

He was beyond reach, like a wounded animal ready to exact his revenge.

She watched as Dartian moved closer to Viktor. Instead of attacking Viktor, he reached out and encircled her wrist with his hand. With as much rage as he felt, she was amazed at how tenderly he pulled her from Viktor's grasp, placing himself between them.

"You have no right to put your hands anywhere near this woman Viktor. It is forbidden for any man to lie a hand on a woman who is not his own, and believe me in this, she is not yours." Tension raised in the room as each man watched the other's move.

Viktor backed up, but not before he shot Saleene a look which clearly conveyed that their conversation was far from over. What could she do? He was the leader of the village they were guests in; if he cornered her another time, she would have to listen. Somehow the thought of being near Viktor gave her more concern than the anger she felt coming from Dartian.

Moving around Dartian she placed her hand softly on his chest just above his heart. Looking up into his eyes, Saleene attempted to calm the beast, as she spoke as if only he was in the room.

"Dartian, please do not do anything at this time. Viktor merely frightened me with his abrasiveness. I am not hurt, just a bit rattled." *Please Dartian, for me, relax. I do not want my gifts to surface when Viktor is around, as he will then have the power to keep me here.* The pleading in her eyes, warned Dartian further from making any sudden moves to provoke Viktor. Slowly he pulled Saleene within his arms and moved his lips close to her ear as he whispered.

"Caru, I would never do anything to endanger your life. I am sorry for my outburst, but I did not want him touching you." His words were like a warm summer's breeze that caressed her earlobe, sending waves of lava rushing through her veins.

Shadow Of The Wolf

by

Robyn Wren

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my father who always believed in me and told me to reach for my dreams. He may be gone but never will he be forgotten and to my mom who has always supported me in all I choose to do.

Prologue

The sun moved across the sky, its rays cascading down like ribbons of orange-gold, spreading a cocoon across the land. Its warmth eased the tension from the raven's back; his absolute stillness on the tree branch barely noticeable by human eyes. Sharp eyes ever watchful, his gaze roamed the hillside, always mindful of the concealed cave and the abomination held within. His family had been given the task of keeping watch over the cave and the danger it held; to alert the clan should anything change its present state. Its evil was so powerful; no human was allowed to know of its existence, for fear of it being released.

Shaking his feathered head, the raven thought back on the stories handed down from one generation to another, growing in length, as each elder parted his knowledge on to his son. His was a task that left the watcher alone for the rest of his life, a quest so important, the watcher was denied a family of his own. Looking across the grassland, the wind seemed to increase in magnitude, the field of green danced with the tempo it produced. There was an almost mesmerizing quality to it, so that at first, the shadowy figure seemed to go unseen; until a small crack of a twig alerted the raven to the presence of another.

Turning his midnight black head toward the sound, the raven's gaze took in the small form of a female moving quickly through the brush, her feet barely making tracks upon the ground. Surprise coursed through the raven's body at the sight of the woman moving through the field, her presence a complete mystery to him. *How had she gotten here?*

The raven was confident that the cave was unknown to the human world; it had been deliberately removed from their history. *Could she be lost?* Questions drummed

chaotically through his mind. So erratic were his thoughts, that he barely caught her slight figure move toward the entrance of the cave, her eyes darting around to see if any others were near.

Before the raven could attempt to call out, the woman's figure slipped quickly into the cave, her footsteps still ringing on the wind. Frantic to know what she'd found, the raven took flight, his feathers taking on an iridescent shine in the sunlight. Circling high above the hole at the top of the deep cavern below, the raven listened with its acute hearing; yet all that he could discern was the woman walking through the hallways and her voice calling out into the darkness. *Could it have brought her here?* The mere possibility caused the raven's heart to beat an abnormal rhythm, the force so strong he felt that it would surely burst through his chest.

Then, down below, a chanting began; low and melodious, filling the air until it felt thick enough to cut. Fear coursed through his veins, causing him to fly away from the opening. A sound from behind caused the raven to turn his head just in time to see hundreds of bats burst through the opening and out into the daylight sky. Something horrible must be occurring for the bats to have left their dark refuge too early, and risk the pain of sunlight. Turning his gaze back to the tree, the raven returned to his perch, hoping that what was unfolding was not as he feared.

Evening crept in as the sunlight descended back behind the mountains, the full moon above cast silver strands of light across the field. The raven paced back and forth on his perch, praying to the gods that all was well. He knew if the moment came and the evil was released, he would have to fly quickly to his village and warn the elders of the situation. The sounds had not lessened over the hours, gaining instead by each breath, in tempo and tone. Then suddenly, silence fell across the land. The thickness in the air seemed to increase; invading the surrounding area near the cave, choking the life out of anything and everyone close by.

Unsure of what to do, the raven began to take flight, only to find his feet had turned to stone, anchoring him to the tree limb. Looking up, he saw a black mist begin to

form from the hole at the top of the cave, swirling and growing with every moment. Fear began to pool in the pit of the raven's stomach, he knew if this continued, he would not be able to get to the village and warn the others of the danger coming. Staring down at his feet, his heart lurched as a high pitched scream could be heard coming from within the cave, shaking the walls with its intensity. Clarity of the situation found its way into the raven's mind as he looked back down at his feet and watched in horror as the stone covering them began to move up his body to encase the rest of his form, forever sealing the fear that pooled in his blood.

Moments before the stone covered the raven's onyx eyes; he caught one last glimpse of the cave and the evil being released. The swirling black mist moved quickly across the field and directly toward the raven, its eyes widened with shock. Nothing could be seen inside the mist, until seconds before his life ended, when red eyes stared back at him from within the darkness.

Chapter 1

The moon began its journey through the bright starlit sky. The stars sparkled like a million jewels shining down across the land. One would have a difficult time imagining the danger that had been unleashed upon the world, and the evil spreading like a plague. In the shadows a figure moved gracefully through the woods, her delicate form silent and sensual with every step. Feet agile and swift as a morning breeze, yet quiet as a mouse, carried her quickly through the brush, at one with nature. It was only recently that she had found herself without a home to call her own, torn from her people, and sent out on a quest from which she may never return.

Alone, with only the animals she traveled with to speak to, Saleene found herself longing for home and a family of her own. Raising her sun-kissed face to the sky she whispered ancient incantations to the gods, crying out questions that she knew only time would answer. She'd wandered the woodlands for so long that Saleene no longer knew if her family was safe within the sacred mountain. Forced to flee when the evil had moved through her village, they'd sought refuge once more within the embrace of mother earth.

Her body shivered with the memory of the day her village had been attacked. The vision of it assaulted her senses as the sights, sounds, and smells flooded her mind once more. There had been no indication of the threat until it was too late, causing many to perish at the hands of the undead.

It had been a crisp spring morning, the wind never hinted at the danger that was to come. It was two days past the Spring Equinox, and the flowers in the village were beginning to blossom. Waking to the sound of the birds singing a morning melody, Saleene had slowly risen,

peacefully brushing off the web of sleepiness. Refreshed from her sleep, she had raised her arms outstretched toward the sky, singing to the birds in the window sill of her bedroom. Sending a prayer of thanks to the gods for her family and friends, she had moved quietly toward the bathroom to perform her morning rituals. While she splashed cold water on her face, a black shadow began to move across the window, gradually blocking out the morning sun.

Curious, she opened the window, only to find a large crow circling in the deep blue sky. *How strange.* It was such an odd pattern for the bird to make. Watching it glide through the air, she began to feel mesmerized by the fluid movements it made, each action a deliberate pattern, captivating in its simplicity. A sudden chill crept into her bones, causing her blood to feel like ice, chilling her to the core. Something was very wrong, something evil was coming.

“Mother?” She’d called out into the quiet hallway; no answer followed.

Looking around, she noticed that the wind had ceased to blow; no sounds were able to be heard. Scanning the area, she found nothing but a blank void, as if her village had been swallowed into a hole. *How could that be?* Fear began to work its way into her soul, causing her heart to beat in a rapid rhythm. Running from her room, Saleene snatched up her weather-worn satchel, she moved from room to room, searching desperately for her family. She sighed with relief when she found that they were all still asleep in their beds.

A sudden crash came from outside her home, the sound echoing throughout. She turned quickly, sped through the house and out the door. Looking around, at first, nothing seemed to be amiss; nothing out of place or unnatural lingered about the village. As she turned, a cold breeze caressed her skin, bringing with it a shadow which covered the morning sun, encasing the village in darkness. Saleene scanned the area once more, again finding nothing but the unusual blankness she’d detected a few moments before. Puzzled, she turned back to her home. Without warning, a loud screech could be heard in the distance, followed by screams from the outer portion

of the village; filling her ears.

Laughter filled the air, jarring Saleene from her memories. Surprised by the musical notes carried on the wind, she was amazed when she spied an inn out in the distance. Though it seemed out of place in the open grasslands, she made her way closer to the light which shined like a beacon, calling weary travelers with its promise of warmth and companionship. She slowly crossed a small stream, and continued making her way toward the light. Getting nearer, she slowed her pace, approaching with much apprehension. A howl from behind caught her attention, drawing her gaze away from the light.

“I know friend, I’m not from this land, but I must check it out. I’ve not eaten in longer than I can remember.” Her voice carried to the lone wolf, its eyes never leaving her. Another howl matched the first, and a smile crossed her lips. “I promise to be careful. Be safe my friend.” As if understanding her intentions, the wolf leapt back into the forest, his padded feet echoing on the wind. She’d enjoyed his company for the countless days they’d traveled together but for now she needed to get closer to the inn. She didn’t want to chance the owner coming out with a weapon in tow and setting his sights on her friend.

Her eyes drew back toward the building. Warmth, safety, and a hearty meal, were her only thoughts as she ventured closer; her feet moving of their own accord toward the light. How long had it been since she’d sat in the comfort of others? Too many days had passed since she’d left her village and the family she loved. She knew, however, the quest she had been sent on was of the greatest importance to all; her sacrifice necessary, to ensure the continuation of every race. Ever so carefully she moved closer to the inn, her mind reeling at all that she had encountered thus far.

As she neared the small building, the door swung open, revealing a large robust man, his eyes looked as if he searched for some disturbance in the night. His frame filled the entire doorway; his eyes were old and full of compassion.

“Hello?” His full, throaty voice pierced into the night.

Saleene hunkered back, allowing the mist to drape a silken web across her, concealing her from view. He moved out of the doorway, and she sensed the goodness in his heart; he desired only to aide those that ventured through his door. Saleene moved out of the shadows, allowing the stranger to see her as well, a show of trust in the small action.

“What brings you out on such a late night child?”

Taking in his facial features from the flickering firelight, Saleene was fascinated with the structure and hard line of his jaw. His race was one she had not yet seen in all of her travels; he was large and overbearing in stature, built to work hard and long. Realizing that he'd been inspecting her as well, a blush stole across her face, drawing a small smile to replace the tension of the night.

“I'm sorry, I don't mean to be evasive; it's just been a long day.”

The innkeeper turned back to the inn, his shoulders were relaxed, signaling his acceptance of her presence. He cocked his head to the side and turned to look back at her, his voice a rough whisper across the night air. “Child...it's so cold out. Why are you alone?”

“I beg your forgiveness sir; I am just a weary traveler that began a journey many moons ago. Your inn is the first I have happened upon. Please forgive my intrusion.” She knew her response would seem plausible enough. Turning her words over in his head, the innkeeper nodded his understanding and without another word ventured back into the building. With the man gone, Saleene breathed a sigh of relief. She decided that she would take a few moments to enter the inn. She needed to get some food soon though, or she would not get much farther.

When finally she opened the door, the warmth from the fire enveloped her small form, reminding her of what it was like to go home each evening and bask in the serenity of belonging. Saleene noticed the innkeeper was back behind the bar, a single nod his only acknowledgment of her entrance. She glanced around at the patrons that inhabited the common room and decided she was safe, for now.

She moved her gaze around the room searching for some small refuge to retire to. Her eyes came upon a

small booth toward the rear. The pale glow of a dimming lantern was the only light for the spot.

“Hello my dear, would you like a seat?” A man’s harsh voice pushed through her thoughts. Turning her head toward the young looking man, it was apparent he wanted more than just idle chat.

“No thank you. I’m just here for dinner, and then I must go.” She gave him no chance to argue, her small body moved passed him in a silent show of disinterest. As she made her way to the darkened booth her eyes fell upon a young man and woman gazing lovingly into each other’s eyes.

Happiness filled her heart as she saw the purity of their feelings for each other shining from them. With her eyes beginning to mist over, she diverted her gaze back to the bar and the keeper of the inn behind it. His eyes were watching her every move. He was making sure his trust was not ill-founded. With a quick nod of her head at him, Saleene continued through the throngs of people to the secluded table. The moment she reached her seat, relief swept through her like a tidal wave.

“Finally.”

Resting her head back against the wall, she closed her eyes and allowed her senses to span out into the room; reading that which could not be seen with human vision. No sense of malevolence could be felt, nothing waited to spring upon her.

“What will you be having m’dear?”

An accent she’d not heard before broke through her fogginess. Opening her eyes, she found an older woman, her features reminiscent of people she’d seen trading with her village often.

“You seem a bit worse for wear, Miss. If you wish, we have a fine stew this eve, I could bring ye a bowl.”

Her words were said with the utmost care, as if waiting to see what kind of response she would receive. Not wanting to alarm the woman, Saleene simply nodded. “That sounds wonderful.”

Fatigue worked its way into her limbs; the distance she had traveled in the days past, must be catching up to her. Sighing, she knew she must find shelter soon; otherwise she would surely fall from exhaustion. Leaning

her head against the wall, she quietly sent up a prayer to the gods, thanking them for leading her there.

Saleene continued to listen to the sounds from within the inn; conversations mixed with laughter, filled the room. Above them all, a song seemed to float upon the air, bringing with it recognition. Opening her eyes, she looked to find the source of the melody, her gaze soon rested on the singer, an elderly woman. As if sensing her attention, the woman's eyes locked with Saleene's, deep green meeting bright violet.

Warmth began to flow from both the song she sang and the compassion in her eyes. To Saleene, it felt as if the woman could sense the weariness within her, and was attempting to provide her with some comfort. No matter how hard she tried, she could not divert her eyes; the power that came from within this woman completely amazed her.

Everything around Saleene darkened, and it seemed as if only she and this woman remained. A soft golden glow surrounded the singer, a halo of serenity that trickled into the air and moved through time and space to cascade along Saleene's weary body.

Feeling the fatigue slowly leave her body, Saleene's gaze finally broke from the old woman's to glance down at her hands and the napkin she clutched unknowingly. *How could such power be held by one person?* The question pulsed through her mind. Saleene found that she was nervous about returning her gaze to the old woman, feeling fearful of what she might find. Suddenly, the old woman was sitting silently in the seat across from her.

"Good day to you my child." The old woman's voice held a purity that humbled Saleene. It also seemed to have a calming effect on those she spoke to.

Saleene's gaze darted about the room. "How did you move so quickly?" The woman's answering smile was the only response to her question.

"I hope my song has helped to ease your burden, if but for a short spell."

The words she states are true, Saleene thought; and she did indeed feel that the weariness had lessened.

"Aye, I thank you for your song, it was very beautiful." What else could she say? *Yes, it was nice but*

you are scaring me and I don't know you, so go away? As if hearing her thoughts the old woman began to laugh, a whole hearted sound, bringing the stares of the other patrons over to the tiny corner of the room.

So many eyes were on them, Saleene began to feel very nervous. "I think I'd better go. Thank you." The woman raised her old weathered hand, and those within the inn returned to whatever they were doing before they had looked in their direction.

"I am sorry for the unwanted attention my child. Those within tend to tune to me when I speak. They are an odd lot of ragamuffins, but the bunch of them is good souls."

"Who are you? And what manner of song were you singing?" The words were out before she could sensor her thoughts. Frustrated by her lack of restraint, Saleene wished she could disappear into the shadows. She could feel the stare of the woman and slowly lifted her gaze, to find an amused grin spanning the old woman's face.

"Ah, child, 'tis good you should ask. The song is one as old as time itself, and as never-ending as the wind. It was written by the gods and given to those who pursue aiding others." Her words hit a cord in Saleene's memory. A song her mother used to sing to her as a babe, when she had bad dreams. Her gaze returned to the old woman.

"My mother used to sing something similar to me as a child. How is it you and she both know it?" She watched the woman, looking at her more closely to see if anything looked familiar, yet nothing rang a bell. Her hair was a brilliant white with touches of gold here and there; her eyes were the color of amethysts.

"I fear I do not know my child. I felt your fatigue beating at me, and as such, knew I must do what I could to aide you." The sincerity of her words helped to relax Saleene a bit more. She could sense only goodness in the old woman. "If you do not mind, I would like to do one more thing to help guide you on your path."

"You've done so much already, and it is greatly appreciated." Before she could utter another word the woman who had taken her order, brought her the stew she'd requested. The smell of the meal reminded Saleene just how hungry she was. How long had it been since she

had eaten a good warm meal? *Too long*, she acknowledged. She quickly thanked the server and began to eat.

Looking up, she noticed the old woman pulling out a dusky rose colored leather bag. Curiosity began to weed its way into her mind as she wondered what the bag contained. Was it herbs, oils, or a parchment of some sort?

“What is that?” A smile crossed the old woman’s face at Saleene’s question.

“Eat child, while I converse with the spirits.” Not allowing her a chance to argue, the old woman began to quietly chant something Saleene could not understand. The hair began to stand on the nape of her neck as fresh power started pooling into their little corner.

Knowledge shined in the old woman’s deep violet eyes, as she dumped out the contents of the pouch, onto the velvet cloth she’d laid upon the table. Ancient runes spilled out, displaying an artful design. Saleene’s eyes grew large, as the magnitude of what was unfolding before her registered.

“That’s not...?” *The woman was a seer!* That bit of knowledge nearly knocked Saleene out of her chair. Her kind believed that all the true practitioners of natural magick had long since perished from the lands. How had this old woman retained the knowledge? At first fear, then awe, replaced by curiosity, ran through her mind. There were so many questions she wanted to ask.

“Shh...child, and eat.” Saleene couldn’t help but watch as the old woman reached out her hand, and gently grasped Saleene’s. Holding tightly, she chanted something Saleene couldn’t understand. Soon after, she could feel warmth begin to seep into her skin, running up into her soul.

“The gods speak of a journey you have been sent upon my child.” Looking deeper into the runes, the old woman gasped as she read the design before her. “There is a great evil which has been let loose upon the lands. Mother Earth is crying out from the damage being inflicted upon her. You will avenge Mother Earth, you will battle the shadows.”

“How can you see this? Will I defeat it?” So many questions ran through her mind yet no answers were

forthcoming.

Amazed at the old woman's words, Saleene turned her gaze to the common room and those within. None seemed to hear the foretelling the old woman was providing, which comforted her. *It is better that innocents are not aware of that which is hunting the lands.* Though she was still not sure about the source or purpose of the evil, Saleene knew she would find it; and she alone would attempt to send whatever it was back to the pits of hell.

"My child, you are wrong." The old woman whispered, as if hearing her thoughts. "You will not be alone on this quest. There are others who were also sent to root out the evil which spreads like a plague across our world. I see four warriors, one of whom will perish at the hands of a great airborne creature. The other three will meet up with you soon." *How could she see this?* The power of the runes had always eluded Saleene's people, but their predictions were much respected.

"How will I know these companions? Where do I find them?" Annoyed that she couldn't understand the runes and also for blurting out her interest, Saleene quietly went back to finishing her meal, hoping the old woman had missed her inquires.

"Hush child, the runes tell only that you will not travel this road alone. When this will happen is not provided, only that it will. Now, the leader of the trio of men you will encounter is one of great power and courage; a member of a race time honored. But hear me in this my dear; there are many pitfalls and trials you will encounter, they will test not only your will, but your faith as well."

The old woman was warning Saleene, and she took her advice to heart, as she knew all too well that things seen on the spiritual plane were not to be disregarded. With a thud, the door to the inn flew open, bringing with it the sounds of malevolence carried on the night wind. Cold air filtered its way into the room, wrapping itself around her. Shivering with the premonition of danger which was not far away, Saleene looked out of the nearby window. A slight movement in the shadows caught her eye.

"Now who's come to hunt me?" She turned to see

what answers the seer could provide, only to find the seat across from her empty. *How could she have moved so quickly? Had I imagined the whole thing? Perhaps I'm more tired than I thought.*

Suddenly, she could hear the woman clearly within her mind. *My dear child, you did not imagine me, for I am very real. My time here is done and as such I must return to my home. Your journey will be one of physical, emotional and spiritual trials; but you have the strength of those before you, to aide you in your quest. Have faith in yourself, as I have faith in you.* With that, she felt the warmth once more of the old woman, and the same feelings of home that she reminded her of.

Saleene returned her thoughts back to her dinner and the night that still loomed ahead of her. She'd just begun to go back to her meal when a cry broke through the night. She dropped her fork, and closed her eyes; listening to the wind and the tales it would tell. *Someone was out there, an innocent being tortured. Okay, dinner's over.*

With her appetite lost; Saleene moved to get her sack, dropping a gold coin on the table for the innkeeper's troubles; and headed toward the door. Before she could place one foot out into the night, she felt the large hand of the innkeeper on her shoulder, stopping her for a moment.

"Wait, no one leaves my inn without their meal."

She turned to face the old man. Smiling, he placed into her hands a sack full of bread and cheese for her travels, a gentle smile crossing his face.

"Thank you." She whispered, touched more than she could say.

His eyes seemed to hold knowledge; he did not inquire as to where she was going, merely spoke in his quiet manner, "Be safe my child, for many dangers lurk in the shadows."

She patted his hand in thanks and left the comfort of the inn.

Chapter 2

Listening to the wind and the tales it told, Saleene closed her eyes, and began scanning the area; searching each of the four directions, desperate to locate the path she must take to find the source of the trouble.

The cry of a hawk circling above alerted her to the direction she must take. As she moved toward the path she must travel, she took one last look at the tiny inn and sent up a prayer that all inside would remain safe; then headed into the dead of night where an unknown evil waited in the shadows for her.

She streamed through the dense forest, her feet barely touching the ground, and noticed that the creatures who resided within had been silenced by an intrusion.

“What has spooked you my friends?” She knew that most forest animals sent warnings to their brethren, she worried that whatever was ahead of her was not of this world. The feel of the forest had taken on a foreign vibe. Sending a prayer to the gods, she continued to move through the thick underbrush of plants and trees. She stopped for a moment to listen to the whispers of the wind. A cold breeze suddenly slammed into her side, knocking her to the ground.

“Who’s out there?” Her voice carried on the night air as she regained her balance. Saleene had closed her eyes to determine the cause of the cold spot, when she felt a withered hand wrap around her arm.

Her eyes snapped open, taking in the ghoulish fingers that gripped her skin. The mere touch of him sent waves of nausea coursing through her, her stomach knotted up with the foul smell. Turning to look at the thing holding onto her arm, her jaw dropped at the sight of the monstrosity before her.

“Hello.” Its voice pierced right through her skull, like

hammers going off in her brain. Black and gray, with oozing flesh barely covering portions of its body, it could only be from the shadowed underworld. Red rimmed eyes that held no soul; its mouth was cracked in a wicked grin.

“What are you?” Its horrid teeth were protruding from its mouth, as if too large for its face, and he was dripping with crimson colored blood that could only be from its latest victim. Her confusion must have pleased it, for she swore its smile actually increased.

“I am death and destruction. I am nothing, yet I am what you fear most when you close your eyes at night.” *Riddles, why did they always give riddles?* Being so close to such evil was making her sick; her stomach protested the stench of its decayed flesh.

“Let go of me.” Her gaze dropped to the hand that gripped her. It looked to be more bones than anything else, but with long talons where fingers should have been. This could only be a minion of the evil that had been released, and it had taken her off guard.

“Now why would I let prey such as you go? My master will be very pleased with you.” *His master?* She needed to get out of there and fast. Saleene searched her memory for any spells that might give her an advantage, something, anything, to distance herself from it. An idea broke through her thoughts and warm laughter moved through her soul. *Would it work?* What did she have to lose? She turned her attention back to the thing still holding her arm, and forced as much strength into her voice as she could muster.

“Foul beast, release me and return back from whence you came.” She hoped her words sounded more confident than she actually felt. “You do not belong in this world. If you do not want to return of your own accord, I will be happy to dispatch you back.” She wasn’t sure if it would work, but she had to try, and hope was something she held onto tightly. She watched patiently for any reaction from her enemy, any signs of it backing off. Apparently, he did not believe the threat; because as he turned his attention back to her, licking his parched dead lips, he cracked the most sinister smile she had ever seen.

“Fool, do you think that you can harm me? You? A mere mortal?” Its laugh laced with mockery at her

position, conveyed his annoyance with her challenge. “I will enjoy ripping the skin from your bones and devouring your soul. You have not known pain as you will know it at my hands. Your screams will echo for all eternity and you will know no peace.” The finality in its voice froze Saleene to the core, causing her confidence to waiver.

Forget not where you are from, my dear. You have the strength of your ancestors flowing through your blood. Do not underestimate yourself. I sensed your power when we first met, and know what you can accomplish. Close your mind to the fear and let your spirit guide you. Believe me in this.

The words, like the brush of butterfly wings, went across her mind, and brought with them a renewed pool of energy unlike anything Saleene had ever felt before. Heeding the old woman’s advice, Saleene closed her eyes and searched within herself. Feeling the calming warmth of the old woman within her, Saleene centered herself once more. Building up the pure energy that had always resided within her kind; she focused on the decayed hand still grasping her arm. A bright white flame began to form along the ghouls hands, burning the remaining flesh off its grotesque limbs.

Screeching out a hideous sound into the night, the creature leapt back from the flame, amazed that it was not burning Saleene’s skin as well. Anger and hatred burned bright red in its sunken eyes. “How dare you burn me mortal? You shall take a very long time to die at my hands.” Its words were a mere hiss resonating from its fetid smelling mouth. He turned his hand over, inspecting the damage done. “You will be begging me for mercy before the night is over.” Slinking back and forth, the creature began readying itself to spring on her.

“You are very wrong foul creature. You do not know with whom you are pitting your skills up against. I will not be defeated by one such as you.” Forcing as much strength and purity into her voice, Saleene knew that the goodness which was inherent to her people would cause the beast to falter. “I have every intention of sending you back to the black abyss from whence you came.” As soon as she laid down her threat, she began chanting in the words of her ancestors. It was a chant she didn’t even

realize she knew until at that very moment; a chant that must have been imparted upon all her kind before their birth. Looking up at the creature, she whispered with a grin on her face.

“Beast black as night, wretched and foul, your heart of stone and soul is lost, you wander the earth decrepit and vile.” A burst of thunder roared from above. “Sky above, earth below, waters that run and winds that blow; heed my warning, honor my plea, Goddess of light who watches over me.” The tempo in her voice coupled with her natural purity, pierced into the skull of the minion, rendering it disoriented by the words. “Aide my fight, cast thy spell, send this creature from my sight and back to the bowels of hell.” As the words were sent upon the wind, Saleene raised her hand in front of her, palm up, daring the ghoul to watch, a grin spread wide across her face.

With hidden eyes, the ghoul stared as a luminescent ball of blue white flames began to form in her hand; the flames danced about erotically, their movement’s fluid and graceful. Fearful of being burned once more, the ghoul backed away, balancing itself on the ball of its feet. Attempting to tear its gaze from the fire burning before him, Saleene knew it would be readying itself to attack soon. What it did not know is that she was already preparing for it to strike, her mind figuring all the possible attacks the creature could make.

Reaching slowly behind her, she unsheathed her trusted blade from behind her back. Biding her time, she focused her energy; waiting for the moment she knew would come.

And it did come, only a few short moments later; heedless to any danger, high on the fresh kill it had made earlier, the beast hurled itself into the air and lunged toward her. With the speed of a jungle cat, Saleene side stepped just seconds before the fiend could connect with her, her body twisting gracefully, fluid and agile. Turning its malformed head in an attempt to sink its rotten teeth into her soft skin, he never saw the blade coming from below, connecting deep within his repulsive body, and severing it in two.

Realizing it had lost the battle, the demon roared out its anger, sending all animals in the area scampering for

cover. Slowly the body of the demon crumpled to the ground, its tainted blood beginning to spill onto the earth, infecting anything in its path. Seeing the damage being done to the forest floor, Saleene quickly hurtled the ball of flame she had used to deter the ghoul's attention, at the blood seeping into the ground. As it connected with the tainted blood, it ignited, instantly sending billows of noxious fumes into the night sky. Searching around, she made sure that no trace of the evil being remained to inflict further damage on some unsuspecting traveler.

Assured that she had thoroughly cleansed the area, she replaced her sword back into its sheath, making her way deeper into the forest. Fatigue began to set in; using her gifts always seemed to drain her at such times. Scouting around for a safe place to rest for the night, she wished that she could return to the inn. Shaking her head at the thought, she knew that if she returned it would bring whatever was hunting her to their front door.

"You've really gotten yourself into a mess this time Saleene," she muttered to herself. As she moved through the brush and foliage, her mind turned to the old woman she had met earlier. She definitely possessed powers unlike anything Saleene had seen before. She wished she had been able to inquire more before the woman had vanished. One thing she was certain of was that she had some form of a connection to the seer, how she did still eluded her. More so, the fact that she had spoken to her telepathically confirmed that they were linked in some way.

A brush against her leg drew her attention. Her gaze dipped to find the wolf that had been following her staring up. "I see you didn't stay away my friend." A nudge from the wolf her only answer. A sigh escaped Saleene's lips as her hand rubbed behind the ears of the creature. "I'm sorry my friend but things have gotten dangerous. I fear I must go from here on out on my own. You should go home now." As much as she loved the wolf's company she couldn't bear the thought of harm coming to her friend. Seconds passed and Saleene feared her friend wouldn't go home. With a shake of his furry head, he loped back into the forest, a haunting howl his only goodbye.

Emerging from the forest into the open grasslands, a

stench riding the wind caught Saleene's attention. She moved her gaze in every direction until she found the source of the odor. In the distance, a form lay on its side; there was no discernable movement to indicate what it was.

As she approached the figure, the pungent odor increased dramatically, sending her stomach into convulsions. It reminded her of when she had found a dead bird who had already begun to decay, only this time it was stronger. Black and charred, it was difficult to determine exactly what it was. As she approached it she noticed a necklace grasped within a burnt hand, dangling like a symbol in the night.

"Should I?" She breathed her question into the wind, debating about whether to remove the trinket or not. Tapping out a rhythm with the toe of her boot, the sound echoing on the evening wind, she considered. The answer seemed obvious, though she hated to disturb the body.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me." She knew it was the only way to be able to inform relatives of the person's death. Gently she removed the necklace from the charred hand, fingers cracking in the process.

The moment her fingers touched the metal a series of images flooded through her mind. None of it was smooth, but thrown together, as if a kaleidoscope of thoughts were meshed together. There were other men and a beast, a lot of pain, enormous wings, an arrow; a tall powerful man with deep blue eyes, red blood everywhere and wolves. The series of images made no sense, but she knew they must have some profound meaning. Her gaze drifted back to the man's body and she could only pray that his death had been a quick one. Inspecting the necklace further she noticed it appeared to be quite large, which led her to believe that the victim must be a man. It was mostly made of gold, but was also littered with gems. It was apparent that he must have been from an affluent family, unless of course, he was a thief, but Saleene did not get that sense.

The design was very unusual, not one she'd remembered seeing before in her travels. Squiggly lines criss-crossing in an intricate pattern reminiscent of the old ways, seemed to form some type of knot symbol.

Turning it over to look at the back of the amulet, she could see an etching in the gold. She spoke the inscription reverently, "Diogel Taith, my son Julian, Buan Atgor. Safe Journey, my son Julian, Swift Return."

"Who were you Julian, and who did you leave behind?" Her heart went out to the family who would never see his return. Not wanting to leave him there for wild animals to pick apart, Saleene reached into her leather satchel and withdrew a pinch of bloodroot and thistle, which would aide in delivering the man's poor soul into the afterlife. Sprinkling the bloodroot onto the body, she purified the remains of any taint of evil. Raising her hand to her lips she blew the thistle into the wind, calling upon the spirits to guide his soul to the ancestors who awaited his return. As she finished chanting the ritualistic words, the remaining shell caught fire, turning into a crimson flame. A quick wind rose up, gathering the ashes and carrying them back to his kin.

Still, one question raced through her mind. How in the world did the man get here and what had killed him? There were no tracks leading to the body, no discernable foot prints. He looked to be a fairly large man, so anyone carrying him should have left tracks, but the grass was smooth. If there were no tracks, and nothing to indicate that he'd been carried across the field, then that could only mean...

"Oh God, please no." At the same time the thought popped into her head, a large swoosh could be heard above.

Chapter 3

Raising her eyes upward, she could see a large creature flying in the night sky above. At once, knowledge seeped in as to what had killed the man. Gargoyle! She had only heard tales of the monstrous creatures; never once had she thought to see one. She watched its movements. Thankfully, it was unaware of her presence, as it was still reeling from the kill it had made. Saleene took a quick glance around, searching the area for some form of cover from the beast circling above.

Knowing that gargoyles had excellent night vision did not help to boost her confidence, but she banked on the fact that it was still recovering from the killing it had done. She could only hope the beast had not spotted her as of yet. As she scanned the area, her eyes came upon an old tree that was lying on its side. It must have been there for many years as vines and shrubbery had already begun to grow on top of it. Saleene quickly made her way to the cover of the tree, making sure not to draw attention to her as she moved.

She could still hear the creature flying above, so for the moment she knew she was safe. *Where had it come from?* Last she'd heard, most of the gargoyles had been destroyed by the ancients and any remaining ones were locked in a frozen grave. The only answer had to be the evil she hunted. Perhaps it had conjured the beasts to do its bidding.

In the distance, she could hear others approaching the open field. She needed to move. Nothing more could be done for the fallen man, and those who were approaching were well enough armed to deal with the monstrosity flying above. Turning quietly, she made her way back out from under the log and kept low to the ground.

The moment her feet hit the interior of the forest she picked up her pace to increase her distance from the edge

of the grove. Lifting her face to the wind, she breathed in the purity of the night, allowing the forest to guide her to shelter. Yet again it provided her with the information she needed, and more. She now knew, that the men who'd been approaching, had engaged the beast in combat; she prayed that they would be victorious.

She moved through the forest, allowing the tranquility of the night to flow around her. Allowing her gaze to drift upward at the canopy of trees, she watched as the moon's rays filtered through the leaves in shades of silver and gray. It was an iridescent web of light cascading down onto the forest floor.

"How beautiful, don't you think?" Her eyes lowered to a wolf that padded next to her. "I see you didn't take my advice from earlier." She'd always felt close to the animals of the forest, but especially to the wolves that wandered throughout the lands.

She sensed that the evil was gone for now. The woodland creatures had begun to sing songs into the night. The innocence of the music flowed like a river, engulfing her in their mystical notes, relaxing her as nothing else could. Eyes shut; she allowed the wind to bring with it all the sounds of the jungle and the animals within.

Saleene focused her attention back to the wolf his stance not faltering. "You really must go my friend. There are evil things happening and I couldn't stand to see harm come to you." As much as she enjoyed his company Saleene gave a mental push urging the creature to go home. "I'll find you later. Now it's time you went home to your family." The wolf's only reaction was a short howl into the night as it pranced into the forest, his movements nearly undetectable.

How she hated to lose her traveling companion but she couldn't chance him falling into the evil. She had always felt at ease within the confines of the trees, even as a mere babe. She would lose herself in the deep forest for hours at a time, playing with the animals. Raising her arms to the sky, she appeared like a mystical creature of the night, at one with her surroundings. She allowed the forest creatures to bring her news of shelter close by, a place to finally rest her weary head. Turning her head,

Saleene ventured deeper into the forest and toward an abandoned shack.

She moved swiftly through the forest, her feet never making a sound, as she rounded a corner to find the run-downed shack.

“Wonderful. Such a well kept place to spend the night.” Her laughter carried on the wind, the sound light and airy.

Saleene glanced over the shack, taking in the condition it had been left in. It had not been used in many moons. The forest had already begun to reclaim it. Tree roots uprooted the foundation, while vines looked to be squeezing the remaining life from the structure. Looking more closely, she noticed a hole where the door must have been and there were no windows to speak of. The roof appeared to have been spared any major damage, which was a good thing, as the wind whispered of a storm brewing in the distance.

As she crept into the shack, Saleene allowed her acute senses to survey the inside for any hint of danger. She felt nothing. Not even discarded remnants of its former owner. Walking toward the middle of the interior, she rested her leather satchel on a smooth rock, turning toward a circle of stones next to it. Picking up twigs, she put together kindling, to start a fire before the storm arrived.

“Ah, warmth at last.” Just as the flames had increased, the cry of a crow alerted her to strangers in the area. Tracing a mental path to the bird, Saleene utilized its keen sight to locate those who approached, and determined how much time she had before they arrived at the shack. Men...three of them, all armed. “Damn.” The word escaped her lips before she could silence her thought.

As thunder rumbled in the background, a flash of lightning arched through the sky, in an array of patterns that foretold of battle. Saleene unsheathed her blade and faded into the darkness. Her ears perked at muffled footsteps moving outside, rustling the leaves as they inched closer. Listening intently, she discerned at least two of them moving in the darkness, but her instincts warned that the third was also present. She watched as

the strangers approached the entrance, looking around for any hidden traps. Even though they attempted to be quiet, her acute hearing and the aide of the creatures in the trees provided her with continual information.

A moment later, two men entered and headed toward the fire. They crept to opposite sides of the shack, never once letting up their guard. They were good; she had to give them that. She could tell they were searching for the source of the fire, to determine if the individual was friend or foe.

Who were these men?

Without warning, she felt the third man's presence close to her. The moment the information settled in her mind she spun around and touched her dagger to the throat of a very large man hidden within the shadows. Their gazes locked and she nearly lost her breath at the deep blue eyes staring back at her. An arrogant smile crossed his masculine face as he indicated to her the sword pointing at her heart.

"Who are you and what gives you the right to enter my camp?" Her voice moved on the night air in a light whisper. She scanned the area to make sure no others lay in wait. Staring back at him, she refused to relinquish her blade, and held her breath until he answered her question.

"We are travelers, pursuing an unseen evil which permeates our lands and looks to devour all who reside within its path." The deepness of his voice lightly caressed her skin like the petals of a rose, his deep piercing eyes delved into her soul.

"Why are you here? You could have easily found another camp." Her voice held a clear challenge to him to deny that they'd not seen her campfire and had come to investigate. They inched closer toward one another, to test the resolve and strength of the other, neither giving a hint of trust.

After a few minutes passed Saleene watched as the warrior lowered his sword and sheathed it behind his back. She lowered her dagger and he moved toward the fire, knelt down, and rubbed his hands together over the heat of the flames.

Saleene approached the trio of men and secured her

weapon before sitting at the fire to regain her warmth. *Who were these men and where did they come from?* She looked in the direction of the lone warrior, his frame still and strong. Each time her eyes moved in his direction, the blue eyed stranger would glance her way. Steel blue meeting deep green. The action caused her blood to rush through her veins like molten lava. It was odd, but she felt as if she'd seen those eyes before.

"Sir, have we met?" Saleene inquired. "You seem very familiar to me."

At her question, the stranger's right eyebrow raised in an amused way, causing her teeth to grind. *How dare he act bemused!* Annoyed, Saleene moved further back into the shadows, her skin sensitized by the path his eyes traveled across her skin.

"I'm sorry miss, but I do not believe we have met previously. I would remember someone who'd attempted to end my life too soon." Chuckling, his eyes registered the fact that Saleene once more gripped the dagger she'd just recently put away.

"Sorry, force of habit." Why she was apologizing to him eluded her, but she found she wanted to know more about him.

Embarrassed by her actions, Saleene once again put away her trusted blade and averted her eyes from the stranger; never noticing the stark emotions that seemed to be brewing in his deep blue eyes.

"My name is Dartian Delaru. My companions are Raku Vasin, a huntsman from the clan Ravenclaw, and Jeremiah Neva, from the neighboring village in Zulisa. And whom, may I ask are you?"

His movements were fluid and sure, his voice laced with a challenge. Saleene noticed that his eyes never left her face. Everything began to fade out, until it was just the two of them, the fire embracing them in its warmth, caressing their bodies. Even the shadows seemed to wrap around them in a haze.

Saleene turned his name over in her mind, searching for recognition. She'd heard of Raku's clan, they were a proud bunch, held in high esteem with the elders. But Dartian, she wasn't sure of. His name felt familiar, as did his presence, but not in the sense of physically meeting

the man. Perhaps she had previously heard his name in passing, and in doing so, recalled the descriptions associated with this powerful man. She lifted her chin in defiance, as she stared deep into his eyes, conveying her refusal to back down.

“I am Saleene, a wanderer from a distant land.” She revealed no more and she cared not if they wondered why. She did not know these strangers, and refused to provide any further information, until she knew their plans.

“It is good to meet you, Saleene.” Raku diplomatically broke the silent war of wills. “I see we are all on a mission. It is good you’ve found such a nice place for the night. Forgive our intrusion.” She couldn’t help but smile at Raku, his small concession was a sweet gesture.

Behind her, a small grunt drew her attention. Her gaze moved from the fire back to Dartian. His eyes seemed shadowed; as if he’d seen too much death, and his soul had been marked.

“I was lucky to come upon this place. I won’t be here long.” She couldn’t move her gaze from his, curiosity about him pounded through her brain. Something deep inside her cried out that there was so much more to the man in front of her, and to her feelings for him, but she pushed it aside, fearful of what it could mean.

Then, within the darkness of the shack, soft laughter echoed in her mind, as the old woman from the inn invaded her thoughts with her enjoyment of the situation. She shook her head and attempted to clear the foggyess that had invaded her mind from the intrusion of the old woman’s laughter and the memory of the vision she had foretold.

“Is something wrong?” Dartian’s deep voice penetrated her thoughts, bringing her back to the present.

At that moment awareness sunk in, her heart beat increased in tempo. *Could these be the men in the old woman’s vision?* The foretelling by the ancient runes could not be discounted, but she had never been the recipient of a reading before.

Looking over at the men who circled the fire, Saleene allowed her senses to fan out, soaking up any information she could obtain. The knowledge that seeped into her nearly brought Saleene to her knees. The battles they had

already been through and the losses they had endured were nearly overwhelming.

Closing her eyes, it felt like pieces of a puzzle that had lain dormant and missing for many moons, were suddenly put into place. How could the old woman have known? How could the runes have foretold this? Looking at the men before her she felt intertwined with their fate, she also knew fate could have a cruel sense of humor when it wanted to. Breathing in, Saleene had an odd feeling that nothing from that moment on would be simple.

“Saleene?”

While deep in thought she sensed darkness creep into the warmth of the fire lit shack and her skin began to prickle. Her head shot up, as her eyes searched out into the darkness. *What has found us?* All she could sense was a thick veil attempting to choke the life from the fire.

“What is it?” Raku inquired as he readied his bow.

“I am unsure. Something is stalking us, but whom it targets, I do not know.” Saleene closed her eyes and reached deep within to scan the area and find the source of the thick, noxious evil. Her acute senses followed the trail of hate. Instantly, an oily presence invaded her mind, filling her with such coldness, that she felt she might never again be warm.

Strong hands grabbed her, pulling her to her feet and into warm steady arms.

“Stop” Dartian whispered into Saleene’s ear, his breath caressing her skin. “Be very still Caru, something is out there and I am not sure what they are looking for. It is not of this world, and using any weapon other than steel, might not be a good idea.”

The arrogance in his voice broke through her web of despair. But more than that, she was all too aware of the heat that had seeped into her from his closeness. What was it about him that seemed to be so familiar to her and why? Bothered by her intense reaction to being so close to him, she released herself from his solid grip and glared at him for making her feel something she should not.

“Don’t do that again.” Her voice reverberated through the small shack.

“What? You were caught by something; I was there to

help you.” *Of course, he would give a plausible explanation.*

For now, traveling together would most likely prove to be beneficial to all involved; but being too close to Dartian was something she wanted to avoid. The man was pure alpha male from head to toe. Power dripped from him like a second skin, and his gaze burned into her soul. This man was lethal to any woman, and she would prefer to keep as much of a distance as possible.

