

Red Cloud Wolves, 2

# NIGHT GEMS

**Kate Steele**

Changeling Press

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*History in the making...*

A lot can change in forty years. Landon and Dark have witnessed it all first hand. In 1889 they led Dark's people, a free Apache tribe, into the Grand Canyon where they remained hidden -- until now.

Over the years legends have taken shape about men inhabiting the Grand Canyon -- men who turn into wolves. For the werewolf hunters who descend upon the ancient tribe, truth means very little and life even less. The thrill of the hunt is their only consideration. For Landon and Dark, the coming struggle for survival will bring blood spilled in the midst of heartache and rage. They will need every bit of courage they possess to save their people and preserve the existence of the Moon Wolf.

## Chapter One

Landon dismounted and once again thought wistfully of his old roan gelding. That horse had been ugly as sin and ornery as hell at times, but he'd had the smoothest gait of any animal Lan had ever ridden. His current mount was a young bay, a sturdy barrel-chested gelding with endless stamina, but *damn* he could rattle a man's bones.

Unselfconsciously, he rubbed his backside then began the process of stripping his mount of saddle, bedroll and saddlebags. He exchanged greetings with the men who came to meet him, leaving them the chore of unloading the pack mules. Trying not to appear too eager, he scanned the vicinity behind them, hoping for one more very familiar face. He swallowed his disappointment at not finding the person he sought.

Tamping down his impatience, Lan took a long look around. After having been gone for the better part of two weeks, it was good to be home. Even after forty-plus years of living there, the views the canyon provided were never less than breathtaking. The sun hit the southern rim and lit the layered stone formations, turning them tawny gold with veins of vibrant rust, vanilla cream, dove gray and deep brown. Trees and brush added greens of every hue while a lavender-blue haze tinted the sky and mountains far above him. Not far from where he stood, the mighty Colorado River continued its perpetual flow, the waters a wide crystal ribbon of endless blue-green.

Struck once more by the sheer grandeur of the place, Lan silently cared for the bay. Letting his mind wander with the familiar work, he mused over how the years had gone by so fast. Every morning he looked in the mirror to shave, the same face greeted him unchanged by the passing of time. Sometimes he felt as though the world had stopped but he knew in truth it wasn't so. Every journey outside undeniably proved it and it seemed the world was closing in on this small piece of paradise they inhabited. Not liking the direction his thoughts had gone, Lan finished checking the bay's hooves

and prepared to lead him to the hidden corral the tribe had built for their horses. He was stopped by Spirit who silently gestured for Lan to turn over the reins and his personal belongings.

“He bathes at the falls,” Spirit stated evenly. “He is troubled.”

Lan’s lips tightened. “You and the others have decided to go to Canada. I thought you were going to wait for me.”

“We have not announced our intentions in council, but you know our shaman. His visions often reveal what has yet to be spoken and they are not always things he wishes to see.”

Lan nodded, feeling as though a portion of his heart was being ripped away.

Spirit’s dark-eyed gaze was filled with understanding. “Do not grieve, brother, we will always be family. Go. Find Dark. Renew your bond. It will bring peace to you both.”

Lan nodded and clapped his hand to Spirit’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze before moving on. The pleasure of his homecoming was dimmed at the knowledge that those of the tribe that remained would soon be gone. It hurt to know they would take different paths. Torn between wanting to nurse his hurt in private and wanting the consolation only his mate could provide, Landon gave into his need of Dark.

He easily found the well worn path that wound inward, away from the river. The spit of land he walked widened enough that trees and brush grew thick and plentiful. The sound of rushing water grew louder, its source hidden until abruptly the path opened out beyond the small forest onto the shores of a sizable pool. Reigning over this idyllic setting was a waterfall. Bright shards of crystal-clear liquid cascaded from high above over moss covered rock. It raced over the softened yet flinty surfaces, fell like a sparkling curtain over a dark opening in the cliff face and landed with a frothy splash into the pool that, at its furthest reaches, joined the river.

Silhouetted in that opening was Lan’s mate and lover, Dark, the shaman of their tribe. He was facing away from Lan, his body clearly visible. Water ran in sleek sheets over his reddish-tan skin. His hair lay flat and smooth like a long, silky flow of black

seaweed over his broad shoulders and strong back. The clearly defined line of his spine drew Lan's eyes down to his ass. His fingers flexed at the sight of those twin mounds, firm and rounded. Below them, Dark's legs were long, his thighs muscular and calves well formed. His feet were firmly planted against the push of the water from above.

As usual, Lan's body reacted to the presence of his mate. His heart beat faster. His lungs began to labor with the need for more oxygen. Heat built beneath his skin. His very blood acknowledged the man and ran faster in his veins while heading unerringly southward. A heavy pulse took up residence in his groin, his cock thickening to push insistently against the buttons of his jeans.

Nearly mesmerized by the presence before him, Lan undressed without taking his eyes from his lover. Unconsciously he willed Dark to turn and nearly groaned aloud when his wish was answered. With a graceful, precise twist of his body, Dark faced Lan and moved forward a scant few inches from beneath the heaviest of the water's spray. Their eyes met. A flare of reddish-orange fire flashed in Dark's eyes and Landon felt the answering heat of the spark within his own. He watched with rising lust as Dark's cock thickened and grew hard beneath his burning stare.

A deep and guttural growl rumbled upward from the depths of Lan's chest. Dark's entire body tensed and sprang, arcing out and downward toward the pond. Lan found himself running. He launched his body into the pool, barely acknowledging the sting of cool water against his skin. He swam strong and sure, arms and legs expertly propelling him forward. Beneath the surface he met his mate. Water cushioned the impact of their bodies as their lips sealed together. Bound, one to the other, they surged upward toward the light and air and treaded water while their mouths engaged in a mutual ravishing.

So familiar, so exciting was the touch of his mate, not even the passing of countless years could dim the fire that rose within Lan. The water eddied between them, cool ribbons of sensation slipping in whenever their movements separated some small part of skin that touched skin. He welcomed the sensual slither of Dark's tongue, his own joining it in mutual celebration. It was a good beginning but not enough. He

growled in frustration. Pleasant as the water was, it made things too complicated. He wanted to lose himself in his lover without fear of drowning in the process.

Lan slid his hands into the wet strands of Dark's hair and disengaged their lips. "Shore," he insisted, breathing hard against Dark's mouth. He began pulling at his lover, steering him toward where he'd stripped himself of his clothes.

Dark resisted. "No. There." He pointed further down the shoreline. Landon could see a pile of things that included Dark's clothes. "I brought a blanket." He nuzzled the soft skin beneath Lan's ear. "And oil."

Lan's grin was wide and immediate. "Race you."

With a whoop and a frothy splash, he paddled for shore with Dark easily keeping pace at his side. They propelled themselves from the water and climbed the gradual incline. Lan engaged in a subtle struggle to fight the pull of the water and felt himself adjusting to the feel of regaining his full body weight now that it was no longer buoyed by the cool liquid. The heavy feeling that settled over him was not unpleasant, rather it was languorous and calmed his need to rush headlong through the coming encounter with his mate.

He threw himself down on the blanket which had been spread across the earth and cushioning grass. "You were ready for me," he commented, letting his gaze once again wander the awe inspiring length of his lover's body.

Dark joined him on the blanket and stretched out over Lan. It felt as though warm, melting icing were being layered over his skin. Landon groaned at the contact and wrapped his arms around Dark's neck, pulling him close while accepting the deep unhurried and yet oh-so-sensual kiss his lover bestowed. Lips slid and slanted, finding just the perfect fit. Mouths opened and as ever there was heat and wet, comfort and a building desire that promised combustion of the most spectacular kind.

The taste of Dark was a come-hither tease that left him starving for more. The scent that rose between them, the wild and wicked musk of aroused male, was a drug that made his entire body burn with need. Every nerve ending was alight and crying out for a touch, a brush of skin against skin, a glide of fingertips over satin covered



muscle that would ripple and dance with the joy of being worshipped by knowing hands and lips.

Lan's stomach tightened and he found himself shaking with an ache that grew and grew until he felt he would explode. Dark lifted himself up and away, fingertips sliding over Lan's swollen lips. "Shhh, calmly, *denzhone*," he crooned adding the endearment that had so startled Lan the first time he'd uttered it.

Even now, though he found it embarrassing to be called beautiful, the word was a lifeline, a pinpoint of serenity in a sea of overwhelming desire. Chest rapidly rising and falling with his labored breaths, Lan watched as Dark straddled his hips then reached for a supple, leather pouch. He brought forth the small bottle that contained slick oil with a faint scent of herbs. Opening it, Dark poured some into the palm of his hand then set the bottle aside. Dark anointed his fingers and Lan waited breathlessly to see where those oiled digits would work their magic.

Rising up on his knees, Dark reach around himself. "Oh, fuck," Lan groaned, his cock lurching in reaction.

Dark's eyes closed and his head tilted back. He was opening himself for his mate. Lan could see the rhythmic movements of his arm, see the bunch and release of Dark's muscles as they worked. His imagination supplied the feel of the slick slide of the fingers that invaded Dark's hot, tight channel. Hadn't those same fingers brought him untold pleasure time and again in just the same way? Gaze centered on Dark's face, Lan was mesmerized by the play of emotion that ruled his lover's expression.

Dark had gone to that place where pure sensation rules. His mouth had opened, his breaths were coming forth in forceful huffs. His tongue slid forward to wet full lips plumped by the kisses they'd shared. Lan licked his own lips, tasting what his lover tasted. The two of them. Together. Their essences mingled and shared.

Changing the focus Lan let his eyes drop, slowly taking in the sight of his lover's body. There was so much to admire, broad shoulders, sleek skin the color of burnished cinnamon and the hard muscles that moved beneath. Dark radiated heat and Lan was drawn to it like a freezing man to a roaring blaze. He reached up to touch, drawn by the

impudent dare of two tiny male nipples. Pinched gently between finger and thumb they were firm, ripe kernels, sensitive to the lightest caress. His mouth watered, longing to suckle those twin temptations.

Dark groaned, his thighs tightening their grip on Lan's hips. His eyes opened and Lan was transfixed by a look of pure hunger. He reached for Dark's hand, the one that still cupped a bit of oil within the palm. His other hand found his partner's shoulder and pulled him forward until their cocks were aligned. Guiding Dark's hand with his own, Lan slid its oil covered surface over their hard lengths then curled the long fingers around their combined bulk. With an easy glide he made the first of many strokes that left them both grunting and straining for the approaching climax.

Lan felt Dark tense an instant before he pulled his hand free. "Want you inside me," his mate demanded with an impassioned snarl.

