmed her assumption and vexed her even more. How could she possibly feel any kind of attraction to a man like him? Evil rolled off him in almost tangible waves. She was about to look away in sheer disgust when he bent and unfastened the strips of cloth wrapped below his knees. She couldn't resist watching as he pulled off his boots and woolen breeches, revealing long, hard-looking legs lightly dusted with dark hair and a perfectly-shaped ivory cock jutting from a nest of black pubic hair. In spite of the cold, his arousal was obvious.

Raising an eyebrow, Niabi asked, "You intend to mate in the middle of the forest?"

His lips curved into a malicious smile that exposed the glistening tips of his fangs. How would it feel when those fangs penetrated her flesh? A blood drinker's bite could bring either pain or pleasure, depending on the intent and emotions involved. She had made love with others of her kind before, had given and received their bite. This was the first time she would be bedding a man she didn't care about and knowing this disturbed her greatly. She could, of course, change her mind and either fight him or make a run for freedom. His sword was within her reach and if she lunged for it, there was a good chance she would reach it before he did. Even if she held up her end of the bargain, what was to prevent him from returning to her village and finishing what he started or sending his men to do so?

"Undress," he ordered.

"From what I've observed around here men are in the habit of merely hiking up a woman's skirt."

"If that's what you prefer, I'll be all too glad to accommodate you, but now I want to bathe. You will join me."

Niabi glanced toward the brook and nearly shivered. The weather was almost cold enough to snow and he wanted to go swimming?

His jaw set, he took a step closer and reached for her cloak, but she avoided his touch and undressed. Living a long life of training and hardship had stolen much of her modesty, still she resisted the urge to cover herself as she bared her body completely to his leering gaze.

Gooseflesh rose on her skin and she trembled, dreading the thought of wading into the undoubtedly cold water in spite of how much she needed a bath after weeks aboard ship. At the very least they would be clean when he took her.

“Come,” he growled, grasping her upper arm and tugging her toward the brook.

At the first touch of cold water on her feet she began shivering harder and jerked away from him. “Let go of me.”

Shrugging, he strode into the frigid brook and ducked his head under. He surfaced seconds later, his dark hair drenched and water streaming down his face and chest, making it glisten in the moonlight shining through the trees.

“You take too long,” he said, advancing on her. She backed out of the water, but he caught her wrist and dragged her closer. Powerful from years spent as a warrior, she fought his hold, but his superior strength combined with the slippery stones beneath her feet overcame her and she slid into the brook, landing rather hard on her backside, frigid water up to her sternum. Her nipples tightened to hard pebbles and she shook with cold.

Though a wicked laugh escaped Etlu’s lips, she took some comfort in seeing that he, too, was shivering, his nipples hard, and skin covered in gooseflesh.

Quickly, she began washing, even soaking her hair, glad to be rid of the stench of the ship.

Etlu waded out a bit deeper and ducked under again, then floated on his back.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually enjoying this,” she said through chattering teeth.

“You learn to like it.”

“Don’t wager on that.” She hurried out of the water, reaching for her cloak.

Etlu did the same. He slipped on his cloak, picked up his sword and the rest of his clothes, then headed into the cave.

"Come, woman," he said without so much as glancing over his shoulder.

"I have a name," she replied, following him into such darkness that even her superior vision took several moments to adjust. Around a sharp turn, the cave narrowed into a long corridor scarcely large enough to accommodate the span of Etlu's shoulders. Irritated by his lack of response to her statement, she continued, "It's Niabi."

"And that should be of interest to me?"

Just when she thought he could do nothing more to increase her anger, he said or did something to prove her wrong.

"If I interested you enough to bargain with me to come to your bed, I would think that you would like to at least know my name. Do you realize we've been traveling together for weeks and you never once asked?"

"Since you never once offered to tell me, I thought you agreed it was unimportant."

"If I mean so little to you, why do you want me?"

They reached the end of the corridor and stopped outside a steel door built into the cave wall. Etlu pushed it open and they stepped into another cave furnished with a trunk, table, chair, and a bed of blankets and furs. Two other steel doors were built into the wall directly across from where they stood. He turned and bolted the door. Even if someone did manage to find his daytime lair, they would not be able to enter.

"You live here?" she asked, glancing around.

"I spend my days here."

"Why don't you stay in the village?"

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "And leave myself vulnerable? One such as yourself who walks by day cannot comprehend the danger my kind faces."

"If you could trust your people, there would be no danger."

"Only a fool trusts anyone."

"You must be very lonely."

Curling his lip, he snapped, "You speak like a woman."

"I am a woman."



"You did your best to hide that fact from your people whom you claim to trust so much."

"That's different."

He snorted. "Is it?"

Sighing with frustration, she folded her arms beneath her breasts and studied him carefully. Other than the gleam in his eyes, he seemed almost inhuman. Regardless of what many of their kind might think, part of a blood drinker's soul would always remain human. His coldness and lack of interest in forming relationships, even among his own people, was unnatural and didn't agree with his apparent desire for her.

"Yes, it is different," she said. "I lied for their own good, because if they knew I was a woman they wouldn't have let me protect them."

One of his sleek black eyebrows arched in a most sarcastic gesture. "Is that what you were doing? Enough talk. I need to sleep."

He opened one of the doors, revealing a tiny hollow dug into the rock wall. When he took one of the furs and a blanket and shoved them into the hollow, Niabi realized his intent.

"You're not going to lock me in there."

"As if I would allow you to wander freely while I sleep."

"I thought you wanted to --"

"Later." He pushed her into the tiny room and shut the door. Niabi heard the bolt slide into place and started to panic. What if he left her in the cell forever? Etlu seemed crazy enough to do something like that if it struck his deranged fancy.

If he thought she would allow him to rest comfortably while she spent the day in a cell, he was sorely mistaken.

"Etlu!" She pounded on the door. "Release me! Open this door immediately!"

Niabi wasn't sure how much time passed with her shouting and pounding on the door before he finally succumbed to her racket and bellowed, "Silence, wench!"

"Not until you release me."

Moments later, the door opened and she stepped out. "It is about time -- what are those for?"

Silver manacles dangled in his gloved hand. He stared at her with a menacing expression and said, "If you won't stay in there quietly, then I will bind and gag you. Silver is quite painful, even to one who can walk by day."

Niabi stared at the manacles with loathing.

"What shall it be, the cell without the silver or the cell with it?"

"Fine," she said through clenched teeth and stepped back into the hollow. Before he closed the door, she extended her hand toward his chest and held his gaze. "I think I'm starting to understand you."

"How so?"

"I'm not stupid enough to anger you when you're locking me up. You might decide to let me rot here." Grinning, she dropped her hand and backed into the cell. "Have I raised your curiosity?"

"No." He slammed the door and bolted it.

This time Niabi sat quietly, pulling the blanket around her. After several moments, she tried reaching out with her mind, hoping to manipulate him into revealing more about himself. His mind was so exhausted from weeks without proper rest that it didn't respond to her guidance. All she could do was observe bits and pieces of his dreams -- horrible images of suffering and fear. She almost pitied a creature so twisted that even his sleep was poisoned by evil.

Tired of her efforts to learn more about the chieftain, she settled more deeply into the blanket and let her thoughts drift to happier times. At least she was warm, clean, and well fed. Slowly she drifted off, wondering what the night might bring. Her restless sleep included an all too vivid dream of the evil chieftain taking her in his powerful arms and kissing her breathless. Their naked bodies clung to one another and he murmured husky endearments in her ear.

## Chapter Three

Niabi awoke several moments before Etlu opened the door. A fresh, outdoorsy scent clung to his nude body and his hair looked damp, as if he'd been swimming again.

"There's water for you to wash with in the basin and food in the bowl beside it." He pointed to the small wooden table on which rested the items he'd mentioned.

"You left me in there while you went out?"

"When I awoke, you were still sleeping. Having a rather *interesting* dream, actually."

Frustrated that he had penetrated her mind, she shoved past him, strode to the table, and began washing.

"Your dreams, or should I say nightmares, were interesting as well," she said, a sarcastic edge to her voice. "Repulsive, but interesting, particularly the image of you drowning in a vat of boiling blood."

His lip curled and he stared down his nose at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you can't remember --"

"I never recall my dreams. Not since I was a child."

"Really?" She held his gaze. Peculiar. "Surely some of the images stay with you once in a --"

"What does it matter? Discussing dreams is a waste of time. Foolishness. Another *woman's* trait." He sneered.

Studying him carefully, she reached for a chunk of bread from the soapstone bowl and began eating with enthusiasm.

"You have a healthy appetite," he observed after watching her devour first the bread, then salted meat, fruit, and nuts.