She turned instead to the man called Raku. “You are a huntsman are you not?”

Dartian had moved into the shadows, only his eyes were able to be seen. That alone made her skin burn as his gaze left a trail across her body. Rubbing her arms, she tried to remove the foreign sensation from her body.

Raku’s eyes were alight with mischief at some joke she could not possibly fathom. Clearing her throat, she moved her focus to the brilliantly crafted bow he held close, caressing it with the utmost care. In her travels she had seen almost all kinds of weapons and knew every type of tree out there. This bow, however, she had never seen in all her travels and it piqued her curiosity.

“I have never seen a bow fashioned such as yours. What type of wood is it crafted out of?”

Chapter 4

From the shadows, Dartian's gaze never left Saleene's small figure. He took in every inch of her body, every curve. He had never seen a woman such as her, and that fact alone heightened his interest. Indeed, she was smaller than most of his people, and her hair looked like flowing gold.

He could tell she was a fighter; her movements at their first meeting were fluid, like a running stream. Something deep inside him wanted to grab her and hold on with all his might.

He diverted his eyes, and stared into the night as the clouds moved in. Oh how he missed the jungle at night. Back in his village he had spent every night out with the forest creatures, listening to the evening ballads they heralded to the gods.

He returned his gaze back to Saleene; and instantly knew that he would follow her to the ends of the world, in search of that which threatened them all. Listening, he smiled as he heard his friend tell her of his homeland, and his prized bow handed down through out the years.

"Aye Miss, I am a hunter for my people. My lands are far from here and the wood used to fashion this bow is very sacred." Raku's voice beamed with pride as he told his tale. "The wood is called Lome; in your language, the nearest translation I can give would mean Duskwood. It is very rare and unfortunately many of the trees have been ravaged by unknown fires."

Saleene could hear the sadness etched in his words, compassion for his people began to rise in her heart at their plight. So much evil, so much destruction that reached much farther than her elders had envisioned. The mere thought of others being harmed and destroyed, as her village had been, brought a fresh rush of rage coursing through her blood.

“I am sorry to hear of the loss of your sacred trees. It seems as if many evil things are happening within the world. I am beginning to think that the source for most of the troubles is one and the same. There could be no other reason for so many bizarre things to happen at the same time. It would make no sense.” Saleene began to feel as if she were drowning in a sea of emotions, all at once bombarding her from out of no where.

“Aye, many villages have been destroyed but no one knows by what. It’s a mystery we are hoping to resolve.” Determination etched his words as the grip on his bow increased.

Saleene turned her attention to Raku. “We will find the source of this evil and remove it. By doing this, balance will be restored to our lands, resetting the circle of life. I promise you this.” Eyes closed, she remembered the destruction that her village had sustained. It brought fresh tears shimmering in her deep green eyes; an open sore on her soul.

A sigh escaped Saleene’s lips as she returned her attention to her newfound traveling companions; each watched her with guarded emotions. Exiting the time-worn shack, she peered up into the night sky; each star twinkled in a kaleidoscope of colors. Sending a prayer upon the wind she hoped that with their combined efforts, whatever should lie in wait for them, they would be able to defeat. As if to signal understanding of her plea, the gods began to shower the sky with thousands of falling stars, each twinkling in unison before dying out.

Amazed at the display, she allowed a soft giggle to sing out into the night sky, the beauty of it humbled her. She did not notice the steel blue eyes that watched her every move, possession burning in their depths. Turning back into the shelter, Saleene moved over to her bedroll and without any acknowledgement of her new companions, snuggled into the covers, finally allowing sleep to engulf her.

They looked at one another, confusion about the night sky’s display a singular emotion among them all.

“Ok, turn in for the night men. Tomorrow will be here soon enough.” They nodded their agreement. Raku

and Jeremiaah went about preparing makeshift beds for themselves and settled in for the night.

Dartian secured the hut, making sure to cover each opening so that nothing could intrude upon them while they slept.

As he neared Saleene's sleeping figure he could feel the heat in his blood begin to rise at the close proximity of their bodies. Shocked by his reaction, he moved past her to get to his own bedroll. As he relaxed down on the ground, he couldn't help glancing in her direction, like a small child hoping to discover a surprise. The moment his gaze drifted toward her face he found deep emerald eyes staring back at him. The jolt of the connection sent lava coursing through his veins, making his trousers feel much too confining for his liking.

"I'm sorry." His words practically lodged in his throat. He turned his head to face the wall and prayed that she hadn't noticed the reaction he was having being so near to her. He closed his eyes in a vain attempt to feign sleep and help regain his balance, every breath deep and rough.

After a few moments he began to relax and the uneasiness he'd felt finally diminished. Rolling onto his back, he'd begun to drift off into slumber when somewhere in the back of his mind he could have sworn he heard her soft laughter filling him with warmth. Dartian opened his eyes once more, finding only the quiet darkness of the cabin and the sounds of those sleeping within. He moved his eyes to her sleeping form and confirmed that she too was asleep. Perhaps he was so tired he was hearing things that weren't there. With a slight shrug of his broad shoulders, Dartian closed his eyes and allowed the calmness of sleep to overtake him.

Shades of grey and pink invaded Saleene's slumber. It caused her to stir, breathing in the crisp morning air. She opened her eyes toward the sound of the others still fast asleep, their breaths a quiet song in the morning light.

"Good." She began to recall the events of the prior evening, going over all that had occurred thus far. Cobwebs seemed to cover her thoughts so that she glanced about the room and took in her new traveling

companions. She wondered if the old woman was correct in her prediction.

“Good morning Caru.” A sensual voice echoed behind her. “I hope you had pleasant dreams.”

His words drifted over her skin like petals of a flower, each syllable caused her blood to thicken and heat. *How long had he been watching her? Why did she react this way?* Not wanting him to realize the effect he had on her, Saleene retreated to the door and opened it to allow the morning breeze to dispel the tension in the room.

“My dreams were fine from what I can recall.” Her gaze drifted out into the distance as she watched the sun rise across the horizon. The colors were so beautiful and serene; it always took her breath away. She loved the way the plants came alive as the sun began its journey through the sky. The leaves were still wet from being kissed by the dew, and the forest creatures arose to meet the day, it was a beauty like no other.

“It is a beautiful morning, is it not?” His warm breath sent heat waves trailing down the nape of her neck. She tried desperately to not allow him to see her reaction. Instead, Saleene retreated out into the forest with the hope that she might find solace within its confines. Try as she might to evade him, she could still sense his eyes following her movements. The action annoyed her, though she was not sure if it was at his behavior or her own reaction to him. She knew she could not avoid him forever; she turned her attention to him, her stance challenging him to push her too far.

“Don’t you like the forest in the morning?” Now he was baiting her, teasing her even.

“Of course, I love the forest in the morning. What kind of stupid question is that? Don’t you have things to do?”

“Not at the moment. There is beauty everywhere in the forest, don’t you agree?”

Instead of backing off, as she’d hoped, he cracked a smile that she thought should have been declared illegal. The sensuality that dripped from his grin would bring any woman in the vicinity to her knees, begging to be held by him. Rolling her eyes, she glared back at him in an attempt to dismiss his charm.

“Yes, it is very beautiful.” She continued deeper into the forest as she deliberately tried to avoid eye contact with him. She could not see him, but her senses told her he was but a few steps behind, keeping pace easily. She attempted to avert her attention from this powerful man whose mere presence alone set her nerves on edge. He acted as her shadow, never fully leaving her side, quietly keeping stride with her.

Frustrated that he would not go back to the shack, she turned quickly, bumping into his strong chest. The action made Saleene lose her footing and fall. Strong arms caught her before she fell to the ground.

“What do you want and why are you following me?” With a slight push against his rock hard chest, Saleene removed her body from his grasp and retreated farther away from him. She prayed he would leave her be.

“Shouldn’t you be checking on your friends instead of following me?” Her words left her lips before she could stop them. She was amazed at her lack of control around him.

“Not really, but if you insist.” Instead of a protest, Dartian raised an amused eyebrow and said nothing further. He simply shrugged his massive shoulders and turned, heading back towards the encampment. For some reason his departure bothered her, as if deep inside she wanted to desperately call out to him to stay. *What was wrong with her?*

At a loss as to why she felt so detached from things now that she was alone, Saleene went about gathering herbs and plants to place inside her leather satchel. Assured that she had all she needed to continue, she sent a prayer upon the morning breeze to thank the gods for the treasures they had provided. She also asked for their aide as the group continued on with their journey. Turning once more towards the shack and the new traveling companions she’d acquired, Saleene wondered if she should fear them, despite how much she needed their help.

Chapter 5

As she entered the shack, she noticed that all the gear had been packed up neatly except for her own items. It was as if no one had ever slept in the shelter. Amazed at the efficiency of the men, she looked around, her eyes unerringly finding him. *Dartian*. What was it about this man that intrigued her so? He was definitely the leader of the group. His presence alone commanded obedience and loyalty. He had a hard edge to his gestures, like a god of old watching over the mortals of their world. And power, curse the gods, power seemed to stick to him like a second skin. Yet for all his stature she sensed only goodness and honor in him. Yet, something else; some underlying conflict just below the surface of his calm demeanor nagged at her. *What was he hiding?*

“Caru, we must head out, if we wish to keep a good pace.” The words jolted Saleene from her thoughts as the sound of his voice caressed her skin.

“I know. Give me a second to grab my stuff and we can go. If you wish to go on ahead I’ll be fine on my own.” Why did he keep calling her Caru? What did it mean? She would have to ask him later if he didn’t cause her to forget.

No amount of rubbing her arms could alleviate the chills that moved up and down her body. Saleene switched her attention to putting together her items into her leather bag. She knelt down next to her bed roll to pick up her items, paying close attention to each as if it was special to her. The room remained silent and she felt as if she were being watched by those who surrounded her.

Standing back up she turned to glance around the shack once more, to confirm that nothing of their presence would remain. Heading toward the door, she accidentally touched Dartian as she exited; her body a gentle caress against his. She felt him lean down until he almost

touched her head, a quick intake of his breath startled her.

“After you, Caru.”

She smelled like heaven. Dartian breathed in Saleene's scent and knew he would always be able to find her now. Dartian's senses came alive as the smell of violets and sandalwood invaded his nose. Mesmerized by the sheer joy of being near her, Dartian swore he would follow her where ever she may go to ensure her safety. Her battles would now be his, her life his main concern.

“Lead the way; do you have a specific direction you were headed to?” He couldn't help but egg her on, her fiery nature made her beauty much more potent.

“I was headed toward the north. No real reason, so if you have a better idea then out with it.” She was annoyed with him; that was apparent.

“That's fine with me...let's continue on.”

As they moved through the forest, the creatures stayed close to Saleene as if they wanted to protect her from the others. It amazed him that she never noticed the occurrence, as if this were nothing unusual for her. So at ease in the forest, she seemed to glide through the foliage, never hitting a stray rock or snapping a twig. The way her hair lifted in the morning wind reminded Dartian of strands of golden silk blowing in the spring breeze. She was so at ease in the woodlands, Dartian swore she could be a grove nymph that wandered through the forest, protecting those that lived within.

They continued through the woods and Saleene kept her senses alert as she scanned the area in search of anything that did not belong. How she loved the forest. Even as a child she would spend most of her time under a canopy of trees, playing with the animals of the forests. Her mother had always tried to deter her from traveling too far into the dense foliage, but it never did any good.

Saleene could remember the closeness she felt to the creatures that roamed the land, the special bond she had with them. One day in particular stood out in her mind.

It was late evening and she had been maybe thirteen summers old when she was alerted to the call of an injured animal. She'd picked up her leather satchel had run into the forest to find the creature and ease its pain.

As she rounded a group of trees, she saw in her mind, the vision of a small wolf. His fur was black as midnight, his eyes deep pools of blue topaz. Her heart had broken when she realized that he had his foot stuck in a trap made by poachers in the area.

Desperate to locate the right path to the animal, Saleene found that the pup was broadcasting out its fear. She tuned her mind to the same path as the wolf pup and began to send him waves of warmth and calming energy. She prayed she could obtain the cub's acceptance. As she drew closer, the wolf looked up at her with confusion in its eyes.

"Oh...you poor thing." She'd cooed. "How awful it is that this was left to trap you." She'd continued to send reassurances to the animal. One thing had surprised her though; the thought patterns of the cub were very different than any other animal she had encountered. She'd refused to divert her attention to the difference and had continued to work on freeing the cub.

As soon as she had it removed from the trap, the wolf attempted to sprint away. She retained her hold on the small creature and continued to send warmth and reassurance to the animal to calm its fear. "I know you want to leave but let me heal your wound before you go."

She did not allow the pup time to make good its escape before she grasped some of its deep blue- black fur, soothing with her voice as she focused her energy on the cuts. As was her gift, she was able to allow the healing energies to flow from a pool deep within her and out into the injured paw. She knew it felt the warmth seeping into its paw and the wolf began to relax, curiosity taking the place of the fear.

Remembering back to that night in the forest, her heart grew lighter at the thought of the time she'd spent with the young wolf. After she had assured herself that the wound was going to heal, the wolf moved closer to nuzzle against her hand. The connection she felt for the wolf was stronger than anything she'd felt before with a creature of the forest. Perhaps it was due to the fear she felt in its mind and the amount of energy she had used to calm it. Sadly, she never saw the wolf again after that, but she did dream of it often, though as she aged, the

dream seemed to change slowly.

The dream. She had not thought of it in so long. It would always begin as it did that day and then slowly over the years it evolved into so much more. She would dream that she was running through the woods, the wolf following close behind. Suddenly, she would stop to turn and smile and instead of her wolf being there, a tall dark stranger would be in its place. His appearance should have shocked her, but she felt as if she knew him. She'd move closer to see his face, then suddenly; he would fade into the mist with only his blue eyes penetrating the darkness.

A crack behind her reminded Saleene she was not alone. Shaking herself from the memories of her childhood, Saleene continued to move through the forest. Her traveling companions never far from her side, and for once, she felt safe on the journey she had been sent on.

"Tell me about yourself Jeremiih. Who are your people?" She hoped to keep her mind away from the tall dark warrior who accompanied her. Instead, she focused on learning more about his friends, who followed him without question. Jeremiih looked back at Dartian and sent him a silent inquiry, seeming to ask whether answering her question would be prudent.

Dartian nodded his approval. Jeremiih looked back at Saleene and her large emerald eyes. Feeling completely lost in the depths of her stare, Jeremiih mused that a man could lose himself completely in eyes such as hers. A rough grunt from behind him jarred Jeremiih from the path his thoughts had taken.

"My people are called The Draug. We hail from the lands of Laughna." Jeremiih could see that Saleene recognized the name but could not place the stories associated with them. Jeremiih smiled, his eyes shined at the thought of his clan and the love he felt for them.

"There are many stories that are associated with my people, most are elaborate stories handed down from generation to generation. Some are far fetched, but make good tales for when the moon is bright and the ale is flowing."

And there were many tales, he mused, some he would never be able to find out if they were true or not. But he

had always loved sitting by the fire to hear all that his father had told.

Saleene vaguely remembered the story her mother had told her and her sister, Kara, when they were still young.

"I recall such stories from my youth. One of which entailed a group of women from my village who had ventured too far from home. While they relaxed near a stream, a pack of mountain lions emerged upon them."

Saleene watched as the men focused their attention on the tale she told, their eyes alight with interest.

"I don't think I've heard this one, go on." Jeremiah implored.

"Frightened by the suddenness of the attack, none of the women were able to call for help." It had always amazed her, the way her mother had relayed the story so well, and it brought on a sense of longing to be back home. How she missed the warm days and the times she spent among the children of the village.

"So what happened if they couldn't call for help? Didn't they carry weapons of any kind?" Of course a warrior would ask that, though she'd thought the same when she was a child.

"No, they hadn't. Not knowing what else to do, the women picked up whatever weapons they could find near them. Unfortunately, since they were near the stream there was not much available. Of the five women who were there, three of them decided to take their chances and run."

"They tried to run from lions? How daft is that?" Raku muttered. Saleene knew that running would instantly cause the lions' instinctive reaction to give chase, but she didn't need to see the accusation that shone in his eyes. "Are your people not taught the basics of survival?" His words were meant to inquire, but they hit her like a whip. She dismissed his inquiry and turned back to face Jeremiah and resume the story.

"Now, even though they did run, only three of the lions actually gave chase. Unfortunately they did catch up to those who had fled on foot and they paid for their mistake with their lives. Now, the two women who'd stayed looked to the other for an idea on how to deal with

the remaining lion. One of the women, her name was Natasha, had picked up a floating branch from the stream. The other woman had picked up a series of stones." As she told the story, the words seemed to flow like the stream she envisioned in her story.

"Did they live? Where do my people come into the story?" His lack of patience brought a fresh round of giggles to her lips. The man was as bad as her best friend, Aleixxia. Neither of them had the patience to wait for the end of a story. "Well, it is said that the one who had picked up the stones began throwing them at the lion in hopes it would cause it to flee in fear. Now in her defense, the lion did move away a few feet but only because it was interested in seeing what had been thrown." She loved how in tuned the men were as she spoke, their eyes never leaving her face. At the same time, she felt Dartian's stare, the weight of his gaze leaving a heated trail across her skin.

"Well? Did she get away?" The men asked in unison, their voices reminiscent of children waiting to hear the end of a wonderful tale.

Saleene returned her attention back to the story, her eyes darting from one man to the other. "Unfortunately, the woman who had thrown the stones believed it was working and turned to run in the opposite direction. That was a big mistake on her part. The moment she took flight, the lion turned his massive head and leapt after her. They say he devoured her in one swallow." The image of the giant lion as it sunk its teeth into the woman's flesh sent chills up Saleene's arm.

"So all the women died up to this point but the one? Um, Natasha you said her name was?" The look on Jeremiah's face gave Saleene the impression that he recognized it from the past. "Aye, all the women had perished but Natasha. She knew she could not out distance the lion so she held steadfast to the branch she'd removed from the stream. Now when Natasha looked at the branch, she noticed it was made from the ancient Cinchona Tree. They say she began to chant while she waved the sacred branch around her."

Saleene couldn't help but watch the interest from the men continue to grow, their nods and murmurs an

acceptance of her tail.

“I’ve heard of this branch before, it’s very old and sacred.” Dartian’s words penetrated through the rest of the men’s. So deep and strong, his voice alone commanded attention and she was not immune to it. Her eyes drifted over to his and for a moment she felt lost in his stare. The man was the epitome of power and it emanated from him, even though he stood farther in the shadows than the rest.

“This is true Dartian; I’ve heard the same thing.” Each man nodded his head, their agreement falling short of impressing her.

“Go on Caru, I’m curious to see what befell our young woman.” Her heart stuttered at his words.

“Well, once the spell was cast, a strong barrier was erected around Natasha. Try as the lion might, he could not break through it to get to her. Natasha was so happy that she’d been able to protect herself from being mauled by the lion that she was not prepared for what he did next.” She paused for effect and nearly laughed out loud when Jeremiiah began to say something but then thought better of it.

“What happened?” Raku however, couldn’t hold it in.

“The one thing she was not prepared for was that instead of getting bored with not being able to get to her, the lion sat down and attempted to wait her out. This, of course, presented a new problem. Since she was encased in the barrier, she could not contact any of her people through the enchanted protection. After hours had passed and the daylight turned into early evening, Natasha began to feel utterly hopeless about being able to get away.” The loneliness the woman must have felt tore at Saleene’s heart.

“The poor woman. Wouldn’t any of her people come looking for her? She had to feel so alone out there, so desperate for some kind of aide.” Of course she had, and Saleene knew how that felt. The kind of despair that worked its way through your bones until you swore each day would be the last.

As Saleene glanced up she noticed that Dartian’s stare had become gentler, as if he wanted to help soften the pain she felt for the plight of the woman. The show of

concern warmed Saleene's heart and allowed her to breathe easier as she continued. Returning her gaze to Jeremiaah, she could sense he was trying to recall the story and its ending.

"So what did she do?" Raku, who had been silent most of their travels, inquired. She decided she liked having their attention.

"Well, after a few hours had passed, Natasha decided she had to try and find a way to divert the lion's attention so she could release the barrier long enough to send word to her people. As she looked around she heard another animal approach from the western woods. The next thing she knew a large black timber wolf emerged from the trees. They say his fur was black as midnight."

She could have sworn the moment she mentioned the wolf all three men's breaths shuddered.

"You've heard this before? Your faces speak of recognition." Saleene noticed a shift in the air as the men moved about restless.

"Who's to say what is real or not. They are legends after all." Jeremiaah's voice echoed through the trees. He was holding back, she could tell.

"That's true enough though all legends and myths are based on some form of truth." Her eyes drifted back from the flowing field to find Dartian staring at her, his body so solid and strong. Saleene's breath caught in her throat at the pure possession she saw flicker in his eyes. He reminded her of an impenetrable mountain, one that stood the test of time. How could one man look so alone even amongst his followers?

"Now it's said," she continued. "That Natasha had never seen such a large wolf before and the sight intrigued her. She knew the lion could easily devour the creature and that caused her to forget her terror. She banged her fists on the transparent wall and shouted, in an attempt to scare the animal back into the depths of the forest."

"Did it work? Did the wolf go?" Raku's voice increased in volume as each word left his lips.

"No, though they say she pounded so hard that her hands had begun to bleed at the continued assault."

"Yet the wolf stayed." Saleene turned her head

toward Dartian, his words full of understanding. What he'd said felt more like a statement than a question, as if he could relate to the reason the creature hadn't left.

"You're right the wolf stayed. Once she understood the wolf wouldn't leave, Natasha drew upon the ancient power of Daear. She refused to let the wolf die, so instead, she used what energy she had left to force a bolt of fire from the sky. She aimed it for the lion in hopes of scaring it away. Unfortunately, this only startled it for a moment."

"Of course it wouldn't. If the lion had stayed this long, why would it leave after that?" Their question was valid and she couldn't fault them for it. How many times had she wondered the same thing?

"What's worse is by using the energy she had, the barrier that had been erected simply vanished back into nothingness."

"But...?" Raku's voice challenged a question, though he thought better of it.

"Aye, she risked her life to save the wolf, but it hadn't worked. What's even worse, another effect of expending her power was that she herself fainted into a black abyss of unconsciousness; the knowledge that she may have condemned both herself and the wolf to a horrible death was her last conscious thought." Saleene could actually feel the magnitude of sadness the woman must have felt knowing she had failed.

"So what happened to her? Does anyone know?" Raku's eyes were lit with the desire to know more.

"They say Natasha woke a short time later to two strong arms holding her, wiping the dust and grime from her face. She looked up and the eyes staring back were the color of liquid gold. He told her his name was Aramis and that his people were called The Draug. No one knows what happened to the lion or the black timber wolf that Natasha risked her life to save."

"What happened to them? Did they stay?"

"All we are told is that she and Aramis ended up living the rest of their days together in the mountains far away."

Looking over her shoulders at the rolling fields, Saleene thought back to how much the story had always

made her dream of what it would be like to meet someone and have that instant connection. The sparks and heat that would arch between them, and the passion that would result, would be heaven to embrace. To have it last an eternity would be more than she could ever hope for.

But she had resolved herself to never finding love when the elders had sent her out on this quest. She had accepted the truth of it, but still, to find true love and embrace it would be...

“Wow, I’ve never heard that one, but I’ll have to ask when I return home.” *Home*. That one single word made them all stop in their tracks for a moment; the knowledge that they might never return, a living breathing entity, haunted them.

“Aye, it’s a wonderful tale Caru. You tell it so well that I can actually feel the connection between the two.” Dartian’s words penetrated straight to her heart, his voice a warm caress that set her soul ablaze.

Even though her eyes were closed as she rested her head against a tree she could feel his gaze as it moved over her. The act burned a trail of flames across her skin. Why did he have this affect on her? She cursed her inability to control her reaction to Dartian but she also refused to dwell on the newfound emotions that swirled inside her. Instead, she opened her eyelids to find him staring intently at her, his face stone cold without any sense of emotion visible.

“What?” The moment the words left her lips he cracked the most devilish grin she had ever seen. That act alone sent butterflies fluttering around in her stomach. She prayed he did not sense her confusion at her reaction to him.

Then, as if he had read her thoughts, Dartian moved toward her, his every step a slow sensual progression to her side. She watched him advance; how could she not? Her breath caught in her throat at each step he took forward, the ripple of his muscles under his shirt drew her gaze. God the man was pure torture to watch.

“What are you...?” Her words were lost in the close proximity of his body to hers. The intensity of his stare made her feel as if she was lost in some magical spell he had woven. She was unable to move out of his reach. Time

stood still and the wind silenced in anticipation. She couldn't move, even if she'd wanted to, and God help her, she didn't want to.

"Caru..." It was the only word to escape his lips as he lowered his head to hers.

She diverted her gaze to the forest, as she attempted to breathe in and center the fire that raged in her belly. Gently he placed the pad of his thumb on her cheek as he turned her to face him. She could see the desire that pooled in his eyes and she wondered if hers mirrored his. Her answer came as he stifled a growl only to descend his lips upon hers.

Chapter 6

The intense firestorm from the connection of his lips to hers sent Saleene's legs buckling and her heart pounding until she swore it would break in two. Without thought, she reached up, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her body became pliant against the strength of his, molding to fit into his embrace. It was as if two halves of the same soul had magically been put back together, their unison foretold by the gods. As his kiss deepened, his tongue forced into the warmth of hers. His arms pulled her further into the safety of his embrace locking them together as one.

Unable to keep her balance, Saleene held on for dear life as feelings she didn't understand raced through her. The intensity of his kiss made her feel weak and dizzy, his scent an intoxicating mixture of musk and sandalwood. Though she wanted to avoid his gaze, she couldn't help but look up and deep into his eyes, and sensed that something dangerous begged to be freed. Her personal warning system cried out. As if nature understood, a cool breeze blew against their heated bodies and cooled the fire that had begun to burn between them.

"Let me go please." Her voice sounded foreign, its tone that of a person who had been seduced thoroughly. Saleene placed her hand against his chest and pushed him away, desperate to put any distance between them she could.

"Saleene don't push me away." His voice seduced with every syllable. She needed to feel the cool air on her enflamed body and quickly. Saleene knew she could not think clearly when she was this close to him. At this rate she would need to keep an ocean between them in order to not lose herself in the wickedness of his body.

"I...can't. Let me go."

So many thoughts ran through her head that she

began to move to the other end of the clearing, desperate to avoid eye contact with the others and the dumbfounded looks she knew were plastered on their faces. More than anything, she could not look at Dartian after the kiss they had shared. She could not fully blame him as she had willingly given herself to him in that moment, but she refused to ever allow him to do it again. Dartian's next words stopped her retreat.

"You need me Caru, admit it."

After all the years she had trained herself to be alone, the onslaught of emotions she felt scared her. His words woke her to just what she'd allowed. She pushed the thoughts away as she again headed toward the entrance to the forest. Turning she glared at Dartian, striving to push her anger down, yet not quite succeeding.

"You arrogant...let this be known, should I at any time even think that any of you have an agenda other than what you have conveyed to me, I will be more than willing to find you a new resting spot." A look of puzzlement crossed each of her companions' faces.

"Why would it be anything else?" She watched as Dartian moved back toward the tree, his face a hidden mask of emotions.

"So we are very clear, your new home will be located 6 feet below the dirt." With that Saleene turned on her heels and sauntered out into the forest, her golden hair flowing in the breeze.

Dartian's followers turned and looked at their leader, questions lingering on their faces. "What got into her do you think?" Raku asked first, his face full of confusion. Dartian simply shrugged his shoulders with a look of amusement in his eyes but no hint of laughter on his granite face.

"Let's get things prepared." He motioned to the others to put together a campfire and prepare the bed rolls for the night. All the while he could not keep his mind from Saleene and the sweet taste of her lips against his. She was an addiction he knew he would never get enough of. But she held back. Why, he was not sure.

His gaze moved to the path she had taken into the forest, her scent still in the air. He returned his attention

to his men and the quizzical look on their faces.

“Raku, stay here and secure the camp. I need to hunt down some dinner or none of us will have the energy to continue this journey.”

He moved to the path Saleene had taken, concern for her welled up inside. He knew she could defend herself, but he feared she was not prepared for what may lie in wait.

“She’ll be fine Dartian. I’d keep some distance for the moment or you’re liable to get a dagger in your throat.” He could hear his friend chuckle as he turned to head in her direction. He felt a change in the air. Something else hunted this evening, but he was not sure of whom it was after. Fear for Saleene coursed through his veins and threatened to choke the breath from his lungs. He bolted into the darkness and headed toward what he did not know.

Saleene continued to wander through the woods. She needed a place to piece together the day’s events. She came upon a clearing with cypress trees and an abundance of violet and lavender bushes that flourished around an old stone slab.

“How beautiful.” Her voice carried on the wind. She could sense the tranquility in the area. Yes, this was the right place to stop. Saleene began to cleanse the circle. She started by pulling out of her satchel herbs. She sprinkled the sacred contents to the four corners as she chanted a tale of old in her native tongue. Slowly Saleene raised her hands to the harvest moon as she went deep within herself to search for the answers to her questions.

She wanted to know why it took such a twist of fate to bring her to this place. And why had the gods put this man in her presence? One look at him caused her blood to course and her body to increase in temperature. Yet there was a familiarity about him that bothered her. There was something he seemed to hold at bay, a secret only he and his followers knew. But what was it? She had so many questions and not one answer to be found.

Unbeknownst to her, Dartian hunkered just out of sight. He observed her every move and put to memory all

that he saw. His deep blue eyes pierced into the night, filled with untold emotions and a will of steel. His heart called out to his mate, his every instinct desired to go to her. She reminded him of a grove nymph offering herself to the gods in the moonlight. Her hair flowed in the night wind and encased her in a golden veil of silk. So involved in the image before him, Dartian did not hear the rustle of the leaves but a few feet behind him, until it was almost too late.

With years of practice, Dartian attempted to evade the attack. As he began to move out of danger from the buzz of a dagger flying, he found his reaction a bit too slow. The dagger pierced his skin and sent shockwaves of pain throughout his body. An internal reflex, Dartian pulled out his own weapon and threw it at his shadowed enemy, its blade flying through the air, his skill honed from years of battle.

Even in pain, his aim was right on target and connected with the thud of metal meeting flesh. An agonized scream was heard and then the figure vanished into the night as if it had never been. Frustrated by his lack of diligence, Dartian slumped to the ground from the pain of the dagger; and the poison with which it was laced, began to enter his blood.

The sound of battle roused Saleene from her meditation and she turned toward the direction it had come from. The moment she saw Dartian lying on the ground, Saleene rushed to his side, concern for his health paramount.

“What happened?” She slowly knelt by him, careful not to disturb the wound as she removed the fabric from where the dagger had pierced his skin.

“Ouch, dammit woman that hurts.” She felt him wince at the pain. He attempted to move away, but she refused to release her hold.

“Men can be such babies sometimes. For a warrior, you should not have allowed yourself to be nicked by a dagger; especially one laced with as ancient a poison as this.”

“Generally I am not slow, but I was otherwise preoccupied and did not sense the presence of the attacker

at first. Trust me...that will never happen again.”

Saleene looked into Dartian’s eyes and saw the struggle; he seemed to be fighting an internal battle that she was unsure of. Instead of inquiring further, Saleene felt it was better to leave it be. As she dressed his wounds a soft chuckle escaped her lips. “Make sure to keep it dry.” She diverted her attention from his face in an attempt to mask further concern.

“Are you sure it’s ok? It hurts like hell.” Saleene couldn’t help but release a sigh. She reached down, tightened the cloth and turned to face his stare.

“Yes, you should survive.” A cold wind blew across Saleene’s skin drawing her attention to the darkness of the forest. Assured that the wound was well dressed and the poison would cause no further harm, Saleene motioned to Dartian that they were not alone. She’d noticed the presence while she tended to his injury but she’d hoped it wouldn’t increase. She was wrong...death was on the hunt for a victim.

“I know. I felt it as I came to this place.” She looked at Dartian with puzzlement on her face. “Let’s go.”

Saleene nodded her head in agreement. They began the journey back to the camp where the others awaited their return, unaware of the danger that was on the prowl. As swift as the evening breeze, they moved through the trees and foliage, their feet barely touched the ground.

“It’s ahead of us. The men won’t be ready for it.” Fear coursed through her. As they continued, the darkness increased its gain on their friends.

“They are warriors, give them some credit.” Determined not to let the evil cause harm, Saleene reached for the light within and threw a message upon the wind.

All at once the jungle came alive with the songs of the wilderness animals. The song sent forth a message to warn the inhabitants of the danger which had invaded their world. Each creature joined together to place as many barriers in the way of the shadow as possible. The evil threatened to overtake their world and it was determined to leave with as many victims’ souls as it could. Saleene knew that the barriers erected would never fully deter the evil; but she hoped it would at least allow

them enough time to get back to their friends and warn them.

She could feel Dartian's eyes move across her. "Impressive, if I do say so myself." Warmth spread through her body at his words. She needed to focus on what might lie ahead. Fear that their companions would not be ready for what was coming coursed through her body.

"I can feel it. It's close Dartian, so very close. They aren't ready for it, they won't have time." A choked cry was lost in her throat at the thought of their friends being in danger.

"Don't think about it. We can't help them if we aren't focused." His words rang true and she held tight to them.

"You're right."

The closer they drew to their destination the darker the sky became until even the brightness of the moon was encased in darkness. By the time they reached their camp even the insects of the forest had been silenced by the dread of the phantom.

. Her eyes drifted across the camp and came to rest on the first of their companions, Jeremiaah, as he lay across his bedroll. His eyes were fixed in fear while his lifeblood trickled down the ground towards the fire. A stifled cry lodged in her throat at the sight of his broken body, his eyes frozen forever in death's embrace.

"They never had a chance Dartian." An apparent struggle had ensued but due to the surprise of the attack, they had not had time to be prepared to defend their lives.

Such a waste of life, she sighed, such goodness forever gone. Saleene choked back a sob that threatened to escape her throat, when in the distance a muffled grunt could be heard in the dark. Both Dartian and Saleene glanced toward the sound, their blades ready for battle. Very slowly a shadowed figure began to materialize and turned their way. A red pair of eyes peered at them, hate burning deep within. As it began to slither towards them Saleene became aware that this was no ordinary enemy, but a predator forged from the gates of hell with only one purpose.

The air began to thicken and permeate with the stench of death. Fear began to eat at Saleene's strength

which caused her to stumble. Strong hands clasped onto her arm and brought her up to look into his eyes.

“Be still Caru, remember this is not of our world, we can and will defeat his vileness.” His voice increased in strength, his words steel in her mind. “We will cleanse our lands of the damage he wishes to bring upon all that we hold dear.” he whispered softly into Saleene’s ear.

“I’m so cold Dartian. I can feel it slither across my soul.”

“If you believe nothing else, believe in me, for I vow with all that I am that we will defeat this apparition and save those we love.” The sincerity in his voice, coupled with the stark possession Saleene noted in his eyes, gave her the strength she needed to overcome the dread that threatened to engulf her.

“I believe you Dartian.” With a nod of her head, Saleene refocused her attention to their enemy as it approached them. She vowed to dispatch this demon from her world. A shriek erupted from the shadowed figure as it realized it no longer had the upper hand. Before their eyes it dissipated into thousands of scorpions with the intent to harm all that it could before it returned back into the shadowed underworld.

“Saleene watch out!” The command broke through all her thoughts, her feet scrambled to move out of the way of the offending insects.

“No, I won’t let it win.” Now she was mad. First it had hurt Dartian, and then it’d killed poor Jeremiah. Now the demon was coming at them with insects. *Oh hell no.*

“Saleene, be careful.” His words fell on deaf ears. She turned her gaze to Dartian’s concerned one.

“I know what I’m doing. Back up some please.”

Saleene reached within and began to chant an ancient spell, one that called upon the gods to assist in the removal of the insects before any further harm ensued. Instantly a bright light burst into the room as a fire ball roared from the heavens and engulfed the insidious scorpions before any harm could be done. From far off Saleene and Dartian heard another scream of hate that echoed through the night.

As the air cleared and the presence of evil subsided

Saleene fell to her knees, her energy drained from the work that she had done. Saddened by the loss of their companion, Saleene reached over to cover his body with a black shawl. As she did so she began to sing a song to pave the way for his soul to enter the afterlife. Tears streamed down her face unchecked as she raised her head up toward the moon, arms outstretched and cried out her defiance to the gods for the evil that had been let loose on the world.

Chapter 7

“Why?” Saleene’s heart began to grow heavier from the sadness she felt for the senseless loss of life, the winds picked up as if sensing the unrest within. A great storm began to rage and paralleled the turmoil that Saleene felt. She felt Dartian watch her with coveted eyes as her sadness and grief overflowed. She shouted out her outrage into the night at the senseless death of their companion. Dartian went to her and placed his hand lightly on her shoulder, sending her warmth and comfort to help combat the grief she felt.

“We all knew the risks Caru. Don’t fault yourself for this.”

With the storm raging, a ragged moan carried along the wind. The sound alerted Saleene and Dartian that one of their companions was still alive.

Saleene averted her gaze to meet with Dartian’s.

“Raku.” The look he gave her warned that the battle was not yet done. Slowly, Saleene breathed in and centered herself to allow the wind to bring forth news of the adversary and information of what had transpired.

Saleene placed her hands on the ground and allowed the earth to tell her what had happened.

“No...don’t!” Dartian’s voice cried out into the night but not before he could stop her from touching the ground. The echo of violence seeped into her soul and chilled her as the stench of evil enveloped her in its embrace. The enemy had come at the call of the phantom. It had attempted to take Raku moments before Saleene and Dartian had arrived. He had been subdued by an ancient poison meant to immobilize their target, not kill.

“Oh God, Raku. No.”

She felt the impact of the poison on their friend, the pain it inflicted caused her to collapse on the ground. Dartian rushed to her side pulling her to her feet. She felt

him tremble as he held her close; his heart beat a drum in her ears.

“Caru, please come back to me.” Dartian whispered, as he gently caressed the nape of her neck. “Do not let this adversary win this battle. I need you with me here and now. It is the only way we can hope to overcome that which lies before us.”

The words he uttered revealed far more than he realized, but none the less triggered an immediate release from the hold of the enemy.

“I am sorry Dartian; I should have realized that a trap would have been set for me. I have not made such a mistake in a very long while. I will not allow it to happen again.”

Dartian noted a small hint of sadness in her voice even though she attempted to hide it. Never would he want her to ever feel she’d done wrong. They needed to get out of there.

“Let’s leave this place of death and find Raku, he is near to us, I can feel his presence. I will find him, but first I need you to aide me in preparing to put to rest our friend.” He knew Saleene would understand the need to pay honor to their fallen friend. He was right as she gave a quick nod of her head in agreement.

“I will get him ready. I know what to do.” He hated the sound of defeat that laced her words.

As he left to find Raku, Dartian could hear Saleene cry out her anger, the sound a dagger in his chest. His feet continued toward a clearing underneath an old oak tree where he sensed Raku rested unconscious. After he assured himself that Raku would live, he began to dig a deep hole underneath the sacred tree. Such a senseless death for Jeremiaah, he thought, why had they not made it back sooner?

Dartian vowed to exact revenge on those who had caused his death. With each stroke into the earth, his anger grew. He had sworn to protect those that had chosen to travel with him, yet he had broken that promise twice already. The first had been but three days past. He sighed as he recalled the day his friend had been taken.

The night had been colder than usual, the sky full of

darkened clouds. As they had spread out to hunt for shelter, an anguished cry had rung out in the still of the night. He had shouted for his companions and his heart had stilled when only Jeremiihah and Raku answered his call. He'd called for them to regroup. Once together, the trio went about the area to try and locate their missing friend.

Raku, a hunter without equal, had begun to look for signs of where Julian may have gone or worse, taken. Twigs broken, grass pushed in from foot steps, anything to give notice as to what direction he would have headed.

As they entered further into the forest, Raku had noticed that the leaves on the tree to his right seemed to have been brushed by something. He was unsure as to what would cause the disturbance, as there were no prints on the ground to indicate something going through the area. Dartian had motioned to his fellow group mates to stop while Raku slowly lifted up the leaves. Without warning a rush of ice cold air blew past the group, the force so strong it knocked them to the ground.

In the midst of the impact, an earth shattering scream was heard above them. He'd looked up and caught sight of Julian as he was pulled up into the air.

Dartian could not make out what had a hold of Julian. Try as he might to focus his eyes, he had been barely able to make out the talons that grasped Julian's ankle. The beast yanked him around like a rag doll. Without thought, Dartian had motioned for Jeremiihah to attempt to draw the beast's attention with some form of commotion, to give them some time to try and save their friend.

Jeremiihah had walked toward the clearing and had begun to rustle the leaves. To the east of where he stood, Dartian hoped, as Jeremiihah increased the noise, that it would gain the attention of the flying creature. It appeared to work as a grey colored beast dove toward the sound. As it got closer Dartian was able to finally see what had a hold of Julian. A *gargoyle*. Fear had pooled in his stomach. He knew these beasts were formidable and that increased his concern for their friend.

He motioned to Raku and indicated for him to aim for one of the wings of the monster in an attempt to wound it.

“Shoot it in the wings, that should get it to drop closer to land and we can get Julian back.” If he was right, he knew it would cause the beast to land. He watched as Raku knock his arrow on his bow and he had prayed his aim would be guided by the gods. As the arrow was let go, it flew up and had penetrated the neck of the beast. The impact was sudden and the beast I had let out an anguished cry. Hope had flourished for a moment in Dartian’s heart, that they were going to be victorious, but instead the beast’s reflexes caused it to release its grip on Julian and sent him heralding toward the ground.

Dartian had let out a shout of fear as he tried to rush and find a way to save their friend. But he knew that due to the rate at which Julian was falling, Dartian had no way to prevent the impact his body made on the ground. The sound of his breath had ceased and seemed to reverberate throughout the lands as the animals in the forest carried the song of his death away from Dartian and on to his people. From the distance a cry from a flock of ravens had signaled the acknowledgment of the fallen warrior.

Dartian had moved to where his friend’s body laid. He approached to retrieve his fallen friend, but the moment he got within mere feet of his companion, the gargoyle dove down to the ground to retrieve its prey. The creature then took flight, farther and farther up into the sky, away from the trio of men left below. Anger had coursed through Dartian’s blood as he shouted out his rage into the night. He knew there was no hope left for their friend, he attempted to follow the beast anyway, but found he could not keep up with the speed of the creature’s flight.

Without warning, the heavens unleashed their fury; pouring rain fell down. The cold water broke the web of sorrow that filled Dartian’s heart, reminding him of the task before him. He returned his attention back to the task at hand; a sigh escaped his throat at the loss of Jeremiah.

“I’m sorry friend. I didn’t protect you as I should have.” As he continued the preparation for his friend’s burial, he prayed it would be the last time he would be

required to do such a thing.

He looked up over his shoulder and caught sight of a raven on a branch, its eyes watchful and intense. The bird turned its head and looked around at the same time Dartian did, to ensure they were still alone. Assured none were near, Dartian bowed his head toward the raven; in sympathy, regret and sorrow for the loss of Jeremiihah, and the loss to his people.

“I am sorry I was unable to prevent his passing Rolando. We tried to get back in time to avoid his death, but I fear we were not fast enough.” The sincerity in his voice was not lost in the formality of his words. The raven moved forward, its wings outstretched as it shifted into the form of an elderly man, silver-gray hair blowing in the wind. His eyes, a cool steel color, were full of knowledge and sadness.

Slow and elegant, the man approached Dartian. Comfort filled his ancient eyes as they rested on his face.

“Dartian, my old friend, it is good to see you. Thank you for sending word of Jeremiihah’s death.” The wealth of emotions that swirled in the icy depths of this man’s eyes expressed his expansive control of the situation. “I know you feel you failed me in keeping my son safe, but do not. He knew the risks associated with this quest and he shouldered those risks on his own. I am proud that he chose to follow you as I did your father before.”