While Dark positioned himself, Lan recovered enough to hold his own cock at the right angle. He nestled the head against Dark's anus and groaned when his mate impaled himself. Feeling the inferno and pressure that was his lover's inner recesses, watching the thick length of his own cock disappear inside his fated one, was nearly his undoing. Lan closed his eyes and grit his teeth, fighting the intense urge to shoot before they'd had the chance for one dizzying thrust.

Above him Dark had stilled and was resting steady against his loins. Slowly Lan opened his eyes and chanced a glimpse at his lover. Dark's lids too were just rising. What Lan saw in those deep and fathomless orbs made his heart contract then painfully thump. "I could die at this moment with only one regret," he panted, his throat going tight.

"And that would be?"

"I hear they don't have sex in heaven."

Dark's smile brought an ache to his chest that hurt so good and wound its way soul deep. Lan felt tears begin to gather in his eyes. To head off an embarrassing display of emotion, he moved. An upward thrust of his hips had spectacular results.

*"Oh, fuck."*

*"Fuck, yeah."*

After that there was little room for thought or words. Their world became two straining bodies in a headlong race for completion. Dark took on the semblance of a desperate rider on a wild gallop. Lan rode with him, meeting each downward slide with an upward stroke of his own. The tight, hot squeeze of Dark's body worked without mercy to wrench his climax free. He returned the favor, grasping Dark's cock within firm, curved fingers and palm. His thumb slid with unyielding accuracy over the swollen head, spreading clear drops of pre-come over the silken, nerve rich skin.

"Come on, darlin', give it to me," Lan gasped past the urgency that had him close to speechless.

He slammed upward into his lover and nearly howled with the stunning gratification of seeing a thick rope of glistening white fountain up to spatter against Dark's heaving belly. Dark's hoarse yell was nearly drowned by his own when the last of his control shattered and his orgasm burst free. The near agonizing pressure was released in blissful and heaving spasms that forced his own seed deep within his mate's gripping sheath.

Lan shuddered, his back arching with the strain before slowly straightening, allowing him to lay back on the blanket, flushed and gasping for air. Dark fell forward and Lan moved, tilting them both to their sides. Wrapped around his beloved's body, he could feel Dark's taut muscles go slack. Lan took a deep breath and heaved a satisfied sigh. Nothing could compare with the utter peace he found after loving Dark. Time was suspended, all cares were gone, there was only the man in his arms and the sure, unshakable knowledge that he'd found heaven on earth.

It could have been an hour or mere moments later that his lids fluttered and his eyes opened. Landon yawned then nuzzled his face deeper into the crook of Dark's neck. His lover mumbled, a grumpy sound that brought a slight smirk to Lan's lips. It felt so good and so right to be here. Every night he'd been gone he'd suffered through restless and fitful sleep. Incomprehensible and half remembered dreams had brought a

taste of foreboding with them. Now able to totally relax, his eyelids drooped. He was more than prepared to let sleep take him again when Dark stirred in his arms.

Fingernails dug lightly in at the base of his spine and were dragged up the length of his back. Lan groaned and wiggled. "Don't know if I should smack the shit out of you or beg you not to stop," he growled.

Dark's low, sensual chuckle added to the shiver that slid down his spine. "Be good and I promise you more later."

"I already was good."

"You were excellent."

Lan prepared to preen.

"I believe we both were."

He allowed his ego to be deflated by Dark's gentle jibe. "Yeah, well, I suppose you helped."

Dark leaned up on an elbow and fixed him with solemn, brown eyes. "Just a little."

Lan couldn't help the slow smile that curved his lips. "Mmm, just a little."

Dark's eyes sparked with amusement and he leaned down to join their lips. Lan took the kiss as his due reward and stretched when Dark broke the contact and sat up. Dark's back was to him and Lan touched the smooth skin, petting softly. His mate had yet to speak the words but Lan could tell the subject they'd been ducking had returned to haunt them.

"Seeker arrived this morning with word of the north country."

Lan felt his stomach clench. "Yeah?"

"It is wild lands with acre upon acre of woods that has seldom seen the encroachment of any man."

"I spoke with Spirit before I came to you. I know what's happening, Dark."

"All that remains is for them to formally announce their intentions."

"Yeah. This is really no surprise. We both felt it would come to this."

"I know, but it is still difficult to accept."

Landon sat up and slid his arm around Dark's shoulders. "But we will accept their decision. Everyone must choose what is best for themselves."

"I know that too. It doesn't make it any easier."

"I know, lover. I know."

Dark turned his eyes to Lan. "I'm not the only one upset by this. You've called me darlin' and lover within the space of..." Dark looked up at the sky, "an hour. My reticent mate's composure is slipping," he teased.

Secretly pleased at Dark's effort to put sadness aside, Lan rustled up a grumbling, "Shut up," and was gratified at the answering twinkle in his lover's eyes. He got to his feet and reached out. "Come on. A quick bath then we'll face the inevitable. No sense puttin' it off."

Nodding, Dark took his hand. Lan helped him to his feet and steered them both into the water.

Several hours later, those who were left of the tribe gathered together in twilight while the sun slid below the rim of the canyon. Hides had been spread around a central fire. Dark let his gaze wander from one familiar face to the next until each one was committed to his memory of this night. It was a picture he felt would haunt him forever. This portrait of what he felt was his ultimate failure.

Feeling the sting of tears in his eyes, he took his emotions firmly in hand. "Brothers and sisters," he spoke, drawing every eye to him, "we come together for this, our last formal council." There was no protest against his words. Everyone knew. This council would merely make the decision official. "Seeker, you have returned from the north. Tell us what you have seen."

Across the fire, Seeker raised his head and as Dark had done, let his gaze wander from one member of the tribe to the next. "There are trees as far as the eye can see and beyond. Game the like of which we have never seen. Deer, moose, elk, rabbit, even the mountain sheep. The rivers are cold and deep, streams and ponds aplenty, many in which the fish fairly leap from the water and ask to be taken. But most of all, few men

have walked these lands. It remains wild and free. As free as we wish to remain." Seeker directed this last remark toward Dark and Lan.

From the corner of his eye, Dark could see Lan's nod. Dark followed his example and spoke. "Which is why those seeking freedom can no longer stay here. More and more people come to the canyon. They come to play, to explore, to see its beauty. With each passing year it becomes harder and harder for us to remain undetected. The government has declared this place a national park. Should they find us, at the very least we will be told to leave. Beyond that I do not care to speculate.

"And so it remains only for each member of the tribe to decide. You know what Lan and I offer. At the time of our meeting, my mate discovered a rich silver mine. It was a place I knew well. The place where the stones grow that bestowed the gift of the moon wolf. We cleared it of all the stones we could find then Lan negotiated with a mining company, turning over the location for a share of the profits. Over the years, Lan has gone many times to gather news, books and information that have kept us current with the world outside. He also learned many things through his connection with the mining company which he shared with us. We all, at times, wear various bits of white men's clothes." He plucked at the jeans he wore. "We speak their language, we read their writings. We did all this that we might better protect ourselves.

"Ten years ago the United States Government granted all Native American peoples citizenship and so it is now deemed a good time for us to return. Landon has purchased two places for us with some of the profits garnered from the mine. One borders reservation lands where many of our brothers dwell. The other is to the north in Montana. In either place we can do that which I had intended for us all along -- to rejoin those on the outside. We could make homes for ourselves in the world and again become a part of it and not be hidden in our self-imposed isolation. Although we have no immediate need for it, we have discussed ways we can make money as a group, many of us have what the whites consider 'artistic skills,' Lan has told us of the income we could earn with such skills as we possess. We would still be free and on the lands we have purchased.

"Many of you have expressed the idea that you have no wish to do this, that you have become comfortable with things as they are. Some have expressed the idea that they feel they have no right to return, that we did not suffer as our brothers outside suffered. But we *have* suffered for our choice. All those who chose not to accept the gift of the moon wolf are gone, gone to our spirit fathers. We who remain will live lifetimes to suffer their loss and mourn the way of life we loved that is no longer ours."

Dark let his gaze again take in those assembled. "I look around and see no children among the faces that I have known for so long. The great spirits have denied us young perhaps because we live so long ourselves. For some of us, this is a deep and hurtful price to pay. I did not foresee these things in time. I led you down a path that stole your humanity. And so I have failed you."

A discontented murmur rose from those gathered in the circle. "You have not failed us, brother." Spirit fixed Dark with a sure and unblinking stare. "You saved us from sure destruction. Even those who survived on the outside have had their traditions and culture bled away as the whites tried to absorb those they did not kill into their world. The people hung on by the skin of their teeth and have suffered untold indignities as well as the poverty and diseases they were bequeathed in violence and hatred.

"We have remained free. We live as we were meant to live and more than that, we were granted the *gift* of the moon wolf. It is not a curse. Ask any who run with the pack if they feel you have failed them." There were many heads shaking their denial of such a notion. "As for our humanity, there are those who would tell you that we as a people have always been half wild. Now we merely do it in body as well as spirit." A round of laughter greeted Spirit's words.

Silently, Dark nodded, touched by the obvious love and support of his people. Throat tight with emotion, he could not speak.

Spirit smiled and continued. "You, Lan and a few others have expressed a wish to partake of the outside world, to see what there is to offer. We do not begrudge you this choice. We will miss our alpha." He nodded to Lan. "And our shaman, but we wish

you to follow the path that calls to you, just as we know you wish us to follow the path that calls to us. Together or apart, we are one. Always."

There was a long silence as everyone absorbed Spirit's words. Beside him, Dark heard a sigh. Landon broke the silence. "You're a wise man, Spirit. It lessens the hurt that tears at me to know that our people will have a strong leader. Other than never having had this need to part come upon us, I couldn't ask for more." Spirit accepted Lan's endorsement with a grave nod of his head and eyes that shone with pride. "Let's have the vote and make it official," Lan prompted.

When it was done, all but seven would head north for Canada. Lan, Dark, and five others would travel with them for a time then remain in Montana to build a home on the land they'd purchased. The council ended and the people separated, going to their various places to rest for the night.

There was a large, natural cavern within the canyon walls that served as a home for all. Small antechambers were used to store food and other supplies. Depending on the weather and personal preference, the central living space was used or not by each individual. Many spent the nights outside in their wolf forms, resting curled up within the thickets and shelter of the trees as their wild brothers did.

Dark intercepted the expectant look Lan sent him and saw the satisfaction in his eyes when Dark nodded and followed him out into the night. Lan led them to the place where they had set up a lean-to in a secluded spot near the pool they had bathed in earlier that day. Squatting down and ducking beneath the hide that served as roof and walls, Lan crawled in and threw himself down on the soft skins and blankets that awaited them.