"It seems eating is my only pleasure around here." She paused, a wooden cup of mead lifted halfway to her lips. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. You're likely to starve me now."

By the contemplative look on his face, she knew her comment hadn't been far from the truth.

"No. I have other plans for you. I hope your appetite is strong in all directions."

She took a long sip of mead then said, "That depends."

"On?"

"The man." She flung him a teasing look meant as mild flirtation. After all, if she had to bed him, she could at least try to enjoy it.

Her attempt at playful seduction was lost on him. Picking up another wooden cup, this one filled with scented oil, he tore the mead from her hand and placed it aside, then dragged her toward the furs and blankets in the corner of the cave.

"Enough talk," he said. "I will have what was promised me."

He dipped his hand into the cup and rubbed the oil over his cock with a few rough strokes. His staff swelled, the ruddy flesh glistening. Pushing Niabi onto her back, he covered her body with his. A hand braced on either side of her head, he used his knee to nudge her legs apart.

The bulbous head of his cock prodded her pussy, then with a swift thrust, he pushed in to the hilt. Her entire body tensing, Niabi gasped in pain as he thrust, his motions short and much too fast.

"Please slow down," she said, bracing her hands against his shoulders.

Instantly he stopped moving and stared into her eyes. "Why?"

"Because you're hurting me. Not that you care, but unless you want me to start doing you bodily harm in return --"

"It might be amusing for you to try."

"Do you want me willing or not?"

He sighed in obvious annoyance, but resumed thrusting, slower and easier.

Niabi lay still while he plundered her body, noting that in spite of his apparent arousal, his expression revealed no pleasure or even raw desire. His eyes didn't close nor did the harsh lines of his face smooth in ecstasy.

After a moment, he stopped thrusting again, his brow furrowed. "You're not upholding your part of the bargain."

"Excuse me?" she demanded. She felt she was doing more than her fair share simply by enduring his primal touch.

"Why are you not willing?"

"I'm not fighting you."

"A corpse or a whore could lie here just as well as you are. I want a willing woman."

She sighed, exasperated. "I don't understand what you want from me."

"Cling to me. Cry out in pleasure."

Completely taken aback by his request, it took a moment for her to comprehend the true meaning of his words. Finally, she said, "Etlu, you mean you want me to make love to you."

"Yes. Come willingly. Make love. What is the difference?"

Could he possibly be serious? Was any man this ignorant?

"There is a great difference. Making love is what happens between two people who care about each other's happiness. A woman responds in the way you describe when she and a man give each other pleasure."

"It takes but a few thrusts to feel pleasure."

"If that's what you believe, then you have never made love properly."

He held her gaze, a contemplative expression in his silvery eyes. "Then tell me what must be done for it to be proper."

Niabi could scarcely believe what he was asking, not only because he seemed genuinely naïve in the art of lovemaking, but because he was interested in pleasing her and not simply having her lie "willingly" beneath him.

"First of all, women like to be touched," she said, brushing a hand over her breasts. "Here."

His eyes gleamed with interest as he glanced at her breasts and clamped a hand over one.

"Gently," Niabi snapped.

He loosened his grip and squeezed the plump mound almost tenderly. The tips of his fingers traced delicate circles over the flesh, edging closer and closer to the pert nipple. Finally he ran his thumb over the brownish bud, stroking in tiny, feather-light circles.

Niabi's breath caught, pleasure washing over her. His long, slender fingers continued stroking and teasing the nipple. It grew harder and more sensitive beneath his touch.

Resisting the urge to close her eyes, she looked at his face, noting that he was staring at her breast as he caressed it. Almost hesitantly, he bent his head and licked the nipple. Gasping, Niabi arched her back, pushing her breast closer to his face. He covered her nipple with his mouth, flicking his wet tongue over it then sucking deeply.

"Ah," she moaned softly, burying her fingers in his hair. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, she allowed them to close so she could better enjoy the sensations breaking over her.

While sucking and licking her left breast, Etlú took the other in his hand and kneaded it, his thumb rubbing the nipple. His scent grew stronger, mingling with hers, as their desire increased.

The tips of his teeth worried her nipple and she cried out sharply, the pleasure almost too intense. Her clit ached with need, yet he seemed too preoccupied with her breasts to care about any other part of her at the moment.

He shifted position slightly and began licking and sucking her other nipple. Niabi ran her hands over his shoulders and back, relishing the feel of powerful muscles beneath warm skin. Her fingers traced the slight ridges of many old scars that roughened his otherwise smooth flesh. She threaded her fingers through his thick black

hair and clutched handfuls of it when he sucked harder on her nipple, sending little ripples of delight through her entire body.

When he finally lifted his head, she lay panting with pleasure, her clit aching with need.

"You're enjoying this?" he asked.

"Heavens, yes," she breathed before she fully realized what she was saying. How could she possibly enjoy this brutal beast's hands and lips on her? Yet during these past moments he hadn't acted viciously. Quite the contrary.

"What else pleases you?"

Her eyes opened and she held his gaze. "Why is this so important to you?"

He took so long to reply that she thought he might simply ignore the question. "Because I never thought there could be pleasure without pain. I have seen people together and when I reached into their minds sensed indescribable things. Unknown things."

"Like what?"

"Sometimes what I felt from you just now. Other times different, though no less intense, emotions. I have taken pleasure with women, but it is not the same as what I felt from these people. It is not the same as what --"

"Go on."

"Tell me where else to touch you." He placed a hand on her belly and stroked the silken flesh. "Here?"

"That's nice, but --"

"Here." His deep voice just above a whisper, he swept his hand over her pelvis and hip, then gently grasped her inner thigh.

"Yes," she murmured. "That's nice."

His fingertips combed through her pubic hair then dipped between her legs again. Using one finger, he circled her pussy then eased the long, slender digit back inside her.

Niabi's legs fell apart, and she tilted her pelvis upward.

Completely focused between her legs, Etlu tenderly explored her slick passage, murmuring, "Wet. Very wet."

"Mmm," she purred, then stifled a sharp cry of lust when he withdrew his finger and touched her clit, so plump and sensitive from his carnal exploration. "Yes. Right there. That feels so -- ah!"

She gasped, her pulse leaping as he covered her clit with his mouth and ran his tongue over it, much like he'd done to her breasts. He lapped with upward strokes, varied at first, then settled into a steady rhythm that soon had her writhing so much he had to slide his hands under her bottom to keep her steady.

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "Please, please don't stop."

The pleasure was so keen that she scarcely knew what she was saying. She simply wanted his lips and tongue to stay with her until she burst in utter fulfillment. Several more long, upward flicks of his tongue against her clit and she came so hard she wondered for the first time if a blood drinker could die from too much pleasure. Throughout the extended climax Etlu continued gripping her bottom and licking her over-stimulated flesh until the last tiny ripple tore through her.

He slid up her body, his tongue leaving a warm, wet trail up her belly and between her breasts. This time when he mounted her, he eased his cock slowly into her drenched pussy.

Gazing at him, she saw his cold expression melt the slightest bit and heard his heartbeat quicken. Obviously he appreciated the difference between a "willing" woman and a lust-drenched one.

"How does it feel?" she whispered.

"Different."

"Good?"

He nodded slowly, his eyelashes lowering and the taut muscles of his shoulders and arms bunching as he thrust -- long, deep sweeps from head to hilt. The rhythm of his thick cock rubbing against her in all the right places rekindled her passion. Niabi slid the soles of her feet up and down his hair-roughened calves before locking her legs



around his waist and her arms around his neck. She clung to him as his pace increased, edging closer and closer to fulfillment.

"Don't stop," she panted, her body once again catching fire. "Please don't stop, Etlu!"

He growled, his fangs grazing her neck and tongue lapping her flesh while he continued thrusting faster.

Closing her eyes, Niabi moaned with pleasure, her body straining against Etlu's until she burst in a climax even more intense than the last. With a ragged cry, he drove his fangs into her flesh and his cock deep into her pussy. Every muscle in his body taut, he surged into her, lapping her blood as he came long and hard.

When Niabi recovered enough to open her eyes, she found him stretched out beside her, staring intently at her face, his expression unfathomable. His fingertips absently stroked her hip and stomach.

"That was -- enjoyable," she said, surprised by how detached she was able to sound when the urge to melt into his arms almost overcame her.

"Apparently so," he said. "I didn't realize a woman could experience the same pleasure as a man."

"I'm starting to believe there is very little you know about pleasure of any kind."

"I have been with many women and fought in many battles. I have tasted all the pleasure in this world."

Niabi curled her lip. "How can you mention lovemaking and war in the same breath? Why is violence and pain your idea of happiness?"

"Our kind were made for pain. The world is for us to rule."

"Your Creator told you that?"