The formality of his words and the twinkle in his eyes reminded Dartian of the stories the old man used to tell him as a child. The adventures he and his father used to go on together were known throughout the clans. He nodded his head at the old man and turned back to glance in the direction of Saleene and the grief that he knew haunted her.

“Still, had I stayed with them and not wandered off.” His eyes drifted again toward the woman filling his mind.

“She is a unique one, the woman whom travels with you. But heed me in this; you must keep her safe from harm. I have had a vision of things I do not understand. They foretell the coming of a battle unlike any this world has seen before. The strength of both of you will be needed to combat the evil.” As the words were said, the old man once again shimmered into his raven form and

faded into the darkness. Only the cool breeze and light mist of rain were left in his place.

Dartian turned his head back to the task at hand, to finish the makeshift altar. Not long after, a quick glance at the altar assured him all was ready. His mind drifted to Saleene, his need to be near her a compulsion that ran through his blood. The time had come to complete this. To put to rest their friend before anything further should happen.

As he entered the camp, he could sense the sadness that Saleene still felt as she moved about. She had cleansed the stench of evil with fresh herbs and candles. As he looked down he saw that Jeremiihah was already cleaned and dressed for his travels to the otherworld.

“You’ve done a wonderful job Saleene...thank you.” Amazed at how proficient she was at every detail, Dartian glanced over to see her watching him, her eyes glazed from the tears she had shed. She seemed so alone, like the world had left her without a lifeline to safety. It tore at him how she appeared to have forgotten what happiness was.

Every instinct inside of him screamed to go to her and hold her tight, to chase all her demons away. But he knew that if he tried, she would be gone as quickly as the summer wind.

“Saleene, Jeremiihah’s resting place is ready. I must move him out and complete the ritual before sunrise.” His words were said with as much softness as he could convey, hoping not to cause her further distress.

“I will move him out and begin the fire for his departure.”

He’d leaned down to pick up Jeremiihah’s lifeless body, when Saleene made a sound of protest to catch his attention.

“Wait.” He saw her shake her head in disagreement. With a slow graceful motion of her hand, she began to weave an intricate pattern in the air. The action mesmerized Dartian with the beauty of it. So casual, so sure, he watched as she continued the pattern. The small movements caused a light breeze to gently lift Jeremiihah from the floor.

Amazed at the scene before him, he watched as the

breeze moved his friend out of his place of death and into the open night. Saleene motioned to allow the magical force to move the body to the altar that Dartian had erected; her hands as graceful as the wind which did her bidding. He could tell she was careful to make sure his body rested just above the altar before she allowed the breeze to lay Jeremiih on the stone, his hands crossed over his sword to signify the passing of an honored warrior.

As Saleene moved around the body, the animals of the forest began to sing a song of passing. The echoes reached far into the interior of the woodlands and reverberated throughout the forest. As she got closer to the altar, she stretched her hands up to the new moon as the clouds began to subside. A whispered plea to the gods to help her friend find his way into the afterlife tore from her lips. Once the prayer was said, she looked back down to his shawl covered body and chanted the Valuda; a hymn to invoke the death ritual. The slab that Jeremiih rested on caught fire and a bright blue-red flame engulfed his still form.

“I’m so sorry Jeremiih, please forgive me.” Her words caught in her throat, the sadness for his passing a raw wound on her soul.

Once fully incinerated, a gentle breeze picked up his ashes and scattered them into the four directions. She looked back at Dartian as tears shimmered in her eyes and down her cheeks. Her sadness increased with each tear so that she turned and moved back towards the camp.

“That was beautiful Caru, thank you.” She could feel the sincerity of his words, his need to comfort her.

As she got closer to their camp, a pack of black wolves cried out in unison, a song to herald the return of their brethren as a flock of ravens took flight. Amazed at the scene before her, Saleene began to lend her own voice to the song, each note a musical melody that drifted upon the wind and out into the night.

Shock covered Dartian’s face; he was in awe at the sheer beauty of her voice, the way it could mesmerize with each passing note. He was moved in ways he could never have conceived of, her voice so haunting and pure that he

knew he would hear her in his dreams. All he wanted to do in that moment was grab hold of her and keep her forever safe in his arms.

He turned his eyes to avoid the emotions he felt when he caught sight of Rolando standing quietly behind the great oak tree. He headed toward the old man and raised his hand once more in greeting.

“I am glad to see you stayed for the formal goodbye.” He motioned to the fire that burned like a beacon in the night. “Though, I’ve never seen the blue-red flames in the crossing ritual that consume Jeremiaah’s body. Such an odd sight, have you ever seen such a thing?” He was curious to know if this was something due to the raven heritage or something else.

The old man moved toward Dartian, a twinkle in his eyes as he watched the fire that engulfed his son’s remains.

“I fear that is not our doing.” His gaze found their way to the lone figure that stood under the moon light, Saleene. Dartian shook his head in understanding. Shades of silver danced off her golden skin while her voice flowed into the night’s sky. The very fabric of the forest seemed to embrace her as she moved.

“The woman holds immense power within herself, and I do not believe even she realizes the extent of that power.” Dartian knew the old man held back something, but he did not want to push the issue due to the loss he had sustained.

“Travel safely my friend. May the winds guide you for the rest of your journey home.” His hand on Rolando’s shoulder, Dartian expressed his condolences for his loss once more. Both races had always co-existed and relied upon each other. To lose even one always hurt their species.

His gaze focused back toward Saleene, Dartian’s breath caught in his throat at the sheer mystery she exuded. The mist drifted like ocean waves crashing into the rocks and began to envelop her in a veil of grays and silvers, embracing her body in a cocoon. Her golden hair cascaded in waves down her back to bring his attention to the smallness of her waist and the roundness of her bottom. Emotions raw and vivid ran rampant through his

veins, the beast within began to roar for release.

Chapter 8

Saleene sensed a volatile situation that arose in the night air. She turned toward the disturbance to search out the cause of tension. All she could see was Dartian standing in the forest, looking like a lone warrior back from battle, tired and worn. Her heart cried out to comfort him. A smile of compassion was all she could send him across the span of distance; but she knew he felt it by the look of surprise that crossed his face. Whatever had troubled him was put at bay, chained from being released into the night. She watched as he bowed to her in an old worldly style, a look of sadness still etched on his handsome face.

“I’ll go clean up the rest of the mess.” Saleene moved to head back to the camp and the fire to warm her chilled body.

As she entered the glen, she looked around, grief filling her once more. How could they have missed the taint of evil in the area? Was she so out of tune with herself that she missed the signs? Frustrated with herself, Saleene wondered if she could have prevented Jeremiah’s passing. If she had been prepared would he still be alive?

So deep in thought, Saleene never heard Dartian enter the glen. He watched her silently as a wealth of emotions covered her beautiful face. He knew she blamed herself for the death of their companion, and it broke his heart to know she felt as if she should have known it would attack and could have prevented it. Dartian knew better.

“Caru, please stop pacing. You need to relax. You’ve spent much energy this evening.” Her face looked quite pale, as if she were an apparition sent from the gods to watch over him. He feared she was too weak from the energy she had spent preparing Jeremiah for the

afterlife.

“I’m fine, just tired is all.”

“We will leave this place of death and find refuge elsewhere for the night. I have put Raku in a safe place for now; he will recover from his wounds.” He moved like a big jungle cat, fluid and agile, to her side. He could see she was shaking, but from what he was not sure.

He reached down, picking her up as if she weighed no more than a child, and pulled her close to his chest. She felt so cold and sluggish that Dartian feared she was going into shock.

“I should check on Raku to make sure he will recover.”

“No, Caru, you’ve done so much tonight already. I thank you for all that you were able to provide for Jeremiah in his travels to the afterlife.” He meant for the words as they came out to soothe and comfort her, but the longer he held her in his arms, the more his blood began to rise in temperature.

Saleene did not speak a word, which worried him. As he sped through the woods in search of another place for them to rest, he felt Saleene move farther within herself, disconnecting herself from the world. He wished he could take the hurt and sadness from her, but knew he could not. She simply needed time to allow the wounds to heal and he would do what he could to aide her with the battle as she faced her demons. She continued to remain silent and Dartian felt the fatigue overtake her as she wrapped her arms around his thick neck and nuzzled closer to his chest.

The innocent act was nearly his undoing as it set his blood boiling with fire once more. Why did this woman have such an effect on him? *What was it about her that seemed to be so familiar?* Due to the wealth of emotions and questions that swirled in his mind, Dartian almost missed the opening to an overgrown cave. He placed Saleene on the ground as he went inside to investigate the interior. He found that it was clear of any animals and that there was no moisture within. Satisfied that the shelter would suffice for their needs this night, Dartian moved back outside to gather Saleene once more and bring her into the cave.

Once outside Dartian's breath caught in his throat as he saw Saleene standing in a small pond near the entrance to the cave. Her hair drifted wildly in the wind as her face was upturned towards the sky. Tears streamed unchecked down her golden skin and Dartian's heart melted at the sight. She reminded him of a goddess paying homage to nature, emotions overflowed like raindrops falling from the sky. He took a few steps closer to her, his hand outreached in her direction, hoping she would allow him to anchor her back into the here and now.

"Saleene..." What more could he say? He needed her to trust him, to come back to him now.

She turned her gaze back toward him; her eyes glittered like gemstones in the moonlight while her skin took on an iridescent glow. The emotions that swirled within their depths told Dartian of the battle she was fighting within, one he knew all too well. With each step closer he felt as if two pieces of a circle were being pulled together, intertwining their lives for all time. He looked down into her upturned face and gently brushed away her falling tears, the softness of her skin igniting the firestorm once more.

"Caru, let's go inside and rest for the night. Tomorrow we can continue our journey." He attempted to put as much command into his voice as he could, but he knew that Saleene wanted to hunt for their mutual enemy now. He refused to allow it though, since exhaustion exuded from her every pore. "We will be no good to anyone if we are exhausted from our fight. I promise we can continue the search tomorrow." He caressed her cheek with his fingers; with gentleness he did not know he possessed until that moment.

He took her hand and led her toward the cave and the gift of sleep. They entered together, a single movement as one. The beauty of their surroundings must have surprised Saleene as he heard her quick intake of breath.

Walking around the inside, she marveled at the pictures carved onto the wall. Each seemed to tell a story, but one that she had never heard about. Behind her, she heard Dartian pick up the kindling to start a fire to help

chase away the shadows from their shelter and bring warmth to the room.

“It’s beautiful in here.” She meant it. The walls were smooth from years of erosion and wild flowers bloomed around the edges.

Turning her gaze back to the story written on the walls, Saleene eyed a peculiar drawing. It seemed to talk of a wolf and a woman drawn together in the forest. The woman seemed to be paying tribute to the gods at her altar, when the wolf appeared. It was difficult to make out the rest of the story as most of what was painted seemed to be lost through the aging of the cave. Such a loss, she sighed, her fingers glided across the smooth rock as her gaze found its way to Dartian’s back. Underneath her fingers a small rock moved, capturing her attention as she removed it from its resting place.

Surprised at the now open slot, Saleene reached her hand into the hole and felt the light brush of parchment caress her fingertips. Gently she pulled on the page till she felt it give way and removed it from its resting place. The old paper was worn but rolled tightly to keep the contents safe. Curiosity got the better of her; her gaze turned to Dartian and she saw his own eyes sparkle at the sight of the find. Moving back to the firelight, she sat down and unrolled a wide piece of leather on the ground to keep the scroll from being harmed.

“Dartian, look what I found.”

“What is it?” His voice laced with the curiosity of a child. She could tell he wanted to reach out and touch the parchment, to find out what knowledge it held. He was so entranced in reaching for the scroll; Saleene chuckled as he nearly fell back when her hand smacked his

“Let me look at it. It is very old. I know how to handle this type of parchment and if it has a protection spell, who would be better to unravel it?” Amusement crossed her face. She knew she had won the battle for the scroll. Carefully, she untied the velvet binds and unraveled the paper her eyes wide as the intricate words came into view. Her eyes enlarged as she read the parchment. *Could it be?* The magnitude of what she held within her grasp amazed her.

“Dartian, do you know what this is?” She knew he

didn't, but still, she couldn't believe it was true.

"Well, what is it?" Frustration laced his words such that Saleene almost felt bad for him

"This is a page from the Tome of Raliah. It is written by one of my people. One of a very important lineage, but thought lost long ago. Here, let me read it to you, it is very interesting but what it says bothers me." With a small intake of air, she began to read the scroll, each word floated upon the wind, each syllable instilled worry in her heart.

"1065- Cave of Danu:

I was commissioned by the elders to document the important events of tonight. These records are required to be handed down through time, from father to son, always entrusted to the ancient line and no other. The work of the priests was done in secret; the tomb was sealed once completed, never to be reopened. If the cave was to be discovered and the man awoken, it would release an evil unlike anything the world had encountered.

Concealed from human eyes, the cave was used for many special purposes by the elders throughout the years, but never for a deed as important as the one I'd been summoned to witness. When I arrived, they had already moved the body silently from his village and into the deepest part of the cavern. Secrecy was needed to ensure the work done on this night would not be discovered. Silence was paramount to ensure that the spell would stand the test of time. What would occur tonight could never be disclosed to any others for fear of retribution.

Their voices, chanting low and melodic, pounded out a rhythm in a language long gone from the world, vibrating through the night. Their words, meant to capture and hold, could also mesmerize and control, a feat few could accomplish.

Not being privy to the specifics, I can only abide by their wishes, and document what occurred as our testament to the gods. By my hand, I decree it was the eve of the summer solstice of the year 1065. The black moon had entered into the third quadrant and aligned with the red star. The high priest indicated the time had begun to commence with the ceremony, motioning me to the place they wished for me to observe and record from.

I stood in the far corner and watched as they began their ritual. Clothed in shades of crimson and blue, their heads covered in black, there was no trace of skin to be seen. As they moved about the circle, their chanting built until the cave shuddered from the sounds. Words that held untold powers reached into the air, filling the room with light and heat, enveloping the elders as they danced within the circle. The focus of their attention was a man, someone who had violated the most sacred of our laws, a man who was to be condemned to an enchanted sleep.

The facts of his betrayal were still unclear to me, but they must have been horrendous, as none would attempt this spell otherwise. They knew that if it was ever broken the repercussions would be monstrous. The information I collected here tonight could never be released to our people, the elders would never chance someone trying to seek the man out of curiosity, only to end up breaking the curse and waking him from his sleep.

The voices that came from the shawl covered altar sounded eerie and ominous, yet they continued to echo in my mind. His screams, caused by the severity of the ritual on his body, will haunt my nightmares for months to come. It must have been painful, as I can still see him thrashing around wildly in my mind, their chants reverberating in the cavern. They bound his feet and hands to prevent him from striking out; and covered his mouth with a black cloth to forever seal his screams. I can't imagine his thoughts, knowing what would be happening to him. They told him of course, they wanted him to feel fear. To know he would never die.

When I asked one of the priests what they had said to him, he muttered that they told him he was going to be immortal as he had desired, but never know the joys of it. I cannot imagine what he must have been thinking, but his eyes; oh his eyes will forever be burned in my memory. They seemed to glow a luminous red, hatred burning bright in their depths. His gaze roamed to the corner I was standing in and the look he sent to me caused shivers to course through my blood. I could feel his loathing for us, his desire to exact revenge on us all.

As they neared the end of the ritual, I saw that the man was no longer bound by the ropes; his arms rested so

still. His body was limp, as if in a deep slumber. Even his eyes were no longer open, no longer able to see those who had forced him to sleep. I do not know how much time had passed, or what more was left to be done, but I felt the surge of power that pooled in the room, a deep dark dread that crossed my soul. The magick that they wove this night was so powerful that I cannot imagine anyone attempting to defy them.

In the distance I noticed that they broke all the containers they had used throughout the night. I am sure this is done in case someone finds the cave and tries to remove the curse. I can only presume it is due to the markings on the pottery and the power words etched upon them. I must admit they were very efficient in their methods, very precise in the workings they wrought this night.

After they finished cleansing the area, they motioned to me that it was time to leave. As I passed the man who lay so still, I swear I felt his hateful gaze bore into my soul.

I now understand why they have chosen to keep what was done this evening hidden from our people. Only one that is truly evil, an abomination that cannot be allowed to roam our lands, would have been sentenced to such a ritual. I will never forget what was done tonight, as the magnitude of its secrecy will forever mark my soul.

Gods help us all if he is ever awakened.

Scryer Morvian

Cave of Danu-1065

Sixth Generation Raliah..."

Dartian's eyes were watching her; she could feel it, a hot gaze that marked her skin. Her heart began to beat out an erratic rhythm pounding against her chest, fearful to look up and find him next to her. A few moments passed when finally, she looked up to find Dartian standing at the entrance to the cave. He reminded her of a warrior of olden days, a guard who stood watch at the entrance to the gods, to keep out those who would do them harm.

He looked so alone. Saleene wanted to go up and chase away the shadows from his eyes. As she began to move toward the firelight, she felt his eyes follow her

every move. Their eyes met as if embracing in a hypnotic dance unable to release control from the other. She felt as if she was falling into the depths of his fathomless blue eyes, losing herself in the emotions that swirled just under their surface.

Saleene stole her view away from his hypnotic gaze the closer she approached the fire, fearful of what she felt when he was near. She diverted her attention once more to the cave and the beauty it held. Reaching down, she retrieved her satchel, placing the sacred scroll into her pouch for further investigation later.

“This is a wonderful place you’ve found Dartian. The drawings are truly a work of art.” Try as she might she couldn’t keep her nerves in check. “How did you find it?” Her voice sounded foreign to her ears and her hands continued to move from picture to picture along the wall. The man had a way about him that made her knees feel weak, ready to buckle from under her.

“I am glad you are comfortable here Caru, I had heard about the cave from the trees.”

Concern pooled like a parasite in his stomach as he watched Saleene against the wall. He could feel her begin to pull away once more, her need to flee evidenced in her eyes. This time it appeared for other reasons which he couldn’t figure out. Her small forlorn figure filled his mind. For reasons he couldn’t fathom his blood began to pool and boil whenever she was near. The light from the fire danced sensually across her skin, her innocence only added to her natural beauty.

“Dartian? You seem so far away. What are you thinking about?” The simple question jolted Dartian out of his trance. Fearful of what his expression must look like, he turned toward the exit to allow the cool night breeze to brush the heat from his body. A few moments passed and Dartian turned and headed toward the fire, an act done purely to give him a few moments to regain his composure.

“I am fine, just in deep thought about where we should head to next.” The answer was true for the most part, but he didn’t want to reveal where his thoughts had traveled. Why did she have this effect on him? Looking up, he found a quizzical look on her face and questions he

knew burned in her deep emerald eyes. He wanted to stare into those eyes, to dispel any sadness he could. Slowly she smiled, innocently brushing a stray tendril of hair from her perfectly round face. The act threw him over the edge. Without thought, he strode past the fire and right up to Saleene's slim figure.

"What are you doing?" Surprise etched her face.

Pulling her into his embrace, Dartian looked down into her upturned face, her eyes shocked at his actions. "Caru, do not fear me. I am not trying to frighten you. Please, let me hold you and make sure you are real and not a figment of my imagination which has come to haunt me for the rest of my life."

His words caressed her skin like butterfly wings, while his touch caused her body to increase in temperature by it seemed a hundred degrees. Deep azure eyes stared back at her and she wished she could read what emotions flowed in their depths.

"I'm not here to haunt you but, we can't do this."

Feeling out of sorts, Saleene quickly moved out of his embrace and retreated into the shadows. Though she tried to center herself nothing worked and she found her gaze drawn to where Dartian stood. He seemed to be fighting an inner battle she couldn't comprehend. Did he too feel the connection between them? Unsure of how to proceed, Saleene wandered over to her bed and slipped between the covers, hoping sleep would present a relief from the turmoil of the day.

Eyes closed, she could still feel his eyes on her. The heat from his stare penetrated deep into her soul. Feigning sleep, Saleene relaxed her breathing in hopes that he would turn his attention elsewhere or decide to lie down and rest as well. Minutes ticked by and the cave grew silent. He must have fallen asleep. Happy with her ruse, Saleene opened her eyes only to find Dartian's intense stare looking back.

"I am not easily fooled Caru. I know you are tired and there is much we still need to discuss, but I am willing to wait until the morning." His eyes held a promise of wild nights and passion unleashed. Unbidden came the thought of their bodies entwined in the darkness of the night as the moon rained down shades of silver and grey.

The path her thoughts had turned shocked and intrigued her. Deciding not to push the issue, Saleene closed her eyes as fatigue finally over came her, the energy spent earlier pushing her into the deep dark abyss of sleep.

Rays of golden sunlight began to stream through the entrance of the cave. As the light touched Saleene's face, she felt the brush of something furry against her temple. Jolted awake, her gaze adjusted to the interior of the cave to find she was not alone. Instead of Dartian asleep, she found a large wolf a few feet from her. Fearful at first, she scrambled to the back of the cave as her eyes searched around for Dartian.

Desperate to calm her breathing and not agitate the animal, Saleene began to inspect her uninvited guest. How come he had not attacked her while she slept? *Where is Dartian through all of this?*

"Hello there big fellow, what are you doing here?" She looked over the wolf further, noticing his deep blue-black fur and his brilliant blue topaz eyes. Something seemed to be familiar about this wolf, but for the life of her she couldn't put her finger on it. Cautious but intrigued, she moved closer to the wolf, hoping her movement would not cause him to attack. As she neared the creature, she noticed that he was just sitting there watching her approach.

It seemed so strange to see this magnificent animal just sitting there as if as intrigued by her presence as she was with his. Eyes shut, she attempted to find the right path to the creature's mind; the patterns were similar to someone from the past. Saleene gasped when she recognized the pattern of its mind. It was the wolf from her childhood! How could this be? One inch at a time she reached her hand out toward the animal as her feet moved closer. Amazed that she was this close to the wolf she cared for so long ago, she found herself smiling as she caressed his thick silky fur.

"Well hello again friend, it has been awhile since we saw each other." she cooed. He tilted his face toward hers his eyes confused. Casually he lifted his muzzle to her hand, nudging to gain attention. Her carefree laughter filled the cave, dispensing any tension that remained. As

she stroked his fur, Saleene wondered where Dartian had wandered off to, she had gotten used to his overbearing ways. Looking around she noticed that his bed roll was already packed and ready to go.

“Have you seen a very arrogant man wandering around?” A giggle escaped her lips as she knew that he was probably outside scouting the area.

A brush of cold air entered the cave, chilling Saleene and bringing with it a promise of evil. Glancing down at the wolf Saleene sent waves of warmth and assurance to the animal, hoping to keep it from being frightened by the presence.

“You must leave this place my friend, for I fear something is on the hunt and I would not wish for you to be harmed should it find me.” She prayed the animal would understand and go, but in her heart she knew she hated to lose her childhood friend.

Seeming to understand her words, the large wolf sauntered to the exit but turned before he left. His eyes reminded her of a deep blue sea fathomless in their depths. Watching the wolf leave, Saleene could have sworn she saw a smile cross his snout as he left the cave.

After he was gone, Saleene felt a moment of sadness, as if a part of her had left with the creature. Happy she had been able to be reunited with her childhood friend, Saleene feared for his safety as she was marked by evil. As her elation subsided, Saleene once again wondered as to Dartian’s whereabouts. She scanned the area and found Dartian next to a small waterfall filling their drinking pouches for the next trek of their journey.

Putting together her items, Saleene ventured out into the dense forest and headed toward Dartian and the waterfall. As she got closer, Saleene’s breath caught in her throat at the sheer beauty of the area. The forest was her favorite place to be. How she loved the trees and flowers that covered the forest floor. Looking past the trees, her gaze caught sight of Dartian as he stood in the water just under the falls.

Water streaked down his hard muscled body and he reminded her of a golden god sent from the heavens. Each muscle so well defined it took her breath away. Shocked at her reaction to him standing there, Saleene turned her

eyes to the ground, a blush stealing across her body.

She could feel his eyes watching her, his gaze so intense she felt branded. Looking up, her eyes met his, stark possession radiated from their depths. Attempting to turn away, Saleene didn't notice Dartian crossing the distance in one giant leap. His hand reached for hers to keep her from moving away and pulled her soft body against his hard frame, molding their bodies into one.

"Caru, I see you have awakened. I hope you had nothing but pleasant dreams last night." His words ignited flames inside her blood, heating her up like a bright summer sun. "I was beginning to think I would have to pick you up and throw you into the lake." His breath across her skin when he spoke sent her blood to thicken even more. "I took the liberty of filling up our rations so we can continue on with our journey."

Something about the way he said 'liberty' made Saleene shiver from head to toe. For some reason he had the look of an animal on the prowl for his next meal. As if sensing her thoughts, Dartian cracked a very sexy smile. One that Saleene swore had a hint of amusement tucked just beneath the surface.

"That was very kind of you to do Dartian." Saleene hoped her voice didn't betray the nervousness she felt. My God the man was lethal in every sense she could think of. Having him stand there looking wild and wet, his long hair caressing his skin like fingers, sent her blood boiling. Turning away, his image was burned in her memory, an image she knew she would never remove.

Bowing once more, Dartian motioned to the path that was ahead. Picking up her satchel and bedding, Saleene turned to head toward the direction it led. Without thought, she moved past Dartian, only to have his hand grasp her arm, pulling her close to his hard solid frame. He bent his head so close that his lips brushed her ear as he whispered. "Caru, when things are not so turbulent and the world so chaotic, we will continue what has begun between us." His words seemed innocent enough but the meaning beneath held a wealth of promise. This scared Saleene to her core.

Twisting herself out of his grasp, Saleene looked up, glaring with every bit of energy she could. "Nothing needs

to be continued, because nothing has begun!” God she prayed she sounded more annoyed than she actually felt. His lips so close to her skin sent tiny fires racing across her body. If he didn’t give her space soon she thought she would surely ignite from spontaneous combustion.

“Ah Caru, keep telling yourself that and perhaps, one day, you might actually believe it.” His eyes held a wealth of emotions Saleene could not fathom, but his face was as still as the forest on the eve of a monstrous storm.

About to counter his last point, Saleene thought better of it and turned around to head back into the forest and hopefully in the direction of the evil.

Chapter 9

Morning had turned into late afternoon and still they were no closer to knowing where they needed to go. Tired and hungry, Saleene looked around for a place to rest and recoup some of her lost energy. A howl in the distance alerted her to a clearing up ahead, a shaded area that they could use to rest for a short time. She turned quickly toward Dartian and caught him staring at her intently; a small blush stole across her face at the knowledge. He seemed to be watching her with a bit too much interest.

“There is a place we can rest up head. It is about 400 feet from where we currently are.” She informed.

Dartian’s voice came from the right. “Good.”

Not giving him time to argue, Saleene broke off into a fast jog, hoping to put some breathing room between them. *Why did he have such an effect on her?* So deep into her thoughts she barely noticed the uprooted vine, her foot catching on the edge of it. Her forward momentum caused Saleene to lose her balance only to land on her stomach, the dust from the ground puffing all around her. Swearing in a few different languages, Saleene looked around the area to see if there were any other hidden roots.

She rubbed her ankle, a bruise was already beginning to form, when a vine from beneath the ground broke through, encircling her other ankle. Whether it was from surprise of the vine taking a hold of her ankle or the strength it had, Saleene found herself being pulled down into the ground, a scream escaping her lips in sheer terror.

“Dartian! Help me!” She prayed he’d hear her in time.

The vines continued to wrap themselves around her calf, working their way up to her waist. Fear pooled in her veins at the thought of being pulled underground.

Desperate to get free she reached into her satchel and tried to locate her dagger. Just as her hand reached the hilt, another vine twisted itself around her mid-section, closing off any chance of using the weapon. She knew she had no way to get out without aide and prayed Dartian would make it to her in time.

Twisting and turning in an attempt to free herself, Saleene didn't see Dartian approach. Her body was already beneath the surface, all that remained was her bound face. Losing consciousness, Saleene began to see shades of gray and silver. In her mind she could hear an insidious laughter that promised eternal pain. Terror coursed through her at the thought of what evil had created such an instrument of harm.

"I'm here. Don't let it take you." His voice pushed through the dark haze of despair.

Suddenly Saleene felt strong hands grasp her shoulders. Tears shimmered in her eyes as she looked up to see Dartian at her side. Somehow he had heard her and had known she was in peril. With a strength she did not know he contained, Dartian was able to pull her out of the ground that threatened to engulf her. With one swoosh of his blade; Dartian began to free Saleene from her confines.

"Never again Saleene, never again." Amazed at the emotions that she felt in his words, Saleene decided she wouldn't counter what he'd said. Once he was sure that all the mutated briars had been destroyed he returned his attention back to her.

"Thank you. I was afraid you wouldn't hear me." Out of breath and sore from the thorns that had pierced her flesh, Saleene looked around still half dazed from her ordeal. Feeling for her satchel, she looked up to find him staring down at her, concern in his eyes.

"Caru, I nearly lost you. Why must you try to stay so far ahead of me? You have nothing to prove." His words and the honesty in them spoke more than he could ever know. God, how she felt foolish fleeing from him.

"I'm sorry." She hated to have made him worry like that.

Dartian cupped her chin with his finger sending warmth through her body. "Don't ever apologize for being

who you are.” Saleene shook her head needing to push aside the emotions she felt brewing. Desperate she turned her head away from his touch.

Determined to continue on, Saleene stood up, then lost her balance and fell into his strong embrace. The sudden contact sent lightning arching between them. His face, as handsome as if etched by the gods themselves, seemed to hide all the emotions that swirled in his eyes. Not thinking, Saleene raised her hand and lightly brushed the side of his cheek. Amazed at the rough masculine texture of his skin, Saleene’s fingers continued to move around his cheek and then across his chin, mesmerized by his sculpted edges.

It was an innocent gesture, but one that set Dartian’s blood boiling. Unaware of the chaos she was causing in his body, Dartian reluctantly steadied her, his hands not wanting to let go.

“We must continue on Caru, if we are to gain on our enemy.” The words said through clenched teeth, made Saleene all too aware of the closeness of their bodies. Saleene backed away, as if burned by the fire building between them. She turned her head to look at anything but him when she caught sight of an odd formed bird perched near them.

Tilting her head, Saleene attempted to recall what manner of bird it was. Midnight black feathers covered it, its wings almost iridescent in color. Its eyes were the most unusual color for a bird, almost as if they glowed red.

“Don’t move. We have company.” Knowledge seeped into her almost instantly as she reached into her bag and pulled out a portion of knotweed. She blew the herbs in its direction, careful to cover the body of the creature.

“Evil lives, evil dies, evil watches with hollow eyes. Sun above, earth below, fire that burns and winds that blow. Take this creature, vile and depraved, and bind it to an earthly grave.” Saleene began to chant an ancient spell used to bind those that are not natural of the world back to their origins. Her words and the power they contained caused the wind to pick up and the thunder to roll in the distance. Dartian watched as the beastly bird squawked out an eerie cry before it dissolved into dust before his eyes.

“What just happened?” He watched while Saleene approached what remained of the creature. She crushed more of the herb and sprinkled it on the remaining dust. The moment the herbs connected a bright green flame ignited where the dust had been, removing what remained of the creature.

“That was not of this world, and it was watching our every move. So instead of allowing it to obtain further information, I sent it home.” Such a simple explanation, the man should understand it. As she quickly brushed past him, Saleene caught the glimmer of an amused smile cross Dartian’s rough face.

Saleene maintained a constant scan of the area as they continued their journey. She refused to fall into another trap. As they entered a grassy clearing a rush of wind nearly knocked her off her feet, but Dartian’s steady arms held onto her. How the heck had he gotten to her side so fast?

“Something is near us, do you hear it?” As if not waiting for his answer, Saleene began to move forward, each step placed with great care.

“Caru, you must not place yourself in danger. I will scout the area and determine the source of the noise.” A soft sigh of annoyance was all she gave.

“He’s right Saleene, no need to put your self in danger.” Raku’s voice intruded into her thoughts.

“Raku!” A surge of relief swept through her as Raku emerged from the forest. “I’ve been so worried about you. How are you feeling?” So many questions rushed through her mind that she nearly walked into the hollowed out stump in front of her.

“I’m doing much better now thank you.” Saleene could tell Raku was still feeling the affects of his ordeal. Every step he took toward them he seemed to favor his left leg. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. Now you really must be careful. No need to have anything befall you.”

“Don’t worry about me I can take care of myself.” *Men, why do they have to be in control?* Paying no mind to his request, Saleene continued forward, her curiosity increased with each step. She sensed that no evil in the area had caused the disturbance. Suddenly, she saw an older woman, scorched beyond recognition. Her small

figure appeared to be lying partially over a fur lined blanket.

“My God, what could have done this?” Saleene dismissed Raku’s question for the moment. She needed to concentrate on the figure in front of her.

“What could cause such a burn?” Looking over the charred body, there were no markings to distinguish who the woman used to be, only the bones remained. Then, underneath the blanket she noticed a small movement.

Reaching down, she carefully pulled the fabric aside, revealing a small baby beneath. A stifled cry caught in her throat at the sight of such a poor helpless child, protected within his dead mother’s arms.

Dartian’s hand reached out to her. “Saleene don’t touch it.” Concern etched his words.

“I know what I’m doing.” Saleene reached down and pulled the child into her arms. “Oh the gods be praised, the child is unharmed!” Sending soothing warmth into the child, she carefully picked him up, cradling him in her arms. Moving toward Dartian, she placed the small child into his arms, knowing he would protect the baby should something happen.

“I don’t know Saleene...” She placed her finger on his lips.

“Please Dartian. I must see to the woman. You can handle one small child.” Saleene returned her attention back to the corpse, her breath ragged at the visions of pain she must have endured before dying.

Saddened by the horrid death of the child’s mother, Saleene reached into her satchel and pulled some hazel from her stash. With a quick puff, she sprinkled it across the body, her eyes turned skyward as she raised her hands and prayed for the safe passage for the dead woman’s soul.

Her voice caused all other sounds in the forest to hush as the magical words of her ancestors were carried on the wind, out into the evening sky.

“Gods of old, bringers of life, birth of babe, fathers of light. Heed my call, know my plea, bless this soul, honor to thee.” Her hands danced with precision as the winds stilled. Saleene knelt near the body, a pale glow surrounding her. “As birth is begun, so death’s grasp is

now. Hear my voice, know my vow. Corners of power, followers of Bast; north, south, east, and west.”

Picking up a small bit of earth she mixed it with water from a vial she had removed from her satchel. Standing once more, Saleene blew the herbs across the remains of the woman to cleanse any residual taint.

“The four element’s strengths combined, earth, air, water, and fire, guide her soul and do not falter. Embrace her soul as she did her babe, secure her passage to those who await her return!” As the words were uttered, a small light began to emanate from the body, a fire that burned bright as daylight. Suddenly, a forceful wind blew past, capturing the ashes that remained, swirling them up into the heavens.

“There must be a village nearby. They had nothing but the clothes on their back, so they would not have traveled far.” An eagle above circled once, capturing her attention. Calling out to the bird, Saleene merged her mind fully with it, using its keen vision to locate the child’s home.

“I’ll go scout ahead. You take care of what needs to be finished.” Raku gave no chance for argument as he bolted back into the forest and in the direction they had been heading.

“He’s fast.”

“You’re telling me. Let’s finish this.” Dartian’s voice echoed through the night.

With a quick nod Saleene continued to scan the land below with the acute sight of the eagle. She noticed a small village perhaps an hour’s walk from where they were. *Good, it’s not far*, she mused to herself.

She thanked the bird and returned to her body, swaying from the use of energy to connect with the bird. Without thinking, Saleene leaned back into Dartian’s hard sturdy frame. The instant connection sparked lightning once again between them. Jumping away from the contact, she turned to face Dartian, only to find a heart stopping amused smile on his handsome face

Chapter 10

“Oh get over yourself.” Saleene muttered. “There is a village about an hour’s or so walk from here. If we hurry we can make it before nightfall.” Without waiting for an answer, Saleene turned in the direction of the village, wondering if she was more annoyed with the look on his gorgeous face or her reaction to his touch.

“She is right you know. The child’s village is but a mere short walk from here.” His words jarred the silence and brought Dartian’s gaze to the thick forest, as Raku emerged from the darkness. His face was still swollen from the wounds that had been inflicted upon him His eyes seemed to know what had transpired between Saleene and Dartian, and a mischievous smirk crossed his face.

“I thought you were going ahead to scout? Did you miss us already?” Saleene couldn’t help but find humor in the look on Raku’s face. He must have watched her as she merged with the bird.

“Whatever. No reason for me to scout what you already know.” A smile covered Raku’s face. “Besides, it’s safer if we travel together.”

Looking down at the child who still slept, Dartian whispered in his ear, “Do not grow up too soon child, and whatever you do, do not try and figure out the females of your race.” Watching the woman before him head in the direction of the child’s village, Dartian wondered about the connection they both felt.

“Let’s go you two. I need to find some rest.” Saleene turned in the direction the bird had shown her feet picking up speed with every heartbeat.

About an hour later they made their way to the end of the field, reaching the outer edge of the child’s village. Looking around, Saleene was surprised at the lack of voices from within. The sun was still high in the sky; the

village should still be a bustle with activity.

“Dartian...where is everyone?” The hair on the back of her neck seemed to stand on edge as if warning her of something.

“I fear I do not know Caru. Something is amiss but I am unsure as to what it is.” Every protective instinct in him screamed to get the three of them out of the town immediately. Turning around, he found they were blocked inside the town; silently a throng of men had surrounded them. From within the homes, the villagers began to emerge from the shadows.

“Dartian? Am I missing something? I don’t sense evil, but I do not like the way they are approaching us.” She felt as if they were being cornered by a stalking cat.

A tall wiry looking man stepped to the front of the crowd, his grey hair pulled back and banded at the nape of his neck. He appeared to be someone of great importance within the village. His golden eyes demanded respect and she could tell he had seen many things in his life.

All three of them bowed in respect to the elder.

“I am Alek, leader of my people. Who may I ask are you, and why are you holding my grandson in your arms?” His voice held strength and concern in his words, his actions thoughtful and sure.

“It is my honor to meet you Alek. I fear I have some bad news for you.” Breathing in to gain her composure, Saleene explained how they came across the child and the remains of his mother. She used her most powerful healing voice to ease the grief that Alek was sure to feel at the loss of his daughter. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Softened by having lost his daughter, he reached out his hands and removed the babe from Dartian’s arms. “I thank you for returning my grandson to me. What of his mother’s body?” The sadness reflected in the old man’s eyes broke Saleene’s heart. She knew he needed to know the truth, but she hated to be the one to tell him.

“Due to the condition of her body and the way she must have passed, I wanted to make sure she had a clear path to the afterlife. I released her soul from the confines in which it was being held and allowed her safe passage to Agnau.”

“I want to thank you for the respect you showed for my daughter. Do you have any idea what might have killed her?” The questions that lingered in his eyes were ones that Saleene could not answer.

“I am sorry but we do not know.” It was the best answer she could provide the grieving man, although she knew it did not help alleviate the suffering he felt.

Surprised at the action of the young woman, Alek looked up into her deep green eyes and felt the compassion this young woman possessed. Thankful for all that she had attempted to do for his family; Alek lightly patted her hand, an acknowledgment for her gift.

“You must stay for the night. The hour grows late, and there are many dangers within the forest.” Saleene almost chuckled at the old man’s words. If he only knew the dangers they had already faced, so much death.

“Thank you for the offer.”

Saleene turned to find Dartian staring at her, his eyes moving across her body, lighting every nerve ending on fire. How could a man do that with just one look? The idea perplexed her, but she refused to dig deeper into the meaning of it all. The old man chuckled at them both and motioned toward an empty house. The moment she began to follow, she heard a deep husky laughter erupt from behind her, carried on the wind and wrapping her up in its warmth. The man was a menace, that was all there was too it.

Saleene returned her attention back to Alek her face flushed by Dartian’s brazen stare. “We are ready...lead the way.” She was desperate to find something else to do but more than that she needed distance and fast. Her emotions were getting too confusing.

“Yes, please lead the way. I think Saleene needs to freshen up with some cool water.” A chuckle resounded from behind her.

Anger, then frustration replaced the concern she had felt, knowing he must have seen her looking so closely at him. Men! They could be so bothersome at times. Sighing, she knew deep down inside she wanted to make sure he never looked sad again.

Puffing the bangs from her eyes, she didn’t see the look of stark possession coming from Dartian, nor the

battle he fought to keep from pulling her into his arms, and making her his for all time.

Rising with the morning sun, Saleene stretched her body, each slow movement a ripple of muscle and skin, taut and golden. Moving toward the bathroom, she hoped to clear the cobwebs from her mind as well as the dirt that clung to her body. She knew Dartian had watched over them most of the night. She had felt his gaze along her body more than once. Just the idea of him near sent her blood rushing through her veins like molten lava.

She stepped into the shower to allow the water to cascade down her body. The warm water a nice diversion from her thoughts and the dreams she continued to have. A sliver of sunlight broke through the window and caressed her arm. The action caused her skin to itch, as if something just under the surface was trying to break through. Intrigued, she looked down at her arm and could have sworn she saw small black hairs just underneath her skin. Rubbing her arm, she felt nothing but the same smoothness as before, nothing out of the ordinary lurking underneath.

Shaking her head, she laughed at the thought of such a thing. *There'd been too many strange happenings all at once.* Saleene sighed and figured her mind must be playing tricks on her. Moving to the window, the air caressed her damp skin, sending chills racing across her body. Basking in the warmth of the sunlight, she could feel the aches of the past days begin to slowly leave her body, her muscles relaxing in the rays shining from above.

Outside, the children had already begun to emerge from their homes, their carefree laughter lifted on the morning breeze. Smiling at the innocence of youth, Saleene quickly dressed as the scent of breakfast caught her attention.

Moving through the hallway, she made her way to the common room, her eyes quickly finding Dartian. Surprise crossed her face as she realized that he was the one responsible for the delicious smelling meal. As if sensing her presence, Dartian turned around and smiled.

“Come, sit Caru, the food is almost ready.” Not giving her a chance to argue, he turned back around, and

continued the task of preparing the rest of the meal. Refusing to interrupt him, Saleene slowly walked to the table, her eyes taking in the beautiful carvings which lined all the furniture in the room.

Sitting down, she was so caught up in the intricate patterns of the tapestry, she never noticed Dartian moving quietly to her side with a plate full of steamed vegetables and meat made just for her.

“Thank...” Saleene tilted her head up to thank him and their eyes locked. His smile, so tender, it could bring a lesser woman to swoon. *Swooning? Now where in the world had that thought come from?* Annoyed with her reaction to his nearness, Saleene smiled back in hopes that he did not notice her reaction to being so close to him.

“Enjoy the meal Saleene, for I fear it may be the last good one we have for awhile.” The note of concern laced in his words brought Saleene back to the reality of their world. How easy it was to get caught up in the moment, forgetting the evil that was infecting their world. Angry with herself, she raised her head to meet his gaze, her eyes locked in an unspoken battle with her emotions.

Sitting down next to her, with Raku still asleep, they both finished their meal in silence. The air thickened with tension until she swore she was about to scream. Just as she opened her mouth, a loud scream echoed in the distance, jarring Raku from his sleep. Reaching frantically for his bow, he looked at his traveling companions unsure of what had transpired but he noted that both seemed to be on edge around the other.

He shook his head and wondered if they would ever figure out that they needed each other. He prayed that they realized it before it was too late. As if sensing his thoughts, Dartian gave his friend the typical back off look, indicating that now was not the time.

“We need to go, something is wrong and I fear if we stay too long we will be endangering the lives of these innocent villagers.” Her words were true, and Dartian sensed the fear she felt at the idea of causing harm to those who had taken them in. All in full agreement, they picked up their belongings and headed out once more into the thick woodlands, praying that whoever had screamed

was still alive.

As they entered, the forest the air seemed to grow heavier, like a weight pressing down on their lungs.

"I don't like this." Something was out there. All of them shared the same foreboding feeling; and the need to turn and run back to the village and the sense of safety it portrayed. The idea crossed each of their minds. Moving in the direction the scream had come, they began to feel as if something was holding them back, refusing to allow them to venture further into the woods. Shaking her head, Saleene glanced toward Dartian. He was amazed at how her eyes sparkled as bright as gemstones, as anger began to pool in their depths.