When Dark joined him inside he could see his lover's outstretched arm and the gesture he made to indicate he wanted Dark to lay beside him. "Come here," Lan ordered softly.

Even in the nearly pitch black interior of the lean-to, Dark, by virtue of the excellent night vision that came with being a moon wolf, was able to see the pensive



expression on his lover's face. Without comment, Dark moved into his arms and settled himself against Lan's body. They easily found a familiar and comfortable position.

Both were silent for a time. From outside, the sound of water rushing over the falls was muffled yet soothing. The songs of crickets and frogs joined in a quasi musical chorus which was accented by the occasional call of a foraging night bird. Inside it was close and cozy. The warmth of their bodies filled the confined space. Their scents mingled, clean male musk that tickled the sensitive passages of Dark's nose and brought conflicting emotions into play.

Lan was excitement, anticipation, lust and love as well as comfort and security all rolled into one. At any given moment he could inspire passion or contentment. Over the years they'd loved and fought and shared everything from their bodies to their thoughts and emotions. Landon was Dark's companion, his lover, his mate. He was the one who kept Dark's feet firmly on the right path when his visions wavered or were too obscure to be deciphered. He kept Dark centered and spoke only the truth, sometimes in a way that could be called blunt.

Dark had the feeling that this was to be one of those times. He waited, willing himself to accept what his lover would reveal. He knew Lan was ready to speak when the arm he'd wrapped around Dark's shoulders tightened.

"I knew you were troubled by the tribe splitting up but I didn't realize you'd lost your perspective over it."

"What do you mean?" Dark asked, cautiously suspicious of what was to come.

"What you said about failing everyone. That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say."

Stung by Lan's words, Dark stiffened and attempted to pull away, but Lan held on tight.

"Don't get on your high horse now. I'm not trying to get you riled up."

"No? But you're doing it so well and apparently without even trying."

Lan chuckled softly. "I knew you'd get mad."

"No one likes to be called dumb."

"I didn't call you dumb. I just said it was a dumb thing to say," Lan clarified. "Let me put it another way. No one has done as much for the tribe as you have. You were given a hands down vote of confidence tonight. Stop fretting about it. Things change, Dark. We had a long run, here in this place, but it's time to move on. It won't be the same as before, but that doesn't mean it won't be good."

"I know, but change can be... intimidating," Dark wasn't about to say the first word that came into his head "frightening." He knew Lan would pick up on his unspoken sentiment just the same. Sure enough, he was given a comforting squeeze.

"We'll face it like we've faced everything else -- together."

Dark smiled and for the first time in days felt his inner misgivings and tension ease. With Lan by his side he could face anything and vanquish any fear. It was a given that nothing could stand against their combined determination to conquer it. His spirits once again rose with anticipation for what the future might hold.

"Together," Dark agreed, his smile widening at Lan's sudden yawn.

"Don't know about you, but I'm tuckered out. What with the travel and that stellar welcome home earlier, I'm about ready to call it a night."

"Feeling your age, *denzhone*?" Dark teased.

"Well I *am*, let's see now, um, sixty-four years old. Seems like this old man deserves a rest," Lan replied in a voice tinged with amusement.

"Perhaps you're right but if I'm to have only the pleasure of sleeping beside you tonight then take off your clothes. I at least want your skin against mine." Lan's rumbling growl made Dark's stomach go tight.

"I can definitely manage that much."

The two of them stripped out of their clothes then settled back together again. Dark breathed a sigh of contentment. His cock gave a half hearted twitch at the close proximity of his naked lover, but he was willing to wait. Sleep was singing a seductive siren song to both of them and Dark had no reason now to fight it. His mate was once more at his side, all immediate concerns had been decided and dealt with and

tomorrow would take care of itself. It was time to let go and rest. He followed Lan's example and slept.

## Chapter Two

"I love you."

Dark woke in the wee hours of the morning to those sweet, husky-voiced words whispered in his ear. A slow smile curved his lips while a warm and joyous sensation lodged deep in his heart. While he knew he had his mate's love, Lan had never made a habit of speaking the words aloud. Of the two of them, Dark was the one more apt to use endearments and words of love. Not that such things bothered him. Each of them knew what was in the other's heart. The words were just a special, added bonus like the occasional sweet after a meal.

Knowing hands began to wander over his body, exploring and arousing. He hummed with pleasure when Lan's fingers pulled and pinched first one then the other of his nipples which had grown hard under that teasing touch. Dark shifted a bit then lay still, content to let his lover do what he would. Eyes closed, he concentrated on the changes Lan's caresses brought to his body.

The beat of his heart increased which sent the blood rushing through his veins. Its liquid heat pooled in his groin and fueled the welcome ache and throb of his cock as it filled and grew hard. Dark's lips parted, his breath soughing forth in short, huffing pants. A groan slid from his throat when Lan's long and slightly rough fingers wrapped around the thick column of his erection and gave it a few firm pumps.

Dark's heels dug into the blankets beneath him as he braced and pushed his hips upward to force himself more fully into Lan's grip. Warm breath misted over his mouth then his mate's lips crushed his. He eagerly accepted the invasion of Lan's tongue, his head spinning with the unique flavor of his lover. His own tongue languidly battled Lan's, his arms rising to enfold him and hold him close.

Lan gentled the kiss. It ended with soft, lingering touches of his lips against Dark's. The contact was brief, ethereal and left Dark's kiss swollen mouth tingling and wanting more. He wanted Lan's mouth, his skin, his body, his taste. He was nearly salivating with the need to take his fill of all his lover could offer.

"I want to suck you. Will you do me too?" His mate's words lingered like a caress against his skin.

Dark nodded, instantly agreeing to the thought of devouring his lover. That Landon knew him so well, knew what he would want, what he needed, filled Dark with smug satisfaction. It let him know how deeply Lan cared. He rolled to his side and waited as Lan repositioned himself. He'd reversed directions so their feet were now pointed in opposite directions. A greedy rumble slid from Dark's throat when his mate's cock was presented to him. It was fully erect, the tip plump and hot and leaking sweet drops of pre-come.

He took the shaft in hand, his tongue sweeping over the crown to gather the essence of his lover. The taste and his action brought forth two groans, Lan's at the enjoyment garnered by his touch and his own at the flavor that never failed to engage his every sense. Dark opened his mouth, drew Lan's cock inside and in turn felt his own engulfed. The circle was joined.

Lan likened Dark's enjoyment of sucking cock to that of another man sucking on a stick of penny candy. It was true, he mused. Just the feel of that firm pillar of male flesh in his mouth fulfilled a craving that sometimes nagged him unmercifully. Although in his own defense it was a longing that had only made itself known when his mate had come into his life. Holding such a vulnerable part of Lan where Dark's teeth could easily damage him and yet being trusted to give only pleasure was such an intimate and giving act. It fulfilled not only that inexplicable need to have something in his mouth when sex became part of the equation, but gave him the unshakable feeling of being one with his lover. Dark truly hungered for his mate in every sense of the word.

Fine-tuning his awareness to Lan with tongue and teeth and lips, Dark played a lustful game of sensual torture that had his mate groaning around the cock that filled his mouth. Those rumbling vibrations shot to the center of Dark's balls, spurring his own rising arousal. Every move triggered a chain reaction that went from one to the other, pushing them ever nearer the waiting climax.

Tongue twisting over the wet flesh in his mouth, Dark slid high to the tip, sucking hard before gliding again to the base. He repeated the action time and again then added the extra frill of pushing the tip of his tongue into the tiny slit in the swollen crown before retreating down the long length. Feeling the time was right, he took Lan deep into his throat and swallowed while gently squeezing his lover's balls. Lan's wild cry was muffled by Dark's cock but audible, and he pulled back in preparation. Lan was coming. There was no disguising the jerk of his body or the snap of his hips which was accompanied by the warm rush of seed that filled Dark's mouth. He willingly swallowed each creamy jet until Lan had no more to give.

Drawing the sensitive organ from his mouth, Dark waited. With his cheek nestled against his mate's loins, he breathed in the full bodied scent of testosterone laden male musk and fragrant come. His patience was rewarded when Lan recovered and returned to pleasuring him.

Now that he was free to concentrate on his own arousal, Dark found his orgasm closer than he'd thought. His stomach grew tight, his hips bouncing in rhythm with the hard, sucking pulls of Lan's mouth at his cock. A wet finger found his anus, niggled its way inside and slid deep. With unerring accuracy his lover found the small spongy nerve-rich gland within. One pass of that gliding touch and he was undone. Dark's own cry echoed in the night as spasms of pleasure wracked his loins and wrenched his seed free. He shuddered with the blissful ache of its going then slumped back against the blankets to enjoy the aftershocks that slowly bled away to leave him sated and sleepy.

With a few final licks, Lan released him and again reversed position until they were face to face. "Who's old?" he grumbled.

Dark snorted a laugh and slid a hand through Lan's hair, holding him still for a kiss. He released his lover. "Not you."

"Damn right."

The two of them snuggled down together and Dark smiled at the thought of it. Lan would vehemently deny being a snuggler but he was, just the same. Knowing his mate was on the verge of sleep, Dark returned the words he'd spoken earlier. "I love you." The arm around his shoulders tightened.

"Good to know it's still mutual."

"Always."

"Always." Lan agreed.

Preparations had already begun for their exodus and so in only a couple of days, the tribe was ready to depart. Their belongings were loaded on the horses and pack mules which had been kept mostly for such use. Some would ride and lead the pack animals, while most would make the trek in their wolf form. Although the mules and horses were not exactly fond of the wolves, they had been raised with and tolerated their presence.

At first light, the journey was begun. Dark and Lan watched the line of pack animals find the gradually ascending trail cut along the canyon wall. But for the various colors that dotted it, from a distance it looked like a line of ants leaving their hill to go on a mission of foraging for the hive. Those in wolf form had already gone ahead and waited in the ponderosa pine and aspen forest that would swallow their number and act as cover for this first part of the journey. They would travel together yet keep their distance from the horses and mules thereby, keeping the sometimes uneasy truce between the two groups. The wolves would also serve as scouts to make sure the tribe would remain unseen as they made their way north.

Lan and Dark had opted to stay behind to give their former home a final once-over and to make sure their back trail was not excessively obvious. Not that they expected to be followed but it never hurt to be cautious. There was also the corral to be

dismantled which they would see to. They planned to spend one more night there then catch up to the others.

In truth, once it was examined, there was little to show that people had once lived there. They had blended with their surroundings, disturbing the natural habitat as little as possible. Granted there were trails worn here and there but without the constant trod of feet, those would soon grow over as would the open space beneath the trees that sheltered the horses and mules.