"Didn't yours?"

"No." She raised herself onto her elbow so she could face him more directly. "Even if she had, I wasn't raised to believe such nonsense. What about your family?"

"My Creator is my family."

"Your parents? Brothers and sisters?"

"If you mean a mortal family, I did not have one."

"Surely you were brought up some --"

"My Creator has always been with me. Plucked me from the battlefield and raised me to know the power of the Evil One."

A feeling of dread tightened her belly. Niabi's Creator had warned her about the Spirit of Evil and those who followed it, spreading agony and destruction throughout the world.

*I cannot tell you how to live your life, Niabi, her Creator had said, but I believe our duty is to fight the Evil One and those who serve him. We have been given the power to do this better than any other creature in the world.*

Niabi knew her Creator was right. She'd spent the first centuries of her life training and fighting beside her in that never ending battle against wickedness. Now, it seemed, Etlu had been fighting the same battle but on the opposite side. In spite of this, she sensed that somewhere deep inside he was not completely evil.

## Chapter Four

Etlu noticed the fear cross Niabi's face at the mention of the Evil One.

"You are familiar with the Master of us all?" he asked.

Perhaps he had been right in choosing this woman. If she shared his belief in the Evil One, she was a more worthy mate than he had imagined. From the moment he had met her gaze in battle, even before realizing she was a woman, he had felt attraction to her. Something in her dark eyes revealed a depth of spirit rare among mortals and immortals alike.

Though she didn't have his strength, she exuded power. When they had fought, blade to blade, he remembered thinking she would have made a fine addition to his army had he not been so aroused by her. His desire had extended beyond the mere urge to claim her body and this worried him. For a member of his army to wield such power over him was far too dangerous, so he decided to put her to death.

When he'd ripped off her clothing to prepare for the Blood Eagle and discovered she was female, he realized he could possess her after all. She could become his concubine. Through her he could finally experience the pleasures he'd witnessed between men and women. Unlike slaves who feared his bed or other women he'd known who wanted part of his wealth and power, this female blood drinker was neither afraid nor lacking in strength of her own.

"Yes. The Spirit of Good whose strength flows through all things is our Master."

Her words sickened him. Gripping her throat snugly in one hand, he rasped, "How dare you speak the name of my Master's most hated rival?"

"Release me," she stated, her unwavering gaze fixed on his.

Slowly he eased his hold, which hadn't been particularly hard to begin with. For some reason he hadn't wanted to harm her, simply instill a little terror.

"Why is there such fear in you?" she murmured. "You trust no one and surround yourself with people who would as soon stake you while you sleep as look at you. All for what? Power? Wealth?"

"Destruction," he told her. "It's what we were made for. And I have no fear except for the Evil One. He has given me power and can take it away."

"He hasn't given you power, Etlu. Any that you have came from within you. And I disagree that we were made to bring destruction to this world. I know it's not my purpose."

"Then what is your purpose?"

"My Creator once told me we must use our power to fight evil."

"And my Creator told me that should I meet a blood drinker who spouts such nonsense, I should kill her."

"Because he wanted to control you."

"He made me in his image."

"What about your own image, Etlu? Do you want to be his puppet forever? Look around you. Think about what we've shared this night. You were gentle with me, and I with you. Tell me that didn't make you feel something."

"Weakness."

Her brow furrowed and she took his face in her hands, her thumbs stroking his cheeks. "How about joy? I felt it and I know you did, too."

"Joy is a form of weakness."

"No. You cannot believe that."

"It is the truth."

"Only because you've spent your life in the shadow of the Evil One. If you will not open your heart, then at least open your mind to other possibilities."

Drawing a deep breath, he studied her carefully. Everything he'd learned told him he should destroy her now that he'd taken what he wanted, yet something disturbing had happened to him. He had hoped that once he experienced a willing woman -- made love -- his curiosity would be satisfied. This newly found knowledge of

the pleasures shared between men and women had increased rather than sated his desire. Already he wanted to claim her again, have her cling to him and wrap her warm, silken limbs around his body as he thrust into her until they both collapsed in delight.

Just as his Creator had warned, she was trying to manipulate him, use her feminine wiles to turn him from the Evil One. Steeling himself against her gentleness, he entered her mind swiftly, surprised by how easily she let him in. No longer did she toss up impenetrable barriers, but allowed him to roam freely through her thoughts.

He saw her life as a mortal thousands of years ago in a strange place as wild and untamed as the Northmen's land. Her people had lived by a river, fishing and hunting. The men were great warriors who defended their tribe against intruders.

A stranger came and with him a sickness that killed many members of the tribe, leaving them drained of blood. Believing the stranger somehow responsible, the warriors tried to drive him off, yet no matter how great the injury, he always returned as strong as before, like an evil spirit sent to crush their people. Then another stranger came, a beautiful dark-skinned woman called Adira. She fought and killed the evil spirit, and this time he did not return. The tribe accepted the woman, worshipped her as sent by the great spirit, yet she did not welcome such praise and soon left.

Niabi's family had been killed by the sickness and she thought her only means of survival would be to marry a man whom she did not love. Seeing the warrior woman had stirred her thoughts and she followed her into the wilderness. After hearing her story, Adira confided in Niabi about her true nature and offered to make her a blood drinker, her immortal daughter.

While exploring Niabi's memories of her first years as a blood drinker, Etlus sensed the love that had developed between Creator and offspring and suddenly could bear no more. He withdrew from her thoughts, seething with jealousy and longing such as he'd never known.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Why do you turn away?"

"Why did you show me those memories?"

"Because you were curious and I have nothing to hide." Sitting up, she reached for his arm, but he tugged away.

Her life, both as a mortal and a blood drinker, had been so unlike his. If he had known even a portion of such happiness existed --

"I have shown you my past. Will you share yours with me?" she asked, lifting a hand to his cheek. Her fingertips brushed across his skin with a feathery touch and he resisted the urge to close his eyes to better enjoy the sensation.

"You forget your place, woman."

"What are you hiding, Etlu?"

"Nothing," he seethed, his fangs bared. "You want to see my past? Maybe you should have a taste of it."

He advanced on her, pressing her onto her back. Fixing his unblinking gaze upon her, he opened his thoughts to her, forcing to the surface all the terrors of his mortal life -- days spent locked in darkness and physical torments he longed to forget but could not. He relived raids on villages. Forced, even as a child, to torment and slaughter mortals or else endure Aru's wrath. In his Creator's house, warriors ridiculed and beat him. Kedar in particular took pleasure in making his life miserable. His blood still pounded with rage when he recalled the sting of Kedar's whip and worse indignities no child should suffer.

Waves of horror and disgust rolled off Niabi, but to his surprise, sympathy did as well. He sensed that she wanted to tear herself away from his memories, but refused to leave him drowning in them alone.

Etlu broke their connection, but when he tried to pull away, she locked her arms around his neck.

"No wonder all you understand is hate," she murmured. "And I had no idea you are so young. Your power both of mind and body is that of a much older blood drinker."

"My Creator would not accept youth as an excuse for failure."

"I'm sorry."

"Why should you be sorry?" he snapped. "I possess more power than you, an ancient, yet *you* offer *me* pity?"

"It's not pity, but compassion."

"You're weak."

"Then let me be weak," she whispered, tightening her arms around him and pressing her face against his shoulder.

Gritting his teeth, he fought the urge to surrender completely to her embrace.

"What happened to that beast Kedar?" she asked.

"I killed him. I suppose I should have been grateful to him. He tested me like no other and made me strong. If not for him, I might not have known exactly how much I could endure."

"There's so much more to life than anger and pain, Etlu. You need not follow your Creator's twisted path."

"It's too late, Niabi," he said, her name shockingly sweet on his lips. "My fate was determined long ago, as was yours. You have fulfilled your end of our bargain, and now you must die."

Niabi froze, her heart pounding. In spite of his past, she sensed goodness buried deep in Etlu, if he would only give himself the chance to dig it out. She was beginning to understand him now and realized that in his mind, killing her was his only option if he wanted to remain true to the Master who had scarred his body and mind.

"You don't have to kill me, Etlu. You've only just begun to taste what has been denied you. Tonight was wonderful, but it can be so much better."

"I understand your fear of death makes you willing to continue as my slave."

"It's true I don't want to die, but as you recall from our battle in my village, I am willing. If I didn't feel for you, I would not offer myself, not even to save my own life."

"You can gain nothing from continuing this exploration."

"And you can gain nothing from putting me to death, unless you're afraid of me after all."

The look he gave her told her he wasn't about to dignify her comment with an answer.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the craggy ceiling. After a moment of silent contemplation, he said, "Very well. I will not kill you now, but I cannot promise I won't later."