Her beauty, so natural, shook him to his core. Her hair flew wildly in the wind as her anger increased. She reminded him of a goddess who had been spurned, desperate to exact her revenge on what had harmed her.

"Saleene" His words tore from his throat as he watched her. The look she gave him sent his heart pounding and his blood coursing wildly through his veins, until he thought his body would tighten beyond control. How could a woman cause such a reaction? He was sure that if she gave him any indication of interest, he would completely lose control. Gods be damned, he would like to rip her leather bodice from her tiny body. So focused on his thoughts, he barely caught the smile that crept across Raku's face.

"We must move quickly my friends, for I fear we may already be too late." Raku's voice, but a mere whisper that seemed to float and sit on the air, brought both Saleene and Dartian back to the reality of the danger they all faced. Nodding in unison, they returned their gazes back to the direction of the scream; their movements were swift and without fault as they sped toward their enemy and any battle that might ensue.

As they broke through the foliage, Saleene's eyes widened in horror as the mangled body of a young woman filled her eyes. "Wait. Don't move another step." Tears of sorrow began to pool, her heart breaking at the knowledge of one so young ripped savagely apart.

"What is it? Do you sense more?" Dartian's voice moved through her like silken threads along her skin. She

needed to focus on the dead not the sound of his voice.

“Not yet. I don’t want you to disturb the body. It’s wrong. Not until the spirit has been set free. Just wait over there while I prepare the soul.” Saleene’s gaze moved over the body, her stomach convulsing at the sight. The pain had to have been unbearable as the cuts were too numerous to count.

Her emotions so raw, she barely saw the creature moving to her right, its eyes focused directly on her neck. Sensing the danger too late, Saleene turned her head; the sight of the shadow caught her eye as it leapt toward her. Its clawed hand pulled back ready to strike, a stifled scream lodged in her throat.

The moment he had seen Saleene move through the brush into the open area, Raku knew it was a trap. The smell of death was too fresh for the beast to have left the area so quickly. Movement to the east confirmed his worst fears. Yes, the trap had been set and they had fallen too easily for it.

“Dammit.” Raku knew no one could hear him. Anger at their stupidity rocked through his veins for a moment, when realization hit him. The creature had the chance to take them all out, yet he seemed to be stalking Saleene. Looking to Dartian, Raku knew his friend had come to the same conclusion and already he heard his hastened footsteps heading toward Saleene, and the danger so close.

Raku knew that Dartian would never make it to her side in time; that in just a few moments the beast would launch its attack, her grief so strong for the dead woman, that she would realize the danger too late.

Breathing out, Raku adjusted his stance, his body tense with the knowledge that he had to save Saleene at all costs. Unsure of where this knowledge came from, he unsheathed his dagger, his entire being ready to defend. A few breaths passed and the creature lunged into the air, its arms pulled back, ready to slash and tear Saleene’s flesh from her bones. The moment the disturbance was felt, Raku flew into action, his body pushed Saleene’s to the ground as his arms moved to embrace the beast, a dagger plunging into its flesh.

The sudden appearance of Raku forced the creature

to stagger, hissing at the intrusion of the stranger in its plan. Anger, then something more, almost like recognition, crossed the creature's face. To Raku's surprise, the creature smiled, which was something that he did not want to discern the meaning of.

"Raku, no!"

From behind him, Raku heard Dartian's shout in the distance causing him to turn. Before he had a moment to understand the words, he returned his gaze to the beast, but not before seeing a large hammer descend upon him, plunging him into darkness.

Dartian could see the fight unfold; his friend had deflected the creature from its attack on Saleene. Increasing his rate of speed, Dartian hurried to his companions, fear for both their lives gnawing on his nerves. Something was very wrong with this, something he just couldn't put his fingers on.

"No." His voice whispered. In the shadows a second figure moved about the trees, smaller than the other creature, its pace quick and silent. The direction it was moving seemed to place it directly behind Raku, a weapon held firmly in its hand. Straining to see what was approaching his friends, Dartian called out upon the wind, hoping his warning would reach them before it was too late. As if sensing the disturbance, Raku turned his head, but not before the hidden enemy was on him, slamming its weapon into Raku's head, rendering him unconscious.

Anger coursed through Dartian's blood, pumping fear and frustration through his system, setting the beast free. Moving faster than most humans, Dartian shifted as he ran, his body contorting into the shape of his brethren; the beast within him was released to revenge the crimes against his friends. His movements increased in tempo, moving him quickly to Saleene's side, her eyes were still closed from being knocked out by the jolt of Raku's push.

Looking around, Dartian sniffed the air, allowing the forest to bring him news of Raku's direction and the creatures that had taken him. Oddly enough, it was as if a black hole had swallowed them up, no scent was able to be detected. He moved his gaze back to Saleene; his heart lurched with concern as the beast cried out in anguish for

his mate.

Slowly waking, Saleene's first thought was of how much her head pounded. It felt like small hammers going off in her brain. Then remembrance struck and she shot up, her back stiff from the lack of movement while she'd been unconscious.

"Ouch." Rubbing her back, her eyes adjusted to the light where she found Dartian leaning against a tree. Just the sight of him caused her blood to thicken and the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end. Sighing, Saleene moved her gaze from him, looking to find the body of the woman who had been murdered. Standing up, she walked over to the still figure, her body draped in a black cloth, signifying the end of life. *Such a waste!* Her mind screamed with fury.

Looking around, she wondered where Raku had gone. "Where's Raku?" Moving her gaze to Dartian, she sensed he was fearful of telling her something, his eyes regarded her with concern.

Closing her eyes, Saleene mind-reached for him, probing into his memories of what had happened after she'd been unconscious. The onslaught of emotions from him hit her so strongly it nearly brought her to her knees, frustration and sadness flooded her, filling her eyes with tears.

"I'm sorry Dartian, it's my fault." She'd been led into a trap.

Breathing in to calm her nerves, her heart threatened to burst, as it pounded out a chaotic rhythm. Lowering her head she quietly wept, her tears meant for all those who had suffered at the hands of the creatures and those the evil would still harm. Her emotions were so raw; it nearly broke Dartian's heart. His first thought was to pull her into his arms and wipe away all of the hurt reflected in her emerald eyes.

"Saleene, you must realize this is not your fault. We all knew what the chances were. It is a task and a burden we all share." Dartian quietly reassured her even though he could see she was already closing herself off to everyone and everything around her. "If we are to win this battle; and this is a battle that we are *all* a part of, we must stick together no matter the outcome."

Even as Dartian said the words he knew instinctively that he would do all he could to protect the woman standing before him. Unsure of how, in such a short period of time she had become his everything; Dartian did know, that without a doubt they were bound together and he would fight to the death to keep it that way.

Slowly Saleene turned her head towards Dartian, her eyes sparkling in the night like emerald gems, with emotions swirling just below the surface she quietly explained to him.

“Dartian, please understand that I know what it is that we face. Do not fear any outcome to myself. I will do all that I can to make sure you and Raku come to no harm. By doing this, you may learn things about me that you find unsettling, and for that I am truly sorry.”

As she said the words; Dartian felt a pull at his heart, in part due to the wealth of sadness and regret in her words, but more importantly, because of the look of utter finality in her gaze. It was as if she truly felt that she would not see the dawn of another day.

“Saleene, we all have things about ourselves we feel others cannot understand, one is not any less than the other. I too, have traits that you might find less than acceptable, but none the less, they make me what I am. *Who I am*” Saleene noted the whip in Dartian’s voice, almost as if he were warning her of something. Something that was just beyond her understanding at the moment.

A nod of her head was all she gave before she bolted in the direction of where they’d taken Raku. Shaking his head, Dartian acknowledged her need to help and that whenever she put her mind to something, she did it wholeheartedly. Sighing, Dartian decided the best way to protect her was to draw upon his heritage and embrace that which was so much a part of him.

“So be it.”

Reaching deep within, Dartian slowly began to feel his muscles contort as fur full and thick began to ripple along his skin. A deep blue-black wolf emerged from the man, long and sleek with deep blue topaz eyes; full of knowledge and intense with regret of what was still to come.

Chapter 11

Slowly lifting his muzzle to the wind, Dartian gathered information about the direction in which their friend had been taken. Inhaling the scent of their enemy, Dartian began the journey toward the deep confines of the forest, where he was sure the enemy had trekked. Reveling in the freedom of his wolf form, he ran with the speed and agility of his brethren, never once giving away his presence to his prey. His senses heightened, his vision able to detect movement that mere humans would overlook, he made his way even deeper into the forest.

Silent and deadly, he continued his journey with only one thought in his mind. Saleene; sweet and innocent, was not made for the death and destruction that surrounded them. She was so pure and compassionate, almost to a fault. She humbled him as no other could and she wasn't even aware of the spell she had woven over him. She was a bright light of goodness, which caused the darkness that stained his soul to become such a heavy burden, he felt he would never be released from it. He needed her, probably more than she needed him, though after the day's events he felt she might indeed need him just as much.

The thought of her out there, alone, ate at him until he felt he would go insane if he did not catch up to her soon. He would protect her, even from himself, though he knew he would never have the strength to allow her to leave his life. Dartian knew he should give her up, but he was honest enough with himself to admit that he never would. Willing to let the gods curse him for his selfishness, he was man enough to admit that if they were to survive, she would always be bound to him, she just did not know it yet.

Since she had a head start, Saleene hoped she could

gain distance on the thing that had Raku. She knew the exact direction of where they were headed but she felt a premise of danger begin to invade her soul. Something was not right with the situation, aside from the obvious. There was something unsettling about the movement of their enemy, something familiar about it, but just outside her grasp. Moments later she reached the campsite where Raku was being held. Crouching low to the ground, she surveyed the area in an attempt to determine the best course of action.

The camp looked as any camp would and that concerned Saleene. *Things are not always what they seem.* Her mother had taught her that during their training sessions. It was almost as if the campsite were an illusion set up to create a false sense of security. An owl cried from above, alerting Saleene that danger was close by.

With her acute sight, Saleene slowly surveyed the area looking for anything which might pose a threat. She noted that the trees were unusually still and even the animals of the forest had fallen into an eerie silence. The only sound was the owl which continued its warning, coming to perch on a tree a few steps from her.

“What is it you are warning me of friend?” Saleene inquired softly, never once letting her guard down. “I know there is something not right here, but your squawking is not helping the situation.”

The owl, understanding Saleene’s words, left its perch and began circling over a large area of trees. Initially, Saleene had not thought to venture away from the camp, but the darkness that was encroaching on her bothered her more and more, chilling her to the bone.

No amount of rubbing her arms would alleviate the coldness she felt. *What is it about this part of the forest? There’s something familiar, but off balance.* It made no sense. If one of her kind was in the area they would have sent out a message to the other. It was a courtesy they all practiced, yet Saleene had not received any such message. Rubbing the nape of her neck in frustration, Saleene never heard the warning of the owl from above. All she would remember was a quick instance of pain, as darkness covered her vision.

Waking from the depths of unconsciousness, Saleene felt the impact of a venomous stare in front of her. Inch by inch she raised her head to seek out the cause of her headache. Her gaze came to rest on a slumped figure beside the fire; shortened breaths indicated the person was fast asleep. The man's appearance was disheveled as if misused and left like no more than trash.

Upon further inspection, Saleene realized that it was Raku who lay so still, as if death awaited the right time to take him. Her eyes began to water at the thought of the treatment her companion had received, wounds apparent across his face. Fury replaced Saleene's fear at the mistreatment he'd faced.

From the corner of her eye, Saleene caught movement at the edge of the camp, tree branches pushed aside by a small hand. From out of the shadows, a figure began to approach her, the fire light revealed more of who the shadows were protecting. Saleene felt the breath leave her lungs as she recognized the person who had betrayed her.

"Dena, I should have known it was you."

"Ah dear Saleene, my dutiful cousin. It's about time you woke up." Dena's face mimicked the contempt that was in her voice. "It is quite sad that I was able to subdue you so easily. You must be very rusty to have fallen into such a simple trap." Dena continued to glare at her younger cousin, hate-filled eyes and a vile smile plastered on her face.

Dena, the eldest daughter of her mother's sister, had always pushed the limits of their laws. Saleene recalled a time when she was but nine summers old, when her cousin approached her with a plan to overthrow their council of elders. At the time, Saleene believed her cousin was only jesting but it soon became apparent that something was not right. Unfortunately, no one else seemed to notice the evil that ran deep in her soul.

One spring morning, Saleene came upon Dena offering a sacrifice to the god Anutima. Saleene recalled the day, it had been unusually cold out and the winds whispered of something unnatural being called forth. She had ventured out to try and locate the disturbance, though she never imagined she would find the

abomination that her cousin was striving to conjure. How could someone she trusted so much be doing something so vile? Seeing this, she did the only thing she could, she advised the elders of the travesty.

When confronted about the deed, Dena had glared at her and vowed one day she would exact her revenge. Sensing the spread of evil on her soul, the elders banished her from the village, never to return. Most of the clan believed that Dena had either died or joined in with another clan, none would have thought she'd be in league with the very thing which threatened their existence.

Hardly able to believe that her cousin had not only survived, but had taken up with as vile a monster as what had been unleashed upon their land, Saleene focused her thoughts into sending out word to her kin and her traveling companions of the real danger they all faced.

"Dena, I must differ on my lack of response. Had I not been preoccupied with the poor illusion that was constructed, I would have been more prepared to give you a respectable greeting." Saleene smiled lavishly at her older cousin, never once allowing the contempt that brewed below the surface to register on her calm face. "You seem to be surviving quite well cousin; all has been well with you?" Saleene inquired, hoping to ensure she could gain enough time to work out a plan to extract herself from her current situation.

"Now cousin," Dena spouted venomously, "why would I even remotely believe that you would offer me anything more than a dagger in my backside should I allow you the chance?" The look on Dena's face conveyed her lack of sanity and deep hatred for her younger cousin.

"I'm not like you Dena, I have morals. You should give up and come back. Make a life for yourself."

"I have a life now, one that was denied to me by our ignorant elders. It is one that you made sure I would never be able to obtain even if I'd not been banished and had stayed in that meager existence you call home." Her cousin's words whipped against her skin. "I am quite happy with the path my life has taken and will enjoy it even more once I drain the life from your body."

It took a moment for the last part of what Dena had said to sink in. The moment the knowledge had seeped in,

fear began to enter her soul. *What could she mean by that?* The look in Dena's eyes sent a chill down her spine. *What did Dena have planned and what of Dartian?* She hadn't sensed his presence in a long while, nor could she alert him to the trap that may lay in wait for him. Emotions she didn't dare inspect further began to surface at the thought of him in danger.

"You've lost your mind, Dena. How can you even think to win at this?" She needed to buy some time. Her eyes moved across the area, surveying the lay of the land. No sound emanated from the forest. It was as if the trees, bushes and animals had all been silenced. Had her cousin woven a spell that draped some kind of veil across the forest? The natural flow had definitely been interrupted. She could feel it.

"You won't figure it out Saleene, so give up." Dena must have sensed that her cousin was searching out answers to her situation.

A muffled cry was picked up on the wind and carried to Saleene's sensitive ears. Her eyes darted directly to a small moving bag.

"Oh no." Saleene's words drifted on the air. How could she miss such a thing? Try as she might, Saleene couldn't discern what the cry was emanating from. *A child? Some animal?* What foul plan could Dena have concocted? A shudder ran through her body at the thought of the poor defenseless creature

"What exactly do you have planned for me Dena?"

"You don't need to know yet. All in due time." Her cousin's hate-filled gaze stared back a smile that was anything but kind crossing her face.

"Prolonging anything at this point is more hazardous to your well beginning than to mine." She prayed her voice sounded more confident than she actually felt. She needed to find a way out and fast.

Her words must have hit the mark as she watched her cousin's face fill with rage. "Don't push me cousin."

Her hands went for the satchel, the contents still squirming around inside. As she untied the rope her gaze never left Saleene's, her eyes blazed with contempt. Out of the bag her cousin pulled a tiny wolf cub, his moans drifting on the wind.

“Leave it alone Dena.” Her heart cried out at the rough handling of the cub from her cousin.

Saleene could tell it had been abused while in the bag, small patches of fur were missing from its pelt. As her compassionate eyes, met with Dena’s demented ones, she understood what her cousin had meant by what would hurt her most.

“Finally you are beginning to understand dear cousin. I will take great pleasure in watching you suffer.”

“Whatever you have planned, you don’t need to include the innocent animal. I alone need to bear the brunt of your hate, not this defenseless wolf cub.” She knew her pleadings were falling on deaf ears. Her cousin was lost to her.

Dena knew that it would break her cousin’s heart to see an innocent harmed for no reason and she reveled in that knowledge.

Where was Dartian when she needed him? Another cry of the cub caught Saleene’s attention then her eyes slowly lifted back to her cousin.

Saleene watching in horror as Dena unsheathed her dagger and began to cut an incision on the front paw of the wolf cub.

“No Dena...don’t!” A roar of anguish erupted from the helpless cub as it tried desperately to free itself from its captor. As blood began to drip onto the ground she swore she heard the earth scream in horror. Seconds ticked by when the wind began to pick up, carrying the cries of the young pup in the direction of its family.

An answering cry of retribution followed, as its pack signaled that revenge would be carried out to whoever had harmed its kin.

“Cry little wolf cub, call your family to you.” Looking up from the dark deed she’d preformed, Dena cracked a sinister smile that shot right through Saleene. Putting the cub back into the satchel she flung the bag toward Saleene, her eyes glowing red with hatred.

“What have you done?” Shock still rocked through her at how Dena had so carelessly harmed the poor animal. How could someone of her own blood turn so evil?

“I told you I would find a way to take revenge out on you. Now you will die by the creatures you hold so dear. I

on the other hand will watch as the village you so love crumbles into ash before my eyes!" Saleene gasped in horror as she watched Dena toss the dagger toward her. As the blade met its target, a scream caught in Saleene's throat. The blade cut deep into her arm sending bolts of pain throughout.

Saleene raised her head to face her cousin, sadness for what she'd become pulsing through her veins. "You won't win Dena, you never could."

"As much as I'd love to stay and watch you die I have bigger things to take care of." As Dena vanished into the woods, Saleene could hear the rustle of the approaching pack. She needed to get out of the ropes and fast.

Twisting and turning she maneuvered her way out of the bindings her cousin had tied. What could have tainted her cousin so much over the years to have brought about this evil? The answer to that question she knew would have to wait as more immediate concerns needed to be addressed. Another cry echoed on the wind along with the answering cry of the wolf's kin.

Carefully Saleene removed the wolf pup from its prison and began to crush soothing herbs into the fire to help calm the wounded creature.

"Shh...little one and let me see what she's done. You'll be ok I promise." Saleene began to chant a healing song she'd learned as a child, one taught to the healers of her village.

She knew that the wolves were closing in and not much time remained. Still her first priority was to the survival of the pup she owed him that. She just prayed she had enough time.

As she had so many times before, Saleene reached into herself for the healing warmth that her kind possessed. Sending that warmth into the wound of the wolf pup she continued to chant to aide in recovery. A soft white light began to glow around the entrance to the cut as she continued her work.

Above the canopy of the forest an eagle shouted out a word of warning. The pack was close and she needed to get out of there quickly. Allowing her senses to branch out she located the pack's direction. They were close... to close. Damn, she would never get out of here in time.

Looking down at the pup she still held she wished she could remove his memories of what had happened.

"I'm sorry little one. You will live, I just wish you family wasn't so upset right now."

She knew she didn't have the time to get out of there as they had caught the scent of her blood that was still flowing from her own wound. More than that, she was too tired from the use of energy to heal the wolf's wounds, her body already felt sluggish. From behind her she heard the growl from the male of the pack heralding their arrival.

Saleene turned around to face her destiny. She knew she could not fight the pack and win as she just did not have the strength. Even if she had she wouldn't have. She refused to harm an innocent creature for no reason. Calmly sitting on the ground, she waited. Moments ticked by as she attempted to link with the creature and convey her sadness and regret to the treatment the young pup had received. All she found was a red veil of hatred and darkness spreading throughout the animal.

"What? How?" Could Dena have influenced this animal in some way to combat any attempt at consoling him? Her answer came as malevolent laughter brushed the interior of her mind. Yes, Dena had done such a thing, knowing she would attempt to calm the animals.

Unsure of what to do, Saleene stood up and backed to the far end of the camp. A large alpha male emerged from the forest, hatred shining in his eyes. The wolf's gaze never strayed far from her position. The air that surrounded them began to thicken with the dark entity which was helping to facilitate the natural instinct of the wolf to protect its own.

"I understand you do not know what it is you are doing my friend, and for that I harbor no ill will towards you. I am sorry your pup was injured and I have done all I can to help the wound to heal." Saleene gently coaxed to the agitated wolf. She knew he was not able to control his actions.

Preparing for the worse, Saleene whispered up a prayer to the gods to save both her village and her companions, from the vile plan that had been put into action. Her only regret as the wolf lunged into the air was Dartian. How she hated not being able to warn him of

what was happening and the trap that may lay in wait for him. But more than that, she felt bereft at the thought of not seeing his beautiful blue eyes again, nor having the chance to try and chase the shadows that seemed to haunt him.

“I’m sorry Dartian; I’ve failed in my task. Find Raku and save those you can.” She sent her plea on the wind as sadness overcame her.

She wished for just one more moment with him; to be held in his strong muscular arms and warmed by the heat of his body. To chase all his demons away, to allow him some peace that she knew he had not had in a very long time.

With a sigh, Saleene closed her eyes to await her demise by the creature of the night. She opened them in time to see a pair of deep blue-topaz eyes, as a second male wolf lunged into the air. Darkness overcame her, as she fainted from the weakness of blood loss.

Sensing the danger to Saleene, Dartian had hastened as fast as he could to reach her side before any it could befall her. As he came upon the camp he saw the beauty of her words as she spoke to the wolf pup while she tended its wounds. She was so sweet and gentle, like a ray of sunlight shining through the death and destruction of all the lands. Something he dared not try to understand seemed to be surfacing, an emotion he thought long lost.

Suddenly from the right of him a large male wolf emerged from the woodlands. His teeth bared, a snarl resonated from the pack leader.

“No.” Dartian’s heart sank at the thought of what this predator would do, should he acquire his prey. He sought to contact the animal but only found a haze of killing fury building up inside of him. It was almost a compulsion ingrained into the wolf by an outside source, but more than that, the patterns of the wolf were peculiar. The brain waves were different, yet they were also familiar. Something nagged at Dartian just out of reach, when without warning the large male began to leap at Saleene as she fainted. Before another thought could cross his mind, Dartian burst through the shrub and into the air, connecting with the other male wolf before it had a chance to sink its teeth into Saleene’s tender flesh.

Knocking the male to the ground, Dartian sunk his canines into the meaty flesh of his neck forcing him into a submission hold. He waited for the killing fury to subside from the male. Dartian then realized why he felt familiarity with this wolf. Searching the right path to his brethren, Dartian shouted out a request for aide in helping to calm the savage beast from his foe.

My friends and family, I need your aide. One of our own is being compelled to harm another. Help me bring him back.

Without a second thought, Dartian heard murmurs from across the land. The soft calming chants of his family and friends, pleaded to have their kin regain control of his mind and soul and fight back from the throes of bleakness that had invaded his consciousness.

Shortly after the chants had begun, a shudder ran through the other wolf as he regained control of his actions and as awareness came to him; a low roar burst out into the wind, confusion and fury for having been so easily manipulated.

He and Dartian both shape-shifted back to their human forms, both eyeing the other for any move that would be construed as 'unfriendly'. Once they both were assured of the others intentions Dartian rushed to Saleene's side and gently laid her into his lap. A cry of anguish was torn from his throat as he inspected the damage done to her.

"Why would anyone or anything harm someone so pure and compassionate?" Dartian shouted his frustration into the air. His anger at the harm done to Saleene growing in magnitude as the moments went on. He removed the piece of clothing covering the wound that Dena had inflicted; his eyes took in the full extent of her injury. His heart sank as he saw the ragged cut and the red lines beginning to move out from the wound.

"Is she ok?" A familiar voice pushed through his thoughts.

"I don't know. This was not an ordinary cut, but one which concealed a poisonous substance. It looks to be working its way through her system." Looking up, Dartian recognized the one who had planned to kill Saleene. Surprise registered on his face as he

acknowledged his childhood friend. *Zachius*. He'd been gone from their town for longer than he could remember.

"Zachius, I'm amazed to see you old friend, what are you doing in this portion of the world? Last we heard you were traveling in the wilds of Naronuk hunting the wraiths who had invaded our kin in that area?"

"Well old friend, it happens that the problem with the wraiths had mysteriously subsided. I was on my way back to our clan to inform them of this abnormal activity when I heard the call of an injured pup." He watched as Zachius reached back to rub his neck a look of confusion crossing his face.

"What is it?"

"The last I remember, I happened upon the family of the pup and saw that their leader had been slain in a most savage manner. I decided I would assist them in locating the missing pup and headed towards the cry the wind was bringing forth. As I edged closer to the camp something seemed to penetrate into my mind and the need to kill anyone who was in the camp took over. I could not control the need to ravage and maul my prey."

Dartian watched as Zachius shuddered as he realized just how close he had come to killing this innocent.

"You couldn't control it. I could see the haze that covered you in the wolf form. It took many of us to call you back." Dartian continued to cradle Saleene in his arms not wanting to let go.

"Dartian, who is this woman? Something seems different with her. She is not of our people, but I cannot put my finger on exactly where she is from." He could tell Zachius was puzzled by both the woman's origins and the protective way he was holding her.

"I do not know much about her other than her name is Saleene. She is as true a healer as I have ever seen and works with words and herbs as our elders do. She is a puzzle to me but one I plan to figure out, if we are able to save her life." He turned his head around and lifted his face to the sky.

"What is it?"

"There is a village close by here, one of our own kind. Let's get out of here and ask the healer there to help save her life." Even as he muttered the words, Dartian was on

the move, easily running through the forest with the knowledge borne of one of his kind. The forest was their home and they always knew which routes were the best to take at any given moment.

Theirs was a dying race, but one very close knit and ingrained in myth and lore. None knew about their species and it was forbidden for any to gain knowledge of their existence.

The only thing on his mind was saving this small fragile woman he held in his arms. She had a heart as big as the oceans and her courage seemed to know no bounds. As he ran through the thick underbrush, he vowed he wouldn't ever let her place herself in this type of danger again. He would force his will upon her if needed, and she would listen. What kind of family would send this beautiful woman out on such a journey? These questions perplexed Dartian as he made his way through the maze of trees and bushes always thinking of the confrontation to come.

Chapter 12

Upon entering the village, Dartian was greeted by the high council. After bowing in the way of their kind, signifying courtesy, Dartian strode past them and headed directly for their healer's home.

"Welcome to our village Dartian. The wind spoke of your trek to reach us." The elder's voice rang through the ground, murmurs resounded from them all.

"Thank you. I will come speak with you once I have had a chance to talk with your healer." He turned without allowing them to speak more. Dartian needed to get to the healer and quickly, he didn't like the look of the wound on Saleene's leg and she'd become feverish with each passing moment.

Zachius, following closely behind, gave the council members a look that conveyed one of silence and secrecy until more could be discussed in private. As Dartian entered the sacred home, the smell of incense and herbs filled his nostrils, calming his nerves.

"It seems that the news of my arrival was heralded before me old one". Glancing around the home Dartian took in the jars of herbs and substances foreign to him but which he prayed would aide in healing even the worst of wounds. The question still remained, were they in time to save Saleene from the grip of death? Dartian hesitated to ask for fear of the answer.

"If I am to do this deed, I need only those pure of heart and thought who can aide me in this endeavor. There is much to be done this night and too much time has already passed" An old man moved from the shadows his silvery hair luminescent in the firelight..."If we are to save this child, I will need only those that truly believe she can be saved to be present; all others can scatter to the winds for all I care." The resolve in the old man's words seeped into Dartian's heart and gave him a sliver of

hope for Saleene's survival.

"I will stay old one. If ever someone wanted this woman to survive it is me." Dartian didn't care what kind of magick the old man wielded as long as he could save Saleene's life.

Dartian watched as the healer began crushing herbs into a bowl and pouring them into a pot which was heated over an open fire. While the herbs began to boil in the simmering water, the healer went about lighting scented candles made of the purest ingredients and blessed by the gods. The aroma from the herbs and candles when mixed properly would greatly increase their ability to save someone with even the most dangerous of wounds.

"The wound is deep and the poison not one I have seen before, but her will is strong, like that of the mountains, and her heart capable of surviving this brush with death." There was hesitation in the man's voice. His head turned in Dartian's direction a stern look on his face. "Now understand this Dartian, she knows not of our people and our ways are not her ways. By saving her a small part of what and who we are may become a part of her. As I do not know how that will affect her down the line, you will need to be prepared to handle any effect this may have". The healer's words floated on the air for a second and Dartian was unsure if they were a warning, or something more.

"I don't care, just save her. Please." The words were torn from his heart. He needed her to live. Nothing else mattered.

"Very good my son. Let's finish this"

The healer began by chanting in the native tongue of their people. Raising his hands to the full moon he invoked the gods of old, while he carefully washed the area where the dagger had penetrated Saleene's sun kissed skin. Dartian watched as the man took deep rich earth and mixed it with rare herbs. He then applied the poultice to the injury and wrapped it up in a swatch of cloth. Awe coursed through Dartian's blood at the sheer power the man held as he centered himself and sought within for the healing light.

Reaching into Saleene's mind to provide assurance and warmth, the healer noticed that she was no ordinary

woman. She was not of their race but something different, yet they had a common ancestry somewhere. Something thought once lost to the world, now resurfacing. *How can this be?* He would have to find out more from her once she was better. The answers to those questions could change the course of their lives for all time, but the fact that her race may indeed be still in existence puzzled the old man.

Once the healer was certain that Saleene was out of danger, he returned to his physical state worn and tired from the energy spent during the healing ritual. He gently covered Saleene with a fur-hide cover and crushed more herbs to remove the stench of evil which seemed to surround the poison that had been induced into Saleene's bloodstream.

"She will live son."

"You're positive? The wound was bad." He watched as the healer returned his focus to him. His eyes shone with more knowledge than he could ever fathom.

"She will live but she needs rest." The healer directed both Dartian and Zachius out of the home so that they could converse and allow Saleene to sleep. As the healer exited he crushed several more herbs and chanted a spell of protection to help bring comfort to Saleene.

"What do you know of this woman, Dartian?" The healer inquired quietly. "She is not of our race but there is something very familiar in her that I've not seen in many, many years." The old man looked at Dartian with eyes which sparkled like black obsidian.

"I fear I do not know much about her old man." Even though Dartian walked along side the healer and the people of the village his mind continued to drift back to Saleene...

"She didn't tell you where she came from?"

Sighing, Dartian continued. "No I'm afraid not. We crossed paths but a few nights ago and have been pursued ever since. One creature we were able to send back to the black abyss for the time being, the other ended up being a relative of Saleene's, that had been banished many years ago for dabbling in the forbidden arts".

Dartian seethed with anger when recalling the scene that had unfolded before him as he arrived at the camp site. He vowed one day to dispense justice to Dena for the

attempt she had made on Saleene's life. Dartian had never enjoyed killing, but he feared he would enjoy watching the life drain out of Dena while he sent her to the underworld to be judged for her actions.

Do not think such vile thoughts Dartian, it is not who you are. My cousin will be judged one day by the gods, but you will not be the one to send her there. Trust me in that. A faint whisper brushed Dartian's mind.

Dartian looked around to see if Saleene had awakened early but the door to the home remained closed.

Dartian, please know that I appreciate your concern and that you would be so willing to dispatch my cousin for her treachery, but I can take care of her all by myself. Suddenly, Dartian realized that he was hearing Saleene in his mind. This knowledge shocked him. When the realization surfaced as to her communication methods, Dartian could have sworn he heard her soft laughter embracing him in warmth.

How is it you can talk to me this way? Dartian asked hoping she could hear his thoughts. His only answer was her melodious laughter engulfing him in warmth, as she slowly faded into the darkness, to once again regain her strength. That small touch seemed to calm the demon that wanted to rise and exact revenge upon those who would harm this small woman. Shrugging his broad shoulders lazily Dartian snickered and kept following his friend and healer into the council's home to discuss the day's events.

"I must leave you now Dartian. Speak with the council and meet me back at my home." The healer's voice penetrated his thoughts.

"Fair enough old one. I will return shortly."

Upon entering the high council's meeting area, Dartian was met with the intent stares of the entire tribunal of elders. The questions that lingered in their gazes seemed to shimmer and hold within the air of the enclosure. *Great, this should be fun.*

Dartian slowly glided across the room to the empty spot at the head of the council's table and awaited the onslaught of questions to come. Slowly one of the men in the room emerged from a darkened corner. He seemed to have an air of arrogance radiating from his movements

alone. Something bothered Dartian about this man, but he was not sure exactly what it was. He waited to see what questions would be brought forth in the course of the meeting.

“Greetings Dartian, welcome to our village. I hope you’ve found all you have sought so far and if you do require anything, please feel free to ask.” The stranger spoke graciously, but his eyes seemed to hold a much darker meaning just out of reach of Dartian’s understanding.

“Thank you. Your healer has been of great assistance.” He hesitated to say more. Something about this man bothered him.

“My name is Viktor. My father is the leader of our clan but he is currently ill and could not greet you formally.” Viktor bowed to Dartian in the way of their people, but his eyes did not blink. Instead, they seemed to be delving deep into Dartian’s soul. “As you know, ours is a sacred lineage which the world can not be made aware of. This is something which must be kept constant for the good of the clan.” A slow smile crept across Viktor’s face, a smile which reminded Dartian of a lion on the prowl for wayward prey.

“I appreciate all that your clan has done for both me and my companion. I will convey your generosity to my father when I return to my homeland. Your assistance will be reimbursed and if a need arises while you are near our lands, we will be sure to aide you.” There was an edge to Dartian’s words as he formally expressed his loyalty to the clan.

“That is good to know Dartian. Now—”

“And as for the survival of the clan, you can rest assured that every effort will be made to ensure the safety and well being of the pack.” He broke into Viktor’s speech, his patience already gone.

Dartian’s deep blue eyes met with Viktor’s mercury ones in a standoff that none in the room would dare interrupt. The tension in the room increased tenfold as the two warriors measured the other up. Finally one of the older, gray haired elder’s cleared his throat to signal the need to move on with the issues at hand. Solemnly Viktor bowed, returned to his dim corner, and folded his

arms across his broad chest.

“Dartian, our intention is not to offend you or insinuate that any malice was done by you or your companion. Our concern lies with the fact that you have brought an outsider into our village, and in doing so puts our clan in a very tenuous situation. What do you know of this woman? What village does she come from? Where does her loyalty lie?”

Dartian could sense no anger in the man, only the gentle concern of one of their kind seeking the well being of the pack. “She knows nothing, nor will she.”

“Understood Dartian, but we must find out what we can before passing any type of sentence on the young woman”. The thought of any harm befalling Saleene at the hands of the council tore at his soul. There was no way he would allow the high council to condemn Saleene to any type of sentence if he had his say in the matter.

“Truth be told old one, I do not know much of the woman as we met but a short time ago. We were traveling together, when we met some unsavory individuals. They had the upper hand and we were caught off guard initially. Unfortunately, one of our companions was slain and the other taken to an unknown location. Now that we have more of an idea of what we are up against, I have every confidence that we will prevail in our task at hand.” The force of his words and the steel of his will, left no doubt of what he expressed; the fact still remained that a stranger had been brought into the village and that in itself was cause for distress. The council members looked at one another murmuring their belief in his words, but the situation still distressed the elders of the council.

“What does this woman know of our people and our gifts?” Another of the elders’ voice chimed in. “Has she witnessed your shape shifting ability? Does she know about the clan at all? Have you explained what you are to her yet?” Even though the words were asked, everyone knew the answer even as Dartian quietly shook his head, his midnight black hair blowing gently in the breeze coming through the opened window.

“Nay sir, she knows nothing of me or our kind. She has been unconscious the duration of the day.” Dartian answered quietly, his mind wishing to leave this place

and make sure Saleene did indeed sleep peacefully. Nodding in understanding the elder slowly looked to confer with the others at the table before discussing the issue further.

“For now Dartian, she is safe from any issuance from the council. I understand she is still unconscious from the injuries she sustained, but that she will recover. For now, let us wait to see what transpires once the child has regained her strength and then we can set forth any plans that need to be made.” Dartian could sense a decree when it was given and knowing there was nothing else to be said bowed to show his respect for the council and turned about and exited the room.

He skulked out of the meeting house frustrated. That any of his kind could even consider imposing a sentence on Saleene bothered him to no end. Couldn't they see she was an innocent? It was his choice to bring her to the village to be healed, not hers. She was ready to accept death, even embrace it, when he knew she was destined for so much more. Shaking his head in annoyance, Dartian began to head to the home in which Saleene rested. Before he had the chance to reach his destination; Viktor stepped in front of him, stopping Dartian in his tracks.

“What do you want Viktor?” Dartian inquired, sighing at the mere fact that he was being stopped when he was so close to where Saleene slept...“Everything that was needed to be said was done so at the meeting with the elders. Now if you excuse me, I must attend to the young woman.” Pushing past Viktor, Dartian once again headed towards the home, only to have his arm grabbed by Viktor turning him to stare directly into each other's eyes.

“Dartian, I do not believe you need to be going into the home at this time. As you said yourself, the woman needs her rest. If you feel you must go in, then as the chieftain's eldest son, I must advise you that I will need to go in with you to confirm that nothing happens to you while in our care.” Though the words were said formally, Dartian knew there was some alternative reason for the offer. Unfortunately, he could not deny entrance to the home to the chief's son, so instead of further discussion he shrugged his shoulders as he continued on his way.

As he came closer to the door, a shadow seemed to begin forming across the sky, sending chills down his spine as if something sinister was watching them. His eyes scanned for some telltale sign of what would cause such a disturbance; he could not seem to pinpoint what the source was. Carefully he opened the door to the healer's home and entered cautiously, concerned that something was hunting them again.

At once the scents coming from within the home filled Dartian's nostrils, calming the shadowing which threatened to consume him. His gaze adjusted to the soft glow of the interior and his eyes sought out Saleene's slumbering body, his heart somersaulted at her beauty. She looked like a fairy nymph resting after a day of mischief. Her golden hair fanned out like a halo surrounding her delicate features, allowing her skin to seem translucent in the glow of the candles. She sent his blood boiling. Her color was looking much better indicating that the healer's work had been successful.

When Dartian had entered the home, he could sense the stirring of the old one as he crushed more herbs and lit more candles. Slowly, Dartian nodded to the old healer, conveying his wealth of appreciation for saving Saleene's life. Behind him, Viktor burst into the room, pushing Dartian out of the way, so that he could see first hand who this stranger was.

Chapter 13

Viktor moved over Saleene's sleeping body and Dartian could sense that this forced visit was about more than concern for his welfare. A protective sense of duty invaded Dartian's soul so that he moved to place his large frame in Viktor's line of sight. It was a casual stance, but one which sent a clear message; this woman was off limits to any other than Dartian. Viktor looked up and locked stares with Dartian, an answer to his sudden movement with a show of arrogance.

"Dartian, you have no need to hide this woman from my sight. I am the acting leader of my clan while my father is ill and I have every right to view any property that should enter it."

The way he muttered property sent a chill down Dartian's spine. *What could he mean by that? He couldn't consider Saleene a piece of property that could be given back and forth?* While these questions bounced through his mind, Dartian saw that Viktor moved enough over to enable him to continue looking at Saleene, with more than just simple curiosity in his stare. Dartian swore he would not allow this heathen to come anywhere near her and he would do anything he could to ensure her safety.

"Viktor, I fear you do not understand my intentions. I do not feel it is necessary for you to see this woman as she is still unconscious and under the healer's care. It would be inappropriate to allow a strange man to view her while she is unaware." Dartian's voice held steel as he continued to stare down his adversary. "But know this; she is not at any time considered anyone's property." These last words were said to Viktor in the manner of a threat only the two of them understood.

Viktor glared at Dartian but said no more as he turned and left the home. Before shutting the door he turned one more time to drink in the sight of the small

woman with golden hair sleeping on the soft mattress.

“This is not over Dartian; you can rest assured of that.” The challenge issued by the grin on his face, spoke volumes compared to the words that were uttered.

A low thud of the door signaled that Viktor had indeed left. Dartian finally allowed a sigh to escape his throat, his attention returned once more to Saleene.

“She is doing very well my son. Her wound is healing nicely and the poison did not do as much damage as it could have. We have had good fortune in our endeavor.” There was hesitation in the healer’s voice, an unspoken question that shimmered in the air.

“I know you have more to say, so please, continue.”

“Dartian, when she does awaken, I would be interested in talking with her. I am curious of her heritage and knowledge of her people. There is much we may be able to learn from this child, much that may go towards helping us in the race to save our kind.”

Dartian noted the faint hint of sadness in the healer’s voice. He knew that all the healers had been working diligently for years to discover other races that might be a descendant of theirs. He had a feeling that this is what the healer was considering. Dartian once again turned his gaze to the woman sleeping so soundly. She was completely unaware of the turmoil her presence was causing in the small village.

“I would like to express my deepest gratitude for all you’ve done for us, healer. I plan to advise my father of your greatness, when I am able to return to my village. What is the name that I can provide him with?” The man had saved Saleene’s life and that in its self made him honorable in Dartian’s mind. But one thing did bother him about the whole situation and it was time he found out. “Old one, how is it you knew of our coming beforehand? I sent no word heralding our arrival.”

This was something that had puzzled Dartian from the moment they arrived in the village. He trusted this man as he had performed wondrous deeds in being able to save Saleene from the brink of death, but he knew nothing of this healer nor of the values this clan upheld. He saw compassion and knowledge shining in his old weathered eyes, but he also knew that appearances could

be deceiving.

Looking up from mixing herbs and oils in an old weathered bowl, the healer cracked a small smile, one that sent warmth throughout the home.

“I am no one of any real importance, but I thank you for your praise. I am known in these parts as Nadrin. I have been long in this world and have seen many things. I knew of your coming as the earth cried forth when your friend was hurt and the winds foretold your coming. But let us not converse here. I have need of fresh air and your woman needs her rest.”

Nadrin began to head toward the door when he caught the apprehension in Dartian’s eyes.

“Dartian, please believe me that she will be safe here in my home. I can assure you, she will not be disturbed. Can you not hear the animals outside? They guard your sleeping friend.”

Dartian once more awed by the power of the healer couldn’t help but ask. “How is it possible? You must be a very power healer, schooled in many of the ancient arts to be able to call the animals to your aide. I’ve not heard of any of our people being able to accomplish such a feat.” The genuine admiration could be felt in his words and the healer slowly patted Dartian on the shoulder as they left the home.

“I appreciate your compliment Dartian, but I fear I am not the one summoning the animals.” Nadrin confessed quietly. “Your friend sleeping soundly inside is the one who calls to them. How she does this, I do not know, but she does it none the less.” This small revelation surprised Dartian. The fact that the old healer did not condemn her or point out this information to his own clan, caused Dartian to like this old man even more. He sensed much loyalty from him but also a strict code of honor he was bound by.

He continued to walk with Nadrin, when his gaze caught sight of Viktor lurking close by. He could tell he was waiting for some hidden message to be sent. Concern invaded Dartian’s mind and he wondered if their conversation was truly between Nadrin and he alone.

“Dartian let’s leave this place and discuss these matters in private. There are things better left to be said

elsewhere.” Dartian nodded and smiled as if they were discussing the weather or some other mundane topic, while the healer led them out of the village and into the forest.

They entered the forest, and Dartian followed Nadrin deeper into the foliage. After a few moments Nadrin motioned to a rock that sat in the middle of the clearing.

“I am sorry for my secrecy Dartian, but the village has eyes and ears everywhere. There is much going on that bothers me, much that needs to be looked into.” His voice a mere whisper conveyed his concern. “I fear that there is something going on involving the silencing of the leadership, but I do not have proof of this as of yet.”

Dartian knew the healer was imparting something important, something that he had not talked about with the others. Why would someone wish to cause unrest within the clan? What was good for the clan was good for all. Wasn't it?