“Even after all these years you can hardly tell we’ve been here,” Lan commented.

“It’s something to be proud of and yet it hardly seems right,” Dark responded. “It’s as though we were ghosts who left little behind as proof of our existence.”

“Makes you feel sort of unreal, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry. I know you’re real. We proved that last night.”

Dark returned the bold grin Lan sent his way then sobered. “What would I do without you? But for your presence here, at this very moment, my tears would be soaking into the ground.”

“What do you think is keeping me in one piece? Come on, let’s get this corral down,” Lan gruffly answered.

Dark swallowed against the tightness of his throat and joined his lover. Side by side they did the work required of them and it helped to ease the sadness. Dark had already decided that they would not spend the night here. He would not make them suffer the silent specters of their past. It was too much to ask of Lan and he would not willingly suffer it himself.

The tasks they’d set for themselves were finally accomplished as late afternoon slid lazily by. They’d rested earlier and eaten the meal that had been left for them. Now that the work was done, Dark rinsed the cloth that had held their food in the pond by the falls and laid it out along with his clothes on the bank before diving into the cool water.



Lan followed his example and they enjoyed a leisurely swim while washing off the sweat of the day's labors. It was Lan who pulled himself from the water first. "Come on out. Race me to the point."

Dark smiled. It was a game they'd played many times. The point was a spit of land where the canyon walls grew closer, the river widened, the land fell away and trees ended. In that place there were only the rock walls far overhead and water rushing in a hard barrage of roiling white froth. In wolf form the two of them had raced the distance there and back many times. Their speed was nearly an even match so it was always a toss up who would win. Dark liked the thought of this final challenge.

Lan had already transformed by the time Dark joined him on the shore. He too took his wolf form and the race began. They ran amongst the trees and through brush, sometimes veering toward the clearer space of the path but most times not. It was rougher going that way but both enjoyed the natural feel of the wilderness. The instincts of the wolf called and so they kept to the places that called to their spirits.

The grass and leaf mold felt good beneath Dark's paws and the smell of the earth and growing things filled his nostrils. No matter the reason for this all out contest, one of his greatest joys was running with his mate. Excitement tore through his veins. He couldn't wait to be reunited with the pack, to lope along for miles or sprint like an arrow shot from a bow in pursuit of prey and all while surrounded by his brothers and sisters.

A fallen log came into view and he effortlessly sailed over it then redoubled his efforts, paws digging in, muscles bunching and releasing to send him swiftly toward his goal. Lan easily kept pace at his side and he knew his mate was holding back. Landon had not become alpha of the pack for no reason. He had proven himself worthy by being the fastest runner, the fiercest hunter and the strongest, most clever fighter.

As Dark had predicted years ago, his people had reserved judgment of Landon. They'd overlooked the fact that he was white in favor of giving him a chance to prove himself worthy of a place among them. That he was their shaman's mate and already a moon wolf had gone only so far in that they tolerated his presence. The respect and

affection he had eventually earned was done entirely on his own. He became one with the people by virtue of his merit as an individual.

Every time he thought about it, Dark's chest swelled with pride. His mate was truly a special man with many gifts but his greatest was his ability to understand, accept and even embrace the differences of others. Unlike other white men Dark had encountered, Lan never adopted the mistaken notion that he was superior based on the color of his skin. In his eyes, each man's worth was determined by his actions, just as it should be.

Their goal was in sight and with a joyous yip, Dark flew across the intervening space. He and Lan finished the race neck and neck, and now that it was done, Dark danced around his alpha, licking his muzzle and playfully nudging him. Lan transformed and Dark followed his lead, dropping down into the grass with him where they laughed and wrestled a bit.

Eventually calming, Lan rolled to his stomach and looked out over the river. "Someday we'll come back here. But not for a very long time, I think."

Dark nodded his agreement. "Someday, *denzhone*, when the pain of leaving is not so fresh."

A sigh greeted his words. "Yeah. Let's go, hmm? I feel like I'm being haunted. Not a sensation I'm particularly enjoying. If we hurry, maybe we can catch the others, rest a couple of hours then travel on with them."

"Another quick bath before we go?"

"Last one back's a rotten egg."

Dark started to laugh then cursed as Lan transformed and started his return run. Quickly following suit, he knew he'd never catch up, but it was worth it. He'd watch the graceful flow of his alpha's limbs as he raced back, they'd swim one last time then leave to join their family. It was time to put sadness behind them and look to the future.

As he ran, unease began to gather in Dark's senses. Something was wrong. He strove to catch up to Lan to warn him, but it was already too late. They'd reached the shore of his beloved pond. Dark could feel the tingle of power as Lan began his

transformation and froze when a sharp crack broke the silence and echoed like thunder between the canyon wall. A piercing cry rent the air as the wolf's body somersaulted from the force of something hitting him.

The transformation completed in mid-air. His lover's body landed with a hollow thud and he lay still in a crumpled heap on the grass. Dark searched in the direction from which the shot had come and located its source. Men were converging on their position. He had only moments to get them away and avoid capture or worse. He changed and rushed to Lan's side. His lover lay still and silent. The bullet had hit near his spine and blood ran freely from the wound.

Dark touched his lover's face. "Lan, can you hear me? Change. It will heal you."

"I can't." Lan's eyes fluttered open. They were filled with pain. "It's silver. The bullet's silver. Christ, I can feel it burning inside me."

Another shot rang out and a plume of dirt burst free from the ground a scant few inches from Dark's position. A glance in their direction showed the hunters coming closer.

"On your feet then. We have to go. Now!" Dark ordered.

Landon gathered himself and tried to rise then dropped back. "It's no good. Can't move my legs. Go. Don't let them catch you."

Everything within Dark rose up in a wave of violent protest. Anger and denial, fear and pure panic sought to engulf him. He ruthlessly beat it down behind a shield of calm. "Leave you? Never. You're coming with me no matter how much it hurts," he warned through gritted teeth.

Gathering Lan in his arms he rose. Lan cried out, his body going rigid then limp as he passed out. Not stopping to think about it, Dark ran. The pond was between them and their pursuers and he knew that unless they were willing to jump in and get wet, he could at least get them out of gunshot range. Shouts and a few more shots rang out behind him, but he put the trees between the hunters, Lan and himself. The flying bullets were harmlessly deflected.

Dark wasted no time in finding a hiding place for the two of them. Fortunately, over the years, his explorations had yielded the perfect location. Instead of heading straight for it, he took a roundabout route which he hoped would confuse any tracker later.

When the sound of the hunters fell behind and disappeared, Dark stopped and lowered his burden to the ground. Lan was still bleeding and he knew leaving a blood trail would bring their enemies straight to them. Hating to abandon Lan for even a few moments, Dark sought out and gathered moss from the base of several trees. He also found and collected a few nettle plants, ignoring the sting they used to defend themselves. Their leaves would act as a natural blood coagulant and the stem fibers could be separated in long strips that he could use to tie a makeshift bandage in place. He returned to his lover's side and set to work.

Using the nettle first, he stripped the leaves from the stems and pounded them between two rocks, releasing the sap within. The crushed nettle was pressed against the gunshot wound. Moss was layered over the nettle then held in place by virtue of the long nettle fibers fastened together, wrapped around and tied in place. Through it all, Lan merely moaned and stirred fitfully, but didn't wake, something for which Dark was grateful. He could only imagine the terrible pain that wracked his lover's body. The silver had not only pierced his flesh, but had to be searing itself within and literally cooking the flesh that was in close proximity to it.

With the temporary patch in place, Dark carefully maneuvered Lan into his arms and again picked him up and continued on. The sun had set and twilight was upon them. Visibility was acutely reduced and Dark had heard nothing to indicate that they'd been followed. The coming night would be their salvation.

He angled inward toward the canyon wall and found the place he sought. Sheltered and hidden behind a wild and tangled thicket, there was a waist-high opening within the rocky wall. Dark had noticed it during their first winter here when the leaves had fallen and revealed the entrance to him while he was exploring their new home. He'd investigated it and found a small, dry cavern with a smooth dirt floor. It

looked to have, at one time or another, served as a den, but was unoccupied when he discovered it.

Though not particularly large, it could comfortably shelter a half dozen men. At the back, there was a natural curved and slanted chimney formation that rose up through the solid rock. Light shone in from up above. Returning outside, he had seen another opening about ten feet above the ground. He deduced it was that which had swept the floor smooth and kept most wildlife from utilizing such a handy home. Rain and snow probably came in from up above and leaked down which would make the place uncomfortable during inclement weather.

Once more Dark lowered Lan to the grass. Before risking his mate, he wanted to make sure the cavern was indeed still empty. Transforming to his wolf, he scented the air, but could detect no current occupant to the place. He made his way through the brush and ducked inside to investigate. Nothing stirred or took umbrage to his invasion. Relieved, Dark returned to his mate, took his human form and carried Lan to the entrance. It was too low to just walk through and he didn't want to drag Lan over the dirt and rock, causing him even greater damage. Finally, cursing under his breath, Dark eased Lan up over his shoulder, squatted down then dropped to his knees and crawled inside.

He blessed the strength that let him accomplish all this while settling his lover belly down on the dirt floor. Dark sat down to rest for a moment at Lan's side and was nearly overwhelmed by the tidal wave of fear and anxiety that threatened to drown him. Hands tightening into fists, he vehemently shook his head, refusing to be taken down by despair. Lan was alive and he needed help. Dark was going to provide succor for his injured mate no matter what.

Taking deep and steady breaths, he reached out and ran his fingers through Lan's brown hair. The once silky strands were tangled and dull, but he took comfort from the touch. Knowing what he had to do, Dark pulled his hand back, assumed his wolf form and left his mate to go in search of what was needed to heal him.

Silently Dark traversed the woods, taking a roundabout route which would confuse anyone trying to follow any trail he left. Alert for any sign of the strangers, he was relieved to find none. When he arrived at the waterfall and pool he found no sign of their scent on this side, but their smell carried across the water. They'd elected not to cross, but had set up camp not far away. Dark breathed deep and detected five distinct aromas, five men. He changed, slipped into the water, took a deep breath and glided beneath the surface to the other side. Once there he searched the bank for his and Lan's clothes only to find them missing.

It was as he'd expected. The clothing itself was not of the greatest importance. It was the knife he'd carried that he wanted. Using every stalking skill at his disposal, he approached the camp. The air was cool against his naked skin and goose-bumps formed. They were chased away by stress-generated heat.

The hunters had a fire burning in a central location and several tents set up. All five men were gathered around the fire, partaking of a meal. There was a lively conversation taking place and Dark listened for a few moments.

"That was the damndest thing I ever seen."

"So you've already said about twenty times already."