Niabi resisted the urge to smile. That was all the reassurance she needed.

After they dressed, he blindfolded her again and toted her back to the village. Etlu placed Niabi in the company of several slave women working in his longhouse, then left to go about his business with his troops.

While helping two pale-haired mortal women mend clothes, Niabi noted their sullen expressions matched those of almost every other servant in the longhouse, both mortal and blood drinker.

"What are your names?" Niabi asked, hoping to initiate some conversation.

"I'm Freja. She's Helga," said the older of the two, not so much as glancing at Niabi.

"How long have you served Etlu?"

"Many years," Freja replied.

"Is he a fair master?"

"His punishments are harsh, but if you keep quiet and do your work, he usually ignores you."

"I see," Niabi murmured. "Does he --"

"If you're smart, you will keep silent and go about your work," said Helga.

"He frightens you, then?"

"Only a fool is not frightened by him," Helga continued. "And only a fool tries to make conversation when none is required."

Sighing, Niabi lowered her gaze to the shirt she was patching. It seemed she was destined for a long, boring night.

Etlu returned to the longhouse just before dawn to escort Niabi to his cave. Again she was blindfolded and toted in his arms. The latter part she didn't mind so



much. It was rather nice being carried in his powerful arms, pressed close to his warm, hard body. Her thoughts drifted to the carnal pleasures they could explore. In spite of his rough, experienced nature, Etlu was innocent in the ways of love, yet by his superior performance the previous night, he was eager to learn.

When she had initially made the decision to bed him, the idea had disgusted her, but the longer she spent with him the more she believed he was not what he seemed. She had known many men in her lifetime, had seen those who took genuine pleasure in tormenting others. She didn't sense that pleasure in Etlu. He destroyed because he understood no other way.

Niabi knew by scent when they left the village far behind and entered the woods. Taking advantage of their privacy, she began kissing his face. She trailed her lips across his cheek and over his jawline. Blindfolded, she seemed even more aware of her other senses. Her lips detected the faint stubble from his night's growth of beard and felt the slender ridge of the scar along his cheek. Burying her face in his hair, she inhaled deeply, relishing its coarse texture and woodsy aroma.

Finally he stopped walking and placed her on her feet. He removed the blindfold and she saw they were standing in the cave, just outside the door to his secret chamber. He opened it and stood aside for her to pass.

Once he'd bolted the door behind them, he began undressing. She did the same, eager to make love with him again. Throughout the night her thoughts had often drifted to earlier when they'd taken such pleasure in each other's bodies. She'd known men in her long life, several she'd been quite fond of, but none had excited her like Etlu. His touch and scent made her pulse quicken. Caressing his well-muscled body aroused the passion of the primal female dwelling deep inside her.

"I want to taste you," he said once they were naked. Drawing her into his arms, he covered her mouth in a penetrating kiss. His tongue caressed hers, then thrust in and out with long, slow strokes.

Moaning softly, Niabi clung to him, rising onto her toes to better reach him.

He scraped his tongue against her fangs. The delectable flavor of his blood filled her mouth. She mimicked his action, piercing her tongue on his fangs, and enjoyed the taste of their mingling blood.

He broke the kiss and placed his hands on her hips, pushing her gently against the cave wall. The lust filled glint in his eyes made her quiver with unfulfilled need.

He smiled slightly and lowered his face to her neck, inhaling deeply. He kissed her throat, then her collarbone. Lowering himself to his knees, he licked his way down her torso, then pressed his face to her soft mound.

"The scent of your arousal stirs me," he murmured.

"Oh, Etlu." She entwined her fingers in his hair. "I love how you touch me. I -- oh!"

Her entire body tensed with pleasure as his tongue flicked over her clit. He traced the sensitive nub, first one side, then the other. Finally he licked its core in light upward strokes that soon had her trembling on the brink of climax.

Just before she came, he stood and turned her so that she was forced to brace her hands against the cave wall.

"What are you doing?" she panted, glancing over her shoulder. Placing a hand firmly on the back of her head, he made her face the wall. He brushed her hair aside, exposing the back of her neck to his lips.

Niabi moaned softly, her eyes slipping shut and her forehead pressed to the rock wall. He kissed her shoulders and the backs of her arms down to her elbows.

"Ah!" she gasped and arched her back as he trailed his tongue down her spine. Her nipples scraped against the craggy wall and a shiver ripped through her from head to toe.

Grasping her buttocks, he squeezed the taut orbs while running his tongue along the indentation between them. One hand dipped between her legs and he slid a finger into her wet sheath. Using the same finger, now slick with her essence, he rubbed her clit in small circles.

With a growl of animal desire, Etlu dragged her to the cave floor, positioning her on her hands and knees. Grasping her by the hips, he mounted her from behind.

Panting, Niabi clutched handfuls of dirt and rock, her bottom thrusting against Etlu who was driving into her with a fast, steady rhythm. Extending one long arm, he caressed her back and ribs, then grasped her breast. He kneaded the warm mound and gently pinched the nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"Etlu, oh!" She moaned, bucking against him so he was forced to use both hands again to steady her hips. Niabi came so hard she might have collapsed had Etlu not continued supporting her. He withdrew from her and pulled her into his arms where she lay for several moments, catching her breath.

"You enjoy being possessed," he observed.

Tilting her face toward his, she smiled slightly. "By you, it seems."

He cupped her face in his hand, staring deeply into her eyes before abruptly disentangling himself from her and striding across the cave. Niabi's gaze followed him, roaming over his broad shoulders and powerful back that narrowed to a lean waist and prominent yet tightly muscled buttocks. Bending to open the trunk, he glanced over his shoulder at her, a wicked gleam in his narrowed eyes. He withdrew steel manacles from the trunk, thick enough to restrain even a blood drinker, at least for a short time.

As he approached, Niabi raised herself onto her elbows, watching him carefully. "If you intend to use those on me --"

"Don't even pretend to refuse. Already I can smell your desire, sense it. You have a measure of power for a female and are not accustomed to being claimed."

"Do you still not understand? I do not appreciate pain or --"

"Who mentioned pain?" He straddled her mid-section, though kept most of his weight on his knees and off her. "Besides, I'm starting to believe there are two different kinds of pain."

"What do you mean?" She studied his severe features from his penetrating eyes to his strong chin. Though good sense told her to fight him rather than submit to his

whim, she remained still as he raised her hands above her head and snapped the manacles in place.

Leaning down, he spoke against her lips, "Keep your hands overhead or feel my wrath."

Her temper rose, yet at the same time a ripple of desire shot down her spine. Before she could consider the sort of reply she wanted to make, he moved swiftly down her body, knelt between her legs, lifted her buttocks, and covered her clit with his mouth. His moist lips and wet tongue tugged and stroked, instantly rekindling her passion. He traced the shape of her sensitive flesh then used the very tip of one fang to tease the plump nub. Niabi moaned, her body arching and hips wriggling against the pleasure. She instinctively brought her bound hands downward so she could grasp his hair, but the moment she touched his head, he dropped her bottom and sat up.

"Put your hands back where they should be," he growled.

"I want to touch you," she spoke through clenched teeth.

He pushed her hands over her head then bent and ran his tongue lingeringly over her clit. "This is what you want."

Niabi's leg jerked involuntarily and her eyes half closed. He was right. That was what she wanted. At the moment all she could think about was having him stimulate her with his shockingly talented tongue.

He glanced at her. Obviously satisfied with her surrender, he focused his complete attention between her legs. While he licked, sucked, and used his fine, sharp teeth to advantage, Niabi writhed with pleasure, her fingers twisting above her head as she fought the urge to touch him. When she was about to burst in rapture, he covered her body with his and shifted his thick erection into her well prepared pussy. He reached up with one hand and stroked her grasping fingers before bracing his hands on the sides of her head and pumping into her. A few swift thrusts hurled her over the edge, but he didn't stop there. Grunting, he continued surging into her, pushing her toward another peak.

Unable to control herself any longer, Niabi strained against her bonds, managing to snap the interlocking chain just before she soared again in ecstasy. Clinging to him, she sank her fangs into his shoulder at the same moment he bit her. The taste and scent of their blood sent new waves of passion washing over them, pushing them beneath its crimson surface until they lay sated and panting in each other's embrace. Finally Etlu stirred, though Niabi remained still, her eyes closed and a half smile on her lips. He removed the bonds and they clinked as he tossed them aside. Stretching out beside her, he again drew her into his arms.

After several moments of silence, he asked, "Tell me what love is."

Lifting her head from his chest, she stared at him. "Surely you must know. There must have been at least one person you..." Her voice faded when he shook his head, his silvery gaze fixed on her. She wondered how to explain to a grown man something he should have understood since childhood.