“Who do you believe is causing this unrest? And exactly what has happened to Viktor's father? How did he become ill?” These questions hung in the air, their answers of great importance. Dartian feared that a conspiracy may be brewing which would cause more problems than the fact that a stranger had been brought within their midst. That coupled with the fact that Viktor seemed to be hiding something bothered Dartian even more.

Could Viktor be the cause for his father's sudden illness? Was someone planning on causing a change in the leadership of this clan? Dartian looked to the old man who was standing close to him, seemingly lost in deep thought, this man knew much and appeared to be very loyal to the leader of the clan. *What untold secrets did he possess?*

“I know what you are thinking Dartian, and I understand your concerns. Viktor's father became ill at the beginning of the new moon cycle. I have tried desperately to find the cause of the illness, but nothing has been discovered as of yet. I have provided him with all the healing he should require, yet nothing seems to work.”

“He has shown no improvement at all?” He knew the answer before he finished his sentence. *Of course not, why else would Nadrin look so bereft.*

“I am at a loss as to what to do at this point and fear Sharlid, our leader, may not last till the next full moon. I have not had the strength to tell him of this, as I am still holding out hope that a remedy can be obtained.” Dartian could read the sadness and regret that emanated from the healer’s eyes. It bothered him that a man so honorable should feel as if he were failing his leader.

Dartian? I hear your pain, are you hurt? The words brushed the inside of Dartian’s mind like the soft breeze on a spring morning. *I am too weak to come to assist you, but if you need aide, I can attempt to summon something to keep you safe.* Startled by the intrusion, he surveyed the area even though he knew no others were near. He smiled at the thought that Saleene had reached out through her slumber to try to aide him. His heart somersaulted at the thought.

I am fine, just affairs of the state to contend with. He thought, hoping she would hear him. *Go back to sleep and do not worry about me, I can handle most anything.* Her answering laughter seemed to penetrate him right to the core of his being. How could she do these things? Should he ask the healer if he has ever heard of such a thing? Looking at the old man, Dartian wondered exactly how loyal he was to their ways and how receptive he would be to the question.

When Dartian turned to the healer he had a puzzled look on his face. He felt like a child caught doing something naughty. Dartian flashed him an impish grin. They both began to laugh at the same time, causing the birds to fly up into the air startled by the noise.

“Nadrin, I have a question for you that is perplexing me at the moment. I am hoping that with your knowledge and years, you may be able to shed some insight on a certain occurrence I’ve been a witness to.” Ever careful in how he worded his query to someone not of his clan, Dartian felt immense relief when the healer nodded his. Feeling safe, Dartian continued on.

“Have you ever experienced someone with the ability to send their thoughts and words to you without speaking them aloud?”

He watched as Nadrin considered his question, a look of surprise cross his face.

“I fear I have never had this occur to me Dartian, however, I have heard of such a thing being done in ancient races.”

Upon hearing the thoughts of the healer, Dartian began to recall being told as a child about an ancient race his species used to co-exist with. He recalled very little as most children told believed it was just a myth, something to help them fall asleep at night. His interest was definitely peaked.

“What do you know of the ancients Nadrin? What exactly happened and did they really exist?”

The mere thought of another race being out there that could possess powers unknown to him both thrilled and terrified at the same time.

“Were they peaceful? And if they did exist, why did they vanish from existence?” Dumbfounded, Dartian began pacing the area, hoping the healer would divulge any information he had, myth or otherwise, to him. A slow smile began to form on the healer’s face, letting Dartian know that he found his reaction to the possibility quite humorous.

“Well before I begin the story, I must request that you sit down and relax. There is no need to cause a rut in the ground by pacing back and forth. Mother Earth tends to enjoy her ground nice and even in most cases.” The old man snickered, pointing out the path that Dartian had created in his mindless wandering back and forth. Embarrassed that he had paced without knowing it, Dartian moved over to the standing rock and sat down, a sheepish grin plastered on his face.

“Well, it is told that many moons ago, there lived a race, one that possessed skills of magick the world had never seen before, or since. They were part of mother earth and as such were granted with her gifts of knowledge, magick and conjuration. Because of this they worship under her direction and helped to create the forests and lands you travel.” Nadrin stopped for a moment to reflect upon the story he was telling, recalling all that he had heard and learned over his many years. A faint smile seemed to form as the story returned to his fading memory.

“It is said that our people and the ancients formed an

alliance in which we each helped the other out during times of turmoil. The ancients were a peaceful race and did not believe in warfare, but if the need should arise they could call upon the powers of Mother Earth to aide them in their battle.” Dartian sensed the feelings of reverence the healer held for this race and the place they held in their myths and stories.

“Do we know if they truly existed, old one? And if so, where are they now? Why can we not locate them?” Dartian’s words fell in a rush, tripping over his tongue as each new question imparted more importance to his bearing than its predecessor. He was shocked that any race this powerful, one that had left such an indelible mark upon his species, could have vanished without a trace save the scattered memories of mythology.

Were they evil? Shaking his head ruefully, Dartian immediately discarded the thought. *Had someone or something erased their kind from the earth, relegating their proud race to tales told to children in the warmth between light and dark? It seemed a waste of precious life if that thought held true. What type of union did our kind share that bound us so close, yet now we do not know if they existed other than in fairy tales?* Dartian closed his eyes tightly and brushed the backs of his lids fervently with the pads of his thumbs as he tried to sort through the chaos that was now his thoughts.

Acknowledging Dartian’s concerns the healer placed his weathered hand on his shoulder indicating more was to come.

“It is said that both leaders were very close friends but that our leader’s son at the time was pushing for the ancients to share their knowledge with him. He was an arrogant man who wanted ultimate power. He wanted to reign over all in the forests. He did not understand the need for balance and believed that he was destined to rule over everything, including the ancients.” There seemed to be a wealth of sadness in the revelation of the betrayal of one of their own against another race. Dartian felt the weight of the healers stare on him, judging his reaction thus far to the tale being told. Whatever the healer had been looking for he must have found, as he continued on in his tale.

“It is said that one night the leader’s son, Jocabe, decided it was time to display to the ancients the power of our kind and to force them to concede to him and give their loyalty to our kind. His way of doing this was to shape shift into our wolf form and kill the leader of their clan. This was of course met with an outcry from the ancients. Our leader was forced to banish Jocabe from the village never to return.”

Dartian shuddered at the knowledge of what the man must have gone through, to die such a horrible death.

“Did he truly get banished?” There had been a hesitation in Nadrin’s voice which caused him to wonder.

“I fear I don’t know. He just vanished one night never to return.”

“I feel for his father. That is not something any leader wants to have to deal with.” Dartian hushed as the leader indicated there was more to come.

“It is said that before Jocabe left the village he cursed the ancients by invoking the god of death Hatisis to kill all the ancients. A storm formed that night like no other, its winds far reaching into many lands. It was not natural, tainted with evil from the invocation caused a black plague to be unleashed on them. After that night no one saw the ancients again.”

Dartian shivered at the mention of both the god of death and that someone could hate so much to have conjured it up to destroy a peaceful race.

“So no one has seen any proof of their demise?” Dartian questioned, finding it hard to believe that nothing was ever found of the old race. How could something so powerful vanish with nothing left?

“Do any know what actually happened to them?” Looking up into the sky, Dartian noticed that a gray mist seemed to be forming above, drifting toward and the ground and headed straight for them.

“It is said they were slaughtered by the demons of the god that Jocabe invoked, but there is no evidence to prove that. Some say the goddess of nature opened up the earth and embraced them in her arms, holding them close through the centuries. Unfortunately, no one knows what happened to them or if they ever really existed.”

Dartian closed his eyes and could almost see the

story unfold before him; the young, arrogant man striving for the ultimate power, to rule everything in the world for his own selfish reasons. Disillusioned enough to think it could be obtained by learning how to master the powers that the ancients possessed, angered at being refused by their leader. The vision of Jocabe exacting his revenge on the leader of the ancients flooded his mind, not to mention the grief it must have inflicted on his father and the clan. Such death and betrayal by one of his own chilled him to the core. What a waste of life.

“Has any evidence ever been found one way or another as to the existence of the ancients?” Dartian wondered how a race so profound could not have left anything behind. Looking up to the setting sun, he felt a peculiar disturbance in the air, as if some unseen figure moved beside him, yet he saw nothing. All that had seemed so tranquil before, appeared to have taken on a foul feeling. Nadrin too had felt the change.

“Dartian, stay where you stand. There is something in the shadows. It is waiting for one of us to move. Ready your sword for my word.” Nadrin reached into his leather bag and pulled out a small vial of earthen powder. Quietly, he uncapped the substance; blowing a small amount into the wind as he chanted a revealing spell.

The air around them thickened while the air shimmered on the dead log Dartian had been sitting on. From within the shadows a black and red spider emerged, its venomous fangs full of poison.

Dartian readied his blade and struck with as much force as he could muster. The blade connected with the abomination, but not before it had shot out a poisonous spike into the air.

A thud to his side caught Dartian’s attention. He turned to find Nadrin on his side, the dart protruding from his neck. The dart had penetrated his neck and rendered him unconscious. Outrage burned through him and the beast roared for release. How would he save this healer from the poison the dart had introduced into his blood? His anger rose with every passing moment.

Bring him to me Dartian; I can save his life as he has saved mine. Light butterfly wings brushed inside his mind, calming the beast once more. *I know what is needed*

to remove the poison reeking havoc within his body. But to do this you must hurry and bring him to me; otherwise we may be too late. How could he know if she could save him? He knew nothing about her other than what he had witnessed thus far.

To lose the healer of this village, foreign to him, could cause a war to break out. Chaotic thoughts pierced his mind until he thought he would go insane, when from nowhere he felt the warm touch of Saleene's fingers across his chin. How could she do this? If the healer lived, he would find out these answers quickly.

I know you worry that he cannot be saved, but please, if you do nothing else, believe me in this. I know the limits of my abilities and I will not fail you in this endeavor. With that said, Dartian picked up the healer and sprung into a fast sprint heading directly towards the healer's home and Saleene.

Chapter 14

Saleene had suddenly been awakened by the deep pain felt by the healer as the pincer had punctured his skin. She was unsure about how she felt this, but knew that without her aide he would die from the poison that was working its way through his blood stream. Carefully, Saleene sat up and moved her legs over the edge of the bed. Breathing deeply she focused herself and tuned into the wounds she herself had sustained. Remarkably, the deep cut was almost completely healed. Saleene marveled at the work the healer had done and for that alone she was determined to save his life.

Looking around the home, she noticed that there were no clothes that she would be able to wear. As such, Saleene went about conjuring some from mother earth. A simple spell, she moved her hands in a quick pattern, fashioning a deep crimson gossamer gown. Quickly dressing, Saleene slipped on her treasured sandals and began moving about the home, lighting different candles the healer had in stock. She then began boiling some water over the fire while adding herbs from her satchel to help promote a soothing and healing atmosphere. She knew she would need every bit of help she could muster to save this healer's life.

She had obtained much information about the healer's injury from Dartian's own vision. She knew Dartian was unsure as to how she could speak to him, but he seemed to not fear the connection, which surprised her. What was more unusual was how natural it felt for her to continue this mode of conversation with him.

"Oh well." She muttered to the wind. "Now is not the time to reflect on that."

With a quick glance around, Saleene felt that she had everything she needed. About the time she turned toward the door it opened with a hard thud. Standing in the

doorway, filling it with his massive masculine form, Dartian entered the home carrying the healer in his arms. His eyes bespoke worry for the man who lay so lifeless in his grip. Saleene's heart broke for him and the emotions she saw harnessed so tightly.

"Bring him to the bed Dartian, and let me begin my work. Pray we are not too late." With calm instructions and a steady gaze, she attempted to convey her belief in Nadrin's recovery. "I am sure I will be able to save him, but there is much work to be done this evening. I may be in need of your aide, are you willing to assist me?"

Her question seemed to hold a two-fold meaning. The first one whether or not he trusted her to save Nadrin; while the second one was if he would condemn her to his people should he see something unknown to him. One look into her deep emerald green eyes and Dartian was hopelessly lost. She trusted him with a secret, one that could be her undoing. This small show of faith triggered a curious stirring in his heart. He wanted so much to grab her into his arms and hold her safe from all who would harm his fragile gift of light. *His? Yes, she was and always would be, whether she knew it yet or not.*

"I am here for you Saleene, you have but to ask. I know little about healing and will rely upon your expertise and direction in this area." Even though the words were formal, he knew she sensed a note of concern and trust laced within his statement.

He trusted her with much more than himself, but also the life of someone who was so important to this village.

The determination and faith he gave humbled her. Such trust was not easily won and she vowed that she would not fail him. Turning her attention back to the situation at hand, Saleene began to walk around the room to secure the door. A quiet chant began to resonate in the home while she removed different hand made candles from her satchel. The room seemed to increase in temperature as she moved about the room. Hands raised to the ceiling Saleene called forth the gods to assist her.

Saleene felt the healing warmth begin to pool inside her, building with each passing breath. Centering herself, she gently laid her hands on the pulsating wound. As her

fingers lightly touched Nadrin's skin, the wind began to pick up outside. A rustle of leaves in the distance heralded the beginning of a storm. Unaware of the commotion outside, Saleene focused on her work. Her fingers moved with a will of their own, mixing herbs and oils together in time with the sound of the wind outside.

When she completed crafting the poultice she placed it on the wound on Nadrin's neck. The area surrounding the wound seemed to glow a bright red then turn a dull orange. While the medicine worked on the poison, Saleene continued to chant, each word filling the room with warmth and energy.

From the area that surrounded the puncture wound, poison began to seep out and drip into the bowl on the floor. The moment the poison hit the bowl, a hiss emanated as thick noxious smoke billowed out of the container.

The smell of decay and death from the bowl turned Saleene's stomach over, her thoughts bombarded from the acidic nature of the poison. Turning to pick up an ancient stick out of her bag, she dipped it into a small vial of red substance. She moved the stick across Nadrin's skin, quick sure movements in a language most had never seen before. The letters began to shimmer on Nadrin's skin then float into the air like puffs of smoke.

Mesmerized by the work Saleene was doing, Dartian could feel his pride in her grow tenfold. *How could someone so young and fragile know so much?* It amazed him that she worked so effortlessly, as if guided by the gods themselves.

Behind him a loud knock of wind caused the window in the home to open, allowing the breeze to extinguish the candles inside the home. Something unseen, almost sinister in nature had gained entrance, floating on the wings of the breeze. A chill engulfed him in the eerie cold. The intrusion of the unnatural wind caused Nadrin to convulse, the movement threatening to reopen the fresh wound.

Saleene motioned for Dartian to close and lock the window while she attempted to calm the healer's raging body from the unknown substance.

Dartian moved quickly to the window and re-

fastened the lock, but not before he noticed Viktor standing near the home across the way, eyes transfixed on the healer's residence. *Why was Viktor standing in the shadow's watching the healer's home? If he's concerned about the healer, why didn't he come and inquire like most would do?* Something was not right with the leader's son and that concerned Dartian greatly. Unfortunately, at this moment he could not concern himself with Viktor, as the life of Nadrin hung in the balance.

His attention returned once more to Saleene and the work she was doing, Dartian marveled at how smoothly she preformed her task, concentrating on each item with her full attention. She seemed to glide across the air; each movement in tune with her surroundings. As Dartian reached over to light one of the candles, Saleene's gentle fingers touched his hand, sending soothing warmth through his body. Then with a whiff of her delicate hand, all the candles seemed to re-light themselves, dispersing the evil that had intruded back into the shadows.

Looking deep into her beautiful green eyes, Dartian could sense she was waiting to see what he would do after the demonstration of her talent. How could he ever condemn her for something she must have been born with, without condemning himself? She was pure and without darkness in her soul. If he was to betray her, wouldn't he be doing the same to himself? Gently, he lightly brushed her cheek with his finger, an indication that he understood her concern and would not reveal any of the night's activity. The moment he touched her skin fire began to race through his blood, igniting his soul. Electricity seemed to spark between them, an undercurrent that could not be stopped.

Dartian's fathomless eyes held her captive for a moment as she saw a wealth of emotions swirling in their depth. They seemed to glow a spectacular azure mixed with tiny sparks of silver. It reminded her of something from her past, something she couldn't place right now, almost a recollection from a dream. How odd that she would see the same phenomenon now.

"Your eyes, they're very peculiar." Slowly she lifted her finger and began to trace a scar on Dartian's face, the act so innocent that Dartian's body shuddered at the

caress. He quickly grasped her fingers, placing a light kiss on her finger tips. The tenderness she could feel in his strong grip sent waves of flames across her skin, turning her blood to hot lava.

The sensation was so foreign that she looked up into Dartian's eyes, a sense of confusion shining in her own. Dartian smiled down at her, a small gesture that spoke volumes. Moments had passed when he gently released her hand, letting it glide to her side once again.

How many hours passed Dartian did not know. He had watched with amazement as Saleene did her work. She was perfection in his eyes. Nothing too small was overlooked. Pride had begun to form the moment she had begun and had increased with every passing minute.

"Is there any more we can do for him?" He hoped to deter his mind from the path his thoughts were headed.

"He will live. But for now he needs rest and lots of it."

"I am sure the elders will want to know what happened to us out there. Will you be okay while I am gone?" Dartian felt safe leaving her in the healer's home, but the question still remained as to the intentions of Viktor. A quick glance back at Saleene from the doorway and his breath caught in his throat. She looked ethereal, her beauty equal to any goddess.

"We will be fine Dartian. Go...do what you need to. I will watch over my patient."

"While I am gone, please do whatever you deem necessary to secure this home from any others. I do not want anyone else other than myself entering while Nadrin recovers."

Nodding her understanding, Saleene motioned with her hands and with one small flick, all the windows in the home closed and secured on their own. Dartian felt reassured, knowing that whatever magick she possessed should keep her and the healer safe.

If anyone or anything should bother you this evening, you know how to contact me. He hated to leave her unguarded, but he knew that the elders would have been informed of the healer's injury and they would require answers.

As he left the home, he felt as if some type of warm

blanket had woven itself around the home, keeping those inside safe. He hated leaving them alone, but knew there was nothing more he could do for those inside. With a quick breath Dartian turned abruptly on his heel and made his way toward the high council's meeting hall and the questions they were sure to ask. For a moment, he thought he caught sight of a cloaked figure hiding in the shadows, watching as he left Saleene unprotected. He moved his gaze over the area, his senses flaring into the night, but all that came back was emptiness and the feeling that something was not right.

Turning back towards Nadrin, Saleene sighed, knowing there was still much work to be done. What was odd was that, she felt as if part of her was gone the moment the door had closed. *Such nonsense*, she mused. Pulling out more herbs, Saleene went about mixing while she sang a song her mother had taught her many years ago. Not thinking anyone was around; Saleene continued to use her gifts to mix the herbs and light more candles. Her talent, one her kind was born with, was never to be shown to strangers. Too many in the past had been murdered or kidnapped because of it. Regardless of the fact that they could heal even the most serious of wounds, the unknown always seemed to frighten even the most knowledgeable.

"So the ancients truly do exist." It was a soft sound, Nadrin's voice, but it caught Saleene off guard and she nearly dropped the bowl she held. *When had he awoken?* She wondered. A quick turn found her facing the healer, a smug smile crossing his face.

"You should be sleeping not watching someone without their knowledge." She couldn't help but smile; the old man had a feel about him.

"I did not mean to alarm you my child, I was just marveling at your unique gifts. You are of the ancient race are you not?"

"I am not sure what this ancient race is that you refer to old one." She picked her words carefully, unsure of how much trust she could place in the hands of someone she barely knew. "My people are old, that is true, but we are not referred to as ancients. Those not of our

lands have referred to us as the Myst People before, but that is all. And though my people may have a few strange habits, it seems as though yours do as well." She said this last part almost as a challenge to see if the old healer would attempt to deny some of what she had witnessed.

"I am sure we both have many wonderful things we can do. When I am more myself I will show you some of our gifts, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have child."

He was honest and sincere, qualities not always easy to find. Saleene found herself charmed by the old man's smile, wanting to believe she could indeed trust him. Slowly she walked back to her work area a quick wink in his direction. With a flick of her hand she closed the window; the display caused Nadrin to boast a whole hearted laugh that reverberated throughout the home.

"Now you must drink all of this medicine, it is my mother's recipe which has been handed down for generations. It is very good and will help speed up your recovery." Even though she acted very abrupt she knew Nadrin could see the twinkle in her emerald eyes.

He took the goblet from her, his hands soft and comforting. The small touch she knew could calm and sooth even the most stubborn of pains. She had honed over the years the art of healing, to allow a mere touch filled with light to be passed on to those who were ill or injured. She took great pride in her gift and could tell by the surprised look on Nadrin's face that it was working.

"You really must stop staring old one; didn't anyone teach you it is not polite?" A slight snicker escaped her lips at his blatant actions. "And you must not get up for at least one full day. The work I've done this evening will hold, but only if you remain in bed."

She hoped the healer would mind her instructions as it would allow her time to ask him questions about some of what she had seen. Slowly she moved to the fire to add more kindling to keep the blaze going through out the night. Tired and worn from the energy she had spent, she pulled up the healer's chair and sat next to him, her hands pulling up the blanket to ensure his comfort.

"Now old one, I have a few things I would like to ask you about some of the strange things I've seen and heard."

Her question was asked very gently, almost a whisper that could barely be heard. "I know you are not like me, yet you are not completely human either. There are things I've heard while I was barely conscious, that do not make sense to me."

She chose not to relate the image she had captured when mind melding with Dartian, nor did she bring up the vision of the large blue-black wolf.

"Tell me of your people old one. What are you and what special gifts do you hold?"

She could sense the conflict that brewed inside of the old man. There was much he wanted to tell but fear of retribution by his clan was evident on his face. Saleene did the one thing she could think of to ease his fears, to show she understood the risk he would be taking.

Her palm up she began to chant an old verse taught to every healer of her clan. The air in the room became electric while in the palm of her hand a bright orange light began to emerge. The ball of light kept spinning and growing till it was the size of a large rock.

"That is amazing! What is it? Is it hot?" All the questions swirling in Nadrin's mind came to a stop when Saleene motioned for the ball to move. A graceful dance with fluid movements in the air till it hovered over Nadrin's head. Nadrin reached up his hand anxious to touch the revolving ball of light. The moment his finger reached the spinning ball they burst into a million sparkles raining down on his head. A burst of laughter erupted from him, something Saleene knew had not happened in a long time. Shocked at his reaction, Nadrin looked back over at Saleene and the smile she wore across her face.

"Ok, you win for now. I will explain to you about my people, but I must forewarn you that it is not what you are expecting. Also, you must promise that no other will know of our conversation." Nodding her head, Saleene moved closer to the healer, to allow him the privacy to speak without the chance of others hearing.

"My people have a very colored history. We have survived for many centuries; however our race is slowly dying out. Why this is happening, unfortunately, we do not know." Saleene could read the sadness in the old

man's eyes. It was as if he felt it was his failure.

"No one person is ever responsible for the fate of their whole race. You must know that." She was sure he did, but it broke her heart that he still blamed himself.

"My people are not human, yet we are. We have special gifts that we are borne with which allow us to be kin to the forest creatures, something that allows us to intermingle easily with the forest animals. But mostly, we are very close to the great wolves that roam and protect us."

Saleene gasped inside at the memory of the two wolves fighting each other deep within the forest. The one who had attacked her seemed to be under a compulsion, as she could not reach to calm his killing fury. The second wolf, which had saved her, seemed to be familiar in some way. All she could recall about her savior were the deep fathomless blue eyes which seemed to have shades of gray swirling in their depths. Awareness hit her from out of no where.

Those blue eyes! They were the same color as Dartian's. Could it be possible? She had heard tale of such a race, but she had never heard of anyone actually meeting them. If it was possible, then it would answer so much. She returned her attention back to Nadrin, a smile plastered on his old face.

"One of our wondrous gifts, as you are beginning to figure out by now, is to be able to shape-shift into the great wolf." The healer beamed a sheepish grin, like a child finally able to reveal a long held secret. "It is an amazing change we can do, one that helps us out in many situations. Aside from that there is a thrill being able to run with the other creatures of the forest." Saleene could see that Nadrin loved the gift that his people held, and she could not help but share in his enthusiasm. The glimmer in his eye and the sheepish grin on his face caused both of them to break out in a fit of laughter, warming the entire home.

From behind, a loud banging began at the door of the home. The unexpected noise jolted the warmth of the home by its intrusion. Saleene looked down at Nadrin with the question in her eyes.

"Who would be disturbing you this late at night? I

know it is not Dartian. When I search for him, I can tell he is still answering questions from the high council.” The wealth of concern was evident in her words and Nadrin knew that she spoke the truth.

“You are correct my child, it is not Dartian. Go and cover up with a coverlet and have a seat in the corner. I will do my best to deter our late night guest from my home.” Nadrin motioned to the corner farthest from the entrance of his home. Saleene, understanding his motives, quickly conjured an old fashioned cloak covered in ancient designs that would help to shield her from the intruders preying eyes. Once she was ready, she motioned to Nadrin to go to the door. The healer moved to the door and slowly cracked it open, hesitation in his every movement.

“What brings you to my home this late at night Viktor? I hope it is of utmost importance to have disturbed me and my patient.” He stated the last in a very concerned tone in an attempt to discourage Viktor from requesting entrance. “I really must ask that you come back tomorrow if your need is not urgent.” Contempt and annoyance burned in Viktor’s jet black eyes at the dismissal of the healer.

“Old man, as acting leader everything within our village is my domain. That means I can enter and exit at my own will. I do not need a reason to enter your home, but I am asking for permission out of respect. I need to speak with the stranger as I know she is awake now.” Viktor pushed the issue strongly with his large frame in hopes of forcing himself into the healer’s residence.

Nadrin sensed the volatile mood that Viktor was in, it worried him, but try as he might he couldn’t come up with a good way to diffuse the situation. Unsure of how to proceed, Nadrin felt a warm sensation brush the inside of his mind. *Do not fear allowing this man entrance into your home old one. I know of his intentions and desire to find some type of trap to lead me into. It will not happen.* The strong conviction he noted in her words helped to ease his concerns. Then it occurred to him that she had spoken to him on a mental path he had never encountered before. That thought intrigued him such that he almost forgot about Viktor standing in front of him. Hearing her soft laughter continue to echo in his mind, Nadrin was able to

relax and focus on the task at hand.

“I will allow you to enter my home, but you must first disarm yourself of any weapons. My home is one of peace and solitude. If you wish to enter you must abide.” The words were said formally and Viktor had no choice but to abide by them. Slowly he removed his sword from his back and placed it reluctantly on the ground. Once finished, he returned his attention to Nadrin as he attempted to enter the home once more.

He still has a dagger hidden in his boot. It is small but lethal. I do not sense malice in his mind, but I would request he remove it as well. Amazed at her talents, Nadrin placed his body once again in Viktor’s path of entrance.

“You still hold a dagger within your boot Viktor. You are not trying to deceive me in my old age are you?” The question was asked in honesty but he knew Viktor could also detect a hint of amusement and challenge in his inquiry. Grudgingly, Viktor removed his dagger from his boot and laid it cautiously on the ground. Straightening up he once again began to enter the healer’s home.

Chapter 15

Saleene watched as Viktor entered the home, his eyes scanning the interior for his prey. Eventually his eyes rested upon the object of his inquiry...her. Sitting quietly in the corner, the shadows obscured her from his view. Saleene acted oblivious to his presence, which she knew bothered him immensely. She covered herself up more in the cloak, to make it appear that most of her was difficult to see, like a veil shrouding her in its embrace. Viktor cleared his throat in an attempt to gain her attention.

“Hello Miss, I am Viktor, acting leader of this village. I am glad to see you are feeling better and that our healer has once again performed a wonderful deed in saving your life.” Though he said the words, Saleene knew he didn’t mean them. She was a stranger to the village and as such, he held no compassion for her. “I would appreciate it if you would move into the light, so we can discuss some questions surrounding your appearance within my village.”

His eyes seemed to hold some secret meaning that sent chills up her spine. Something seemed very off with this man, Saleene was just not sure what it was. She knew she would have to be very careful when in Viktor’s presence, and only allow him to see what she wanted.

As she stood up she pulled the cloak tighter around her, its warmth a comfort against his prying eyes. As she slowly moved towards the middle of the room, the firelight danced across her skin. Her body flowed like a summer’s breeze, fluid and full of grace, the simple display casting a shadow of mystery in the room. Viktor’s eyes watched her every move as if he was mesmerized by each step she took. Saleene heard his breath catch in his throat as she got within arms distance from him.

“So what questions do you have for me sir? Though, I

would like to commend your village on having an adept healer at your disposal. He is one of your many treasures is he not?" Saleene glanced over at Nadrin sharing a secret smile which she knew Viktor would never understand. She could sense his resentment toward the old man.

"I would like to know what you have witnessed so far since coming to my village. Have you spoken to any of the other people who reside here?" His questions seemed to hold a secondary meaning, as if he was searching for some type of proof in which he could use against her. She stared back at him, conveying her understanding of his question and her honesty in answering.

"I fear that I have not met any of the people who live in this wonderful village. I was not awake when Dartian brought me to the healer and just today woke from my slumber." Her words were said so quietly that she knew Viktor had to strain to hear her words. "I can only say that I've spoken with your treasured healer since I've awoken and that was long enough to assist him in fixing the wound he had sustained while out walking in the forest."

She intentionally left out the fact that she was the one who had saved Nadrin's life and instead put the entire praise on him. She knew she had to make sure that no interest would be aroused by this dangerous man.

Viktor had no choice but to not press the issue further till he had more time to corner her for additional information. They stared at each other for a few minutes, her deep green eyes against his black ones. She could feel his interest in her grow, but not due to the obligations of being leader. He wanted to interrogate her, but for what she shuddered to find out.

"I appreciate your honesty to my inquiries and will take my leave for now. I am happy to see that you are recovering well and that Nadrin has not suffered too badly of an injury." Saleene had the sensation he was issuing a warning that both her and Nadrin could not fathom. Her only hope was to make good her leave before having to encounter this man again. He reminded her of a hungry mountain lion, strong and deadly, ready to pounce on unsuspecting prey. She needed to make sure that his

focus was not solely on her as the object of that intention.

Without much thought, Viktor moved quickly over to her, pulling her to her feet. His arms circled her waist and crushed her soft body to his. He quietly whispered in her ear, the feel of his breath across her skin sent coldness through her body.

“We are not done here by a long shot Saleene. I am certain you know more than you’ve let on this evening and I will soon find out all I wish to know.” The last part of his warning sent a chill straight to her core, causing her stomach to knot in dismay. This man had a dark shadow crouching across his soul and she feared it was swallowing him whole. His touch made her feel sick and reminded her of a snake coiling around its victim. Try as she might she could not dislodge herself from his grip. Annoyance replaced fear as she tried to push against his solid chest.

“You have no right to me Viktor. You need to take your leave from here at once.”

“I’ll leave when I choose to. Don’t forget that.” His words dripped with venom, each syllable a prickle across her skin.

“Release me Viktor! This is completely inappropriate and quite frankly very rude!” she interjected, lacing her words with as much contempt as she could muster. “If you do not let me go, I will go to your high council and let them know of your behavior.” She prayed he would believe her and let her go, though the look he gave and the hard set of his jaw indicated he had no intention of releasing his hold until he was ready. Then from behind them, the door to the home flew open, extinguishing the flames from the candles and leaving nothing but the firelight to see by.

“Dartian!” A sigh of relief swept through her. Her eyes took in the hard edge to his stance, the look of anger that crossed his face.

Chiseled and toned, he reminded her of a god just returned from war. His hair, normally tied at the nape of his neck, was flowing wildly in the night air, adding to his mystery. Saleene feared that the wildness she sensed growing in Dartian at Viktor’s presence would cause him to change. That would be bad, very bad.

As she turned to face Viktor a roar echoed throughout the small home. "You might want to leave now." A smile of victory stole across her face as her eyes looked at his arms still grasped onto her.

"Let go of her now!" Dartian's voice raged through the room. "You do not have permission to touch her in any way!"

The anger that emanated from him shook the whole room. He locked eyes with Viktor, challenging him to dismiss his demand. "Do not cause me to forcibly remove you from here. I respect Nadrin's need to keep the tranquility in this place of solitude, but I swear if you do not let go of her at once, I will go against my better judgment on this matter."

"Dartian." What could she say? He was beyond reach, like a wounded animal ready to exact his revenge. She watched as Dartian moved closer to Viktor. Instead of attacking Viktor, he reached out and encircled her wrist with his hand. With as much rage as he felt, she was amazed at how tenderly he pulled her from Viktor's grasp, placing himself between them.

"You have no right to put your hands anywhere near this woman Viktor. It is forbidden for any man to lie a hand on a woman who is not his own, and believe me in this, she is not yours." Tension raised in the room as each man watched the other's move.

Viktor backed up, but not before he shot Saleene a look which clearly conveyed that their conversation was far from over. What could she do? He was the leader of the village they were guests in; if he cornered her another time, she would have to listen. Somehow the thought of being near Viktor gave her more concern than the anger she felt coming from Dartian.

Moving around Dartian she placed her hand softly on his chest just above his heart. Looking up into his eyes, Saleene attempted to calm the beast, as she spoke as if only he was in the room.

"Dartian, please do not do anything at this time. Viktor merely frightened me with his abrasiveness. I am not hurt, just a bit rattled." *Please Dartian, for me, relax. I do not want my gifts to surface when Viktor is around, as he will then have the power to keep me here.* The pleading

in her eyes, warned Dartian further from making any sudden moves to provoke Viktor. Slowly he pulled Saleene within his arms and moved his lips close to her ear as he whispered.

“Caru, I would never do anything to endanger your life. I am sorry for my outburst, but I did not want him touching you.” His words were like a warm summer’s breeze that caressed her earlobe, sending waves of lava rushing through her veins. Looking deeply into his eyes, Saleene felt as if she were falling fast, unable to stop. “Let us get rid of this tyrant so that we can speak in privacy about what has occurred.”

His words barely registered; Saleene felt as if she were lost in the blue depths of his eyes, never to find a way out. Slowly she nodded her head in agreement and turned to look at Viktor.

Nadrin noted how much Viktor seemed to hate the protective way that Dartian held Saleene, as if they belonged together. He feared Viktor would enforce their laws long enough to rid himself of this powerful adversary. If Viktor was able to get rid of Dartian, Saleene would be lost. That worried him more than dealing directly with Viktor on any issue.

Feeling Viktor’s hawk-like stare burrowing into her back, Saleene slowly turned around to face him. She swore she could see something not right burning in his stare.

“Viktor, I can assure you that I have nothing to hide from you or any of your people. I do however; have an aversion to those who would try to force their will upon myself or any others.” Not sure if she sounded as scared as she felt, she hoped her words would shut him up for the night. There was something off in this man, but what was causing it she did not know. Looking back at Dartian for assistance, she found he was smiling at her with a half-cocked grin, amusement crossing his masculine face. She lightly thumped him on the chest for his display of humor when her nerves were so frazzled.

“I’m sorry Caru, was that suppose to hurt? I promise next time you feel the need to strike me, I will feign the injured man for you.” A small chuckle seemed to catch in Dartian’s throat. She wanted to throttle him good. *How*

can someone so good looking be so annoying?

Saleene turned her gaze back to Viktor and the problems he presented. Behind her, she could feel the warmth of Dartian's smile on her back, melting her insides. How could she be mad at him when he could so easily make her forget everything? Shaking her head in dismay, Saleene returned her attention back to Viktor and his unblinking stare.

"Viktor, I really must insist that you leave now. Nadrin is still recovering from the attack and needs to have peace and quiet for a few days." Attempting to maneuver around Dartian, Saleene could sense he would not relinquish his hold on her. "I understand your need to continue our discussion, but I am sure it can wait a few more nights, to allow time for both myself and Nadrin to rest and recover a bit more. I will be more than willing to continue our talk at that time." Saleene gave Viktor a look that indicated there was no chance of obtaining any further information at the moment, so he casually nodded his ascent.

Saleene attempted to move away, but Dartian grabbed a hold of her and brought her back into his strong embrace, not allowing Viktor another chance to touch her. Why did the man have to be so stubborn? Sighing, Saleene did not try again to remove herself as her energy seemed completely depleted after all that had occurred.

She knew Dartian could sense her fatigue as his touch became a gentle caress.

"I am sure you can find your way out Viktor. I must insist that you leave us, Saleene is extremely tired after all she has been through today..." Dartian left no room for discussion. Saleene watched as a small smirk begin to cross Dartian's face as his head dipped down toward her to place a light kiss on her head. Viktor on the other hand fumed at the display.

Too tired from her battle with Viktor, Saleene leaned back into Dartian's solid frame and the warmth of his embrace. The unconscious act drew a snarl from Viktor but nothing more. His eyes foretold his displeasure at being dismissed, but they knew he could not chance upsetting the healer of his village. After a quick bow, Viktor made his way toward the door but not before

turning his head toward Saleene.

“This is long from over Saleene. And you are correct; we will resume our discussion in a few days, in the privacy of my home. Just the two of us.” He glared at Dartian as he stated his intentions. The look between the two men caused the tension to rise even higher within the normally tranquil home. Seconds passed, and then Viktor turned and slammed the door, sending shudders throughout the home.

Chapter 16

Completely exhausted from healing Nadrin, confronting Viktor and calming Dartian, Saleene sighed. Unaware of her own actions she found herself relying on the hard strength of Dartian's well muscled chest. So strong and rock hard, it seemed to take her breath away. As she tilted her head back she noticed Dartian's deep blue eyes delving into her green ones, seeking something she wasn't sure of. She felt lost, as if she were drowning in emotion. Her legs grew weaker, whether it was from the work she had preformed or the battle between Viktor and Dartian, she did not know. Saleene moved out of Dartian's embrace, a small feminine retreat which sent Dartian's blood rushing through is veins.

Looking over her shoulder at Dartian, Saleene whispered, "I believe I've made an enemy in this village. That man scares me to death." Still rubbing her arms, Dartian advanced to put his arms around her, allowing the warmth of his body to seep into hers. It was such an innocent act, yet one that caused a jolt of electricity to race through both their bodies, setting their souls on fire. Saleene moved quickly away, her body reeling from his touch. She knew they had both felt it, the look alone in Dartian's eyes confirmed it. Suddenly this man scared her just as much as Viktor, but in a very different way.

She needed to turn her attention away from the path her mind was taking. *Why was this happening to her?* Averting her eyes toward Nadrin, she noticed he had a smirk beginning to form on his face. Completely annoyed with both men, Saleene turned and glared at them with frustration mounting in her chest.

"You know Caru, if you keep twisting that cloth it is going to shred into a million pieces." Dartian chuckled.

Annoyed with her nervousness, Saleene focused her stare on Dartian. She wanted desperately to throw

something at his head. If only she wasn't so tired, she would have throttled him but good, wiping the smirk off his handsome face. Instead of attempting to deal with his arrogance she decided to refill her mother's old chalice, placing it on the hearth.

"I am going to go to sleep now." She looked at Nadrin, his smile still on his face. "Nadrin, you must rest and drink another glass of the brew I've made for you. I will check on you later and make sure you are resting well. Good night." She left the room before another word could be said.

Closing the door behind her, Saleene wondered what had caused her to feel so in tune with Dartian. He was the most overbearing, egotistical man she had ever met, yet he seemed so protective and honor-bound. Removing the shawl that had covered her thick mass of golden hair, Saleene began to prepare for bed. Lighting a few more candles to help dispel the tension in the healer's home, Saleene thought back to her family and wished she could see them again. Her mother would be able to provide answers to many of the questions she had lingering in her mind.

Pulling back the covers, Saleene noticed the artwork on the quilt that covered the bed. Such detail, such depth, the patterns took her breath away with their beauty. A story was woven into the intricate patterns; one probably handed down generation to generation. Pulling up a chair next to the bed, Saleene began to look closer at the pictures. There seemed to be something familiar in the story they told. Something she had read many years ago as a young child. What was the story about? She tried desperately to recall but for some reason there seemed to be a block in her memory.

Annoyed, she drew back the covers further and crawled into bed. With a quiet prayer on the wind, she used her gift to secure the home for the night. Assured Nadrin's home was safe; Saleene slowly closed her eyes, allowing the darkness to envelop her as the day's events finally took their toll.

Outside Saleene's room, Nadrin and Dartian began to secure the home for the night, in their fashion. Not saying much to each other, Dartian spoke first, asking, "What is

it old one? You are holding back something and it would be much easier for the both of us if you just asked.” Dartian was beyond caring about propriety after the day’s events. He respected the healer, but there was only so much a person could deal with.

Chuckling at Dartian’s annoyance, Nadrin simply smiled and motioned to the chair near the fireplace. Picking up the old worn chalice, Nadrin downed the remaining brew like Saleene had instructed, knowing that whatever she had concocted would surely aide in his recovery.

“Dartian, I mean no offense and I am not trying to make things difficult. However I must ask, what are your intentions regarding Saleene?” His inquiry, straight and to the point, shocked Dartian. “I can sense your protectiveness when it comes to her, and you nearly all but said if Viktor came near her again he wouldn’t survive the night.”

The scene of Viktor holding Saleene in his arms replayed through Dartian’s mind again. The memory drew his fury to a boiling point. So much so that Dartian could feel the beast begging to be released. Nadrin, sensing his struggle, placed his hand on Dartian’s. The small touch caged the beast once more.

Once more under control, Dartian sat down and looked at the healer, confusion in his eyes.

“I am unsure of my plans and how they may include Saleene. Everything seems so vivid when I am around her. Emotions that I’ve never encountered begin to surface whenever we are close.” The vision of her lying so helpless from her injury tore at Dartian’s heart. “I know it is every warrior’s job to protect the innocents of the world until such time as we find a mate, and I have for as long as I remember, but something about Saleene brings out far more potent feelings that I do not understand.”

Sitting back in his chair a thought came to Dartian, one which he knew was forbidden but the idea still intrigued him. Looking over at Nadrin, Dartian decided it was worth the chance to ask the old man, as he would know of their customs and legends far better than he.

“Old one, has there ever been a time when one of our kind found his soul mate outside of the clan or for that

matter outside of our race?" Asking the question, Dartian found that he was more interested in the answer than he'd figured. He actually felt himself bracing for the answer, hoping against hope that it was possible. Nadrin seemed to be turning his question over in his mind; it felt almost as if he were deliberately holding off on answering him. As that thought crossed his mind, Dartian noticed a smug smile crossing Nadrin's old weathered face.

"Dartian my boy, there is a legend from long days past which tells of a time when our race did find their soul mates from within another race. Now, how valid this is, I can't confirm."

"But there is a chance; it may be possible?" *Could it be?* Dartian needed to know.

"It is said that once, long ago, when the world was at peace, one of our great warriors was out hunting for a widow of a friend. While he was running after a beast he intended to slay, he came upon a circle of stones and stopped as he heard the most beautiful melody coming from within." Each word spoken hung and danced on the air like a living being that peaked Dartian's interest tenfold.

"As the warrior entered the circle he was met with multitudes of forest creatures blocking his path to the person inside, as if protecting her. Trying to convey his intentions to the animals he knelt on the ground and shifted into the wolf, his eyes focusing on the fiercest of them all. Sensing his sincerity, they allowed him passage inside."

Dartian, listening to the story, became further entranced in the tale that Nadrin wove and the images playing out in his mind. Something about it rang with recognition, but he couldn't fathom just what it was. Motioning to Nadrin to continue on, his thoughts kept turning to Saleene and the night they had met inside the run down shack. Her golden hair flowed like a silken veil to cover her while the firelight had danced off her skin, enshrouding her in mystery. The thought of her in any peril tore his heart in two, sending sharp pains radiating throughout his body.

Are you ill Dartian? I sense intense pain. Do you need my assistance? Is Nadrin hurting? The gentle touch of her

inquiry sent waves of heat coursing through his blood. Her voice, like a spring breeze, calmed his soul unlike anything he had ever encountered. Immersing himself in her beautiful voice, Dartian began to relax once more. Hoping she could hear him, he replied. *I am fine Caru. Just a memory coming back to haunt me.* He could hear her soft laughter filling him with joy. Amazingly, he felt as if he could actually feel the soft touch of her fingers caress his cheek, sending another series of shockwaves rocking through his body. He could not understand her gifts, but regardless, he found himself completely at ease with whatever talents she possessed.