"Yeah, but don't you think so? I never really believed that old Injun agent when he was tellin' them stories in the saloon."

"Then why'd you come on this trip?"

"I like to hunt. Don't care much what I'm huntin' but a Injun that can turn into wolf? Who'd a thought such a thing could be true?"

"Thing is," another man offered thoughtfully. "That wolf you shot, when he turned into a man, he looked like a white man."

"So what? He's still a freak and needs killin'."

Fury rose inside Dark until he felt he would choke on it. It took every bit of control he possessed not to rush in like a crazed madman intent on trying to tear them all apart with his bare hands. It was only the thought that he might fail, leaving Lan totally defenseless, that held him back.

“Sides, if he’s runnin’ with Injuns he ain’t worth wastin’ no worry on.”

“Don’t make no never mind either way. Them silver bullets done the job. If he ain’t dead by now, he will be tomorrow along with that Injun what hauled him away.”

“We shoulda crossed the water and gone after ’em.”

“In the dark? Don’t know about you, but I don’t cotton to the idea of one of you bastards shootin’ me by accident ’cause you think I’m some wolf come to take a bite outta your ass.”

Raucous laughter followed this statement and their conversation continued. “What do ya s’pose them red rocks are in this here pouch? Must be somethin’ special for that Injun to keep ’em in a medicine bag. I heard tell they only carry important stuff with ’em in those things.”

“Probably just somethin’ one of ’em thought was purty.”

“Hey, watch it. Don’t be makin’ a grab for what’s not yers. I found ’em, I’m claimin’ ’em.”

“You two grow up. It’s stupid to be fightin’ over some rocks. We got more important things to talk about like what we’re gonna do tomorrow. So shut up and pay attention.”

Torn between wanting to hear their plans and getting back to Lan, Dark decided to make haste and do what he came here for. His fear for Lan weighed heavy upon him, and if he waited too long these hunters might end their conversation and retire for the night. Now was the time to take advantage of their distraction.

Slipping in behind one of the tents, he carefully loosened one of the tie-down pegs and crawled beneath the canvas. Inside he found the things he needed. As quietly as possible and trusting in their own noisemaking to cover any small sounds he might make, he began casting through the belongings in the tent. Two bedrolls had been laid out. Dark took one of the blankets. He found someone’s personal grooming kit and removed the mug that held shaving soap along with the straight edged razor that accompanied it. He also found a canteen and a waterproof tin of matches. Rolling these

things up in the blanket he eased his way back out of the tent, gritting his teeth against the rocks and dirt that abraded the more tender parts of his body.

Ghostlike, he glided through the trees toward a place near the river bank where he'd planted several willow bushes. The fuzzy catkins were gone. It wasn't those but the bark he wanted. He broke several branches off and added them to the contents of the blanket. Returning to the waterfall and pond, Dark waded into the water and held his bundle high in one hand while awkwardly paddling across. He was panting by the time he reached the opposite shore but his bundle had remained mostly dry.

He stopped long enough to fill the canteen with water and to rinse the cup clean of soap. The return trip took a longer time but he couldn't change and carry the bundle too. Again he took a less than direct route to the small cavern to confuse anyone who might find a sign of his passing.

Dark gathered small branches and dried grasses for kindling as well as larger pieces of wood for the fire he intended to build. Burdened by firewood and his bundle of stolen bounty, he eased through the thicket and crawled into the cavern. Even in the near pitch black of the cave, he was able to make out Lan's position. If he'd stirred at all while Dark had been gone it was very little.

Dark set the blanket down and opened it. Finding the matches, he lit one and squinted in the too bright flare of light. Holding it steady he gathered the bits of kindling and lit them. Slowly feeding larger pieces to that small flame, he got the fire established then turned his attention to Lan.

He spread the blanket close the fire and moved his mate onto it. Lan groaned and stirred, his eyes opening. "Where?" was all he managed in a rusty croak.

Dark rummaged for the canteen and tipped a small amount of water into his lover's mouth. "We're in a small cavern near the point. The hunters have not crossed the pond, but they will in the morning. *Denzhone*, I must remove the bullet from your back before they come. We are hidden here but I fear not for long and you must heal yourself."

Lan attempted a nod but groaned again.



"I have willow. I was going to brew some tea, to help with the pain, but I don't think I will. In this case, I don't believe it will help. I don't know what I was thinking." Dark ran a hand through his hair in agitation. "I think we must pray that you pass out again." Anguished by what he must do, Dark reached for one of his lover's hands and carefully wound their fingers together. "Landon, I don't know what will happen when I do this thing. I may damage you beyond repair."

"Don't doubt yourself." Lan swallowed and continued. "You can't make it any worse. Do what needs to be done." Dark felt the slight squeeze of Lan's fingers against his own. His lover was growing weaker. "No matter what, I love you. Remember. Always." Lan closed his eyes as though keeping them open was too great a chore.

Dark rapidly blinked back tears, again letting anger and determination stiffen his backbone. Gathering calm to replace panic, he prepared. Taking the stolen cup, he filled it full with water. He set it nearly in the fire to allow the water to heat. While waiting, he unfastened the makeshift bandage and carefully uncovered the wound in Lan's back. The nettle leaves had done their job in stopping the flow of blood, but the wound was an angry red mass of raw skin and clotted fluids.

Using the razor, Dark cut a corner of the blanket free and doused it with the now hot water from the cup. As carefully as possible, he cleansed the area around the wound. Afterward, he filled the cup and again waited. When it was ready, he washed his hands then held the razor over the flames to sterilize it. It probably wouldn't make much difference, still it made him feel better to keep things as sterile as possible. This healing would depend on Lan and whether or not the injury was beyond repair.

Dark placed a hand on Lan's shoulder and gently shook him. "It's time, *denzhone*. We must do this now."

Lan managed a small nod. Dark bent and brought their lips together for a quick fierce kiss. "I love you. Fight for us. Do not die on me. If you do, I will never forgive you. Or myself."

"Can't have that, darlin'. Get on with it."

Dark offered Lan a thick piece of one of the willow branches and Lan took it in his mouth. Biting down, he nodded.

Dark took the razor firmly in hand. With his fingers he probed around the wound, doing his best to ignore Lan's groans. At one point he could feel a spot that radiated more heat than any near it. It was here he chose to apply the razor. Here, close to Lan's spinal column. With a savage curse, Dark made the first incision. Lan's screams though muffled, were heartrending. His entire body went stiff, but somehow he managed not to thrash about. Dark cut deeper, his teeth clenched so hard, his jaw ached. His vision blurred and he blinked the tears away he was unaware of having cried.

It was abruptly quiet as Lan's body went limp and he passed out. Blood poured from the incision and Dark widened it, nearly ranting aloud at the fact that he had only the razor and his fingers to dig within Lan's body. The razor touched against something hard and Dark prayed it was the bullet. He probed with a fingertip, touched a hard object and was burned by it. He had indeed found the bullet. Ignoring his own pain, with a triumphant growl he struggled to get a grip on the offending object. The bullet seared itself into the flesh of Dark's finger and thumb and it was that which finally allowed him to pull it free.

He quickly employed the razor to separate his burnt flesh from the bullet then dropped both and turned his attention back to Lan. It was then he was struck with the irony of the situation. They'd wanted Lan to pass out so that he would be unaware of the pain, but unconscious he couldn't change. Unless Dark managed to wake him, he could very well bleed to death.

A shaking produced no results. "Landon! Damn you, wake up!" There was no response.

Dark slapped Lan's face and poured water over both it and his neck to no avail. Despair began to overwhelm him. He closed his eyes, beat the negative emotions back and dropped his head forward. Breathing deeply, Dark reached within to the center of his being. He consciously connected with that part of himself that sheltered the moon

wolf and the bond to his mate. Placing his hands on Landon's head, he began to softly chant.

His inner wolf took heed and raised his head. An eerie howl resounded within Dark's head and blended with his chant. Power rose around him and stirred the very atmosphere within the cave. Dust swirled and tiny whirlwinds formed. Sparks of light flashed from the bits of quartz that were embedded within the cavern wall and miniature bolts of electrical energy were sent zinging from one bit of glassy crystal to the next. The blurring nimbus that accompanied the transformation of man to wolf and back surrounded both he and Lan. A second howl answered the first and at a distant point in his inner vision, Dark could see a second wolf struggling to meet his. That other wolf fought against invisible restraints, growling and baring his teeth, snapping at some unseen opponent. His claws dug in and he bucked and writhed, forcing his way forward inch by inch.

Inside his head Dark silently whispered. "Fight, *denzhone*, fight."

A surge of power snapped forth from Dark to join with one generated by Lan's wolf. The wolf was enveloped in a hot, shimmering haze that burnt to ash the ties that held him. The wolf gave a triumphant howl and bounded forth, free of any encumbrance. Dark felt the change sweep over them both and opened his eyes to see his mate, a fully formed and handsome wolf, healed and whole.

Taken by a wave of dizziness, he abruptly sat and swayed. The wolf before his eyes blurred as Lan took his human shape and Dark was suddenly aware that he himself was once again human.

"Are you all right?" Lan asked, his tone distinctly worried as he reached for Dark and pulled him close.

"Too many changes in too short a time," Dark managed to explain before the edges of his world grayed, turned black and disappeared.

## Chapter Three

"Mmm." Gentle fingers combed through Dark's hair and lightly massaged his scalp.

"There you are. Feeling any better?"

Dark yawned and stretched a bit while he snuggled his head deeper into Lan's lap. "Tired."

"I'd tell you to go back to sleep, but we've got a little problem," Lan spoke in soft subdued tones. "Those bastards that shot me have crossed the pool and they're poking around over here looking for us."

Lan's words slowly registered and sent a jolt of remembrance reverberating through Dark's memory. He sat up with a jerk and a curse. "Why didn't you wake me?" he hissed, keeping his voice down lest it echo and be heard by anyone who might be outside.

"Mostly because I just plain couldn't. Whatever you've been doing since I got shot took a lot out of you."

Still groggy, Dark blinked his eyes and took in their situation. Lan had moved the blanket to one side of the cavern and close to the rock wall which he was leaning back against. Both of them were naked and dirty with random smudges of blood here and there. Most of it was Lan's some of it was Dark's from having to cut the bullet free of his fingertip and thumb.

In addition to the blanket, they possessed a pile of branches burnt nearly to ash, a tin of matches, a cup, a half full canteen of water and a blood encrusted straight razor. Raising his hands, Dark looked them over, expecting to see dried blood. They were very nearly clean and his digits had healed, leaving his skin smooth and unmarked.

"I washed you up a bit when you passed out," Lan commented.