"Love is caring about a person's happiness. It's an incomparable feeling that has less to do with a meeting of bodies and more with a joining of souls. Do you understand?"

"No."

Sighing with exasperation, she tried another definition. "When you love someone, you want to protect them."

"I protect my people, but I do not love them."

"That's not what I mean."

"Did you love the people in your village?"

"I cared for them deeply and some of them were good friends, so yes, in a way I did love them."

His brow furrowed. "So you're here with me because of love."

"In a manner of speaking, but --"

"Love is a weakness."

"It's a strength, Etlu."

"It made you a prisoner."

"And your hate has made you a prisoner."

He stared at her, unblinking, as if trying to make sense of her words. Finally he shook his head and stood, tugging her to her feet and leading her to the cell.

"Why must I stay here?" she demanded. "Let me sleep beside you."

"You know that is not possible."

"How can you do this -- bed me then lock me away like a prisoner?"

"Must I remind you that is exactly what you are?"

"Someday you will have to trust someone, Etlu." She held his gaze but he remained immovable. The warm, breathing man who had pleased her with his body had once again become the icy minion of evil.

Stepping into the cell, Niabi wondered if anyone could ever truly reach him. His Creator had made a chieftain, yet destroyed a man.

"Here." He offered her another blanket and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. When he bent to kiss her, she turned away, closing the door behind her.

\* \* \*

The following night, Etlu released Niabi from the cell and they returned to the village. Again she joined the women in the nightly tasks of cooking, sewing, and caring for the children. She noted how well the mortals had adapted to their chieftain's nocturnal way of life.

After several hours in the longhouse, Niabi stepped outside for some fresh air. Walking around the village, she sought out Etlu but didn't find him among the warriors on the training field or with the guards stationed along the wall. Nor was he in the forge. Finally she asked one of the men his whereabouts and was directed to a clearing in the woods.

She found Etlu naked and knee-deep in a brook, a fishing spear in his hand.

More freezing water. How could he bear it?

Horik stood on the bank, his gaze fixed on Niabi with its usual hatred. For some reason her presence had angered the auburn-haired warrior from the first. Horik didn't interest her, however. Her attention focused on Etlu.

Though familiar with his body, she couldn't help admiring him. Tall and sleekly muscled, he exuded wild vampiric beauty like no man she had ever seen. His dark mane hung thick down his back. When he turned slightly, his silvery gaze following the movement of a fish beneath the dark water, his harsh yet captivating features came into her view.

The tips of his fangs glistened when his lips parted slightly just before he jabbed his spear into the water. He pulled it up, a large fish wriggling on the end. Grasping it in one hand, he pulled it off the point and tossed it to Horik. His gaze once again fixed on Niabi, the auburn-haired warrior bit off the fish's head, spat it on the ground, then devoured the rest of the scaly gray body raw.

Etlu glanced at Niabi before he resumed fishing.

"Return to the village, Horik," he said.

Horik's jaw tightened visibly, but he did as Etlu ordered, flashing his fangs at Niabi on his way by her.

Once Horik's scent faded, Etlu strode out of the water and picked up his cloak. He stood near enough for her to see him shivering slightly, rivulets of water streaking his flesh. Draping the cloak over his shoulders, he stepped even closer to her. The desire in his eyes revealed that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. What was it about the man that compelled her?

"Come." He opened his arms, inviting her into the warmth of his cloak. She obeyed, tilting her face up to his.

She was about to kiss him, but paused, her lip curling slightly. "You haven't been eating raw fish, have you?"

He chuckled. "No."

Nodding, she slid her arms around him and touched her lips to his. They felt cold from his swim but soon warmed against hers.

Their mouths still locked, he nudged her against a tree trunk and raised her dress to her waist. He prodded her sheath with his stiff cock while rolling his thumb over her clit.

Niabi's breath quickened and she grasped her dress, holding it so both his hands were free to caress her clit, buttocks, and thighs. By the time he fully eased into her, she was more than ready for him.

"Etlu!"

Biting her lower lip, he grasped her bottom and raised her off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist, allowing him to support her entirely. Grunting with pleasure, he used his arms to pump her on his cock.

"Ah!" she cried, clinging to him with all her considerable strength. At the same moment she came, he covered her lips in a crushing kiss. She cried out into his mouth, shaking and pulsing in ecstasy.

His breathing ragged, he released her, allowing her to lean against him until she recovered enough to stand on her own.

He left her leaning against the tree while he stooped by his pile of clothing and removed his belt. Tingling with desire, Niabi watched him approach, guessing what he had planned. Silently, he tied the end of the belt to first one wrist, then reached around the tree trunk and fastened her other hand with the opposite end.

Niabi's heart pounded, her chest rising and falling with excitement. He had been right when he'd guessed a part of her liked being controlled by him. When he took her in his arms and claimed her, when he growled possessively in her ear and used his fangs to pierce her flesh, she almost forgot she was his prisoner.

Etlu broke her thoughts by covering her mouth in a soul stealing kiss. He thrust his tongue between her lips while cupping her breasts and rolling his thumbs over the nipples that were already hard with desire.

"Oh please," she breathed when the kiss broke and he bent, taking one of her nipples between his lips and sucking hard. While he licked and tugged, worrying the taut flesh with his teeth, he reached between her legs and slid two fingers into her wet sheath. He explored with slow, tender strokes, then withdrew his fingers and teased her clit until her legs trembled.



Niabi's hands clenched into fists and she struggled to keep from breaking her bonds.

As if sensing her internal battle, he said, "Don't even think about breaking my belt."

"Then stop tormenting me," she groaned, arching her neck when he used the very tip of his tongue to rhythmically tap the most aching, sensitive part of her clit.

With a throaty, evil laugh, he licked her, then stood and entered her with a long, slow thrust. Flexing his knees, he drove into her, again pushing her over the edge. Panting and squirming against the rough tree trunk, Niabi came. As the marvelous pulsations ebbed, she was leaning hard against the tree while Etlu freed her from the bonds. When she opened her eyes, he stood in front of her, his handsome face tense with need, his cock hard and glistening with her wetness. The ruddy head looked ready to burst.

"I want to feel your mouth on my cock."

Niabi drew a sharp breath, her heart pounding. Oh, how she wanted to taste him, control his passion, and make him cry out as she did when he licked her.

She knelt in front of him and clasped his cock in her hands. Rubbing the staff, she leaned closer and took the head between her lips. Her tongue rolled over it, lapping and exploring, paying particular attention to the ridge along the underside.

Etlu wrapped his hands in her hair, his rock hard thighs tensing and his hips thrusting slightly as the pleasure grew.

The musky scent and the velvety texture of his skin raised her passion, making her clit ache with need. She reluctantly left the bulbous head and licked every inch of his staff, then worried the crown with her fangs.

He groaned, his hips thrusting faster. One hand clasping his staff and the other kneading his sac, she sucked his cock head. She swirled her tongue over it, then drew him so deeply into her mouth that he brushed the back of her throat.

Every muscle in his body tensed. His fingers tightened in her hair and with each ragged breath she felt his excitement building. Her mind reached out to his and she

sensed him fighting his impending climax. Smiling around his cock, she sucked faster, squeezing his balls and rubbing his staff with her fist.

A hoarse cry escaped his lips at the same moment he pulled out of her mouth and came. Niabi watched, thoroughly aroused and fascinated by the sight of his essence shooting across the ground, every muscle in his magnificent body straining and his usually rough expression softened by pleasure.

## Chapter Five

Several nights later, just before dawn, Niabi was in the longhouse helping Freja grind flour for baking. Though still not the friendliest person, Freja had warmed to Niabi the slightest bit and occasionally engaged in conversation with her. Perhaps because Niabi had proved herself a good and willing worker, or maybe because the villagers were overcoming their initial wariness of her, some of the other women had welcomed her attempt at friendship.

She and Freja had just started discussing plans for making new dresses when Horik burst into the house. "We're under attack!"

Warriors who had been eating at the table or lounging by the fire sprang to their feet and followed Horik outside. While the women rushed to collect their children, Niabi went to join the warriors. Her keen hearing detected the distant sounds of battle on the outskirts of the village -- the clash of steel and men shouting and screaming in death.

No sooner had she stepped out the door than Etlu's horse blocked her path.

"Get back in the house," he ordered.

"Give me a weapon. I can fight!"

"I said get back in the house. If I find you have disobeyed, you will feel my wrath."

"Etlu, listen to me. It's nearly dawn. You and several of your men cannot endure sunlight. I can be of help."

"I don't need a woman to fight for me! Get back inside," he said in a low, dangerous tone, his gaze meeting hers with such ire that she knew protesting would be fruitless.