Looking back over to the healer, Dartian noticed an impish grin crossing the old man's face.

"She is talking to you again, is she not?" The question seemed more of a statement than a question, but Dartian nodded none the less. "She is an amazing woman with a wealth of knowledge and compassion for one as young as she is. I worry that she has almost too much compassion in her for her own good. We must keep her as far from Viktor as we can and at no time can we allow him to be alone with her. I do not trust his intentions, whatever they may be."

Dartian sensed that the old healer was deep in thought when a sound of struggle was heard coming from Saleene's room. Before Nadrin could react, Dartian was up and bursting through her door ready to attack anyone who might be harming her. When he glanced around the room all he could see was the flickering of the dying candles and Saleene's body thrashing back in forth in her bed. A nightmare. Moving toward her bed, Dartian reached his hand down to help calm her thrashing body.

Looking at her was like looking at a muse, her golden hair embraced her like a halo. He could tell she was having a bad dream and it broke his heart to think that anything would disturb her sleep when she needed it so badly. Gently, his finger brushed the side of her cheek, a simple jester which caused lightning to arch between them. He lowered his face so close to Saleene's ear that his warm breath caressed her ear like a woven cocoon.

"Wake Caru. A bad dream has invaded your slumber. Wake for me so that I may chase all your ghosts away."

His words, so tender, woke her from her deep sleep, without fear of him being so close to her in the bedroom.

Looking up into Dartian's fathomless eyes, Saleene was unsure if she was awake or still dreaming. Her dream had started out simple but quickly had taken on a horrible turn. She had revisited the camp where her cousin had been. Replaying the sick game over and over in her mind, but this time the wolf was not stopped. This time she became a wolf as well. The eyes of the wolf stayed in her mind. There had been hatred in its eyes not to mention a red burning fury that shone in its depths. Then there was Dartian, as strong as an oak, as powerful as the sea, sitting on her bed. Was he real or part of the dream? Cautiously, she reached up her hand and lightly touched his shadowed jaw. The innocent gesture shook him to the core, melting his heart as nothing else could.

As her finger lightly caressed his shadowed jaw, Saleene marveled at how warm and strong his skin felt. Chiseled and golden, he seemed to glow in the fire light. Surely she must still be dreaming to have her personal warrior so close to her. Her inhibitions aside, Saleene's fingers moved down to Dartian's broad shoulder, memorizing every detail. As she continued to trace a line down his arm, she was amazed at how real the dream felt. Suddenly it occurred to her that perhaps she was not asleep after all. The texture was too real to be otherwise.

Dartian realized that she believed she was still dreaming, and decided to allow her to continue in that belief. The touch of her hands sent healing warmth throughout his body. So gentle, so fragile, she looked like an elusive siren waiting for her lover. Her hair shimmered in the moonlight, so soft and golden, he felt as if he could hold the strands in his fingers forever. Continuing to move her fingers along his solid chest, Saleene began to doubt that she was still dreaming. The heat coming from this man was far too real.

Feeling embarrassed she snatched her hand back and quickly pulled the coverlet over her head, hiding the blush which was stealing across her body.

"Go away" was all she could muster. Her sudden retreat under the covers indicated she must have figured out she was not dreaming and was shocked at her actions

toward him. Breathing in deeply, Dartian slowly removed the blanket covering Saleene's face and slowly moved his mouth closer, hearing her quick intake of air.

"Caru, I am sorry if I frightened you, but when I heard you calling out, I feared you were in trouble. I rushed in and you seemed so dazed, I did not want to alarm you." He said the words filled with such sincerity that Saleene could only believe he was telling the truth. "What were you dreaming about that disturbed you so much? Allow me to chase any demons away so you can sleep in peace." Dartian could sense her apprehension, but she was also not pulling the cover over her head again. This was a small bit of progress, but at least it was a step in the right direction. How, in such a short period of time, this small woman had come to mean so much to him still confused him, but he knew he would give his life to keep her safe.

"I was only dreaming of the dreadful night back in the forest. It was so vivid, I felt as if I was reliving the moment again. Only this time my savior did not make it to me in time." This last part was said with such sadness that it tore at Dartian's soul. "I am sorry if I caused you any worry Dartian, it was not my intention. It just felt odd to have the wolf who rescued me before, be absent from my dream. It felt as if he had abandoned me in my darkest hour." The look on her face conveyed her worry. But it surprised Dartian that she was aware of the other wolf that had saved her. *How could she know? Had the healer said something to her?* If she knew more than she let on, that would open a door for Viktor and that terrified him.

"Saleene, what do you remember about the other wolf? I need to know. Has Nadrin said anything to you?" Looking down at her, he thought he caught some glimpse of recognition. Her eyes began to pool into a deep emerald green with specs of gold swirling in their depths. Every time she looked at him this way his heart fluttered. "Saleene, this is important. I want to protect you, but I need to know what you have been told." He tried to put force in his words, but he only seemed to come across as desperate.

Smiling, Saleene reached up once again to smooth

the frown crossing Dartian's chiseled face. "Dartian, I know not much. Let's finish this in the morning. I fear I am dreadfully tired tonight." The last of her words were barely audible as sleep engulfed her once more. Her fragile hand, gently falling to the bed once again, indicated she was no longer awake. Sighing, Dartian pulled the covers farther up to keep her safe and secure while she slept. How he wished he could tell her that he would move heaven and earth to keep her safe. That should she ever need him, he would do all he could to be there for her.

I know you would Dartian, and for that I thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I like having my big blue-eyed wolf, always on guard. The words shimmered in the air, brushing the corners of his mind like the wings of a butterfly. "Big blue-eyed wolf?" He whispered. "She knew, somehow she knew." The thought of it both scared and excited him. *But how did she know?*

Looking down at her sleeping so peacefully, Dartian didn't have the heart to wake her to ask, instead he leaned his head down, lightly brushing a kiss on top of her forehead. The slight touch of his lips against her skin, reminded him of honey and cream, a taste he would forever keep within his memory. He wanted to taste her lips, feel their scents mingling. So shocked by the path his thoughts had taken, Dartian moved quickly towards the door. He sent a silent prayer to the gods to keep her safe while she slept, and hoped they were listening tonight.

Quietly closing the door behind him, Dartian turned back to see the old healer smirking like a child who had been caught doing something wrong.

"What?" He asked point blank. Nadrin seemed to be enjoying Dartian's position a tad too much. Shrugging his shoulders, he moved closer to the fire to warm his hands. "You had mentioned a legend of our people, and the possibility for one of our kind to find our mate outside the clan. I need to know the story and what happened to our ancestors." Nadrin sensed the growing concern within Dartian, nodded his head and motioned to the empty chair once more.

"Now you must realize that this is only a legend and as such I am unsure how much of this is fact and how

much is not. But, the thing about legends is that something had to have happened to cause the legend to begin." Settling himself back down into his chair Nadrin began the tale again.

Chapter 17

“Well, since I can’t remember where I left off, the beginning will have to suffice. It is said that one day one of our warriors was out hunting for a widow in the clan, when he happened upon a circle of stones near a forbidden part of the forest. From the direction of the stones he heard a beautiful, mesmerizing song. The pull in that specific direction was very strong. So strong, he could do nothing other than oblige the compulsion. As he approached the stones, near the entrance of this part of the forest, a multitude of forest creatures blocked his advance. Sensing their need to protect, the warrior shape shifted into the wolf form, which allowed him to move past the creatures guarding the pathway.” Nadrin watched Dartian’s face as he retold the story.

“After he had obtained entrance into the forest, he shape-shifted back into his human form and continued on his journey. He noticed that animals of all shapes and sizes seemed to be at ease in the area. A calming effect covered this portion of the woods like nothing he’d ever felt before. Then as the breeze blew across his face, the melodious sound of a female voice singing in the wind again captured his attention. They say the voice he heard was so pure it almost brought him to his knees at the goodness he felt from it.” The thought of such a voice hit a cord with Dartian, Nadrin could sense it.

“The sound of the voice compelled him even further into the forest. He wanted; no he felt strongly that he needed to find the source of such beauty. As he came upon the inner sanctum of the forest, there was another circle of stones with a polished stone slab in the middle of it. Next to the stone was a small woman with a wealth of golden hair cascading down her back. The warrior stood mesmerized by her beauty and the light shining from within her soul. Wanting to reach out to her, he feared his

presence would scare her away. As if aware of his presence, the woman turned slowly around, her bright violet eyes capturing the warriors deep azure ones. They say the warrior wondered if he was dreaming or if this was truly happening. Before he could decide though, the woman floated on the air towards him, her feet never once touching the ground. The stories say her skin looked like honey and was as soft as a rose petal.”

The look on Dartian’s face conveyed his interest in hearing what happened to the two. Nadrin knew he felt deep in his heart, that it was important to both him and Saleene.

“Please continue on. What happened to the two?” He hated to sound impatient, but something inside him knew that his and Saleene’s fate were tied together just as the warrior and woman from the legend. He only hoped the outcome was a good one.

“They say as she came closer to the warrior, it was as if two parts which had been severed long ago, were finally brought back together. Their hearts and souls recognized the other. They knew, regardless of what the others thought, that they would find a way to make their worlds intertwine. Now, there was much strife at first, but it is also said that they were never apart, but had to travel a great distance away from their loved ones to prove that their union was true. No one knows if any children were born to the warrior and the woman, but there are many tales of our people coming into contact with people who have traits of both.”

Dartian hoped that the legend held truth as he knew it would mean much to both of their futures. He also knew that he and Saleene were becoming closer with every mind-share and minute they spent together. As he looked up to ask the old healer another question, he noticed that Nadrin was fast asleep, his breathing indicating that he was not faking it. Shrugging his shoulders, Dartian decided he could use some rest as well. He laid back on the cot provided by the old healer and had begun to rest his eyes; when he felt something cold pass over house. Curious as to the source of the disturbance, Dartian rose out of his bed and wandered towards the window at the far end of the room.

Looking out, he saw at first nothing but a clear night sky with millions of stars that glittered like gemstones in the night. But something had definitely come by the house, so Dartian continued to survey the area when he caught a glimpse of a figure hiding in the shadows of a home across from the healer's.

A snarl escaped from Dartian's throat as he recognized Viktor, prowling around Nadrin's home again. It was apparent that this man was not going to leave Saleene alone as he had hoped. The situation with Viktor was becoming unsettling. *Why was he so interested in her? Why did things seem off-balance when he was around?* As he pondered these thoughts Viktor emerged from the side of the darkened home and began to head toward the healer's residence. Ready to defend Saleene with every bit of strength he had, Dartian began to feel the change overcome him. Fur began to ripple just below the surface begging to be released once more. As Viktor came within a few feet of the house something peculiar happened which caught Dartian off guard. The moment Viktor was barely ten feet from the home, he bumped into an invisible wall.

Dartian watched as Viktor pounded on what appeared to be thin air but was hard as diamonds. Viktor drew out his knife and attempted to penetrate through the barrier. The moment his blade touched the wall a multitude of creatures emerged from the forest and circled Nadrin's home, protecting those within the walls. Dartian could see annoyance cross Viktor's face, as he realized he would not be able to get past the forest animals or the mystical barrier that surrounded the home. Viktor turned abruptly and disappeared back into the shadows once more.

Amazed by her gifts once again, Dartian turned from the window and headed back to his bed. Laying down he closed his eyes, marveling at the display he had seen. On a bad note, that event would cause Viktor to be even more determined to get a hold of Saleene, which bothered him. As he concentrated on the threat posed by Viktor, Dartian could almost feel Saleene's delicate fingers brushing across his jaw, sending lightning running through his blood.

As he began to drift into the black abyss of sleep, he

swore he heard her haunting laughter following him into his dreams. And dream he did. He found himself immersed within the woods from the legend. He walked as the warrior of old, moving quietly through the woods. As he came closer to the woman standing in the middle of the sacred circle, she turned slightly towards him. Expecting to see the violet eyes mentioned by the healer, Dartian was surprised when Saleene's vivid green ones stared back at him.

Sparkling like new found jade, she shimmered in the night's sky, like an apparition from long ago. She began to motion for him to come to her, her delicate hands gliding as if in tune with the music of the forest. As he neared her, a shadow invaded the area, disturbing the tranquility of the night. Saleene's face turned a ghostly white as an unforeseen hand grabbed a hold of her, pulling her into the black abyss, her screams tearing at his soul.

Waking abruptly from his dream, Dartian sat up, his head spinning from the horrible vision. He would need to discuss this with Nadrin to see if he should be concerned. Eyes adjusting to the interior of the room, everything seemed normal in the morning sun. Dartian stood to pull on his breaches when he heard the melodious laughter of Saleene in the common room.

"That woman is trouble. She could cause any man to lose his sanity." He muttered to himself.

Turning towards the door to leave, a voice brushed his mind. *Men are so silly. There is nothing wrong with laughter sleepy head. Now get out here and have some breakfast. Nadrin and I have slaved all morning on it.* He could feel her laughing at his surprise over her casual use of this type of communication. Shrugging off the teasing, Dartian made his way to the common room and the woman who seemed to hold his heart without even knowing it.

Dartian entered the common area and was greeted by the aroma of the breakfast cooking in the kitchen. His eyes adjusted to the light and locked in on Saleene, as she stood over the fire stirring the pot of stew. The vision of her took his breath away. Her hair was pulled up on the sides and fastened with an old looking clasp.

Stray tendrils loosely embraced her face, while the

rest of her golden hair cascaded down her back to her narrow waist. She was wearing a dusty rose dress which flowed down to her delicate ankles. Chuckling, Dartian realized that Saleene was not wearing her sandals once again. The view of her so calm and relaxed caused Dartian's breath to catch in his throat.

Sensing his presence when he'd entered the room, Saleene slowly turned around to face him. As usual the sheer power that radiated from his presence alone drew the breath from her lungs. The man was lethal, in more ways than one. Attempting to not let her reaction to him be noticed, Saleene flashed Dartian a warm smile.

"Good morning sleepy head. It is about time you woke. Have a seat and eat. You look as if you have not had a meal in days." Saleene did not confess that if he kept staring at her she would surely faint. The man had a way of chasing all good sense from her mind.

Motioning to the table, Saleene began to put together some of her mother's stew into a bowl and broke off a piece of bread. Walking over to the table she laid the meal in front of him. For a moment their eyes locked. The emotions she saw swirling in the depths of his azure eyes almost caused her knees to give out.

"Eat now Dartian. It is an old family recipe, but one that you will find to your liking." As she made the comment and turned to walk away, her hand lightly brushed against his arm. That small touch sent shockwaves coursing through both their bodies. The intensity of the emotions she felt caused Saleene to jerk her hand away, rubbing her arm from the contact. Looking back at Dartian, she noticed a smug smile crossing his face.

Ugh...men. God how she wished she could throttle him. Instead, Saleene decided she would just leave him to his meal and go about her business. Walking over to the corner, she picked up her medicine satchel and her shawl and headed towards the door. Looking up from his meal, Dartian took in her appearance and immediately began to dispute her leaving the home.

"Dartian, I am not staying inside. There are items which I need to replenish before our travels continue." She gave no room for disagreement as she made her way

to the door and out into the sunlight.

Feeling out of sorts at her stern dismissal, Dartian turned to notice Nadrin smiling at his discomfort. Annoyed that his emotions seemed to be so transparent, Dartian resumed eating his meal, when he heard laughter spill in through the window. Curious, he got up and made his way to the window looking out into the middle of the village. There, near the well in the center of the village, Saleene stood with the town's children circling her as they laughed and danced around. She seemed to shine with an inner light which caused all around her to smile and rejoice. A knock at the door jarred Dartian from his thoughts and caused him to trip over a log leaning against the wall.

Nadrin, watching the scene unfold, nearly burst into laughter at Dartian's folly. Frustrated, Dartian regained his balance and attempted to locate Saleene. No where in sight, he mused she must have slipped into the forest while he'd lost his balance. Confusion crouched deep inside at his need to keep her in view. Dartian began to head back to the table when the knock came once again at the door. Turning on his heel, Dartian forcibly opened the door only to be met with the knowing grin of Zachius.

"Seems to me that you're in need of balancing lessons my friend." Zachius laughed, it was apparent he had heard the commotion from outside the door. "Are you allowing a woman to get the better of you Dartian?" Zachius sent Nadrin a playful wink as he moved into the home. A burst of laughter resounded from behind.

"Will you two give it a rest please? It was a simple accident; I've only awoken a few moments ago. Not to mention I was deep in thought when you knocked Zachius, and if anyone is in need of lessons, it is you." He attempted to put as much annoyance as he could in his voice, but it only seemed to make both men laugh even harder. Knowing he would not win this discussion, Dartian decided to change subjects for now. "Old man, I am wondering if it is possible to see your village's leader. I have some questions I would like to ask of him."

Dartian knew he needed to speak with the leader of the clan about Viktor's disconcerting behavior. He feared for both Saleene and the village's safety.

“I do not see why you couldn’t. I was planning on taking Saleene to see him later this afternoon after Viktor heads out with the pack to hunt.” The confusion that crossed Dartian’s face at the mention of taking Saleene to the leader was met with a calm nod from Nadrin. “I am hoping that perhaps some knowledge her people retain may shed light on how to cure our leader. I am at a loss and perhaps she may see something I have missed.” The honesty in his voice told Dartian that this was something very important to Nadrin, so Dartian shook his head in agreement. At least they would all be together should anything go wrong.

Chapter 18

Just out of reach of the voices from within the healer's home, Saleene started to enter the dense foliage of the forest. As soon as the darkness of the woods hit her skin, Saleene felt an instant sense of peace. She'd always enjoyed being outside in the woods with the creatures that lived within its confines. She made her way toward the area that Nadrin had said most of her plants would grow. As she got closer, the peace that surrounded her grew. She felt as if she was home again.

As she plucked what she required to replenish what she'd used the last few days, she sung a song her mother had taught her, thanking the gods and plants for their sacrifice. The plants almost seemed to respond to her singing, and the animals of the forest emerged to greet their guest. Looking up Saleene noticed a midnight black wolf looking at her, its eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Saleene greeted the animal sending him waves of warmth and images of their friendship into his mind. At once she felt his acceptance of her as he moved closer to allow her to stroke his fur. As she sat in the grass allowing the music of the forest reach her ears, she caught the sound of water moving in the distance. Full of curiosity, she headed in the direction of the water.

As she ventured further into the woods, her heart seemed to grow lighter and lighter. Eventually she broke through the deepest portion of the forest. Moments later she found in front of her a crystal clear spring with a small waterfall behind it, pouring fresh water into it. The sight of the treasure took her breath away. Assured she was indeed alone, Saleene removed her day dress and waded into the cool spring water. The moment the water caressed her body, she could feel the tension wash away.

How odd. The water seemed to contain some type of healing property. As she had done in the past, Saleene

sent the information on the general path of communication her family used. She knew that if given time, her mother or sister would answer her call.

My daughter, it is good to hear from you. I am glad you are well. It warmed Saleene's heart to hear from her mother. How long had it been since they had last talked?

You seem to have discovered one of the ancient healing pools. If used properly, it can be used to cure even the strongest of illnesses. Remember the bark of the sacred tree? If you combine the pulp of the tree with the water, it will remove any poison that has accumulated within the body.

Thank you mother, your advice will be useful. I am glad to hear from you. Convey my love to everyone. Is Kara still at home? Kara, her younger sister by two summers, had always wanted to follow her big sister around. It had broken both their hearts when she had been asked to go on this journey, but they knew it unavoidable.

No my daughter, your sister was sent out on her own quest but two cycles ago. There was unrest in the land of Rala and she was sent to find out the cause. Rala. The name alone sent shivers along her spine. The place was considered off limits to her entire town. Whatever had happened must have been great to cause the elders to send someone there. I am hoping to hear from her soon Saleene, and when I do I will convey your thoughts her way. With that the connection ended.

Returning her gaze back to the natural spring, Saleene removed four vials from her satchel, filling each with the healing water. Then, assured she was still alone, she began to wade back in. The water touched her sun-kissed skin like little tongues caressing her body. The thought brought forth an image of Dartian, all hard muscled and chiseled features. Warmth spread through her body while the lower part of her belly somersaulted. Surprised by her reaction to her thoughts of him, Saleene dove underneath the water to clear her head.

When she came up for air, she noticed a disturbance in the area. One quick scan was all she needed. There was something out there but it was not evil nor was it an animal. Sighing, she turned her gaze to the large oak to the east of the pool.

“You can come out Dartian. It’s not polite to spy on someone.” She knew without a doubt that it him. She was becoming more attuned to him daily, which confused her even more. “The water is wonderful, you should take a swim. I promise not to stare at you as you have at me.” She made the last comment as a challenge to see if he would indeed show himself.

Dartian had just wanted to make sure that Saleene would come to no harm. He had walked through the forest and heard her enter the sacred water. He had felt as if he were compelled to move towards her, his feet finding their way to the tree he now stood behind. The sight of her blew him away. Her golden hair sparkled in the water; the gentle waves caressing her body would forever be etched in his memory.

She looked like a water nymph paying homage to the ancient gods. He knew he had not made a sound, yet she had known he was watching her. *How had she managed that?* Then she’d had the nerve to challenge him to show himself. He couldn’t deny her anything. It annoyed him that he would give in to her every demand.

“Blasted woman.” It was all he muttered before moving out of the shadows and into the daylight, his eyes never leaving her face.

When Dartian emerged from the dense foliage, his shirt was already off and his breaches were slowly coming down. The sight of his tanned body took her breath away. She had hoped he would not take her request seriously, but a part of her knew he would. He was perfectly formed for a man; thick leg muscles, golden skin, and broad shoulders. No man should look as good as he did. Almost immediately Saleene felt as if she should run and hide, yet she knew she wouldn’t. A part of her wanted to watch him, needed to see every bit of him to make sure he was real. As he watched her, his eyes seemed to trail a heated path along her body, setting her skin on fire. Dunking under the water, she attempted to alleviate the heat building inside.

Large strong hands encircled Saleene’s waist, bringing her up against a rock hard chest. The heat that breached between them felt as if it could ignite a fire in the forest. Breathing heavily Saleene tried to look away,

desperate to divert her attention to anything else. Dartian's fingers gently captured her chin and turned her to face him. Eyes locking, Saleene felt as if she was falling into the deep blue abyss of his. She wanted to be lost forever in his embrace, safe and secure. As she recaptured some of her composure, she noticed Dartian's head begin to descend towards her own, his lips about to brush the tip of hers.

The moment his lips touched Saleene's, lightning began to course between them, igniting a flame of passion through her veins. Her legs began to feel weak such that her only choice was to reach up and wrap her arms around Dartian's neck. The innocent act caused Dartian's body to shudder against her chest.

So aroused was she by his touch that Saleene barely caught the disturbance in the air. A hawk overhead squawked out a warning, causing her to pry herself from Dartian's grip. She dove under the water to clear both her head and cool her body. Swimming to the other end of the pond, Saleene emerged from the water, a dagger behind her back. Try as she might she couldn't seem to figure out what was causing the hawk's cry. She looked back at Dartian and noticed a smirk begin to cross his face.

"What?" Annoyed at his lack of concern for what was out there, Saleene continued to scan the area. All she could sense were the animals within the forest. No other creatures seemed to be around, yet there was definitely something else out there. It was not evil, but the fact that she didn't know what it was bothered her.

"If you know what is out there, I suggest you either tell me or chance whomever it is getting a dagger in their throat." Completely exasperated, Saleene shot Dartian a look of frustration, indicating she was not jesting.

Shrugging his broad shoulders at her annoyance, Dartian answered with a sarcastic smile. "Rest easy Caru, it is a friend that is near us. However, I would prefer that we are clothed before he makes his appearance. I asked him to wait for my call before presenting himself." Motioning to Saleene's clothes, Dartian chuckled as bright crimson covered her face.

She moved to the shore, covering herself quickly with her day dress. Dartian's breath seemed to stutter as he

watched the water cascade off her body, like tiny tears falling to earth. Wringing out the water from her hair, she plaited her long golden hair in a makeshift braid, turning to Dartian to let him know she was ready.

Sending out a whistle on the wind, Dartian glanced to the dense foliage to his right. The brush moved as if an animal was moving through it. From within the woods a large man casually walked out of the forest his black hair wild and untamed. Saleene felt as if she was seeing twins. Both men were built in the same manner, though Dartian's hair was jet black, this stranger's hair was more of a deep mocha color. Looking a bit closer, the stranger also had obsidian eyes as opposed to Dartian's deep blue ones. Something seemed familiar about him, but Saleene couldn't seem to place him. *Had she seen him in the village?* She was unsure, but hoped that Dartian might shed some light on whom he may be.

"Saleene, I would like to present one of my oldest and dearest friends, Zachius. We have known each other since we were children. We've been on many adventures through out the years." Saleene could hear the affection in Dartian's voice and it warmed her heart to see him smiling. Saleene moved closer to Dartian, fearful of getting too close to this man. Like Dartian, power clung to his very core. What was it with his people? Why did they seem to have some primal essence emanating from them?

"It is a pleasure to meet you Zachius. Any friend of Dartian has my respect." Saleene wasn't sure if she meant it, as this man terrified her. She wanted to get away, to clear her head of all that had just happened. As if sensing her thoughts, Dartian wrapped his arm around her waist pulling her against his hard body.

"I am sorry if I frightened you Saleene, I wanted to make sure you and Dartian were prepared for my visit." He bowed so elegantly that Saleene nearly forgot her idea about running. "I have heard many good things about you. Dartian and Nadrin boast of your good deeds. It is an honor to finally meet one of such beauty." Warmth spread through her body at his compliment.

She had never thought of herself as beautiful. She wondered exactly what Dartian thought of her. Looking up at his emotionless face, Saleene was curious as to what

he was thinking at that moment. She could certainly meld her mind with his, but out of respect she decided not to.

“I really need to head back now Dartian. I need to check in on Nadrin as well as see about helping out the leader of the village.” She attempted to remove herself from his strong grip. Twisting and turning, Saleene only seemed to find herself more tightly held in his grip. Looking up she noticed he had a half cracked smile forming on his face. Patience wearing out, Saleene thumped him hard on his chest in hopes of inflicting some form of pain for his arrogance.

One quick look and Saleene found his mouth descending on hers, the light caress of his kiss a warm addiction she swore she would never get enough of.

Feeling faint, Saleene grabbed a hold of Dartian hoping to balance herself. Staring into his eyes, Saleene found them swirling with untold emotions. Her heart broke for him. He had such control over his feelings that she swore he bore the weight of the world on his shoulders. She wanted to help share his burdens, to comfort him and remove the dark shadows she’d sensed. But for now, she needed to get back to the village. She would sort this out later.

“Let’s go Caru, and meet up with Nadrin back in the town. The healer has faith in your abilities, as do I. I am sure he will be worried about us by now. He seems to feel he is responsible for you.” Shrugging his shoulders, the thought of anyone else being responsible for this woman was nonsense in his mind. He had already vowed to protect her in anyway possible. *God help anyone who ever attempted to take her from him. There was no where she could be taken that he wouldn’t find her.* Her scent filled his soul, imprinting her in his heart for all time.

As they made their way back to the village, Dartian was amazed at how all the creatures of the forest seemed to flock to her side. It seemed as if everything in nature sensed her goodness and wanted to be near her, bathing in her light. Yet she never seemed to notice the effect she had. She did everything without thought, acting on pure instinct and compassion. He also noticed that she never seemed to make a sound as she walked the path back to the village. It was as if she glided on the air, so silent and

graceful, it warmed his heart.

After a few moments the trio arrived back at the village. Breathing a sigh of relief, Saleene turned to head to Nadrin's home. She could feel Dartian walking a step behind her, the warmth of his body a light caress against hers. As they approached Nadrin's home she heard a moan coming from inside. Fear crept into her heart. Bolting for the door, she waved her hand to open it, hoping that Nadrin was okay. Her eyes adjusted to the darkened room and Saleene saw Nadrin lying on the floor, his eyes half shut from pain. Glancing back at Dartian, Saleene motioned for him and Zachius to move the healer back to his bed.

Moving quickly to the side of the bed, Saleene began to assess the damage and cause of Nadrin's sudden illness. What could have caused this? She noticed that he was semi-conscious and that there appeared to be no superficial wounds causing the problem. Walking over to the sink, Saleene filled her mother's bowl with warm water adding a few drops of the spring water along with some calamus root. Then dipping a clean cloth she began to cleanse Nadrin's face. She needed to find the source the injury. Chaotic thoughts raced through her mind, fear for his health paramount.

"Dartian, I need you both to step back while I look over Nadrin. I need to figure out where the injury began." Not giving them a chance to argue, Saleene began to search across his body, looking for anything that would cause the pain.

"Be careful Caru. Whatever may have injured Nadrin may still be in the house. I will not allow you to be harmed by a rash act." Though she knew he meant well, his words bit into her like a knife.

"I know that, thank you very much. Why don't you and Zachius go find what did this and leave me to my work." She heard a grunt behind her that indicated they both understood but were not used to a woman ordering them around. She couldn't help but smile at the knowledge that they'd listened anyway. Refocusing her mind back to Nadrin, a disturbance in the air barely caught her attention.

A few seconds after her internal warning system

went off, a large venomous spider sprung into the air directly at her head. Sensing the danger coming at her, Saleene raised her hand and formed an ancient pattern in the air. A transparent shield of crystals formed out of the nothingness, encasing her and Nadrin from the creature. The spider hurled through the air and came into direct contact with the crystal, bouncing off to make a loud thud against the wall.

Furious that it had missed its target, the spider turned to attack anything close to it. Saleene sensed the danger to Dartian and Zachius and called out to the gods, focusing her energy into a bright orange ball that formed in the palm of her hand. Muttering a few chants the ball of flame began to spin faster as it levitated in the air and flew straight toward the creature, impacting and incinerating it on contact.

“Make sure there are no more of those please. I detest bugs.” She knew there were no others lying in wait, but she wanted to keep her mind focused on Nadrin and not the fear she’d had when the spider had turned its attention toward Dartian.

Closing her eyes, she sent herself outside of her body in pure energy coursing through Nadrin’s body. Most of his wound seemed to be healing as it should, and there did not seem to be any foreign substances in his blood stream. Then the thought occurred to her. Nadrin had planned on napping while she was away. Had something tainted him as he slept? Moving towards his temple, where most believed was the all Seeing Eye; she noticed a gray smudge covering the area where the most energy is brought in and released at night.

Fatigue coursed through her as she brought herself back into her body. She felt Dartian rush to help support her till she could gather her strength. She hated the concern that lined his handsome face. Placing her hand lightly on his arm, she wanted to do whatever she could to chase away his shadows. Turning back to Nadrin, she picked up the wet cloth and went about cleansing the invisible smudge from Nadrin’s temple. A quick flick of her wrist and all the candles in the room lit, their warmth dispelling the stench of evil.

“He will be fine.” Saleene advised. “I am not sure how

this occurred but I do not want him to be alone for awhile. He needs to sleep for another hour or so and then we will wake him up and see if he can shed some light on what happened.”

“Caru, you are worn out from the work you have done. You should rest as well. Zachius and I will watch over both of you.” The intrusion of his words into her thoughts caused her to jump. Turning around she found herself flat against his hard chest, the warmth of his body melting into hers. She had begun to turn, when she felt his arms lift her into his embrace, carrying her to her room. Too tired to struggle, Saleene gently laid her hand against his shoulder, her head nuzzled into the bend of his neck.

Dartian carried Saleene into her room, his arms holding her tight to his body. He made his way to her bed, each movement pressed her body closer to his and he could feel her warm breath against his neck sending flames flickering along his skin. He could tell she was exhausted from the work she had performed, but the innocence of her actions caused his blood to turn to molten lava. He placed her gently on the bed while he tried to calm his ragging body. As he turned to go, Saleene lightly touched his arm, a small caress which revealed more than she could ever know. Looking down into her lovely face, Dartian sensed the beginnings of affection forming in the depths of her emerald eyes.

“Thank you.” Her words brushed against him to embrace him in her warmth. “I am curious about something though.”

“What’s that?” At that moment he would give her anything if it was in his power to do so.

“What does Caru mean? You keep calling it and it sounds beautiful but it’s not a word I’ve ever heard before.”

Her question surprised him for a moment. He’d never thought to tell her the meaning as it was always said without much thought. It just felt natural. “Nearest translation I can give you would be my love.” He couldn’t help but smile as he watched a blush steal across her body.

“It’s very beautiful.” It was all she could say. Even

her voice felt sluggish from all the energy spent. Slowly her eye lids began to flutter and drift down a clear indication of her need for rest. Her hand, like a feather floating in the wind, slowly drifted from Dartian's rugged cheek to land softly onto the bed. She was so tired, but at the same time she hated to leave Dartian looking so forlorn, like a lost child searching for something missing in his life. Unable to stay awake longer, Saleene vowed to herself that she would try to figure out the puzzle of his sadness later.

Chapter 19

She looks so peaceful, Dartian thought, as he looked down into her lovely face. The light touch of her hand had made his heart pound out a rhythm to match hers. She was beautiful as she slept, like an angel sent from the gods. He felt dirty and vile compared to her goodness and compassion. Lightly rubbing a golden strand of her silken hair between his fingers, he avoided letting go. In the distance Dartian heard a grunt from Zachius. Reluctantly, he released the hair he held and slowly bent down, placing a tender kiss on her forehead.

Getting up and moving out of the room, Dartian quietly closed the door behind him, allowing her peace and quiet to regain her strength. Shooting Zachius an annoyed look, Dartian couldn't help but laugh at the smirk covering Zachius' face.

"She is an amazing woman, Dartian." Zachius stated honestly. "She will make a good mate for you; perhaps she can keep you in line."

"Yes she is amazing, but she is not my mate. We are of two worlds." Though he prayed he could find a way, he also knew he had to face the facts. He was a shape-shifter...she was not.

"And your point?"

"Well...she is fool-hearty, headstrong, willful." he tried desperately to list qualities he felt were bad but all he could think of was her good things. "But she is also beautiful, courageous, spirited, compassionate, and full of light. Such the opposite of me, it is scary." Sadness filled his heart until he felt he would explode from it.

"Dartian, I know you better than you know yourself my friend. She is everything you say, true enough, but she is also your true mate. I can see the way you two look at each other. She may be the opposite of a lot of what you are, but that could be why she is right for you. And race

be damned, you know the legends.”

Dartian heard the sincerity in Zachius’ voice. But he knew their world was volatile and that the union between two different races had never been sanctioned by the elders. Too many unstable problems could arise from the pairing. No, if they were meant to be, they would both be outcasts if they proceeded. Shaking his head he slowly moved to the window, looking out into the bright blue sky, but only her face invaded his vision.

Muffled voices coming from the common room followed Saleene as she began to drift into a fitful sleep. Questions swirled in her mind. So many things were unanswered. She could feel that whatever had attacked Nadrin was only meant to incapacitate him, not kill him. That bothered her. The combination of herbs used was known to few, who could possess the knowledge to combine them properly around here? Worse than that, what purpose did it serve to administer it to the village’s healer? These questions tormented Saleene as she fell into a deep sleep.

Moments later, Saleene awoke once more. Still feeling drained she looked around the room, but all was quiet in the home. Confused, she got up from her bed, placing her bare feet on the cold tile floor. Barely any light could be seen throughout the room, indicating that night had fallen.

“I know I told Dartian to let me sleep only an hour or so. Why did he let me sleep till nightfall?” She knew the others couldn’t hear her, the quiet in the house made her nervous. Concerned that something more may have happened while she slept, she opened the door and made her way to the common room. No one seemed left in the house. *Why would they have gone out without her?*

Annoyed that Dartian might have left to visit the leader without her, Saleene picked up her pace, heading for the door. Looking around the interior, something just did not feel right. Before she could stop herself, she opened the door, allowing a gush of air to push into the home. The slam of the vile breeze forced the breath from her lungs knocking her to the floor. Trying to regain her balance, Saleene looked up from where she had fallen back at the doorway only to find a large wolf staring back,

his eyes blazing red with fury.

Pulling her legs beneath her, Saleene slowly stood up, trying desperately not to agitate the animal. Seeking to connect with the animal with her mind, all she found was blackness thickened with evil and the desire to kill. Fear began to eat away at her confidence.

Dartian, where are you when I need you? Saleene screamed inside herself. Closing her mind from the path of the wolf, she attempted to center herself, building up her natural energy to help ward off the attack. She hated the thought that she might have to harm this poor creature, especially since he did not appear to know what he was doing.

“Please go away.” Saleene whispered into the wind. “You do not wish to harm me, I know you do not. Do not allow this evil to control your will.” As the words reached the ears of the wolf, an evil laughter came from behind her. Suddenly the wolf vanished and the door was shut as if it had never been opened. Confused, Saleene turned towards the sound of the laughter. She was met by a pair of black obsidian eyes. The hate that poured out of them chilled Saleene to the bone. She could not tell who they belonged to but they seemed very familiar.

In the corner a cloaked figure began to emerge from the shadows. As the apparition began to take form, Saleene gasped when she saw it was Viktor before her. Before she could move, his hands were around her throat, choking the life from her.

“I told you I would be back for you my dear.” Spittle from Viktor’s deranged mouth dropped across her shoulder. “Your precious guardian is not here to protect you now.”

The strength that Viktor possessed kept her dangling in the air, her feet inches from the floor. Seconds ticked by until she began to see hues of gray shooting in front of her eyes with sparks of lightning. She knew she was slowly going unconscious from lack of air. Mustering all the strength she could, Saleene focused a mental shove towards Viktor. It was just enough to get him to let go, his body vanished as if never there.

Looking around, Saleene noticed she was no longer inside the healer’s home, but inside a cave somewhere.

There was a familiar feel to it, as if she had seen it before, many years ago. Her legs still weak from the attack, felt like willow branches blowing in the wind, uneasy and wobbly. In the distance she could hear water drip and the sinister laughter she'd heard before Viktor had tried to kill her.

Turning toward the sound of the voice, Saleene headed down a path that lead her deeper into the cave. It was old and barely discernable, but she had no trouble weaving her way around.

"Where am I?" Her voice echoed across the cavern walls.

Littered with stones and sand, Saleene wondered if the cave was located near a body of water. Overhead she could see the bats were still asleep. It must still be daylight after all. Up ahead she noticed a fork in the pathway. One way looked to lead farther down into the cave, while the other one continued on the same level but deeper into the interior.

Her inner guide pushing her to the east, she headed down deeper into the interior of the cave. The cave became much narrower, with moisture dripping from the smooth ceiling. Surely she must be near water, but there was no clear indication of where the cave was located.

As she neared the end of the walkway, Saleene slowed her pace, keeping her senses alert for any traps. To her surprise, she noticed she was able to see in the darkness as if it were midday. Every detail was vivid and bright, as if the sun was her personal light in the darkness. Unable to take the time to determine how this was possible, Saleene continued forward. A few feet further and she came around another bend in the pathway, where she entered a large cavern.

In the middle of the cavern she saw a body still on the ground. Scanning fervently for a place to hide, she noticed a large rock formation near the pathway she was on. It looked to be about fifteen feet tall, with an ancient flower blossoming on top of it. If her situation wasn't so perilous, she would have loved to find out more about the flower. She made her way behind the boulder, her vision of the open area unobstructed.

Upon closer investigation Saleene realized that it

was Raku she was seeing. Elated that she had finally found him, she began to creep closer, hoping to free him from his captures.

“Raku wake up. It’s me, Saleene.” Her words whispered on the drifting breeze did not rouse him. When she was mere inches from him she bumped into a solid transparent wall. The moment her fingers touched the surface she was thrown back by an invisible force, knocking the wind from her lungs. Pain shot through her fingers and when she looked down at her hands, she saw that her fingers were beginning to blister from the contact with the barrier. Eerie laughter wrapped her in cold, prickling her skin at the sound. *Who was doing this? What had kept her from freeing Raku?*

Then from above a ball of fire burst from the cavern’s ceiling, raining droplets of lava all around her. Thick smoke rose from the ground where the lava had pooled, slowly forming into the shape of a woman. Dena.

The venomous glare coming from Dena chilled Saleene’s soul as she watched her cousin move towards Raku’s still body. She couldn’t even imagine what her cousin had planned, nor how lost her soul truly was. The smile that crossed Dena’s face sent a coldness coursing through Saleene such that she felt she would never be warm again. How could one of her own turn so dark? The thought bothered her so much that she never noticed the shadows reaching across the cavern.

“Let him go. You don’t need him.” Not that she expected her words to break through the insanity that stood before her; she knew she had to try.

Moving back to the barrier, Saleene began to chant a buffer spell which allowed her to touch the barrier without causing her further harm. She began to pound on the invisible barrier hoping she would find a way to break through. Saleene cried out in an attempt to rouse Raku from his unconscious state, anything to make him open his eyes. Tears streamed unchecked down her face as she continued to hammer her hands against the magical barrier. She pounded so hard her palms began to bleed from continued assault.

Slowly Dena removed a tiny dagger and dipped it into a blackened chalice. A thick tar substance covered

the length of the blade, the stench so vile she felt as if she would pass out. Dena then began to head back towards Raku, licking her lips as she watched the horror crossing Saleene's face. Satisfaction seemed to grow with each step at the knowledge of the torment she was putting her younger cousin through.

"Cousin, dear cousin, you look so pale. Is your warrior not taking proper care of you?" *She knew about Dartian?* "If he is too much for you to handle, I would be more than willing to take him off your hands. One such as he would be a great asset to my cause."

"Dena, I hate to disappoint you, but you will never gain hold of Dartian. He despises you and would run you through, the moment the chance arose." Hoping she could buy enough time to formulate a counter spell for the barrier, Saleene continued on diverting her cousin's attention. "Besides, you seem to be doing quite well being all comfy with the shadow men whom you have aligned yourself with." Throwing as much contempt into her words as she could muster, she knew she hit a nerve when Dena let out an annoyed growl.

"You will pay cousin, never dispute that." Dena's voice held such contempt it felt like a knife had penetrated her heart. How could someone of her own blood have turned so evil?

A noise reverberated in the cavern, the suddenness catching Dena's attention. Reaching out to touch the barrier once more she noticed that her hand was becoming translucent. Puzzled by the turn of events, she looked around with more than just her eyes.

Apparently her cousin was so intertwined in the black arts that she had summoned Saleene's soul from her sleeping body, carrying it into the cave. Reaching out once more to try and get through to Raku, Saleene's small frame shimmered once, twice, thrice and with a poof of smoke she was pulled back out of the cave and back into her body. A cry of retribution followed her as she made her way back to her body that still lay asleep.

Hearing Saleene's cries, Dartian had broken down the door to get to her. The sight of her lying so limp, her palms bleeding for some unknown reason, tore at his heart. Sitting down, he cradled her in his arms with more

tenderness than he knew he had, trying desperately to sooth her back to consciousness.

“Caru, please hear me. You have had a bad dream. I need you to open your eyes.” He knew she heard him. He actually felt her reach for him in his mind, to grab a hold of his strength and lead her back from the darkness.

He watched as she slowly opened her eyes, confusion pooling in their depths. A small wince escaped her when she tried to move her hands, the pain of the wounds very real. He watched her to make sure she was real, that he had not lost her to some nightmare. The look of desperation on her face nearly undid him, the look of utter despair. She seemed so small and helpless after her mental battle. He had to find a way to keep her safe, but how to do this was still a mystery. She was so strong in her own way, but also so fragile, he wanted to put her on a shelf never to be touched by others again.

You do not need to keep me safe Dartian. I am not something so fragile that I must be kept from the world. I was merely not on my guard when my cousin pulled me in with a dream spell. Now that I know the extent of her powers, I will be more prepared next time. The intimate way she spoke to him in his mind always put his fears at ease, though he knew this time she spoke thus to him due to her exhaustion, more than anything else. *Now, if you would be so kind as to assist me, I need to cleanse my wounds, I would like to check on Nadrin before heading to see the leader.*

He could hear her light laughter brush the inside of his mind, calming the beast once again. It amazed him how she knew what to say and do to subdue his anger. Why she did, he still couldn't answer. Some things were better left for a time when they could be alone; to sort through what was brewing between them. Raising his head, he turned his gaze to Zachius and the grin he knew was crossing his friend's face. A small grunt echoed in the room.