Nodding to hide the anxiety that twisted in the pit of his stomach, Dark asked, "How's your back?"

"It's all right."

"You can move your legs?"

"Yeah."

"Let me see." Lan obligingly shifted his legs around. "Let me see the wound." Dark changed position to where he was kneeling and moved closer to Lan.

"It's fine."

"Let me see it."

"Dark, don't fuss."

"Show me."

"Damn, you're stubborn." Heaving a resigned sigh, Lan scooted around and presented his back to Dark. "I tried washing it a little. That dried blood itches."

Blurred smears of dirt and blood were streaked over Lan's back. The wound was healed but a rough scar, bisected by a second long, slightly jagged scar, marred the smooth line of his skin. Dark frowned and winced at the pain that lanced through his heart at this visible reminder of their ordeal. Reaching out, he trailed his fingertips gently over the imperfections. "The silver prevented you from healing without a mark. It poisoned your flesh for too long."

"I figured that. At least it healed."

"How does it feel? Is there pain?"

"It's a bit sore. A little tender to the touch." Dark drew his fingers away. "You're not hurting me."

"Good. I've done enough of that."

Lan turned around. Their eyes met, brown and blue, each searching the soul of the other. "You did what you had to do."

"I know. I feel no guilt for what I did but... your screams will haunt my sleep, *denzhone*."

"I'm sorry."

"Why do you apologize? You did not shoot yourself in order to make me cut into your flesh."

"I know, but I still feel bad about it."

"How do you feel otherwise?"

"I've felt better. About like you."

Dark shook his head at the careful tone of their conversation. So calm, so controlled. They'd stood within the presence of death. He had no fear of the great beyond, no worry for himself. The Great Spirit awaited and his place there was assured. It was the thought of being left behind that tore at him. Life would not be worth living without his mate beside him. Without Lan to touch, to talk to, laugh and argue with, to hold, to love, what else could possibly give meaning to his everyday existence? The world would be a cold and hollow place without the man who had become part of his soul.

He abruptly rose from his place on the blanket and moved away, hoping the act of distancing himself from his mate would also freeze the rise of overwhelming emotions that threatened to choke him. Heat burned behind his eyes and he swallowed hard, struggling to find a small island of calm within the sudden storm that raged within. He hadn't counted on Lan following him. When the warmth and weight of his lover's hand settled on his shoulder, Dark lost the fight.

A harsh, abbreviated sob tore free from his throat before he could stop it. An unstoppable flood of tears blurred his vision. Strong arms turned him. He was enfolded within Lan's embrace and wound his own arms around his lover.

Against his shoulder he felt more tears where Lan had laid his head to rest. "You're the only one who can do this to me," Lan gasped, his voice a rough, broken rasp that sounded as though he had to force the words free of his throat.

In a strange way it comforted Dark to know he was not the only one so affected. To share this impassioned upheaval with his lover deepened their bond. In silent and shared communion the two of them purged themselves of their worry and fear for each other.

Finally growing calm, Dark confessed, "I thought I was going to lose you."

"You almost did. Death nearly had me, darlin'. I could feel it. It was so peaceful and the desire to stay there with it was so strong. There was a sweet, soft voice calling for me to close my eyes and rest. I couldn't do it. I kept hearing your voice overriding that other one. I kept thinking that if I slept, I'd never see you again. I never want to leave you." Lan's arms tightened then relaxed a bit.

Dark felt the brush of Lan's breath against his skin. The warmth of Lan's words poured into his heart and strengthened him. "You did hear me. I told you to fight."

"Oh, yeah, I heard you. That's another reason I'm still here. I figured you'd kick my ass if I died on you." Lan chuckled softly. "But more importantly, you said you'd never forgive me. I couldn't die with that on my head."

A fresh wave of tears threatened Dark's returning calm. "I'm sorry, *denzhone*. I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't your fault."

"It's all right. It just made me fight that much harder. I needed everything you gave me to get free." Lan hugged him hard and lifted his head from Dark's shoulder.

Dark followed his example and the two of them looked at each other, both self consciously dropping their gazes before allowing their eyes to meet again. A smile tugged at the corner of Lan's mouth and Dark felt an answering amusement bubble up from the depths of his being. He couldn't stop the wide grin that nearly made his cheeks hurt.

Lan's eyes sparkled. "Now that we're done crying like a couple of sissies, maybe we should put some thought into how we're gonna get out of this mess."

"First, we have time for this."

Dark reached up and placing a hand to either side of Lan's head, held him still for a kiss. Lan's eager need to cooperate was more than apparent. He readily accepted that which Dark shared with him. Releasing his grip, Dark's arms slid around his neck and Lan's arms pulled him close. Their lips parted, mouths opening to accept the necessary and longed for joining. An aura of heat surrounded their bodies. The unwashed musk of aroused males, earth and blood was intense and tart.

To Dark, the flavor that filled his mouth had never seemed so essential, so powerful or so compelling. His sense of self-preservation blurred and weakened, preparing to let go to allow him to fall victim to the wave of sensuality and passion that threatened to sweep him away. Forcing himself to maintain his equilibrium, he released his hold on Lan and leaned back. Lan took the hint and let him go. The two of them stood with eyes wide and darkened with hunger. Both were breathing hard and their cocks had gone rigid.

*"Son of a bitch,"* Lan growled.

Dark nodded in sympathy. At that moment he wanted his mate so badly he was almost willing to crawl out of his skin to get to him, but under the circumstances, restraint was definitely called for. Their enemies were close. This was no time for making love.

*"We need to get out of here,"* Dark commented.

Taking his eyes from his lover, he went for the canteen and picked it up. Shaking it, he opened the top and took a swallow of the tepid water. Even that small act helped clear his mind. He offered the canteen to Lan who accepted and took his own drink. He recapped the canteen and laid it back on the blanket.

*"Chances are they've left someone in position by the pool in case we try to circle around them. Do you know how many are out there?"*

*"Five."*

*"Too many to slip around in the daylight. Looks like we wait until dark. Should be easy to get by them then."*

*"If they don't find us first."*

*"This place is well hidden. We should be safe here."*

*"Normally I would say yes, but I had to make several trips in and out. In the dark. I have no way of knowing how much evidence I left behind. I tried to confuse anyone who might find traces of my passing, but if there's a competent tracker among them, they may eventually find us."*



"I take it you carried me here first then went out to get this stuff?" Lan indicated Dark's pile of stolen goods.

Dark nodded.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it now. It's been awhile since I heard anyone outside. Maybe they've given up. It's what, about noon? It'll start getting dark in about six, seven more hours. What do you think? Do we wait or do you have something else you'd like to try?"

Thinking of the guns and silver bullets that awaited in the hands of the men that hunted them, Dark shook his head. "We wait. It's the safest thing to do and I agree with you. It will be easier to get by them in the darkness. They will have retreated to their camp across the pond and all we need do is slip by them. We can easily accomplish that as wolves."

"Agreed. Might as well get comfortable." Lan returned to his place on the blanket, gingerly settled his back against the rock wall and sighed. "How do you suppose they knew to come equipped with silver bullets?"

"I may know the answer to that question. You said yourself that rumors had begun circulating about men who could become wolves." Dark took a place on the blanket next to Landon and squirmed to get comfortable on its coarse surface. Rough as it was, he mused, it was still better than sitting bare-assed on the dirt.

"Yeah, that's another reason we agreed it was time to move on. Some of those rumors were being put together in conjunction with a supposed lost tribe of Apache that had taken shelter in some hidden place. People being what they are, someone's curiosity was bound to get the better of them and they'd come looking for us. Not that we would have been easy to find, but more and more of this area is being explored and mapped now that it's been declared a national park. It was only a matter of time before we were found."

"I heard those men talking when I went to relieve them of what I needed to tend you." He sent Lan a wolfish grin which was answered in kind. "They spoke of tales garnered from an Indian Agent. Apparently this man somehow heard stories that are

passing among the people. The legend of the moon wolf and the power of the stones are not well known, but not a secret among our people either."

"Most people wouldn't put much stock in those kinds of stories. Wonder why these guys were any different?"

"I don't believe they are. As one man put it, he just wanted to hunt. It didn't really matter to him what he killed, only that he got the opportunity to do so. That they found us and the legend proved true was just dumb luck on their part."

"Figures. The first to find us are the kind who want to wipe us out. Couldn't have been some nice, vague professor-type we could have fed a couple of bullshit stories to before we sent him on his way."

"Professor-type? Here?"

Landon shrugged. "Some of them are pretty damned intrepid from what I hear. They go around discovering things all over the world, like those tombs we were reading about in the paper. The ones in Egypt? Remember that?"

"I remember," Dark admitted with a smile. "I believe if you could, you might head for Egypt and look into it yourself."

Lan took Dark's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Who's to say we can't? I think we should make up for lost time and do some traveling. God knows I've loved it here, but I wouldn't say no to a little adventure. Money's no problem. The investments from the silver mine have paid off in a big way. There's a whole wide world just waiting for us out there. I think we should take advantage of it."

"We will. Let's just take care of this more pressing problem first," he reminded gently.

"Spoilsport."

The two of them sat in silence for a while until Lan sighed and again spoke up. "This is like waiting for the watched pot to boil. Never knew a day to last so long. How much longer do you suppose it is till sunset?"

"It's hard to say from in here but at least four or five hours."

"Shit. I wish we had some cards."

Dark snickered. "Patience, *denzhone*."

"I can be as patient as the next man as long as I've got something to do. How about we, uh, you know." Lan wiggled his eye brows in a way that sent ribbons of mirth tickling Dark's insides.

He grinned. "No. Your shouts of pleasure would lead them straight to us."

"My shouts of pleasure? What about yours? You're not exactly quiet when you're riding my cock. Why just the other day, Spirit made some bawdy comment about hearing you yowling in the middle of the night that just about singed my ears off. I about burst into flame with embarrassment."

Dark scowled. "Spirit had best mind his own business and his manners or he'll face the sting of my claws and teeth in his hide."

Lan's chuckle drew Dark's gaze to his face. His blue eyes were alight with a teasing sparkle. "Knew that would get you."

"Sometimes you're extremely childish."

"Maybe so but it's fun."

Dark was about to reply when a sound from outside caught his attention. He and Lan froze, both of them listening intently for any further disturbance. It wasn't long in coming.

"Here, look. I told you that were a false trail back there, but no, you wouldn't listen to me, would ya?"

"If you're so all fired smart, where's this trail lead? Under them bushes and that's it? Don't see no wolf holed up under there."

"You can't see through there. It's too damn thick. Could be a dozen critters sittin' back there and you wouldn't see 'em."

"So what do we do?"