As she reentered the longhouse, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Etlu and his horse cantering out of the village.

A short time later, she and Freja sat in a corner, preparing herbs to treat the warriors' injuries. "I wonder what's happening out there," Niabi fretted.

"Don't concern yourself. Etlu has never been defeated. He is a harsh master, but our people here are well protected and none of us starve, which is more than I can say for this place before he overthrew our former chieftain."

Freja's words surprised Niabi. This was the first time anyone had spoken well of Etlu. Not that anyone spoke badly of him, either, though his people's fear of him was obvious and justifiable.

"I wonder who is behind the attack," Niabi continued.

"Most likely Harald, a chieftain from across the ridge. He and Etlu rule most of the land in these parts. It was only a matter of time before one provoked the other, as both are ruthless and hungry for power."

The women continued mixing herbs in silence until the first casualties arrived, then they busied themselves tending the wounded.

Hours later, several uninjured warriors whom Niabi knew had positions of power stepped inside. Sunlight shone through the open door and Niabi's belly clenched. Where was Etlu and how had he survived the daylight?

Overhearing bits of conversation among the newly arrived warriors, Niabi learned that Harald had been behind the attack. Etlu's army had crushed their enemies and pressed on to Harald's land where, after another bloody battle, Etlu claimed it as his own. Relieved to finally know Etlu had survived, Niabi continued her work.

It was late afternoon when Etlu returned, covered from head to toe in heavy leather and mail armor that left no bit of skin exposed. Even his eyes were hidden behind a metal grate built into his dome-shaped helmet.

He turned in her direction, and though she tried to sense something -- anything -- from him, his mind remained closed to her. After exchanging a few words with one of his most favored warriors, he approached Niabi and said, "Come."

Nearly bursting with curiosity, she followed him outside where he placed the customary blindfold on her and lifted her onto his horse. He mounted behind her, his arms winding snugly around her as the horse lurched forward.

Once they reached their destination, he removed the blindfold and told her to await him in the cave. A short time later, he joined her.

"What happened today?" she demanded, watching him remove his helmet.

His dark hair clung wetly to his head and neck, a stark contrast to his corpse-pale face. Blood red eyes, darkly shadowed beneath, stared blankly across the room.

"How did you manage the sunlight?" she asked softly, stepping closer and touching a hand to his cheek. If his severely irritated eyes were almost painful to look at, she could scarcely imagine how they must feel. "Daylight renders you blind, does it not?"

"Obviously." His voice dripped sarcasm. "By now you should know the power of my mind. I have learned to fight by sensing my enemies' plans. I see through their thoughts. As for sunlight, this armor protects me from its deadly rays."

"It must still cause you pain," she said, her deft fingers loosening ties and buckles in an attempt to help him remove the armor. He brushed her hands away and lifted off the leather and mail. Beneath, his shirt clung to his sweat soaked body, the powerful muscles and lean lines sending a thrill of desire through her. Even weakened by sunlight and battle, he was the most stunning man she had ever seen.

"I can smell what you want," he said. "But later. I must rest first."

It was odd having him speak to her without focusing his gaze upon her. Even in the darkness of the cave it would take time for his vision to return after prolonged exposure to sunlight.

"Of course. Are you hungry?"

"Thirsty," he said, removing the remainder of his clothes.

A new wave of desire broke over her. He was thirsty for blood. *Her* blood. She sensed that he needed it quite desperately.

Quickly she undressed and grasped his hands, tugging him toward the bed of furs and blankets.

Stretching out on her back, she welcomed him into her arms. Though she expected him to bite quickly in his hunger, he surprised her by gently licking and kissing her neck. The tips of his fangs grazed her flesh then pierced it.

Niabi gasped at the pleasure of his bite and tightened her arms around him. His hot, damp body felt so good. Her breasts crushed against his hard chest and her legs entwined with his, she felt his cock swell. "Etlu."

*Niabi, his thoughts touched hers. So much for resting.*

Using his knee to nudge her legs apart, he shifted position so the tip of his cock slid into her pussy.

"Yes, oh, yes," she panted, longing to feel him deep inside her. Drenched with passion her body easily accepted his length and girth.

Groaning with need, he continued lapping her blood while pumping into her. Niabi quivered, her internal muscles clamping around his cock. She locked her legs around him and wove her fingers through his hair.

"Etlu," she breathed, splaying her palms across his back, relishing the feel of his straining muscles. He was so powerful, such a raw, lustful, untamed beast, yet for her he had tempered his savage appetite and learned to touch her with love. His scent filled her and somehow every thrust of his cock seemed connected to her heart.

His groans deepened to a thoroughly animal sound and he thrust faster, his heart pounding in time with hers.

Niabi came quickly, clinging hard to his neck, her legs wrapped around him, riding out each spectacular burst of passion.

Lunging into her, he tore his mouth from her neck and drew several ragged breaths. "Niabi! Damn you, woman!" With a final thrust he came. Collapsing atop her, he gasped, his body quivering in the aftermath. "Destructive, beautiful wench."

As sleep claimed him, she sensed his thoughts. *You're killing me, Niabi, and I almost don't care if I die.*

\* \* \*

Etlu awoke in comfortable darkness, refreshed by sleep and Niabi's blood after the strength-sapping daylight battle.

Harald had been a more worthy opponent than he'd imagined, managing to discover Etlu's aversion to daylight. The man had planned his attack well, but Etlu had long ago prepared himself to fight on any ground, at any time. Daylight could destroy him, but he had found ways of outsmarting it.

A soft moan and the sensation of a warm body nearby drew Etlu's attention. He turned sharply, staring at Niabi curled up beside him, her lovely face softened by sleep.

What was wrong with him? He had fallen asleep in her presence, leaving himself vulnerable.

"Good evening," she purred, her eyes opening halfway. Smiling, she rested her hand against his neck. "You look better. Rested."

He nodded curtly, still irritated by his negligence.

"It was nice sleeping beside you," she said. "And you see, you can trust me."

"I can trust no one."

"Didn't you enjoy sleeping with me?" She edged closer and draped one of her long, smooth legs over his. "You seemed to. I never would have guessed you'd like to cuddle so much, oh fierce chieftain."

The teasing expression in her eyes annoyed him, mostly because he found it bewitching. "I do not cuddle," he said stiffly.

"You held me so close it felt like we shared a single body."

He stared at her, his eyes narrowed. The image she described was almost too appealing. He stood and reached for his clothes. "I must return to the village. Enough time has already been wasted here. There is much work to do."

"If you weren't so quick tempered and unduly harsh, you would be a good chieftain. Your people are well fed and protected. I believe some of them even admire you, in their own way. You --"

"I *am* a good chieftain," he interrupted. "More important, I am true to my nature as a blood drinker."

"You know my feelings on that matter."

He grunted, not wishing to begin that conversation. The woman had already corrupted him enough, making him feel for her. A leader, especially of immortals, could not allow emotion to influence his decisions. What she called harsh, he called survival. "Dress quickly unless you want to stay locked in the cell all night. I do not intend to wait while you dawdle."

A slight smile touched her lips, but she pulled on her tunic. Standing in front of him, she held his gaze, then kissed him -- a tender brush of her lips that sent an odd tingling sensation throughout his body.

Growling, he turned and led the way out of the cave.



## Chapter Six

Days turned to weeks during which Niabi and Etlu spent much of the day making love while at night she worked at the longhouse and he trained and hunted with his men. Though sullen and hot-tempered, Etlu usually allowed his people to go about their lives without unwarranted punishment. He had even learned to hold rather long conversations with her without resorting to threats when she disagreed with him or asked a question about his past that he preferred not to answer.

If he needed prodding to converse, he needed none to make love. During those hours wrapped naked in each other's arms, he opened himself to her in a way she had never imagined possible. He perfected kissing to an art, pouring his every emotion into each brush of lips and sweep of tongue. No longer was he simply claiming her body, but possessing a part of her soul. Though he continued blindfolding her on their way to and from the cave, he no longer made her sleep in the cell, but kept her possessively in his arms throughout the day.

Niabi was starting to think of him as a fair leader until one dusk after a particularly heavy snowstorm two men were caught attempting to steal a few strips of salted meat.

Horik and several other warriors awaited Etlu outside the longhouse, the two men chained, shivering, on their knees in the snow. The men had been beaten, and by the chalky look of their faces, Niabi immediately knew Horik and the others had quenched their blood thirst upon them. "We waited for you to give word for them to be executed," Horik said.

"Please," one of the men said, swaying slightly, his voice weak. "Since your attack on our village several weeks ago, many of our people have died. Our families are starving. We needed just enough to feed our children --"

"Silence!" Horik's gloved hand lashed across the man's face, knocking him into the snow. "Your groveling makes me sick."