“Zachius, I need you to bring me a bowl with some warm water and soap. Also bring Saleene's leather bag.” He knew she would want to tend to her own wounds, though he hoped to be able to assist her in some fashion. As he spoke he felt her move further into his embrace,

fatigue still pushing through her body. He shot his friend a desperate look. Zachius nodded and headed out the door and into the common room.

“Relax for me, Caru. You fought well. Conserve your energy for now. Zachius is coming with your medicines.”

“Thank you for coming to me. The spell she wove was a strong one.” The sadness in her voice tore at his heart; he hated to hear her sound so forlorn. He was about to kiss her pouting lips when Zachius returned with her bag. A small groan escaped his throat.

“What did I do?” He knew his friend had seen his head lower, but he was smart enough not to mention it.

Dartian watched as Saleene used her gifts to combine the herbs and oils together into the bowl of water. As she dipped her hands into the water, he felt her cringe as it stung her hands. He swore under his breath, his need to comfort her at the top of his priority list. He knew she was done when a small sigh escaped her rosy lips. God, how he wanted to taste her.

Dartian wrapped his arms around her waist. He pulled her into his embrace in an attempt to help her regain her inner balance. No argument from her proved to him that she needed his strength. For some reason he couldn't fathom, a smile crossed his face as he breathed in her intoxicating scent.

The fact that she so willingly trusted him with helping her humbled him as nothing else. For a woman as strong willed as she was, she was not afraid to admit when she needed help. The feel of her against his body and the way she fit so perfectly made no sense. It was as if they were made for one another. Instead of feeling awkward, Dartian embraced the emotions she let loose in him; he promised himself that they would try and figure out why later.

“I need to check on Nadrin now. If he is feeling up to it, I really would like to see the leader. Maybe there is something I know that can help determine his illness.” Dartian sensed her concern and his pride in her continued to grow. He could not blame her for her need to heal those who were sick. It was an intricate part of her personality to take care of those who were unable to do so themselves. A quick nod and he opened the door to allow her to exit.

As she passed she did something that surprised him. She intentionally grazed her fingers across his forearm, a soft smile across her face. It must be her way of thanking him, he mused. But the innocent act turned his blood to molten lava with that one touch.

She moved quickly out of the room, her attention diverted from the man behind her. That one single touch, done out of thanks, had sent lightning arching between them. Why did he have such an effect on her? Why was it each time they touched, her body felt light and her mind dizzy with wanting to know him even more? This puzzled her; no man ever had the effect that Dartian did. Sometime soon they would need to have a talk about what was happening. Just not now.

As she drew closer to the bed she noticed that Nadrin's breathing was off a bit. What could have happened? She was about to close her eyes when it dawned on her that he was not really sleeping.

"Nadrin, you old coot, you are not sleeping. Don't you know it is rude to listen and watch when others are not aware?" She stated this as if to reprimand, but could not stop from laughing at his silly behavior. "Since you are awake and seem to be just fine, I believe now is a good time to visit your leader."

Saleene knew there was a good chance nothing could be done for the man, but she hoped she might find some kind of an answer.

Turning her back on Nadrin, Saleene moved toward the window, her movements fluid and graceful. Dartian couldn't help but notice the feminine sway of her hips. Her innocence only added to the natural sensuality that radiated from within her. His gut clenched tightly as emotions he didn't realize he'd had began to grow in magnitude the more he was around her. Not realizing he was staring at her, Dartian nearly jumped when Nadrin cleared his throat, breaking the spell she had woven upon him.

Moving his gaze away, he noticed the amused smirk that covered Nadrin's face. *Blast her. Why did she have to be so damn sexy?* Annoyed at how transparent he must have been, Dartian attempted to play it off as best as he could. Shrugging his broad shoulders in a nonchalant

manner, acting as if nothing had occurred, Nadrin began chuckling even harder. The look on the old man's face conveyed his enjoyment at Dartian's discomfort.

"Many things in life are difficult to understand, let alone control my son. And in some cases, control is not always the best action." As she turned to face Nadrin, her eyebrow furrowed in confusion at his words, she clearly did not understand the purpose behind such a statement. Her gaze moved to Dartian and he could barely stifle a chuckle that caught in his throat. Even confused she was beautiful.

"Is there something I am missing here?" She couldn't help but show her amusement at whatever had transpired between the two men. It was even more enjoyable, as it had undoubtedly put Dartian on the receiving end of the farce. "If there is a joke going on, I would love to be a part of it." The idea of making Dartian squirm caught her interest. The man needed to lighten up. Besides, if someone didn't put him in his place now and again, he would become more overbearing than he already was. As if sensing her thoughts, Dartian cracked his arrogant smile directly at her, setting her teeth on edge once more.

"Ok gentlemen, enough is enough. Let's go. I want to get there and back before nightfall." Saleene didn't disclose that she feared that the dark would bring untold danger to the village. Something was amiss and it was setting her natural warning system into high gear. Her unspoken thoughts must have shimmered in the air as both Dartian and Nadrin nodded their heads in agreement.

Without realizing it, both Saleene and Dartian reached for the door at the same time, causing their hands to lightly brush. Electricity snapped between them. Her eyes meeting his, she could see possessiveness etched on his face. The raw hunger she saw in his stare heated her blood. *Damn the man and his looks.* Quickly, she opened the door and made good her escape from the warmth of his touch. Behind she could hear Nadrin burst out in laughter, clearly enjoying himself too much.

Why is this happening? She thought, not for the first time.

Determined to ignore the growing bond between

them, Saleene headed toward the home of the village's leader. She knew that the men were following close behind, but she continued forward, hoping to put distance between them. More annoyed with herself and her body's reaction, she couldn't fault the old man's enjoyment of the awkwardness that flowed between them. So deep in thought, she never saw what was in front of her. That is, until she came into contact with a rock hard chest.

A yelp escaped her throat as she connected to the warm hard body. Two strong arms steadied her, hands rough from hard work. Looking up she found a sarcastic smile crossing Zachius' face. Rolling her eyes, she wondered if all men in general were this arrogant or if only those of Dartian's lineage bared this trait.

"You really should watch were you are walking Saleene, you never know who or what you might bump into." The pure masculine voice coming from Zachius alluded to something just out of reach. *Men, they made no sense*, she swore. Now is when she wished she'd asked her mother all the questions a young woman should know when dealing with men. Unfortunately she had never thought to ask.

Suddenly she felt Dartian's presence directly behind her, his arms encircling her waist, claiming her. Try as she might, she could not remove his hold. Why was he so possessive? Leaning her head back she looked up at him, raw emotions chiseled on his handsome face. Was that jealousy she saw shining in his beautiful blue eyes? *No way*.

As if understanding her need for space, Dartian slowly released his hold on her, but not before he leaned his head down and gently placed a kiss on the top of her head. Instead of feeling comforted by the action, it annoyed her. She felt as if it was his way to show possession of her, between himself and his friend.

"Oh will you two quit. Enough is enough. You are both driving me crazy." She muttered, completely exasperated with them. She decided right then and there that men were bound to drive women completely insane with their stupidity.

Chapter 20

Both watched her walk away and then once more returned their gaze to the other, a smile crossing their faces at the same time.

“She is a handful, is she not?” Zachius inquired, humor crossing his face.

“Aye...that she is.” The moment he had seen her come into contact with Zachius the beast within him wanted to tear and maul, an emotion he was completely unfamiliar with. His friend had sensed the danger and knew not to push the issue too much further.

“I will be out hunting this afternoon, if you should need me, just call.” They both knew that space was for the best until Dartian could work out his connection to Saleene. Their kind was unique in that they only loved once, and that mate would be theirs for all time. He also knew that until the bond was secured, the male was more dangerous than ever. Turning his head back in the direction of Saleene, he could only pray that they both figured out their path was the same before something bad should happen.

“Are you two coming or what?” Saleene called over her shoulder, her golden hair like fine woven thread draping down her back. He watched as Saleene reached for the door only to be stopped by Nadrin before she could knock.

“Allow me to knock my dear. They do not take well to strangers.” Nadrin’s voice held a subtle warning.

Slowly the door opened and older robust woman stood in the door frame. Her eyes appeared to be shadowed from pure exhaustion. She glanced at each of them, nodding as her eyes reached Nadrin.

“What do you want this eve healer? The lord is still not well.” Sadness could be felt in her words.

If she was annoyed with him earlier, she didn’t act

that way at the moment.

“We are here to see if we can determine the cause of the lord’s illness. I have brought someone who knows more about the healing arts than I do.” This admission brought a gasp from Saleene. Dartian knew she was amazed that one who had lived so long would admit to such a thing, especially about a stranger to their kind. The admission appeared to have surprised the woman at the door as well, considering as her mouth gaped, so did the door she had originally held mostly closed. Taking advantage of the moment, Nadrin pushed passed the woman, waving his hand in the air.

“Thank you for allowing us entrance Melissa. I know you watch our leader like a hawk and for that you will always be held in high esteem.” Said almost formally, Saleene knew he was trying to make her feel an important part of their leader’s healing process.

Without further question the woman called Melissa opened the door fully to allow them full access into the home. As Saleene’s feet crossed the threshold, a shadow crossed her soul, sending shivers throughout her body. Looking around for the source, she could see nothing but the interior of the home. Unsettled by the feeling of malevolence that was prevalent inside, Saleene inadvertently reached for Dartian’s calm strength.

Looking at the two men next to her, she knew she needed to make sure to protect them from whatever might lie in wait. Chanting under her breath she invoked the spirit of protection to guide and keep them safe while they were inside the leader’s home. Once she was sure her barriers were strong enough, she re-opened her eyes and caught Dartian giving her a quizzical look. A quick shrug of her shoulders was all she gave. Let him figure it out.

The leader’s home was an impressive structure. Large ceilings with intricate designs carved into the wood, with bright colors displayed throughout the interior of the home. Deep blues, reds and greens adorned the tapestries hanging upon the wall. The beauty of the artwork caused Saleene to falter, her gaze taking in the breathtaking details. So engrossed in the artwork, she nearly bumped into Dartian’s hard frame, his arms quickly steadying her from falling. Feeling embarrassed, she attempted to

retreat back toward the door, her eyes downcast toward the ground. Sensing her feminine retreat, Dartian quickly snaked his arm around her waist, pulling her into the confines of his body.

Feeling out of sorts at being so close to the warmth of his body, Saleene fidgeted, trying to gain her release. It seemed the more she struggled, the tighter his grip became. Finally, not wanting to drain her energy before seeing to the leader, she relinquished her struggle and sunk into the bend of his arm. His body felt hard as if made of stone, and the ripple of his muscles caused warmth to pool in her stomach. Her legs actually felt as if they were losing their strength, making her lean more heavily into his arms. Her body had a life of its own when in close proximity with his, and she had no way to combat it. She needed to find a way to put distance between them and it needed to be soon.

Looking down at her golden head, he knew she was experiencing an internal battle with her emotions. Yet it amazed him how perfect she fit against his body, as if they were made for one another. Breathing in her scent, she reminded him of lavender and spice, an addicting smell which caused his body to react in a demanding manner. Instead of bucking against the raging inferno coursing through his blood, Dartian decided to embrace the feelings he was so unaccustomed to. Happiness, fear, longing, desire, she stirred all these within him and she didn't even realize it.

"Nadrin, tell me again how your leader became ill." He knew she was attempting to divert her attention to anything other than their closeness. He would allow her this day to avoid their connection, but come tomorrow they would discuss things. He vowed that some resolution would be attempted, even if it required him tying her up on her bed to discuss things. Suddenly the image of Saleene bound to a bed flooded his mind, causing even more discomfort as his pants became too tight. *Damn his body and damn this woman.* Her curves pushed so innocently across his skin. She would never understand the pure hell she was putting him through.

"Well my child, it is tough to say. The day prior he seemed to be fine, never once any indication that

something was wrong. If anything, he seemed fit as could be, out mingling with our people, overseeing the day's business." She could tell he recalled the day vividly; his eyes alight with the memory of a healthy leader. She listened as he explained how the day was clear and warm, the sun casting down rays of golden sunlight across the village.

"Nothing unusual occurred at all?"

"Nothing that seemed out of the ordinary." And she knew he spoke the truth. She had felt it the moment they had entered the home. There was a darkness that crouched in the shadows, waiting for the moment to strike.

Saleene saw the sadness that surrounded Nadrin and it broke her heart. He had given so much of himself already, yet he continued to blame himself. Try as he might, nothing seemed to aide in his recovery. Pondering what Nadrin had discussed, something still seemed to nag at her, something she was missing.

"Did he go out to hunt at all that day? Did any strangers show up, or did anything occur that was not the normal activities of the day?" She knew it was a long shot, but she needed to find out every minute detail. There was much that could cause it and anything that might shed light on the cause would help.

She watched as Nadrin concentrated, trying to remember anything he might have forgotten. He was trying too hard though. It was not long ago. His memory was sharp, of that she was sure, and there was no reason for it to be this difficult. Confusion registering on his face bothered her. As she was about to let Nadrin know he could think on the issue later, he doubled over in pain, clutching his head, his body falling to the hard floor with a loud thud.

"Nadrin!" Dropping everything, Saleene rushed to his side, lifting his head gently into her lap. "Dartian, bring me my satchel and some water, quickly." The force in her voice allowed for no questions to be asked. Dartian placed the satchel next to Saleene and rushed off into the dark in search of water. Her hand gently caressed the old man's hair as she smoothed back the spot where it had connected with the floor. Pulling her hand away, she saw

it was covered with bright crimson blood. His eyes, fluttering, she hushed him to be still.

“My child...I am sorry for this.” His words, mere whispers, pierced her heart. “Something has blocked my memories. But you are right... something did happen that day, I am certain of it. A shadow. A dark shadow engulfed the village. Our leader....” Nothing more came from his lips as the black abyss of unconsciousness consumed him, his breathing labored and unsteady.

Reaching into her bag, she withdrew a small piece of linen. Gently, she replaced her hand behind Nadrin’s head in an attempt to stop the bleeding. Murmuring the soft healing chant, she never noticed the dark shadow that crossed the room. Not once did she feel the coldness increase in magnitude to the point where her breath could be seen floating in the air. So in tuned within herself, working desperately to stop the bleeding, she never saw the fiery red eyes watching her with an intensity that bordered on compulsion.

Closer, inch by inch, an arm took form and moved toward her, till the shadowed fingers could almost touch her golden hair. The moment the fingers were inches from her head, Dartian made his way back to Saleene, bringing the water she had demanded. Knowing it could not battle both, the apparition hissed out its anger, a vow that it would get a hold of the woman soon, before vanishing back into nothingness once more.

As he approached, his heart caught in his throat. Watching her sitting there, eyes closed, murmuring words he could not understand, he wanted to gather her into his arms for all time. How much he wanted to be the one to chase away the tears that he saw fall down her cheek and the demons from her soul. She looked so beautiful, her hair falling to the side as she attended Nadrin’s wounds. With the sun breaking in through the sky light, she glowed in the cascade of colors. Almost ethereal, her mysterious beauty completely unnerved him, banishing all sane thoughts.

“Bring the water next to me Dartian; I must cleanse his wounds before any infection sets in.” Her voice pure and light reminded him of an angel, stirring him from his thoughts. Feeling guilty for wasting any time, Dartian

knelt down next to her, laying the bowl of warm water on the floor.

“What else can I do to help?” She knew he meant what he said, as she could sense his sincerity. The fact that such a strong man was willing to aide her as she worked caused her heart to somersault a few times. Looking up into the depths of his blue eyes she felt utterly lost. This man perplexed and confused her as none other. Shying away from looking at the reason for her reaction, she returned her attention to their friend and the blood that may still be flowing from his head.

“Thank you for your offer Dartian. If you could help me to turn him onto his side, I need to examine his wound. I believe I’ve stopped the bleeding, but I want to make sure there is no further injury to his head.” Switching to the healer persona, Saleene instructed Dartian as to what she needed and how. A voice of authority, it amazed him how many different levels she seemed to work on. So young, she knew far more than she should, and he guessed she had been relied upon by her kin for more than she should have at her age.

Looking closely at the wound, she noticed that it was only a small gash, one which could be cleaned up easily. Pressing her hand against the opening she allowed the healing energy within to flow out and into Nadrin, its warmth embracing him. Gently she added lavender to the warm water and dipped a clean cloth into the mixture. Lightly pressing the fabric to the wound, she sent the bright energy out of her and into Nadrin, sealing up the wound. Once she was assured no further chance of infection could begin, she released her hold on the old man and returned fully to her body.

Swaying with fatigue, Saleene inadvertently reached for Dartian. He must have known her needs as he was at her side, cradling her in his strong arms. Normally a strong woman, Saleene felt so weak that she didn’t care that he held her gently in his arms. Nor did she care that when she looked up she saw raw possessiveness shining in his eyes. No, for once she would just savor the feeling of being held closely, nothing more nothing less. Closing her eyes, she never saw him mouth one single word. *Mine.*

Relaxing back, she felt his warmth begin to seep into

her, replenishing the energy she had lost. Feeling once more at ease, Saleene began to move, realizing at once the magnitude of the man that held her. Try as she might to refocus her attention on Nadrin's sudden collapse, she found her thoughts continued to go back to Dartian and his powerful arms that embraced her. His strength and virility were something all too real, something very disconcerting to her nerves.

Moving with great care, she lifted herself up, her backside gently caressing his lap, unaware of the chaos she was causing. Her mind raced at the events that had transpired in the last few moments, she was unsure of what had caused Nadrin's pain, but determined to find out soon.

Moving back over to Nadrin's still form, Saleene's heart grew with sadness for this poor man. He had been through so much, seen so many terrible things happen recently. But it bothered her that the onset of this most recent problem happened for no apparent reason. What was even more disconcerting was the fact that it seemed to have been triggered when he tried to recall the events leading up to his leader's illness. *Could some spell have been placed in his mind to cause him to feel extreme pain when remembering a certain time? How could that be possible? Was there some form of magick or curse that would do that?*

Confusion and concern criss-crossed her mind; like a puzzle waiting to be unraveled. Saleene returned her gaze back toward Dartian, she worried that the problems the village was encountering may very well be beyond her abilities. This troubled her immensely, as she had never once failed in any undertaking she'd set her mind to. Blinking back tears of uncertainty, she decided that perhaps she needed to consult with the elders on this issue, obtain their vast knowledge on whether this had ever occurred before.

"Dartian, we must remove Nadrin from here and take him home to rest. He will recover quickly, but the cold floor is not the best place for him to be." Her words, said with the merest hint of regret, told more of her mood than she realized. If she knew how transparent her emotions were at that moment she would have been

annoyed with herself, especially with Dartian watching her like a hawk.

Moving gracefully and without sound, Dartian quickly retrieved Nadrin's unconscious body and carefully moved toward the door. Turning his head to face the still shocked maid he informed her of their intentions.

"We will return in the morning, once the old healer has a chance to rest from his ailment. Be prepared and make sure that we will not be disturbed during that time." His words, an order and nothing less, registered with the old woman, her head nodding in understanding. Slowly walking back out into the daylight, the sun seemed to cast a warm aura around him, as if an inner glow seemed to come from within. The unusual sight reminded her of a battle worn warrior returning from a long siege, his body intact but his soul needing to be cared for.

Every instinct within cried out to embrace this man and hold him close. She wanted to chase all the demons she could sense were eating away at him. Her arms ached to hold him close; his head nuzzled against her, his breath caressing her skin. He looked so alone, his eyes shadowed by untold battles, his heart scarred by unseen enemies. How could she have ever thought him an enemy when her heart knew he was so much more? Shaking her head at the path her mind was taking, Saleene safely tucked her questions back into a safe spot for later examination. For now, she needed to root out the issue with Nadrin and find out exactly what had transpired the day the leader had fallen.

Following closely behind Dartian, Saleene basked in the warm rays of sunshine showering the earth. She felt alive when nature sang on a day such as today. Raising her eyes to the bright blue sky, she marveled at the billowy clouds dotting the sky, like feathered pillows laid out for the gods to rest on. Looking around the village, she smiled as she watched the children playing, their contagious smiles lighting up her heart as it always did.

So carefree and full of wonder, youth was an amazing aphrodisiac, pulling all those near into their unbidden joy. Frowning, Saleene noticed that there were only sons playing in the sunshine. Where were the daughters at? Were they not allowed the same gift of play? She was

determined to ask Dartian once they had Nadrin safely tucked into his bed and out of harms way. As they neared the healer's home, a child came running from behind, a sense of urgency plastered across his solemn face.

"Sir, we are in need of the healer. Come quickly!" The terrified child blurted out, not seeing the condition of Nadrin right away. As his eyes took in the healer, they widened in horror. "Oh no! What has happened to him? Who can help us?" His terror-filled questions pierced Saleene's heart, her eyes misting at the boy's sadness.

"What is the problem child? Perhaps I can be of assistance as I have some knowledge of healing as well." Knowing that elaborating to the child would be as if spouting it to the wind, she focused her mind to the child's to help pave his understanding without inquiring further.

"My mother is sick. She will not answer me nor will she get up from her bed." His words, so pain-filled, she wanted to gather him into her arms and rock him till his tears ceased. Looking up at Dartian, she conveyed her need to attend the ailing woman.

Moving closer to Dartian, Saleene stood up on her tip-toes, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered.

"Nadrin will be fine, make sure to cover him and apply some more of this to the bandage. I must attend to this woman." As she handed him the vial, her fingers lightly caressed his hand, sending warmth spreading throughout his body. *Damn the woman was a menace.* But she knew just what to do to make him comply, when all he wanted to do was tell the world to go to hell and take her far away. This time moving his lips to her ears, he muttered in a soft menacing voice.

"Hurry and help this woman, but move in much hasten back to my side. There is much we need to discuss Caru, and time is not something we can afford to waste." The dark promise his words held sent a shiver through her body, causing her blood to boil and thicken. Nodding her head in agreement Saleene turned back to the child, indicting to him to lead her to his mother.

As he watched her move quickly away, he felt as if part of him was going with her, never to return. How had he gotten himself into such a mess? Wasn't he always in control? It made no sense, but he planned to resolve some

of the issues this evening, one way or another. Turning back to the healer's home, he kicked in the door, his frustrations mounting with each step. Only the movement of Nadrin within his arms caused him to soften his mood, wishing not to cause any further harm to befall the old man.

He laid Nadrin down gently onto his bed. Following Saleene's instructions he reapplied the poultice to the wound to insure the cut would heal. Her scent seemed to follow him every where he went. Jasmine and chamomile filled his nose, relaxing him once more. Her scent was so addicting he felt he would never get enough of it. How had she gotten so deep into his skin? No woman had ever made such an impact on him before and the thought of it shocked him. Looking out the window at the setting sun, he wondered what was taking her so blasted long to get back. He even found himself cursing the child who had stole her away from his side, but knowing his Caru would do no other than aide.

Suddenly a thought entered his mind, one he had not thought about before, what if the child was a trick? His heart began to beat out an erratic rhythm, fear pooling in his mouth. He could not recall the child, nor if he had ever seen him running around the village. Frantically, he began heading for the door, the vision of Saleene lying helpless as some unseen monster ripped the life from her.

Oh Dartian, you have such a vivid imagination. Relax and watch Nadrin for me. I am almost through here and will return shortly. Her words, mere whispers in his mind, calmed the raging beast. How had she known he was distressed? *How? Because your fear was swamping me silly, now leave me in peace so I can finish with this child's mother.* And then she was gone, though not before he could hear her warm laughter brushing his mind, embracing his soul in her goodness. Yes, the woman may be independent, willful, carefree, headstrong and stubborn, but she always knew when and what to say to ease his concerns. In a nutshell, she amazed him at every turn but frustrated the hell out of him with her inability to understand the danger that surrounded her.

He knew something would need to be resolved soon between them; it was more than just the evil he was

concerned about, but the strong connection building between them. He vowed he would make her listen, even if he had to tie her up and gag her to keep her from changing the subject. She would hear him out or he would surely burst from the sheer electricity that kept increasing more and more in intensity with every passing day. Returning his gaze to the old man, he wondered if there was more to the legends than what he had heard thus far.

He knew it was forbidden, but he could feel that there was going to be no other path for him. He wondered if this is the way the warrior of the legend had felt when he found that his mate was not of his clan, nor even of his race. The old healer had never finished the story, so he didn't know if they had lived out full and complete lives. He only prayed it was so, but if not, he would give any moment he had to be with Saleene and no one could tell him otherwise. Not even the woman he was meant to be with.

"This should be fun." He muttered into the air. Smiling he knew his little spit fire would balk at the thoughts running through his mind, but he knew the truth of them. She would just have to find a way to bridge her beliefs and follow her heart. She cared for him; she just wasn't prepared to admit to it yet. But he would prove to her what he saw in her eyes. And her eyes, ugh, the gods gifted her with such vividly deep green eyes that shone like gems when she was fighting mad. He wanted to drown himself in her goodness, wrap her in his arms, never to let go. But he also knew trying to take what he knew was his by force, was not the way he wanted to win her heart. No, this would take considerable coaxing, wooing, pleading, and proving to her that their lives were entwined for all time.

Resting his large form against the wall, he moved his gaze over the intricate carvings covering the mantle of the fireplace. Amazing workmanship, detailing a story he recalled hearing during his youth. If his memory was correct, it was about a battle that had ensued between the netherworlds and the beings which could move between time and space. The battle had ensued for hundreds of years between the gods of the underworld and those on

his world, neither one obtaining the upper hand. Those that could sift time and space between the realms had watched with a neutral stance, never once interfering.

Continuing to lightly trace the designs, it seemed part of the story had been etched out, as if the outcome could not be disclosed or that someone had not wanted what had happened to fall into the wrong hands.

So engrossed in the images on the mantle, he barely heard the door open behind him. But the moment her scent filled the room, he knew she was there, his body stirring to life. She may not have spoken, but he would know her anywhere, her scent filled his body and warmed his heart. Forgetting about the tale before him, Dartian turned to face the woman who held his heart. As his eyes drank in her beauty, he wondered how she would react to their discussion. He hated to cause any further distress after such a troubled day, but knew he had no choice. She looked so tired; her energies used to aide those who were ill, never once considering what toll it would take on her delicate body.

“Saleene...come, sit by the fire and relax while I prepare you some dinner.” About to tell him not to, Saleene noticed the stark concern chiseled across his handsome face. Leaning back into the oversized chair, she closed her eyes, welcoming the black quietness that seemed to surround her. Her mind reeling after the day’s events, she still could not figure out the answer to Nadrin’s sudden collapse. Something continued to nag at her thoughts, until she thought she would scream at the gods for the answer.

Chapter 21

Fatigue began to set in as the aroma of chicken and rolls caught her attention. Opening her eyes slowly, she caught sight of Dartian standing over the sink, fixing a plate of smoked chicken, fresh bread and vegetables. Amazed at the simple gesture, she found her heart turning over at the kindness he continued to bestow upon her. Was there anything he could not do?

She knew he thought she was dozing due to the work she had wrought that day, but she found herself wide awake. Something within her seemed to be roaring to be released. Taking in the sight of his solid form, so in tune with all around him, he was so beautiful it hurt to look at him. His earthly features could set hearts pounding and the inner strength was matched by his rippling muscles and hard physique. If she ever wondered what a god would look like, she would have bet they mimicked their appearance after him. Sometimes when he wasn't aware, she noticed a deep sadness pooling in the depths of his azure eyes, causing them to sparkle like pools of the sacred waters.

At times it seemed as if a wealth of emotions were bottled up, waiting to be released. But she noticed that when things were at their most difficult was when he exercised the most discipline. As if he carried no emotions, felt nothing about what was occurring. *Must be a self defense mechanism to pull him through the battle*, she mused.

Though, the idea of him having been hurt to where he must hide his feelings, bit at the very core of her soul. Her heart burst with the need to comfort this honor bound warrior. *What shaped this man into what he is? What conflicts had erected such a strong wall around his passion and what could release it?*

So deep in thought, she didn't notice Dartian turn,

his deep blue eyes moving quietly over her slender figure, taking her form into his mind for safe keeping. Walking over to her, he gently placed the plate of food on the table in front of her, turning to reclaim the bottle and pour a small glass of wine into the aged chalice.

“Caru, you must eat to regain your strength. I have slaved over this for you and would not wish it to go to waste.” Looking up at him, she noted a sparkle in his eyes. *Was he teasing her?* He never seemed to tease, but who was she to deny him a moment of joy when things could so easily turn bad.

“Thank you so much for the meal Dartian, it means a lot to me.” Looking down at her plate, she inhaled the fragrance and smiled, knowing it would be as good as it smelled. “Who taught you to cook?” She wondered. “It looks very good. Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

“Ah, even though I am a man trust me I’ve been taught to cook. My mother believed every person should know how.” His small omission spoke more about him than he could have known.

“Well I’m very impressed.” Her words drifted on the air. “You’ve done so much for me already.”

Not knowing how much her words revealed, she never caught the knowing smile that crossed his face as she focused her attention on eating the meal before her.

Stretching lazily, Saleene felt as if she had lived hundreds of years after the last few weeks. No longer hungry, she pushed herself away from the table and began to stand. Without a sound, she found Dartian next to her, his hand gently encircling her wrist. Looking up, she met his stare and the untold emotions that swam in their depths.

“Caru, I believe now is a good time for us to have that talk.” His words were simple enough, but seemed to hold within them a wealth of unspoken desire she could not miss. “Let’s leave Nadrin in peace while we walk underneath the stars. It is a beautiful clear night and the moon has a silvery light to shine down upon on us.”

His words were so sweet and alluring, that she found herself moving with him toward the door and out into the crisp night air. Her gaze drifted up into the sky and the twinkling stars that littered the night. So peaceful, that

she didn't notice Dartian staring at her, amazement and concern etched on his handsome face. She sensed his stillness and hesitation, but the beauty of the night pushed fear out of her mind.

"Dartian, it has always been my belief that if something concerns a person it is best to be open and honest about it. No need to allow time and frustrations to cloud the issue." Even as she said it, she knew that she was just as confused about their bond that seemed to be growing stronger with each passing day. However, she preferred that he initiate the discussion because, in this one instance she admitted to herself that she was just too scared to.

Laying her hand gently on his arm, she resumed walking in the night with her strong warrior. Hers? Since when did she start thinking of Dartian as belonging to her? *How strange.* Shaking her head, she filed the thought away for review at a later time, for now she needed to find out what was troubling Dartian and how to ease that concern.

"Well? The night is upon us and rest is still needed before tomorrow arrives." She knew he was proud and could enter any battle without thought, but this was new territory they were both venturing on and neither knew where it would lead.

"I am sorry Caru; my mind is a jumbled mess at the moment. I ask your forgiveness if I should not make sense at times." She could read the sadness and confusion in his words and it melted her heart. She wanted to pull him into her embrace and comfort him. As the vision of holding him entered her mind, she felt him pull her close, his breath a caress on her cheek. Leaning her head back to look up into his deep blue eyes, she found his head bend as his lips descended upon her lips.

The light sensual brushing of his lips, like the caress of a feather, sent her stomach flip-flopping in anticipation. So light, so warm, the touch sent heat flowing through her veins, until she thought her skin would surely catch on fire at the heat brewing between them. *How could one touch do so much?* It left her wanting more, needing more of him. So many things ran through her mind, so many visions she wanted to have

come true. Next thing she knew his hands wrapped around her, sealing her within his strong embrace. Any thoughts of leaving vanished from her mind as pure feeling and sensations replaced them.

Spinning through time and space, Saleene felt as if she were on a tidal wave of emotions; fear of the unknown, curiosity of what he would do next, awe at how her body responded, nearly melting into his and confusion as to why this would happen now. She began to part her lips to breathe when his mouth crushed hers sucking in her essence within his own. Such strength, yet he held her with infinite gentleness. *How could such a powerful man be as careful as he was?* Drowning in his embrace, she vowed to find a way to chase his demons away, to somehow remedy anything that would cause him pain.

“Caru, you take my breath away with your smile. Did you know that your presence alone lights up a room?” Her beauty, her innocence as well as her natural sensuality were an intoxicating mix, and one he had no defense against. He sensed she wasn’t even aware of the power she yielded in her small feminine body. Even more so, he had a feeling that she had a passion buried deep within that was roaring to be released. What he wouldn’t give to be on the receiving end of her passion once unleashed.

Regaining control of his raging body, he knew now was not the right time to explore the emotions wishing to be released. Now was the time to get her to acknowledge the connection between them though. Cupping her chin with his finger, he raised it so she was looking deep in his eyes, so she would know he spoke the truth.

“Caru, there is something forming between us, something neither of us have any control over.” Breathing slowly to relax his tensed muscles, he savored the feel of her so close. “I know you feel the connection we have each time we touch, every moment we are together, it builds in magnitude. It is overwhelming at times, but it is something we need to understand, something we need to work through.” *Work through? Where had that thought come from?* Looking deep into her eyes, he knew she understood what he said, though his choice of words seemed to have struck a hurt cord within her.

“Work through Dartian?” Her voice stern to hide the

pain she had felt at his last statement. "You arrogant, pigheaded Neanderthal! We have nothing to 'work through' except your manners, or lack there of. You can take your ideas of romance out of your head and drown them in a bucket of ice cold water." She began to move out of his embrace, but his arms encircled her once more, tightening his grip.

He knew she was mad when she jabbed her elbow back in hopes of forcing him to release her. Thankfully he had anticipated her move, and he swung her around so fast she lost her balance and grabbed his shirt to avoid falling. Her unsteadiness allowed him a better vantage to recapture his strong hold on her, one he took full advantage of. Swinging her up into his arms, he cradled her against his hard chest and headed toward the dark woods, determined to find a secluded spot for them to continue their discussion.

As they moved further into the dense forest, Saleene continued to kick and struggle, to get back some of her freedom from his hold. The more she moved, the more his grip seemed to strengthen, until she thought she would be pulled into his body, and lose what was left of her. It didn't help that her body had a mind of its own, flaring up at the mere touch of his skin against hers. Finally, her energy depleted, she slumped in his arms, closed her eyes and reached for the black abyss of sleep.

A few moments later, she felt him stop, his body as still as the mountain. He must have found a place that was secluded enough for him, as he gently placed her on the ground, moving away a few steps, allowing her some space to regain her composure. Completely exhausted from battling with him earlier, she decided that brute force would not work with him and that she would need to come up with an alternative way to get away.

Opening her eyes, she diverted her gaze, refusing to look at him for fear of betraying her own emotions to his arrogance. Slowly she stood up, surveying the area for any indication of where he had taken her. Nothing looked familiar and being that she was not from these parts, she had no bearing of where they were or how far from the village he had traveled. One thing she was sure of, the place was remote and extremely tranquil, as if untouched

by anyone until now. *How had he known of this place?*

Shaking her head, she refocused her mind on locating a way to get away from him so she could think about what had transpired so far. Then it came to her, off to the left looked to be an opening in the foliage that would be perfect. She would just need to find a way to make him look away, just for a second.

She returned her gaze back to his piercing eyes that stared directly at her, a small smile crossing his sexy face. If there were any reservations beforehand, they were gone in that overbearing smile. She knew she would only have a scant moment to get away; she used her gift of movement to cause a sound in the opposite direction of where they stood. Acting as if the sound distressed her, she nearly laughed when Dartian turned his head to the direction of the sound, allowing that precious moment to present itself. Taking full advantage, Saleene leapt for the clearing only to be brought up short by finding herself face down on the ground, something soft and strong tethered to her ankle. How did she not feel that before? For that matter, how did she not feel him wrapping her ankle with it?

Surprise began to surface, then confusion followed by frustration and finally ending up with total fury. How dare him! She began to pull herself up to her knees when she felt his strong arms wrap around her waist, pulling her back to her feet and against his body. She knew she could use magick against him to force the issue, but the thought of any harm coming to him by her hands caused a sickening feeling inside. Completely exhausted from their struggle together, Saleene looked up and glared at him hoping he could read the annoyance she felt.

Instead of seeing a mocking smile cover his face, she saw etched lines that she did not recall seeing before. Lines from the stress of battles he'd fought on her behalf. How many were due to her only the gods knew. It was when he was like this that her heart cried out to comfort him, to console and wipe any bleakness from his world. Instead she refused to give in to her nature and stood, her back ram rod stiff, her eyes blazing with anger at his actions.

“Caru, I know you are upset that I brought you here

and bound you to me, but I had to so we could finally talk about what is going on between us. And before you say nothing is going on, must I remind you of the kisses we have shared?" The memory, still so vivid rushed through him, sending his temperature rising a hundred degrees easily. "If for some reason you cannot recall, I would be more than happy to remind you personally."

"Stay away from me Dartian, and I mean it. You had no right to steal me out into the night and then tie me to your side. Things like that are not done." If only she could find a way to get him to release her, but she had a feeling it would not happen until they discussed their situation. She could use magick but the idea of hurting him bothered her. Sighing, knowing she had no way out; Saleene sat back down onto the smooth rock, lifting her ankle to rub the red mark already forming around it.

Next thing she knew Dartian was there kneeling before her as he encircled her ankle, gently bringing it to his chest. The gentleness he displayed as he held her leg, his fingers lightly caressing her skin sent shockwaves through her body. Trying to suppress a yelp of pain, she placed her hand over her mouth, muffling the sounds that emerged from her throat.

"I am sorry Caru, it was not my intention to cause harm to you, nay, it was only my desire to keep you near me until we could try and sort out some of what was going on." Lightly smoothing some aloe onto the burn marks, each muffled cry from her lips tore at his heart, making him hate what he had done in a moment of desperation at her refusal to discuss things. Yet every touch of her satin skin to his made his body tighten in pure torture of the ecstasy of being close to her.

"Dartian..." Her words ended as another yelp of pain escaped her lips.

"Please forgive me in my lack of judgment in my decision to bind you to me; however I do not regret the idea of keeping you close. We both know there is a connection between us, whether you choose to admit it or not, the connection is still there." He neither raised his voice, nor said the words with any annoyance. All she sensed was pure honesty coming from him. A desire to find out why lightning seemed to arch between them

whenever they touched.

“Dartian, I am sorry I was acting so unreasonable, but this is very unusual for me and to be honest, I do not know what to make of it.” Tired of fighting him, Saleene leaned back, relaxing her muscles as he continued to rub the aloe on her ankle. “I will admit that when we are together things can be a bit explosive, though I don’t know why.” *Other than you are the most sexy, virile, and arrogant man I’ve ever met. One who should be outlawed and never allowed around females...* she thought to herself.

“Saleene, when I look at you I sometimes feel like I’m still asleep...dreaming, wishing never to wake up. I’m not afraid to admit that I care about you, but you should already know this.” His eyes spoke as loudly as his words and went straight to her heart, wrapping around it tightly and securing itself to her soul. How does one combat such truth, such honesty, as what he had just said? She knew that there was something going on between them, and it was something that neither could control. Acknowledging this released a vice that was squeezing her, sending a rush of calm running through her.

“You are too kind Dartian. I will tell you this much, that whatever it is that is happening between us, it’s not something I’ve ever felt before, and I promise that when we can devote time to explore it, we will. But for now we really must find out what is going on in the village, as much as I wish we didn’t have to.” Not realizing what she’d just said, Dartian’s eyes lit up at her subconscious omission and held it close to his heart knowing he had made some progress.

Dartian conceded to allow some space for a better time to divulge their emotions. He would grant her this reprieve, but not without a price. Pulling her further into his arms, he lowered his lips to gently caress the nape of her neck, sending sparks pulsing through her body. He continued his assault on her senses as he lightly kissed her warm skin, from the nape of her neck, up across her cheekbone to her fluttering eyelids and down to her luscious lips.

He knew the reaction he was getting would cement the obvious feelings they had for each other, even though

she refused to admit to it. Given time he would make her come to him, begging to feel his body next to hers. It would just take some creative pushing, but his mother always told him he had a vivid imagination. Resolved in his plans, he moved quickly away from her warmth, but not before watching the passion begin to surface on her beautiful face.

What a kiss. Raising her fingers carefully to her lips, she felt as if she had been branded by him. His strength and power searing her right down to her soul with a single touch, his body a perfect match for hers. Her lips felt swollen after his sweet attack her on senses, and she wondered if she could ever touch another man again. Not sure if she should be in awe or furious at his behavior, Saleene decided that since life was so precious she would not question the time they spent together, but savor every moment.

Chapter 22

“Dartian, where are we?” Her question, so innocent, took him off guard. He had expected anger from her for his actions, which was something he could easily convert into passion; but this...this was something he was not prepared for. Looking over his shoulder at her, his breath caught in his throat at her exquisite beauty. So natural, as if a part of nature itself, her golden hair danced on the wind, like golden rain falling from the sky. His resolve to make her beg for him flew right out of his thoughts, as his own need to protect and be near her overcame any other plans he may have made.

“Ah Caru , this is a very sacred place. Each clan has one it uses during the different phases of the moon, when we must show our respect for the gods of old.” Remembering all the times he had spent as a child, running to the sacred circle, dancing throughout the night with his people. How he missed his clan, where things made sense and danger did not lurk around each corner.

“How did you know of this spot? Did Nadrin tell you about it?” Curiosity, which most times got her into trouble, always seemed to get the best of her. She knew that if this was a sacred place, that his clan should not be revealing it to an outsider. To provide it to Dartian was one thing, since he was of the same race, but she, both an outsider and not of their people, could cause problems. So why did he bring her here? Puzzled, she returned her gaze to his, searching for the answers in his eyes, but finding none. Instead of pushing further, Saleene turned her face up toward the sky, basking in the feel of the moon brushing her face with its silvery gaze.

He watched her move about the circle, arms stretched out to the night. The moon beams caressed her skin like a lover tracing every inch of her delicate body. The vision made his body tighten further in response to

his thoughts until he swore he would burst from the pressure. She looked so mysterious in the moon light, her hair like golden silk cascading down her back, the silver from the rays casting iridescent highlights down her back. So ethereal, she was a haunting vision come to bless and curse his mortal existence. Watching her like this, he felt like a young boy who happened upon a goddess dancing in the moonlight, paying homage to her world.

“Dance with me Dartian. Dance with me and let us forget the troubles we face. For one night, I wish to believe that the dangers that linger above us do not exist, that only the two of us live on this world.” Her words hit his heart with such force they nearly brought him to his knees, his eyes misting at the sincerity in her voice. How could he deny her request? It was one which he had wanted to voice for so long but had not due to fear of losing her. Such a simple thing, to dance, but one he knew would inevitably tie them closer together. Before he knew it he was at her side, pulling her into his embrace and moving with the songs of the forest. His world, her goodness, such a thing he never imagined, humbled him as nothing else could.

“Ah Caru, you are so beautiful with the moon shining down upon your lovely face. This night will be our night to forget about all troubles. Nadrin is safe in his home as are those within the village.” He did not reveal that he had watched her cast protection barriers on all the villager’s houses, securing them from anything which may try to harm them as they slept. His pride in her grew with every waking moment, astonished at her ability to give so much of herself to help others. The more he learned of her nature, the more he felt small in comparison to her kind-heartedness and the purity that shone from within.

As they continued to dance, each movement slow and sensual, he felt as if they were becoming one being. There was no Dartian without Saleene. She was his heart and soul, everything good that could be part of him. No beginning, no end... just them, so perfectly matched.

He wanted the moment to go on forever, never to end, not when he knew that the days to follow could tear her from him in the blink of an eye. He never fully understood how protective or selfish he could be, not until he had met

her. This woman in his arms ignited emotions in him he did not know existed. He knew he could not survive without her smile, or the way she moved so gracefully through the village, her hips swaying like the wind. No, they were bound together for all times, whether she acknowledged it yet or not was of little consequence, as he knew eventually she would have to face their fate together. Until then, he would bide his time, watching over her like a hawk.