There was a moments silence then one of the voices outside shouted. "Hey, Injun! You speakee English? Come on out. We won't hurt ya."

There was rough laughter and another voice cursed. "You stupid jackass. He ain't no Chinaman. 'Sides you really think if he understood he'd come marching out

here like some lame brained idiot? We shot his buddy. He knows we ain't lookin' to make new friends. Here's what we do."

Shots started to pepper the thicket, some of them careening through the cavern opening to ricochet off the rock walls. Lan and Dark ducked. It was the best they could do under the circumstances until the firing stopped which it eventually did.

A disembodied voice spoke up. "Did you hear that? Sounded like an echo. There must be an opening in the rock wall back there."

"Why don't you crawl through the brush and check it out?"

"Like I'm gonna risk having my face bit off," another voice scoffed.

"Wouldn't be no great loss. It ain't like you're purty or nothin'."

"Don't give a damn. My ugly mug's stayin' right where it's at. But I gotta idea. Let's burn 'em out."

"Hell yeah. Start gathering some dry wood, boys. We're gonna have us a barbeque."

Dark looked at Landon. Had the situation not been so serious, his expression could almost be described as comedic. Dark had to wonder if his own looked so flabbergasted.

"Now what do we do?" Lan snapped. "We just lost waiting for nightfall as an option."

Glancing toward the back of the cavern, Dark pointed out. "There *is* another exit."

"That? But it just leads up. The smoke will rise right up to follow us."

"We could climb up, change at the top and jump on the hunters from above. With the element of surprise on our side maybe we can overpower them and get away."

"Yeah, and maybe we both get shot this time. Shit." Lan shook his head. "It's a risky plan, but it doesn't look like we've got much choice. Let's go now. If they get that fire going too big they might stay back too far out of range for us to jump them. I'll go first."

"No. My plan, I go first," Dark insisted. There was no way he was letting Lan take the initial leap.

Outside there was the crackle of burning brush and tendrils of smoke began to waft inside the cavern. Lan looked as though he wanted to protest, but gave in. "All right. Let's get it done."

Dark sent his lover a grim smile and turned away. He reached the chimney and was just about to heave himself up for the initial bit of the climb when he was stopped by a hand on his arm. He twisted his head, ready to question his mate when a pair of warm lips took his in a hard kiss. Dark groaned and joined in the kiss so enthusiastically, his lip split.

Lan pulled away and licked the blood over the tiny cut as it sealed. "No more bleeding for a while. Be careful."

Speechless, Dark nodded and began the climb. The chimney's incline was a slant for which he was grateful. Otherwise they'd have had to put their backs against the wall, scraping off skin as they shimmied upward. As uncomfortable as that would be even with their wounds healing as they went, Dark was glad that Lan's back would not be subject to anymore injuries just yet.

As it was, it was steep enough that he was gripping every outcrop he could find to keep from slipping backward. His knees and toes were losing layers of skin and by the time he reached the top, several fingernails were broken and bleeding. The sting grew less and disappeared by the time Lan finished the climb and waited behind him.

Dark moved to the far reaches of the ledge and peered out. Below, four men stood in a loose semi-circle around the thicket. As fortune would have it they were within easy range of the leaps he and Lan would make from up above. Dark set his sights on the two furthest which would leave his mate a nearer and hopefully easier target. Dark knew he was tired, but he was sure Lan had to be even worse off after everything he'd been through.

With barely a conscious thought, he changed. Digging his claws into the rock, Dark gathered his muscles and launched himself into the air. At that moment the wind

shifted. The men below changed position to avoid the black roil of smoke that came their way. One of the men he had aimed for was out of range, but two others had moved together, Dark hit them with a rabid snarl and immediately began biting and slashing at any vulnerable bits of flesh he could find. Behind him he heard a scream as Lan too hit another opponent.

Hidden within a cloud of smoke, pure chaos reigned. There were grunts, snarls, snapping teeth, gibbering, fearful cries, moans and coughing. The men Dark attacked dropped all resistance and he changed back to his human form. His eyes and nose were burning from the smoke and he could barely see. Several feet away, he spotted Lan. His mate had found the throat of one of the hunters. The man was limp beneath him when Lan released his grip. Flecks of blood and spittle ringed his muzzle and more blood was spattered on his fur. In Dark's eyes he was magnificent.

Lan resumed his human form and came to him. "Where's the other one?"

Dark tried to reply, but choked as the smoke filled his lungs. He shook his head to indicate he didn't know. Lan stooped to pick up a rifle and threw his arm around Dark. The two of them stumbled away from the burning brush and out of range. Feeling as though he was about to hack up a lung, Dark bent at the waist and wretched. There was little in his stomach but the few sips of water he'd had in the past few hours. With its leaving he felt better.

A warm hand landed gently on his back. "You okay?" Lan's voice was harsh and gravelly.

Dark slowly straightened. Beside him, Lan was furiously blinking his eyes in an effort to clear them. They were free of the cavern, with three of their enemies down, but they were still in danger. "We have to move. We have to find the other one."

"No, you don't. I'm right here. You can drop that rifle."

Dark stiffened and turned. The fourth hunter had circled around and came upon them from behind. He heard the thump as Lan loosened his hold on the gun and let it drop.

"I'd hardly a believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. That Injun agent don't know it, but them stories he was tellin' are true." The man who spoke was rough, ill groomed and coarse. The clothes he wore were serviceable but dirty. By the sound of his speech he was clearly uneducated, but his grip on his firearm was sure and steady. He was obviously well acquainted with its use. "You two are gonna make me a rich man. Gonna put you in a cage and charge folks to come see the freaky wolfmen."

"What makes you think we'll cooperate with you?" Dark growled.

"Cause iffin' you don't, I'll shoot your buddy here again. That shot I got into you left a nice big scar didn't it? You want more a the same, just go ahead and raise a ruckus. Whoever pisses me off, the other gets the shit for it. That's the way it's gonna work. Ya'll wanna wear some nice silver collars?" Assured of his success, the man let loose with an evil laugh. "Bet I can get the ladies to come look at you two fellers. You got the kinda goods that'd get 'em all excited. Come ta think on it, bet there'd be a feller or two wouldn't mind spending a hour or so gettin' to know you right personal like. Oh, yeah, I got me some big plans."

Dark could feel rage building inside with every word the man uttered. A rumbling growl sounded from beside him. Lan too was obviously taking exception to the man's threats. Dark reached out and gripped his mate's forearm in warning. From the corner of his eye, beyond Lan's position, he saw a movement and a chance for freedom.

"That's right, Injun. You keep your friend under control. Now march. The three of us are headin' back to camp."

"What about your friends?" Dark asked. Lan turned an incredulous look on him. "Don't you think you should check on them? They may still be alive."

"What the hell do I care? They c'n all go straight to hell. Less people I gotta split my profits with."

"You lousy son of a bitch." Lurching out from the cover of the nearby trees, another of the hunters appeared. His clothes and skin were torn and bloodied but he

still carried his rifle. "You'da left me out here to die. Let's see how you like it." He pointed his gun and pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out and their original captor was thrown back by the impact of the bullet. With speed that was little more than a visible blur, Lan grabbed the rifle at his feet and shot the other hunter. Both men hit the ground at the same time and were still.

"So much for friendship," Lan quipped.

Dark rolled his eyes. "You killed the man you jumped back at the fire?"

"Yeah, no doubt. You take care of the other one?"

"Yes."

"That leaves one."

"Sorry but that leaves none." Dark and Lan whipped around to find Spirit prowling toward them. "You were late. We got worried. A few of us came back to see what was taking you so long."

"Jeez, this is hard on the heart. I've been snuck up on twice today, but I gotta say this is by far the most pleasant of the two," Lan confessed with a grin. "Spirit, it's good to see you, brother."

"Landon, Dark, you both look a little worse for wear. We found the camp and the hunter who was posted to prevent your escape."

"What did you do with him?"

"He's gone to be judged by the Great Spirit."

Lan nodded. "Can't say as I'm sorry."

"How many were there?"

"Five," Dark responded simply. His gaze went to the three others who appeared out of the forest behind Spirit.

"Why don't you both go bathe and rest?" Spirit suggested. "We'll take care of them. The river shall serve as their resting place."

"Better than they deserve," Lan muttered. He slung an arm around Dark's shoulders. "Let's go. I'm starting to feel my age again."



“Clown,” Dark replied but smiled as he said it and went willingly where his mate led.

## Chapter Four

The water was cool and soothing. Dark swam for a time then lay back and floated on the surface. Sounds were muffled by virtue of his ears being submerged. With his eyes closed he didn't have to watch while Spirit and the others dismantled the hunters' camp and disposed of their possessions by tossing them into the river. Lan, on the other hand, watched with avid, nearly wolfish interest and Dark had left him to it. With the next rain that washed the intruders' blood into the soil, it would be as though they had never existed.

Dark sighed. He wanted their home cleansed. Those men had brought hatred and disharmony into a place that had sheltered him and his family for years. He wanted all traces of their presence to be eradicated. There would be no one to mourn them, at least no one here. They had sealed their fates and justice had been served. He and Lan had defended themselves and won. Dark felt no guilt in wanting even the memory of those who lived on the pain of others gone.

A light spattering of water sprinkled down on his chest and throat and chin. He opened his eyes and found his mate uncharacteristically waiting for his attention. Had things been normal, Lan would most likely have had him half drowned by now. All in the name of fun, of course. Putting his melancholy thoughts aside, Dark mustered a smile. "Feel better?"

"Much," Lan answered. "You?"

"Some." Dark straightened, tipping himself upright in the water and wound his arms around Lan's neck. "I'm tired, *denzhone*, but I want to go. It's past time we left."

"I agree. Spirit and the others found our things. Let's get dressed and we'll go. Whisper's going on ahead to let the others know we're all right. The rest of us are riding. I figure we may as well take the horses. No sense in leaving them here."

"Mmm hmm." Dark hummed his agreement, lazily treading water while Lan's hands stroked soothing paths up, down and over his back and buttocks.

"You're not going to sleep on me are you?"

"Almost. You make me content. You bring peace to my soul." Dark nuzzled his lips against Lan's ear and whispered, "I love you." He felt Landon's smile and a soft kiss against his skin.

"I love you too. Come on. Time to go."

Dark nodded and the two of them swam for the shore.

Two days later they caught up to the tribe. That evening there was a fire, food and a quiet celebration. Tales were told of legends and mysteries and enemies vanquished. Landon began their story of that last day in their old home. Dark continued it through Lan's healing and let his lover finish the story while he relaxed and soaked in the familiar and beloved feel of his people around him. It was a good night. Both he and Lan had rested on the ride, letting the horses carry them while they regained their strength. As the night moved on, some began to rise and drift away to seek their various resting places.