Niabi stooped to help the man sit up, but Horik grasped her roughly by the arm and pushed her away.

Growling, Etlu advanced on Horik. "Who gave you permission to touch what's mine?"

The auburn-haired warrior looked surprised. "But she has no business aiding a prisoner."

"Etlu, it's the middle of winter. Their families are starving," Niabi said in a calm, steady voice, careful to control the rage simmering inside her. "I'm sure these men would be willing to work for the food --"

"We're not here to give charity," Horik said, holding Etlu's gaze. "Shall it be the Blood Eagle?"

At Horik's words, both men paled even more, their eyes glittering with terror.

"Etlu, don't do this," she whispered. "Punish them if you must, but to kill them over a few pieces of meat is --"

"Our law states they must be executed," Horik continued, then lifted a taunting eyebrow in Etlu's direction. "Unless you are no longer making the laws here."

"Insolence on top of touching my property?" Etlu glared at Horik. "I know there will be at least one man punished this night."

"Etlu --"

"I have heard enough out of you as well." Etlu glowered at Niabi. "You will go to the longhouse and join the other women until I tell you otherwise."

"I will not go anywhere until I know the fate of these men."

Several of the warriors exchanged glances, before their anxious gazes fixed on Etlu, waiting for his reaction to her impertinence. Too late Niabi realized her mistake. Now he might kill the thieves just to prove that he, not a woman, made the decisions here.

"You will go where I tell you," Etlu said, his tone and expression leaving no room for argument.

Her belly taut with rage, Niabi decided it best to do what he asked, simply for the sake of the two mortals.

*Etlu, please, she spoke in a spiritual voice, hoping he would not block her out. At least consider hiring them. That would mean two more loyal workers rather than two lives sacrificed for a bit of food. You have so much --*

He cut off her thoughts and thrust her out of his mind. Trembling with fury, she stepped into the longhouse and silently joined the women in preparing food for later that night.

Etlu returned for her within the hour. "Come with me," he stated in a curt tone.

Flecks of blood marked his shirt and his eyes glistened with malice. Drawing a deep breath, Niabi tried to penetrate his thoughts to discover if he had killed the men after all, but she met an impenetrable barrier.

She followed him out of the longhouse to where his horse waited. They rode to a clearing in the woods.

After they dismounted, he approached, using his height advantage to glare down at her. "Never question my authority again in front of my people."

"Did you kill those men?"

"That is not your concern."

"You did, didn't you?" She ground her teeth in anger.

"If someone steals from me, they will be punished."

"Is death the only acceptable form of punishment to you?"

"You fight like a man but think like a woman," he scoffed. "Unless you want punishment as well, you will heed my words. I am the chieftain and I make all decisions here. Not you. Not Horik. And certainly not a couple of pathetic thieves."

Nearly blinded by rage, Niabi yanked the silver dagger from the sheath about Etlu's waist. She pressed the tip of it to his throat.

"You want to kill me," he stated calmly, not so much as flinching though she knew the silver against his skin must already be burning. Rather than back away and attempt to disarm her, he stepped nearer, the blade pressing harder to his throat. "Go ahead. Do it, Niabi. Pierce my throat. Or better yet, here."

With a savage jerk, he tore open his shirt, exposing the pale flesh of his powerfully muscled chest. Grasping her wrist, he placed the point of the blade over his heart and applied enough pressure to break the skin. The scent of his blood filled the air. Crimson rivulets trickled down his pale flesh to stain the waist of his breeches. His expression remained hard and unreadable, as if the pain meant nothing.

Niabi stared at him, torn between rage and pity.

"Do it, Niabi," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "Do it."

She should kill him and rid the world of another monster, a blood drinker unworthy of his power, yet something stopped her.

"No?" His lips turned upward in an evil grin and he twisted her arm, forcing her to drop the blade. He shoved her so hard she landed on her knees. Bending, he picked up the dagger, wiped the blood on his thigh, and sheathed the weapon while Niabi rose to her feet. Striding toward her, he backed her against a tree and spoke against her lips. "Don't ever threaten me again."

His mouth covered hers in a crushing kiss. Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, he explored with long, rough strokes, wrapping her hair around his hand until his fist pressed against the back of her head.

When the kiss broke, both were panting. Disgusted that she could still feel lust for such a brutal bastard, Niabi brought her knee up fiercely between his legs.

Grunting in pain, he pushed her harder against the tree trunk.

"Release me," she said. "Or why don't you kill me, like you did those men? You're good at bullying anyone weaker than yourself. Does it feel good, after so many years at the mercy of men like Kedar and your Creator?"

Without another word, he tugged her toward the horse where they mounted and rode back to the village. When she entered the longhouse, Niabi was stunned to find the

thieves kneeling in a corner while Freja and Helga tended their backs that bore evidence of a flogging.

Etlu hadn't killed them after all. Why hadn't he told her?

Niabi approached the men.

One of them looked up at her and said, "Thank you. If not for your intervention, I'm certain he would have killed us."

"Our families are being brought here for the winter. We'll be allowed to work for our keep," said the other man.

"I wonder what's gotten into him," Helga said under her breath.

Freja glanced in Niabi's direction, the slightest smile on her lips. "I have a good guess."

Niabi's stomach fluttered and her heart soared. It seemed she was making progress with Etlu after all. As if sensing her thoughts, he stepped into the longhouse, his shirt once again buttoned but stained with blood where he'd pressed the blade to his chest. Even from a distance she noticed the bright red burn mark on his throat. Dampening a bit of cloth with water from a basin, she approached him.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted," she said, gently pressing the cloth to his throat. "Why didn't you tell me what you decided to do about the men?"

"It was not your concern."

Using her spirit voice, she said, *Tonight I will give you a proper apology.*

Though he didn't reply, his eyes shone with desire and his scent grew stronger, more aroused.

A young, dark-haired warrior stepped into the house and strode to Etlu, who turned away from Niabi. "Horik has left," the warrior said. "After he recovered enough from the flogging you gave him, he took his belongings and rode off. Several other men went with him."

"Take what men you need and bring them back."

The warrior nodded curtly and left.

"Why did you flog Horik?" she asked, though she suspected the answer.

"For insolence. And for touching you."

"Your property?" she said, an annoyed edge to her voice.

"Yes."

*I belong to myself, Etlu, she spoke in his mind.*

Cupping the back of her head snugly yet without causing pain, he told her, *You belong to me, Niabi. You are mine, do you understand? Mine.*

She stared into his eyes, sensing a desperation in him she had never felt before. Was Etlu, the savage chieftain, falling in love with her? Even more important, had she fallen in love with him?

\* \* \*

The following evening when they arrived at the village, the young warrior whom Etlu had sent after Horik and the others approached with news. Due to their head start and the heavy snowstorm, the deserters had avoided capture. Etlu ordered the search to continue, though he didn't seem terribly concerned about their escape. Most likely they would ally themselves with another chieftain and no doubt face Etlu in battle where he would take his revenge.

He had no idea how soon that reckoning would take place, or the outcome it would have.

## Chapter Seven

Etlu was on the training field practicing swordplay with several of his men while Niabi stood nearby when he caught Aru's scent. It filled him with a feeling of dread, stirring all sorts of terrible memories. In spite of his thick gloves, Etlu's hands grew cold and his heart pounded.

Horses galloped over the snowy ground -- Aru's white stallion followed by an army of chestnuts and bays.

Dressed in black and silver armor and a dome-shaped helmet, Aru motioned for his men to stop a fair distance from the village. Flanked by two mounted warriors, he urged his horse toward Etlu.

It had been so long since Etlu had seen his Creator that he had almost forgotten the ruthlessness in his expression. Aru exuded power like no blood drinker Etlu had ever known. His physical strength was incomparable and his mind impenetrable.

In spite of the shiver that ran down his spine as his Creator approached, Etlu stood his ground.

Aru's pale eyes swept Niabi, then fixed on Etlu with loathing. "I have heard disturbing rumors, Etlu. It is said you've abandoned me and the Evil One, that you've become soft and weak. That a woman is the true chieftain here." Again Aru glanced in Niabi's direction.

"Then you have heard wrong," Etlu stated. "Tell me who has carried these lies and I will destroy him." He knew full well who had done it. The scent of Horik and the other deserters mingled with the blood drinkers of Aru's army.

"I would rather see you destroy her." Aru pointed at Niabi. "Unless she is, after all, your master now."

"I have but one Master."

"Then prove it. Destroy her or I will."

Etlu turned to Niabi who met his gaze, unflinching, though he sensed she understood as well as he did the implication of Aru's words. If Etlu did not kill her, Aru would take both their lives.