That first night out upon leaving their canyon, Spirit and the others had hunted and returned, bringing with them rabbits which were spitted and roasted over a crackling fire. The men had laughed and shared stories of past hunts while eating the succulent meat and sucking the juice and grease from their fingers. Dark's spirits had risen and the melancholy that haunted him had shredded and blown away on the night breezes. He, Lan and the others had gone a fair distance downwind of the horses, changed and slept under the trees in a warm, secure pile of fur covered bodies.

Tonight, Lan disappeared for a short while then returned with a blanket. He cocked an eyebrow and gave Dark a meaningful look. Snickers from some of those still gathered accompanied Lan's action and Dark turned his gaze in Spirit's direction, daring him to say anything. Spirit merely gave him an innocent look and a shrug. Rising from his place by the fire, Dark followed Lan out into the night.

They walked for some distance before Lan stopped and spread the blanket on thick grass under a stand of sheltering aspen and pine trees. He dropped the leather pouch in which Dark kept various personal items, including the oil they used when making love. Lan kept his gaze boldly on Dark while stripping himself of his clothes. Dark followed his lover's example, excitement building within to accompany the heating of his blood and increasing pace of his heartbeat.

Naked, the two of them stared at each other. Dark let his gaze wander his lover's body. His skin shone pale under the light of the waning moon. Dark admired the uniform tan of Landon's body. While he sometimes basked naked in the sunshine, Lan's skin would never be as dark as his own, something that bothered Dark not at all. He liked the contrast when they came together. Even that was exciting in its own way.

Over the years, Lan had grown leaner, his body even more hard and delineated. There was nothing but the smooth flex and bunch of muscle with every graceful move he made. He was truly *denzhone*. Beautiful. At this moment, Dark had never wanted him so badly. The events of the past few days came rushing in to send his desire soaring. He needed his mate, needed to be buried deep within his body, needed to confirm that they were indeed still alive, still one.

Not stopping to think about it Dark approached, and with a move so fast that even his lover was taken by surprise, he swept Lan's feet from under him and took them both to the blanket with a modified thump.

"Damn, Dark..." Lan began only to find his lips taken in a searing kiss.

Dark wasted no time with words. He swept over Lan like a firestorm of burning passion mere inches away from raging totally out of control. He ate at Lan's lips and mouth, tongue sweeping in to taste every hidden recess. His hands caressed, aroused and inflamed. They skated over Lan's body, touching on all those sensitive places he knew would raise his mate's passion to fever pitch.

Lan's moans reverberated inside Dark's mouth and he swallowed them down like the most delectable sweet before releasing his lips. Dark nuzzled his face into the side of Lan's throat and breathed in the earthy male musk of his lover. Teeth fastening

in Lan's skin he sucked, ingesting the flavor while pulling his blood to the surface until he felt it pool beneath his tongue. Willing his canines to grow sharper, Dark pierced Lan's flesh, a wave of molten heat jolting through his body at Lan's cry of surprise. Easing his hold, Dark lapped at the rich blood, his lover's essence, until the wounds sealed themselves.

He raised his head, eyes snapping open with the spark of heat that made his eyes burn. Sweeping down, he took Lan's mouth again and shared the coppery sweet flavor of Lan's blood before pulling away to center his attention on the small, hard nipple beneath his fingertips. Dark dropped his mouth, lashing his tongue over the tiny nub before sucking hard. Lan groaned and arched beneath him. Feeding on his lover's show of pleasure Dark continued, bestowing similar attention to his other nipple while letting one hand slide low. He opened his mouth and released the now hot and swollen flesh. With long glides of his wet tongue he traveled the length of Lan's torso, gathering the scent and sweat of his lover as he went. The tart musk was savored and allowed to rest against his palate until he was nearly dizzy with the taste and aroma.

Glancing down, he found the rigid length of his mate's cock rising up to meet him. He wrapped his fingers around it, squeezing firmly while jacking Lan's foreskin up and down over the swollen crown. Pre-come generously anointed the head and to Dark's sensitive ears there was the slick squelch of wet skin with every pass. The sight and sound made his mouth water. Delicately he laved his tongue over the plump tip and lightly suckled the salty-sweet liquid from its source. Sealing his mouth around his prize, without preamble Dark engulf the thick column to the root.

Lan's groan became a modified and strangled shout, his hands rising to clench in Dark's hair, pulling hard. Dark welcomed the painful sting of his scalp. It was more feeling, more sensation, more to prove they were both alive. Without stopping the up and down movements of his mouth and tongue on Lan's cock, Dark fumbled for the leather pouch Lan had dropped nearby. Finding it, he fumbled for the ties, and with a growl, gave in and released his hold on his lover.

With controlled frenzy, Dark tore the bag open and found the oil. He poured a measure of it into the palm of his hand and re-corked the bottle before returning his attention to his lover. Lan was watching him with a dazed yet revealing expression. He wanted Dark's fevered loving. His eyes were filled with hunger and a craving for more. His breath rose and fell with the strength of his pants and he moaned softly at the delay, shifting on the blanket.

"Hurry," he growled.

Dark nearly howled at his mate's approbation. "Turn over," he ordered tightly.

Lan readily complied, rising to his hands and knees. Dark took position on his knees between Lan's spread thighs. Unable to help himself, he buried his face in the crease between Lan's cheeks, his tongue finding the tight entrance to Lan's body. He licked and nudged the tender skin and brought his oiled fingers into play. Raising his head, Dark teased his finger over and around the quivering hole then slid it home.

Lan groaned and pushed back into that small penetration. "*More*," he ordered.

Stroking his finger in and out, Dark brought two fingers together on the outward move then sent them both deep. He found Lan's prostate and caressed the small spongy nut, drawing grunts and shudders from his lover. Ready to burst at Lan's obvious readiness to receive him, Dark palmed his cock, spreading the oil over himself. Withdrawing his fingers, he placed the sensitive crown of his cock against Lan's anus and pushed.

For a moment he was held in a tightfisted grip then Lan's body relaxed, allowing him to bury himself in hot wet silk. Dark groaned at the sheer perfection that surrounded his cock. He basked in it, moving his hips only slightly, just enough to stir and stimulate. There was nothing to compare to the feeling of bliss that crawled up his spine and down into the core of his testicles where they rested against Lan's ass. Dark increased the movement and found the pleasure growing exponentially.

It wasn't long before he was slamming himself inside his lover. The fire that had threatened to rage out of control burst its bonds and consumed them in its fiery heat. He reached around and grasped Lan's cock, pumping it in time with every thrust. Dark

felt as though his blood was boiling, not that he cared. All that mattered was the tight grip he had on his mate's body and the pounding relentless rhythm that took them closer and closer to climax.

His stomach muscles rippled, his body going tight with the sheer overpowering blast of sensation that melted his brain and being to an unthinking puddle of aching pleasure. The rush of semen through his cock suctioned the last of his deeply buried fears and burned them to ash while leaving him shuddering and sated. The hot cream that anointed his fingers and Lan's cry when he came merely added to Dark's peace and satisfaction.

Dark curled himself over his lover's body and rested his cheek for a moment against his sweat coated skin before easing himself away. Lan's scar called out to him and Dark caressed it briefly with his lips. He felt Lan shiver and he petted him softly with a soothing murmur before disengaging their bodies and collapsing against the blanket with a sigh.

Lan dropped to his belly and lay still. His eyes were closed and his lips were parted, his breath sighing softly in and out. Dark smiled and turned on his side. Raising a hand, he traced Lan's face with his fingertip.

"Stop it, that tickles," Lan mumbled.

"Make me."

There was a moment's silence. "Too tired." Lan's eyes opened. They were filled with sleepy calm. "You bit me. You don't do that unless you're really horny or really upset. Like after we've had a bad fight. You ready to put what happened at home behind us now?"

"Yes." Dark let Lan see into his soul. "Although I will never forget." He dropped his hand and curved it over Lan's back, letting his palm and fingers cover the scars there.

"Don't need to forget. Just remember we're all right, we're together and we love each other."

Throat tight with welling emotion, Dark nodded. "So, *denzhone*, will we soon be bound for Egypt?"

Lan snorted. "I seriously doubt it. There's plenty to see and do right here in this country. You know something? After what happened back in that little cavern, when we joined inside our minds? I think I got a little bit of your gift."

"Which one?" Dark teased. "I have so many."

"Your visions, smart ass. Last night I had a dream. It was so clear and something about it just seemed so right."

"What was it?"

"I saw you in a classroom. You were teaching children Native American history, children of the people. I think it was a reservation school."

Dark raised his brows. The idea sounded surprisingly good. "I'll consider it."

"You should," Lan yawned. "You'd be good at it. You have the kind of patience needed for that kind of thing."

"Perhaps. What of you? What would you do if I became a teacher?"

"I don't know. Something will turn up. Hush now. This old man's worn out." A mischievous smile curved Lan's lips and he chuckled as though unable to hold his mirth inside.

Dark snorted a laugh. "I resent that old man stuff. I'm the same age as you, you know."

"Really? You don't look a day over twenty-five. Come here, darlin'." Lan wrapped his arms around Dark, held him close and nuzzled his face into the crook of Dark's shoulder and neck. "Guard my dreams?"

Dark relaxed against his mate, drinking in the closeness and warmth. "Always, *denzhone*. Always." He buried his nose in Lan's hair and slept.

Miles away, on a small spit of land along the great Colorado river, a lone figure sat shivering damp and cold. The man rocked to and fro, his fists clenching as pain racked his body. "If it's the last thing I do, I'll find you. I'll find you both and make you



pay for what you've done." He raised his head to the heavens, eyes flashing a vibrant orange-red as maniacal laughter rang out.

Dark shuddered and gasped, instantly awake. Lan stirred and muttered fitfully. "Shh, go to sleep," Dark soothed, petting his lover gently until he settled. As for himself, it was a long time before he closed his eyes. Trouble was coming. Dark didn't know when or what form it would take, but he would be vigilant and wait. In the meantime he was surrounded by love and the warmth of his mate. For now, it was more than enough.

## **Kate Steele**

I've always been a bohemian at heart so it comes as little surprise to me that I'd end up a writer. It's the perfect job for an over-imaginative, dreamer such as myself. It's probably why most of the books I write have a paranormal flavor. I love dogs, wolves, Yaoi manga, and iris. My favorite activities are anything that includes the words "Add To Cart" or pizza, and I'm dying to get a tattoo. I love hearing from my readers. You can contact me at [katesteele27@yahoo.com](mailto:katesteele27@yahoo.com) or visit my website at [www.katesteele.com](http://www.katesteele.com).