After a lifetime of pain and hatred, his self-preservation instinct was powerful, yet his newfound love for her rivaled it in strength. The thought of resuming his lonely existence before meeting Niabi was unbearable, as was the thought of her dying.

"Well?" Aru demanded, baring his fangs, his eyes gleaming with bloodlust.

Grasping Niabi's upper arms harshly, Etlu dragged her toward him.

"Etlu," she whispered, though her voice carried no plea, only sadness. He knew that even when facing death his Niabi was too strong to beg.

"Silence, woman," he growled, hauling her toward his horse. In a swift motion, he threw her belly down across the saddle and slapped the mare's rump hard. It bolted.

Aru looked momentarily surprised, then grasped a silver dagger from the sheath about his waist.

Etlu leapt at his Creator at the same moment Aru raised the dagger in Niabi's direction and knocked him to the ground. She had managed to right herself in the saddle and was headed toward the woods. At least now she had the chance to escape.

"Traitor," Aru snarled, shoving Etlu off him.

He landed hard on his back, his head striking a rock. Knowing he wasn't a match for Aru's strength, which came directly from the Evil One, Etlu realized he would not survive this battle. If he was to die, it seemed only fitting that the man to end his wretched life be the one who had created it.

"Bring her back!" Aru roared. His men and several of Etlu's mounted their horses and chased after Niabi.

Simultaneously, Creator and offspring leapt at each other. Their bodies locked in a writhing mass of straining muscle and ripping teeth. Etlu didn't care if he lived or died. All he knew was that he could no longer exist, unquestioning, by his Creator's



ways. Niabi had exposed him to a world he had never imagined and he needed it as he required air to breathe and blood to drink.

Using every bit of skill and strength, he fought Aru, but his Creator's superior powers overtook him. The ancient blood drinker drove his fangs deep into Etlu's shoulder. He gulped his offspring's blood until the world faded to black.

\* \* \*

Etlu awakened on his back in a hole in the earth. Bound by barbed silver chains that cut into his wrists, torso, and legs, he gritted his teeth against burning waves of agony. Silver was the least of his concern. The rising sun shone in the pit, blistering his skin and robbing him of his vision. Grunting in agony, he rolled to the edge of the pit, the barbs driving deeper into his flesh. He stopped, panting, his eyes tightly closed. At least here an overhanging rock provided enough shade to keep him from roasting like a pig on a spit.

The day passed far too slowly, yet even the darkness of night brought little relief to Etlu's battered body.

When the moon rose to its highest, Aru came to stand over the pit. "You have disappointed me, my son. Did I not raise you from a field of death and teach you to wield the Evil One's power? You've wasted your strength. Become weak as a mortal. You've been tainted by that woman's kisses and trapped by her illusion of happiness."

"You lied to me, Aru. You told me there was no pleasure outside of pain. You stole my life just as you stole my mother's and my people's."

"I am your people. I am your Creator and the Evil One is your source. I could have killed you quickly, Etlu. Drained you to death. But that would be too simple. Your demise will be slow so that you may think about what you have relinquished for a mere woman -- a dead woman."

"She's not dead."

"My men captured her in the woods. She is dead, as you will be when I'm finished torturing you as you've never been tortured before. You think you understand pain? Your childish experiences are nothing to what you are about to learn."

Aru's scent faded and Etlu sat alone, his head resting against the rock, his flesh stinging and limbs aching. The need for blood was almost overwhelming. If he didn't get some soon, madness would claim him and death would follow swiftly. Unless Aru intended to feed him just enough to keep him alive until he grew bored with these savage games.

In spite of Aru's taunts, Etlu did not believe Niabi had been killed. If she had died, he would have sensed it. Her strong, living presence still existed in his heart and mind. She had escaped from both Aru and Etlu's evil. She was free, just as she should have been from the first.

"I think I finally understand," he whispered to the night. "I know what love is, Niabi."

## Chapter Eight

"Etlu, can you hear me?"

A soft, familiar voice whispered so close to Etlu's face that the speaker's breath gently fanned his cheek. Around him floated muffled sounds of men and women talking softly as they went about their nightly chores. The scent of cooking food made his empty stomach grumble. Such comfortable, familiar sounds and aromas seemed like a dream.

A hand caressed his face. With each breath Niabi's beautiful scent filled him.

"Etlu."

He forced his heavy eyelids open and gazed at her beloved face, not truly believing she was there. After so many weeks trapped in Aru's pit, fed just enough blood to survive while enduring his Creator's torments, the presence of the only person he'd ever loved was unfathomable.

Growing up with Aru, he believed he'd suffered every possible agony and indignity, but during these past weeks he'd discovered his Creator had invented even more. No part of Etlu had escaped unscathed. So many times he'd longed for death. Only thoughts of Niabi offered any comfort. In the scorching light of day when he cringed, blinded and engulfed in pain in a dark corner of the pit, he would remember the times they had slept peacefully in each other's arms.

"It can't be you," he murmured, his eyes fluttering shut.

She kissed his eyelids and said, "It is me. I'm here. You're safe in the main house in your village. Aru and his followers are gone."

The wild scent of a powerful blood drinker wafted on the air, making Etlu's heart pound in terror. Only Aru had ever exuded such a scent, yet this aroma was not his Creator's. Etlu opened his eyes again, willing them to focus.

"It's all right." Niabi smiled slightly, smoothing hair from his forehead. Her hand felt wonderfully cool against his feverish skin.

"Who else is here?" he asked. "That scent --"

"After you helped me escape, I eluded Aru's minions and sought out my Creator. She and her traveling companion, Ariel, returned here with me and helped me reclaim your land. Ariel destroyed Aru. Afterward we found you in the pit. That was almost two days ago."

"Is he awake?" asked a deep male voice.

"He's starting to come around," Niabi said.

"Aru is dead?" Etlu could scarcely believe it.

"Yes," she replied.

"But he could not be killed. I have seen him survive fire, silver, heart injury. He told me the Evil One himself had made him indestructible."

"That is true," the male voice spoke again. This time a shadow fell over Etlu's bed. He turned his gaze from Niabi to a tall, pale man with piercing gray eyes. "I am Ariel. As your Creator was sent by the Evil One, I was sent by the Spirit of Good to whom all other spirits bow. I, and those few like me, possess the power to destroy all blood drinkers, even those empowered by the Evil One. We exist to punish the wicked."

"And me?" Etlu moistened his lips, cracked and blistered from exposure to daylight and weeks without enough water. "Will you punish me?"

"Ariel," Niabi said to the man, her eyes glistening. For the first time Etlu heard a plea in her voice. She had never begged for herself, but now she pleaded for him. This touched him profoundly. He reached for her hand, squeezing it gently, ignoring the way his fingers ached from the simple movement.

"By freeing Niabi and denying your Creator you've shown that you're capable of change. The question is, do you want it? If you prove yourself worthy of life, you need not fear my wrath. A man of your power can do far more good for our cause, alive and well, than punished for an unfortunate past. Remember my words, for your life shall

depend on them.” Ariel stared hard at Etlu for a telling moment before he turned and left.

“Do you want a new life?” Niabi moved closer to Etlu and placed her hands on his shoulders, her warm gaze fixed on him. “Do you want me?”

“I have never wanted anyone the way I want you. The only real happiness I have ever known was the time I spent with you.”

“Etlu.” She brushed his mouth with a tender kiss.

Folding his arms around her, he tugged her onto the blanket beside him, relishing the warmth and solidity of her body against his. “I vowed if I ever saw you again, I would tell you how much I love you,” he said, stroking her hair. “I do love you, Niabi.”

“I love you, Etlu.”

“I don’t deserve you and I have no right to ask, but will you be my wife?”

“Yes. Oh yes.” She grinned, kissing him again, more deeply this time.

“From now until the end of time I will love you and only you, Niabi. You’ve freed my heart and I will dedicate my life to proving myself worthy of your love.”

“You are.” She leaned her head against his chest, one hand resting lightly on his bandaged side. “Now rest. Heal. We have centuries ahead of us to make plans.”

Closing his eyes, Etlu drifted back to sleep, Niabi in his arms.

## **Epilogue**

After Etlu recovered, he resumed his position as chieftain with Niabi ruling at his side. The effort he had once devoted to conquering and killing, he now turned to providing for the protection and happiness of his people. Eventually he turned leadership over to a worthy warrior so he and Niabi could move on to other lands.

The evil reputation of his youth faded as if it had never been. Like Niabi, he became known as a blood drinker of integrity and power. Together they upheld the spirit of good and every passing age strengthened their love and devotion.

Each dawn, when Etlu and Niabi settled to sleep in protective darkness, he held her close and whispered, "I love you, my heart. I am forever yours."

**The End**

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