Closing her eyes, Saleene moved to the rhythm of the forest. The sounds drifted on the wind made her heart soar, the freedom of just moving within his strong arms bombarding her senses. It all felt so right, so perfect. But she knew that they could not be together, anything that seemed to flow between them could not be allowed to develop into anything more. The thought of not being with him made her heart grow heavy, as if it had already made up its mind to be bound to him. She knew that as much as she would like to follow her heart, she also was not so naive to not know that he was a warrior of greatness. He would be able to woo many women into his bed, not needing to worry about attachments.

No, she decided, she would not fall into his trap and no matter where her heart guided her. She would be sweet, accommodating, and attentive, but she would not allow her heart to be given to this powerful man. He would tear it into pieces in the blink of his sexy blue eyes. Oh but what she wouldn't give to be able to be the one woman for this man. She couldn't deny the fact that their chemistry was explosive whenever they touched. *Was he like this with all the women?*

An unexpected shot of jealousy coursed through her blood at the mere vision of him dancing so slowly with any other woman. Shaking her head, she gently pushed herself out of Dartian's embrace, moving quietly into the shadows, not allowing him to see the emotions boiling in the depths of her eyes.

"Caru? Is there something wrong?" She could see the puzzlement etched on his handsome face, his eyes searching out the reason for her retreat. "I see nothing near us but the creatures of the night and the stars shining down upon us." His words, so sweet, her heart

filled with sadness at the notion that she would never hold him close again. Suddenly clarity hit her, something she had not considered earlier when dancing so close to him. She knew there was a good chance she would not live through this adventure, that she would never find her true love, nor experience the love of man.

Looking deep into his eyes, she knew that if she showed interest he would leap at the opportunity. She also understood that even though she was inexperienced, her senses told her that he was not. She did not want to leave this world without knowing what being thoroughly loved felt like and he was a man who could fulfill those dreams. Closing her eyes, Saleene sent up a prayer to the gods, thanking them for bringing him into her life, and with a small vow, returned her gaze to him, decision made to lose herself for this one night in the strength of his arms.

Dartian moved closer, not fully understanding the pull to her side. She seemed different, as if resolved about something he could not fathom. Try as hard as he might, he could not determine what had changed in her, until he looked into her eyes. Shock hit him hard. Was that desire that burned in their depths? Could he be lucky enough to be the recipient of that emotion? Joy spread through him like a wildfire, burning his soul with the look she gave. He praised the gods for this gift. But what had caused her to change her mind? As quickly as the thought entered his mind, it was gone, for she was in front of him, moving her head up to his, her lips lightly brushing his with the tenderness that nearly brought him to his knees.

He wrapped his arms around her once more. He pulled her into the warmth of his body, his lips hungrily seeking hers. The moment they connected time seemed to stop and only they remained. Darting his tongue into the warmth of her mouth, an intimate dance ensued. Her natural sensuality sent his emotions reeling with untold feelings. Friction began to build in the pit of his stomach at the dance their tongues were creating. Not wanting to stop, Dartian's hands began to move of their own accord, lightly caressing her back, and slowly moving down to the perfect roundness of her bottom.

The action caused a small moan to escape her throat

only to be drowned out in the roar building in his ears. Oh but the woman was torture to a man's senses. Moving his mouth off of hers, he slowly trailed kisses down her throat, his gentleness sending waves of lightning brushing over her already sensitized skin. Tenderly, he moved across her shoulder, bringing her closer still to his body, his arms moving under her legs lifting her off the ground. Without realizing what was happening, Saleene could feel herself being moved through the forest, to where she did not know, nor did she care. The continuing assault on her senses amazed her. Dartian never lifted his gaze as he knew instinctively where he was headed.

Moving with the speed of his kind, he made his way to a sacred cave, one he had found a few days earlier. He had envisioned bringing his woman there, but had begun to believe she would never accept him, or the bond building between them. Now with her in his arms, he felt complete, and knew nothing would pull them apart.

As he entered the cave, he moved to the far corner and the bed he had carefully crafted a few days prior. Placing her delicate form on the bed, Dartian moved silently across the room, lighting candles to illuminate the room with a soft golden glow. Turning back to Saleene, his mouth went dry at the vision of her lying so compliantly on his bed, her golden hair spread out like a halo encircling her tender face. If he had any reservations about his feelings for her, they vanished in that moment. She was so beautiful, so innocent, she took his breath away. Not wanting any distance between them, he moved quickly back to her side, his hands lightly touching the golden strands of her hair. So silky and fine, they were like spun gold crafted by the fairies. Moving his eyes over her luscious lips, his blue eyes met her green ones and time once again stood still.

"Caru, you are so beautiful you make my heart ache. Fy Calon, Caru. Fy Byth." Though she knew not the words, the tenderness she felt in them melted her heart so that she wanted to weep, holding him forever to her. She knew at that moment, that her decision to give up her innocence to him was the best choice she had ever made. One she would never regret for however much time remained in her young life. Moving her hands up to his

face, she lightly traced the edges of his features, committing to memory every detail to take with her into the next life. Without thought, she closed her eyes and allowed all the feelings she had bottled up to break free and wash over her.

Moving his body closer to hers, he slowly moved his hands to the buttons on the front of her bodice. Tenderly, he unfastened each one, his breath catching as each came unhinged from its clasp. With each passing moment, more of her golden skin came into view causing his manhood to tighten beyond sanity until he thought he would lose control and rip the dress from her body. Forcing control back into his body, he pushed any thought of aggression from his mind and concentrated on the gentleness she deserved. He knew she was an innocent, knew she was untouched by any man. Because of this, he would not allow her first time to be rough but gentle, something he never thought he possessed.

He wanted to bring her to the stars, to hear her shout his name as she shattered, before bringing her safely back to earth and his warm embrace. His fingers reached the final button, his breath stopped as if he was finding something new, something he had waited a lifetime to discover. Moving his eyes across the creamy expanse of her stomach, he noticed a small design, something familiar to him. He could not place a finger on what it was, but filed away the information for later inspection. Continuing his exploration of her body, his eyes left a heated trail his lips followed up her narrow waist past her ribcage to the swell of her full breasts. Nipping at the peaks of her rosy buds he felt tremors began to race through her blood.

“Dartian” she whispered, her voice barely audible. The mere thread of sound sent his blood boiling even higher until he thought he would spontaneously combust. He could feel her body moving up to reach for his, her hips arching naturally against the hard length of him. That simple movement shattered all sane thoughts from his mind, releasing the beast that had a fierce need to claim his mate.

Moving his hands down, he grasped the hem of her dress, pulling it up over her head, opening her up for his

inspection. Oh but what a scrumptious body she had, like liquid gold poured over porcelain skin, she reminded him of the goddesses of old. His hands began to roam down the curve of her hips, tracing every line, ever crevice, until he reached the inner v of her legs. A small gasp shot from her throat, urging him further over the edge. Leaning back up, he pressed his lips to hers; removing any thoughts of denying him further from her mind. Surprise rocked him as she quickly removed his shirt and pants, hating the feel of the confining fabric against his sensitized skin.

Slowly he moved his hand to the tiny curls between her legs, feeling the heat radiating from between. Ugh, but the woman was a burning inferno of passion, waiting for the right man to release her. Swearing to himself that no other man would ever be this close to her, he refocused his mind to completely branding her to him. He moved his hand to her heated core, gently pushing on the mound, sending shivers racing through her body. Slowly he moved one finger into her channel, nearly shocked at how hot and tight she was. Reminding himself she was an innocent did no more than intensify the desire he felt. Carefully he inserted a second finger, expanding her even more, reading her body for his.

His experienced touch caused her to arch even further toward him, wanting to capture all there was of his touch, but not knowing exactly what she was doing as pure instinct took over.

Not able to take it any longer, Dartian removed his hand, positioning himself on top of her delicate body, spreading her legs to accommodate his large form. Inching his throbbing manhood to her moist entrance, Dartian nearly gasped at the feel of her beneath him. Everything felt so right, so perfect, that he never wanted the moment to end. He knew she was untouched and he braced himself for the moment of brief pain he knew she would feel. Capturing her gaze with his, he lowered his head to hers, his lips crushing against the softness of her lips, drinking in her scent as he plunged through the thin barrier of her innocence, silencing the moan that escaped her.

Stilling himself, he allowed her body to become

accustomed to his intrusion, enveloping his shaft in the warmth of her channel. Oh how he dreamed of this moment since he first saw her. He remembered how her beautiful green eyes had sparkled with defiance yet her body screamed to be held. Once he felt her body release some of its tension, he began to slowly move, breaking out a rhythm that was foreign to him.

Looking down into her passion filled face, he wanted nothing more than to love her forever, to see her smile each morning and make love to her each evening before they fell asleep in each others embrace. Oh how he hoped for that dream to come true, prayed that they made it through this quest to see that happy ending. Lowering his lips, he crushed against hers, sending everything he felt into his kiss, praying she could understand what he could not say in words.

Amazed at the feelings coursing through her body, Saleene could barely remember the taking of her innocence. All she recalled was Dartian's knowing gaze as he gently moved his hands across her body, building the already raging inferno inside her to higher degrees. The moment he had removed his cloths, her eyes unerringly found the very masculine part of him which she had found herself daydreaming about for the last few days.

Any questions she may have had were answered in that one moment of time. The man was definitely in proportion if not more so. How he had planned to place that in her was something she chose not to think about as his fingers and mouth had assaulted her senses. Without thought, she found her hips moving of their own accord, reaching desperately to take all he had to offer, not caring about anything else.

Next she knew, he was gently parting her legs and moving his hands across her sensitive skin. His eyes, his beautiful deep blue eyes, were looking at her and she felt utterly lost in their depths. There was so much passion and emotion swirling, pooling, until she thought they would surely run over, bathing her body completely. She wanted so much to be what he wanted, to listen to his dreams, his desires. Then his mouth was crushing hers, as his body plunged deep into hers once more. Her thoughts centered on the pure pleasure he was igniting.

The raging lust she felt as his body filled her, so that she swore she was no longer herself. The slow methodic rhythm he made chased any sane thoughts from her mind until she thought she would surely die from pleasure.

Her body began to rage and burn, catching on fire with every thrust, a slow sensual burning inside. Escalating with each stroke, colors began to break in her vision, a kaleidoscope of pure feeling mixed with fear. Her hips moved in time with his plunges, their bodies forming a unified soul so that she no longer knew where she began and he left off. Never had she felt so alive, so complete. A complete mystery to her up until now, she felt the tension inside her build, like an inferno being fed with the flames of desire.

Suddenly more colors even brighter and more intensely beautiful than before; began to swirl around them, encasing them in light. Amazed at how her body was reacting, she couldn't fathom sensations any stronger, but once again her body showed her differently. Each movement, each touch, caused more and more flames to lick across her skin until she thought she would surely die from the sensations he was igniting. They were climbing into the night sky, their bodies rippling with electricity as they peaked. Her body tightening so much around him that they both soared to the stars, to explode as one and fall together back to earth, breathing deeply in each others arms.

"Ah, Caru, Rwy'n dy garu di." She felt his arms tighten around her, his warmth seeping into her soul, comforting her as nothing else could. He moved his body slightly to allow her room to breath, though he was still within her, it caused small aftershocks to rock through her, sending flames shooting across her skin once more. He must have felt the same, as he began to nibble on her ear, sending even more waves of heat moving through her blood. Arching her back without thought, Dartian took full advantage and began to suckle her breast, causing a small moan to escape her throat. Once again he felt himself flare with desire, desire for this woman alone. He knew he would never get enough of her, not in all the long years to come.

Lifting himself up, he wrapped his arms around her,

pulling her up to face him. Looking at her, she had a dazed sexy glow shining in her eyes. Growling, he lifted her up, wrapping her legs around him, putting his hardened shaft just below her moist entrance. He watched as emotions slowly crossed her face. He could tell she was surprised that she was so ready for him when she had just soared to the stars a moment ago. A small gasp escaped her swollen lips at her body's reaction to him, a song of ecstasy whispered upon the wind.

And then, without warning, she lowered her head to his, devouring his lips with a hunger she didn't know she possessed. Ah, this was the passion he had sensed residing within her, a pool of ecstasy that rivaled his own.

Amazed at how ready she was for him, he was surprised once more when she began to move of her own accord; a tempo he began to match. Tightening her womanly muscles, causing him to harden more than he ever thought possible. Dartian thought he would lose his mind in the wealth of desire he was feeling. Friction building upon friction, heat flaring higher and higher, it was pure torture. There would never be a Dartian without Saleene, where one ended the other began, with no way to tell them from the other.

Their movement, a sensual dance of eroticism, blew his mind. He could hear screaming but was unsure if it was him, her or both of them as once again they reached the edge, exploding into the night sky. Sated they settled softly back to earth and the haven of each others arms.

After some time had passed, how much she did not know or care, Saleene rose her hand to Dartian's sleeping face. Oh, how right she had been to lose her innocence to this man.

"Dartian?" She asked quietly, wanting to assure herself that he was truly asleep. When no answer escaped his lips, she moved closer, whispering into his ear. "If I never say this again, thank you. Thank you for your kindness, your strength, and for showing me what being thoroughly loved could feel like. I will never thank the gods enough for allowing me to glimpse this, and if I never live to be loved again, I will bring the time we shared with me into the next life. Be safe from all harm Dartian, be safe to find love." She leaned up and lightly

brushed a kiss to his forehead. Moving quietly from the cave, her eyes misted as she left the one man her heart would forever belong to.

Chapter 23

Unbeknownst to her, Dartian had been awake, relaxing in the knowledge that he had finally found his true mate. He was so deep in thought; it had not registered at first what she was saying. When he felt her get up and leave, it began to sink in. She was thanking him, but saying goodbye. At first rage boiled through his veins, but then a small voice of reason hit him. *What had she said?*

'And if I never live to be loved again'. *My god, she believed she would never live to find love. She wasn't saying goodbye because she wanted to, but because she believed she would not be around to be loved.* In that moment of clarity, Dartian felt something he never imagined he would; a small tear caressed his cheek, flowing freely down to fall to the floor below.

Sighing, he knew in that moment that she loved him, for if she did not she would not have implied it in so many words. The fact that she refused to acknowledge it meant nothing, for her actions spoke more than her words did. She had given him far more than she knew, and with that they were bonded in his kind's way, as if they were married. The fact he had not informed her of this, was only because she had not given him the chance. Oh but he would remedy that quickly, for he refused to ever give her up, fate be damned.

Rising to his full length, Dartian re-clothed himself, thinking back over the time they had shared. It amazed him how much she had given him, believing as she did that her life would end soon. Shaking his head at the notion of her leaving this world, he resolved to make sure with every fiber of his being that it never would occur.

He loved her, which in itself was a miracle as far as he was concerned. When his kind searched for their true mate, they knew it would be forever. As they only loved

once, it was powerful and overwhelming and when they did commit it was for all time. Finding ones true mate was nearly impossible as most of his species was dying out, a rare disease plaguing their lines. So few women of his kind existed, and none had ever drawn his interest; which saddened his mother. But had they known that their true mate could be found elsewhere? The idea was so far fetched. But there was no doubt she was his soul mate, the one he would give his life for, and he would do everything he could to prove it to her.

Fully resolved to his mission, Dartian felt a renewed sense of calmness sweep through him, and he could have sworn he heard an old woman chuckling in his mind. Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs, he moved toward the door and out into the night in search of Saleene. He had a need to discuss with her their future together, even if it meant he would have to tie her to his side once more to do so.

Moving quickly through the forest, Saleene ran away from the cave, away from Dartian, and away from her heart. She was no fool. She knew she loved him, but with that came the knowledge that they could never be together. Oh, he would no doubt be wonderful to be with, of that she was sure, but he deserved more than she could offer. Her vow to her clan was more important than her life, she had accepted that. Quickly she ran through the thick brush of the forest, never once missing a beat, not once leaving any indication of her direction. She could sense that Dartian would follow, but she refused to allow him a chance to find her. She needed time to think, to sort out her feelings, before facing him again. Allowing her senses to fan out, she located exactly what she was looking for.

Turning her body, she moved in the direction of a sacred pool. She needed the seclusion of the pool and solitude it provided to replay the day's events. As she rounded the corner, she nearly tripped over a branch lying on the ground. How did you not see it lying there? Cursing herself for failing to notice such a small thing, Saleene moved her gaze around the area, searching for any source of danger. She knew she was alone. She also knew it was her raw emotions swamping her that was the

real issue. Perhaps a swim would help clear her mind of the jumble of emotions that overtook her thoughts.

Swimming to the middle of the healing water, she ducked her head, finally allowing all of her emotions to reign free. Happiness for finally finding out what love felt like, sadness knowing she could never feel it again, fear that she could not protect him, and rage at the gods for putting her on this quest, knowing full well she would find love but not be able to keep him. As she surfaced from the pool, water cascaded down her face as did her tears. She raised her face to the sky, crying out as her heart was torn in two.

“Why? Why did you bring him to me?” she heralded out into the night. “You knew he would be the one I would love, yet you knew we could not be together!”

Her heart broke at the knowledge that she could not spend eternity with him, but not being able to stay away was impossible. Looking around, she pulled her legs up to her chest, resting her chin on her knees. Tears streaming down her face, she buried her head in her hands, whispering.

“What have I done to deserve such torment? What have I done to cause such anger from the gods I’ve served all my life?”

Ah child, if love was so easy, it would not make it worth finding. The soft voice of the old woman caressed her mind, easing some of the despair she felt. Raising her head, Saleene turned around, searching out the old woman from the inn.

“Where are you?” *Where are you?* She cried. Holding her breath without realizing it, Saleene searched the mental paths surrounding her but found nothing.

Rest easy my child, I am always near you. Do not think that you are alone. We are never really alone. Her words, as before, helped calm the sadness building within, threatening to choke the very breath from her lungs. *I tried to tell you before, that you would find a strong man, but even I could not know he would be the one you were destined to love.*

Remembering her words, Saleene closed her eyes, fighting back a new onslaught of tears. *But why? Why do I care so much for him when we are not of the same race? I*

knew when I left my village that I would not be returning. The village elders advised me of this, as the nature of the quest would take me into the very bowels of hell. Yet now I want more than anything to live, even though I know I must fulfill my vow. Fresh tears began falling unchecked down her cheeks, as unbridled emotions seemed to burst from her very soul. As if understanding her sadness, a bolt of lightning coursed through the sky, lighting it up in a brilliant display of silver streaks, as thunder clapped in the distance.

Be still my child. Dry your tears so that nature can calm the rage it is feeling from your intense sadness. I know you do not understand why things have evolved as they have, but know there is always a reason behind all that happens. Believe me in this my child, and if ever you need me, I am but a thought away. Closing her eyes, Saleene felt the old woman's presence as if she was truly there, and once more her emotions calmed as did the storm brewing around her.

Keeping her eyes closed, she sent a prayer upon the wind thanking the old woman for her comfort, though deep inside she knew that the love she shared with Dartian would never evolve. *I love him, but love in this one instance will not be enough to keep me in this world when I face the evil my cousin has become.* Standing slowly she moved to the rock where her clothes rested and redressed quickly, sparing one last glance at the comforting pool.

Turning quickly on the ball of her feet, Saleene once more bolted through the forest, heading back to Nadrin's home and Dartian. She knew he would have questions in his eyes, with answers she could not provide. How she wished she could just disappear into the forest and become something other than what she was, something no one could find her in.

Suddenly an image seemed to form in her mind, so detailed she could have sworn it was in front of her. Sleek and agile, strength lined with a deep black fur. Curiosity bloomed in her stomach and she swore she felt a sharp prickly feeling course across her skin. Stopping for a moment to look around, she looked down at her arm, only to see long thick hair begin to break through her skin.

Puzzled, she reached her hand over to touch her arm, when an intense pain shot through her, dropping her to her knees, hands on the ground in front of her. Attempting to scream, nothing came out but a noise that reminded her of a wolf's howl, sending terror spiraling through her. Her mind raced to find out what was happening, but all she could see was a haze of red, gold and blue in front of her. It was as if all that was around her changed to be replaced by heat and cold.

Trying desperately to stand up, another jolt of pain rocked through her body as her joints contracted and claws burst from where her nails were. Her mind reeled from the onslaught of emotions and pain until she closed her eyes and embraced the pain as she knew that fighting it didn't seem to help. When it finally subsided and nothing more seemed to be happening, she finally opened her eyes. Gazing around her area, everything appeared to be as it was before only more vivid, as if a light had been switched on.

Curious, Saleene began to push herself up only to find she could not stand upright but instead found she was low to the ground and had paws where her hands and feet once were. Bewildered, she wondered if she were dreaming as there was no logical way this could be happening.

Moving as carefully as she could, she made her way back to the sacred pool, needing to see what had transpired. As she cleared the foliage, she moved her head close to the reflecting water below her, a scream caught in her throat. Staring back at her was a large black wolf with green eyes! *What? How?* So many questions and emotions ran through her mind she didn't know what to address first. Then a thought entered her mind, one she had not considered.

No one knew her in this form. She could run freely, using the abilities of the sacred beast to track poor Raku and Dena's hiding place. Not understanding why this was happening, she embraced it and ran. She ran until she couldn't run any further. Jumping from rock to rock, pouncing on the grasslands and splashing in the streams. Lifting her nose to the wind, she inhaled the scents it brought, and the scent she found was his. Dartian.

Emotions she had tried not to think about came crashing through her new form, more intense than ever. *How could he have found her?* Jumping into a nearby bush, she concealed herself in the dense foliage, watching for his approach. Holding her breath, she blinked, and he was there. Tall, strong, and lethally handsome, his chiseled face etched with worry. *Had she done that to him?* It pained her to know she might have caused him any form of sadness, but she knew their life together was not to be. But there he stood, not moving as if knowing she was near, though how he could was beyond her.

“Caru, I know you are here. You cannot hide from me, for I could find you no matter where the wind blew you. Do not run from me; do not hide from the one person who understands you more than anyone else in the world could.” His words so humble, so tender, caused her heart to turn over and melt. At that moment she knew he would never stop following her, but if he saw her in her present form, perhaps he would be scared enough to leave her alone.

Breathing in deeply, she loped out from her hiding place, landing directly in front of him. Lifting her head to look into his eyes, she braced for his horror as he saw her and the monster she had become. Willing him to look down, she did the one thing she could think of to get his attention. *I am here Dartian, look down and see what you hunt. See the monster I've become.*

As he turned his head to look down, his deep blue eyes met emerald green ones. His breath caught in his throat as realization hit. *Saleene! But how? She was in the form of the great wolf and a beautiful deep blue-black one at that!* So many questions swarmed through his mind, he could not keep track of them all. Then he saw something else, some untold emotion. *Sadness? But for what? Despair? Why?* Kneeling down, he reached out his hand, carefully caressing her fur, conveying his concern.

“Caru, how has this happened? Have you always been able to do this?”

Surprised at his lack of fear and un-seemingly easy acceptance of her transformation, she backed up against the tree, her eyes swirling with questions. *How is it you are not fearful of me? And I do not know how this*

happened only that it did all of a sudden. All of a sudden she was worried that he did not react as she had thought and was instead attempting to get closer to her, his hand never wanting to leave her fur. Confusion ran through her.

She looked at him with questions in her eyes; Dartian's heart broke as knowledge seeped into his mind. What had the old healer said when he had saved Saleene's life? Racking his brain, one phrase seemed to stand out above them all, 'I do not know what repercussions my healing will have on her, as her ways are not the same as ours.'

Reaching down to hold onto to her, Dartian only felt air as Saleene sprinted away into the shadows, her retreat making no sound on the ground. Lifting his hand to begin to undress, Dartian stopped as a figure emerged from the shadows, capturing his attention away from Saleene's fleeing figure.

"What do you want Zachius? I thought you were far from here after we last spoke." Annoyed that his friend was keeping him from following, he also knew that Zachius would never have come if it was not important.

Looking his friend over, Zachius couldn't help but want to smile at the situation Dartian found himself in. Instead he moved to the tree, leaning his large frame against it folding his arms across his broad chest.

"Dartian, you need to leave her be for now. There are things she needs to come to terms with. Things she does not understand. She needs to work them out for herself, not have you barreling down and crowding her with your emotions." His words said so matter of fact, that it shocked Dartian. Turning his head to look at his friend, he stopped abruptly, confused as to what to do next. Sighing, he shrugged and sat down on the rock near him, weary from the day's events.

"What is it Zachius? What is so important that you are keeping me from my woman?" Dartian hissed, annoyed that his friend had interrupted him when he needed to be with Saleene.

"Dartian, settle down and listen to me for a moment." Breathing in, Zachius began telling his friend how he happened upon Saleene bathing in the pool, and the tears

she had shed while crying out her anger at the gods. Rage began to brew in his stomach hearing that his friend had seen her with next to nothing on, but he calmed himself, awaiting the outcome of his friend's tale.

"I followed her silently, her thoughts so chaotic she never knew I was near. Then something strange occurred. I could sense she was deeply troubled, when suddenly she fell to the ground, as if pain rippled through her fragile body. I was about to go to her, when it happened." Stopping for a moment to allow his friend to digest what he had relayed so far, he could see the anguish in his friend's eyes, the need to protect his mate.

"Out with it."

"She changed Dartian. Deep black fur began to burst from her skin, covering her body as it contorted and from your woman sprung a wolf, just like what our people shift into. I was so much in awe I almost lost track of her." He then continued on telling him how he managed to follow her to make sure no harm would befall while she tried out her new form. He could tell she was confused at the transformation, but then he also noticed that she seemed to embrace the new freedom she found in the new guise.

"So you watched her, never once telling me what had happened? You let me follow and find her myself. Why?"

Why indeed. Zachius pondered the thought, but lazily shrugged his shoulders, knowing that there was no real reason for it.

"I knew you were following us, and as you seemed so centered on trailing her, you would not have listened to me no matter what I said." His words rang true in Dartian's ears, and he nodded acknowledging his friend's honesty. "Dartian, she does not know how this happened, as when she began to shape shift I could sense her terror and confusion. Allow her time to come to terms with this new persona she has, give her the space she needs to accept it as part of who she is now."

Sighing, Dartian knew his friend was right, but it galled him he hadn't realized it himself. "I know why she has changed Zachius, and I fear the truth might push her further away from me." He could see the questions burning in his friend's eyes, and resolved himself to the fact that she needed space. Dartian relaxed a bit more as

he explained what the old healer had told him so many days ago.

He told Zachius that some of their people's blood had been transfused into Saleene in an effort to keep her alive; the side effects it could have on her were unknown, but Nadrin had determined it was worth saving her life regardless. And consequences be damned Dartian would have done the same thing. Looking back at his quiet friend, he attempted to determine what path his thoughts had taken, when a knowing smile began to form on Zachius' face.

"Old friend, think you that I would condemn what has been done?" His smile growing as the possibilities emerged in his mind. "Do you not understand the full impact of this discovery? What it could mean to our kind?" His excitement overflowing into his movements, he stood up, pacing back and forth like a caged animal waiting to be let loose from its confines.

"Zachius, what exactly are you talking about?" He had an inkling of what ideas might be going through his friend's mind, but was fearful to go down that path himself.

"Oh do not tell me you haven't considered all the possibilities this opens up to us. You and I both knew that she was your destined mate, of that we agree. But the fact that she is now a shape shifter means even more. If she can change, then perhaps others of her kind might be a destined mate of other men of our people." So into his thoughts, Zachius never saw Dartian's fist coming, not until it connected hard with the edge of his chin, knocking him to the ground.

"What the hell was that for?" Still stunned that his Dartian had hit him, Zachius slowly moved a safe distance away from his childhood friend.

"Saleene's people are not our guinea pigs. The fact that she can shape shift has no bearing on the fact that she is indeed my true mate. That would have been the case regardless of the current situation." Rage filling his words, caused his friend to hold back any disagreement, knowing it was futile when Dartian was in this mood.

"Now, if by some miracle another of our kind meets up with one of her people and the connection is there,

then of course that would be wonderful, but we will in no way bring any of this to the attention of the council. They will either balk at the notion or upturn everything and make her people slaves to ours in the effort to save our race. I will not put her people through that.”

Knowing what Dartian said was true; Zachius nodded his head in agreement.

“I’m sorry Dartian, I had not thought about what the council might do in this instance. You are right of course; nothing should be said at this time. Though you must admit, the thought that perhaps the chance is out there, that our males might have a mate somewhere is very promising.” But he needed no answer from his friend, as they both knew that hope was the one thing keeping their race alive. Without a mate, the beast within clawed to get free, to run with the creatures of the forest and shed forever the human side. No, any hope, any glimmer of a chance, was worth more than gold.

“For now, let’s deal with what is happening to Saleene and worry about the rest later. I still think you need to give her time; she is stronger than you credit her for. She will find a way to co-exist with the changes, and when she’s ready she will return to the village. If there is anything I’ve learned about her, she will not leave a sick or injured person until they are fully healed. Now let us head back to Nadrin and wait for your woman to return.”

He knew Zachius spoke the truth, but he hated to admit it to him. Instead he turned on his heel and sprinted out into the forest and back to the village. So many thoughts, with so many emotions running through his mind, he wanted to roar out his frustration to the heavens. He needed to be with Saleene, to comfort her through the unknown, but he knew she needed space to understand what was happening to her. Blast the gods, and damn the circumstances which caused them to find each other when so much still needed to be done.

Faster and faster he ran as the wind whipped through his untamed hair, sending tendrils flying through the air like strands of silk. His mind reeling at the image of Saleene in wolf form continued to run through his thoughts. How beautiful she'd been. Saleene was sleek and sensual; radiating the exoticness of the creature. As

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he cleared the forest, he dashed toward the healer's home only to be stopped by Viktor, whose eyes took in the fact that Saleene was not with Dartian.

Chapter 24

“Dartian, I see you do not accompany the woman. Where is she at? I still need to speak further with her to appease the council.” He knew that the reasons Viktor had to see Saleene had nothing to do with the council and everything to do with some unseen obsession.

“Viktor, you have no need to speak with Saleene. You have already asked her questions, and both I and Nadrin have already told you she knows nothing of our special gifts.” Anger seethed just below the surface. Dartian stilled himself from allowing this man to see the annoyance he was feeling at his perusal of his woman. “I am telling you this much though, she is under my protection and the protection of my clan. Understand that before you come looking for her in the future.”

Not allowing Viktor time to rebut his claim, Dartian moved past him, continuing in the direction of Nadrin’s home. Opening the door, he stepped into the warmth and solitude, drinking in the aroma of burning candles. Looking in the direction of the table, he saw the old man sitting in his chair, eyes closed.

“Welcome back lad, it is good to see you’ve returned.” So he once again had not been sleeping. He should have known he would not get away without having to speak to Nadrin. Turning around, he saw a half-cocked smile cross the old man’s face, one he couldn’t help but return.

“Old man, you should know better than to fake sleep. Didn’t Saleene already chastise you for it before?” He couldn’t help but jest with the old fool. His father had died when he was but three summers old. He was raised by his mother until she died.

“Why are you still awake?”

“Just an old man wondering where the two love birds had taken off to. I can sense the change in you my lad. You’ve consummated your bond with our fair Saleene,

have you not? Though I sense something is troubling you, out with it lad or I'll be forced to confine you to your room."

Laughter bubbled out of Dartian's lips, filling the room with the masculine sound. How could one not laugh at the old fools antics? Moving across the room, Dartian pulled out the chair and placed it across from Nadrin, sitting down quietly, choosing his words carefully.

"Old one, remember what you said to me the night you saved Saleene's life?" He waited to hear if he remembered the conversation, hoping he would, so that he could understand the reason for his concern. Watching him closely, he was not disappointed when the old healer shook his head in acknowledgment.

"Aye my son, of course I remember. I told you that I did not know what effect saving her would have on her body, as our ways are not the same as her people. Come; tell me what has transpired so that we can prepare for anything that may ensue from the choices I made that night." Relieved that Nadrin was not upset, Dartian replayed the night's events in great detail, never once leaving out any bit of information, no matter how small or trivial. Of course he didn't divulge the passion they had shared, but he had a feeling the old fool had some idea of what had transpired between himself and Saleene. After finishing up his tale, Dartian slumped into the chair, his weariness showing on his face.

"Ah, I see. I had a feeling something like this might happen. It makes perfect sense now. I knew I sensed something about that girl; I just couldn't place it. Now you did mention something that I am curious about. You said she had a birth mark. What did the design look like?" His curiosity, apparent in the giddiness of his voice, caused another chuckle to burst from Dartian's throat surprising both of them.

As Dartian was about to open his mouth the door flew open and Zachius stalked into the room, his stride sure and straight. Dartian watched as he closed the door with the kick of his boot and headed right for him, a look of concern etched on his face.

"We have a problem Dartian." That was all said, as his eyes scanned the room for hidden enemies. Looking

around he did not stop, but headed over to the window, pulling the curtains closed to provide further privacy. Returning his gaze back to the two men, Zachius pulled out a chair and sat, his face conveying the magnitude of his news.

“What is the cause of this Zachius? You are never worried.” That in its self bothered Dartian, for he knew if his friend was troubled, then something was amiss, something that bore listening.

“Dartian, after you left the woods I remained to ensure that your woman did not return to the area. I was hidden by an overgrown log when I noticed that something else was in the area, cloaked by the darkness. As I remained silent, the form emerged from the shadows revealing Viktor. He knows Dartian. He knows Saleene can now shape shift.” His words registered like a blow to the head.

Dartian jumped from the chair and headed for the door. He knew he had to find Saleene and find her now. With Viktor knowing of her ability, he would pursue her tenfold. Heading for the door, he found himself facing Saleene, a single tear flowing down her beautiful face.

“It is ok Dartian, I am here and Viktor will not find me if I do not choose for him to.” Her words, so sad, so helpless, that he wanted nothing more but to whisk her into his embrace and take her far from harm. As if reading his thoughts, she merely lifted her hand and lightly caressed his cheek, sending warmth through his body, calming the beast raging to protect his mate.

“It will be fine Dartian, though I am tired and need to rest for awhile. Please wake me when we can attempt to visit the leader again, I have a few ideas I would like to check on.” With that she silently glided out of the room and vanished into her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

“What just happened?” Zachius inquired, confusion crossing his face.

“She knows doesn’t she?” The question flowed in the air between them. He looked at Nadrin, hoping the old man could help shed light on their situation. “I can sense a change in her, as if she has given up on something.”

The image of her at the door, her face overcome by

sadness broke his heart as nothing else could. He would move heaven and earth to make her smile, and he felt he might just have to do that in the end.

“She is a smart girl Dartian. Given time I feel she could figure out most anything. For now she is safe within my home, so let us not worry about her safety. Now, you were going to tell me about this birthmark she has. It may have some significance and may provide many answers.” He could tell by the tone of his voice, that there would be no deterring the old man from his inquiry.

“Well, there is not much to tell you old man. I only caught a glimpse of it, but it was a unique design and not sure if it was a birthmark or a design imprinted upon her skin when she was born.” There had been talk that some races would imprint designs of their people from birth to carry on the traditions throughout time, he wondered if this was such a case.

Shaking his head, he continued on. “From what I could see, it looked like an old oak tree with a wolf and raven’s shadow surrounding it. Unfortunately, I was unable to take a closer look at it, but at the time it did not seem to need further inspection.”

As he listened to what Dartian had to say, Nadrin’s eyes grew in understanding. He beamed a smile at Dartian, his old eyes full of understanding. Leaning back in his chair, Nadrin closed his eyes in reflection, his smile growing in magnitude as something Dartian had no way of understanding must have flared in his mind. Opening his eyes, something just out of reach seemed to be shining in their depths.

Impatience crossed Dartian’s face as he stood up and paced across the floor, heading right for Nadrin, wanting to shake him into telling him what he knew. Sensing the beast rising in Dartian, Nadrin lifted his hand and motioned Dartian back to his seat, a small gesture filled with authority he could not dismiss.

Dartian breathed in and out to center himself as he returned to his chair. Waiting patiently, Dartian struggled to control his annoyance at the delay, knowing that the old man was not trying to push the silence. As the stillness began to grow in magnitude, Dartian felt as if he would scream out into the night to break the eerie

quietness that encompassed the home. Looking up at his friend still sitting quietly in the corner, his composure flickered as the moments ticked on. He shot him a look that could only be construed as worry.

“My boys relax. If my memories are correct, the mark she has on her is something of a miracle. Let me double check something in the ancient texts, but I think she is part of an ancient race which we thought long gone from the world.” Rising, Nadrin made his way to his shelf of old texts and manuscripts, blowing the dust from one which appeared not to have been used in many years. He moved over to his table and laid the ancient book in the center, carefully opening the pages slowly as to not cause damage to the information the tome contained he began to read.

“What does it say?” Zachius’ voice held interest and Nadrin couldn’t help but smile.

“Long ago, after a fierce battle for leadership, two factions emerged within our people. There were those that wanted to fight to control all that is within the forest, to lead and manipulate the creatures of the woodlands. Then, there were those who felt that we had no right to try and control others; that the balance of nature would slide too far in one direction if we went that route. It is said that what ended up being our current line, was from the first faction, though after the years drew on we no longer tried to force control over the forest. The second group fled the lands when it was apparent that the leader at the time would not bend to their concerns.” Reading further into the texts, Nadrin’s brow raised, a twinkle appearing in his eyes.

“What is it old man? What happened to the second race and what does it have to do with the mark on Saleene?” He needed to know. Had to know. Dartian tried desperately to listen carefully and not seem impatient but he found himself wanting to pick up the texts himself and find the answers he sought. Restraining the desire to jump from his seat, he closed his eyes and thought of the fragile woman sleeping in the next room. Out of no where he felt her soft caress and the smell of jasmine and chamomile rise out of the air embracing him in her warmth. Returning his attention back to Nadrin, he willed him to continue on, the need to find out answers

the top of his priority.

“There is not much said about the second faction other than they left the confines of our people and roamed the lands for many years. There are hints here and there of gossip and tales being told that they eventually met up with another group of people. These people also revered nature and the desire for complete unity of all creatures of the lands. Those they met up with did not have the shape shifting ability, but used magick in their workings. It appears that they were welcomed into this race and eventually the two became one.” His brow furrowed as he continued to read, the words barely discernable through the ancient texts.

“From what I can tell, so to signify the combination of the two people, a spell was laid upon those of the town to mark the combination of their species. The spell caused a mark to be laid upon the females, to be passed down from generation to generation. No other information seems to be available as to the outcome of their merger.” A quick smirk crossed the old man’s face, his fingers still tapping on the old book. “You know what this is referring to, don’t you Dartian? The other race that our ancestors had merged with was the Ancients.”

“How could that be? I thought we had a war break out with the Ancients hundreds of years ago. Didn’t they say that their race was never seen again?” Try as he could to recall what the old lore had said about the war he could only remember bits and pieces. Shaking his head, Dartian looked to Nadrin and the answers he sought.

“All we knew is that the race vanished. It was said that mother earth pulled their village into the safety of a great mountain. If that is true, this was after the other part of our people had merged with theirs. The possibilities are astounding that this might be real, but if they are then Saleene is a direct descendant of that merger, which would explain the strange mark you found.” His head reeled at all the information and possibilities that this presented.

“How does this affect Saleene and the danger Viktor poses to her? He knows she can shape shift, once he figures out she is a direct descendant of the group who left...” His words trailing off as his mind shifted back to

Saleene and how much she meant to him. He had to find a way to keep her safe from Viktor, and make her understand that they were bound together for all eternity.

“Being that she is part of our race, even though in a round about manner, gives her some immunity to Viktor. However, this also causes a slight problem with her being under your protection. Because she is from our race, even deluded, it gives Viktor the right to claim her since she is now within the confines of our village. As you know if a woman is unclaimed of our race, the leader at the time has the right to claim her and no other can dispute that claim.”

“But she is claimed. I’ve claimed her. Besides, she is not of our people; she is a mixture of two. That should allow her to be immune to our laws in such matters.” Rage seethed just below the surface, began to find its way to his eyes, causing Nadrin to shift in his chair uneasily.

“We will figure this out Dartian. Don’t worry.”

“No, I will leave this evening; take her with me, never to be seen again. I will not allow him to exercise anything when it comes to her. I will kill him before I allow it.”

“Relax Dartian; I have no intention of allowing Viktor to get his hands on Saleene any more than you do. I am just preparing you for what will surely come next, now that he is aware of her connection to us. We must plan how we will deter him from laying claim to her.” The mischievous grin that crossed Nadrin’s face helped to ease the tension Dartian was feeling. With the three of them working to keep Viktor from Saleene, he had no doubt they would succeed. And if not, if Viktor truly pushed the issue, he would spirit Saleene far away from the village.

Chapter 25

Waking from her sleep, Saleene could have sworn she'd been dreaming a wonderful tale. One where she was able to move through the trees, jumping with agility and speed not known to her before, but one she embraced with all her heart. Slowly opening her eyes, she allowed the wind to bring her news of the day's events and any danger she needed to prepare for. Listening to the tales it told, she became instantly aware of the men outside and the quiet planning they were doing. She scanned the area and knew that something indeed had changed. The men huddled quietly in the common room, talking in whispers amongst themselves. *What could they be planning?*

Shifting her attention, Saleene sent out a whisper on the wind to her mother. *Mother? Are you awake?* Waiting for a few moments, she knew her mother would respond given time.

Aye daughter, I am here. What troubles you? Her mother could always tell when something was amiss. Nothing could be hidden, no matter how small. A quick breath in, Saleene replayed the last few days' events, leaving out no detail other than her time spent alone with Dartian. Those memories she kept safely hidden in a special place in her heart.

After a few moments of silence, she could hear her mothers soft sigh brushing her mind, filling her with love. *My daughter, I feared that someday this would happen. This is not a surprise, as you were always close to the creatures of the forest. It is said that some of our people posses the ability to change into an alter form, the wolf being one of them. We had no way to know which females this would be passed on down to, but it appears that you are one of the chosen. They told us that if you were born with the mark, you had a higher chance of being able to change into our other form.*

Something her mother was not saying bothered her. Thinking back, she could not recall seeing such a mark on most of their people. Even as children they were always curious about anything that seemed out of the norm. Suddenly she remembered where she had seen the same mark. Not in one place but two. Inside the cave she and Dartian had first stayed in before they had been ambushed. It was a primitive drawing, but the similarities were there. And the other. Oh, could it have affected her as well? *Mother, what of Kara? Does she retain this mark as well?* Fear welled up in her throat, threatening to choke the breath from her body. The wait for her mother's answer was a test in patience as it seemed to take forever for her to answer.

Aye my daughter, your sister also bares the same mark, though I know she has not yet shifted into anything yet. I have not told her the chance, as there is no guarantee that if born with the mark, one will have the ability. Her mother's reassurance did nothing to help ease the dark shadow crossing her soul. Something was wrong, but she did not know what it was. Sending her thanks to her mother, she quickly dressed and headed for the door and the answers she hoped to find from the men talking so quietly in the next room.

She entered the room without a sound and thought at first that her presence was not noticed. Crossing to the window, she began to move the curtain to allow the breeze to flow in, dispelling the tension that was so evident. Before she could move the curtain, Dartian's hand covered her hand bringing it to his lips. Gently he placed a kiss on the top of her hand, pulling her into his strong embrace.

How she savored the warmth of his body. She didn't even realize he was pulling her away from the window until she opened her eyes and found herself next to Nadrin. Looking up into Dartian's eyes, she sensed he had not slept for awhile as lines she'd not noticed before were etched across his handsome face.

"Tell me what has transpired that you three are conspiring while I slept? And do not try and tell me nothing, remember, I can read all of you like an open book." Her eyes blazed a challenge to them all. She knew the moment they conceded defeat when they all sat down

in their chairs, Dartian pulling Saleene into his lap. Placing his arms around her, as if knowing with his will alone he could tether her to his side, he nodded to Nadrin to go over what they had uncovered throughout the night.

“Well my child, it seems that after going over the ancient texts, it appears that your people are kin to ours, in a round about manner.” The confusion on her face prodded Nadrin to continue. After about an hour, he finally sat down, exhausted from retelling what they had found in the old books and the connection between the two races. The realization began to work its way through her mind, when the shadow that had crossed her soul earlier began to increase dramatically.

“Oh my God, my sister!” Attempting to remove herself from Dartian’s grip, she found she was no match for his strength, wriggling around without budging an ounce.

“Let me go! I have to leave; I have to warn my sister!” She nearly smashed him in the chest as she continued to try and push herself away. She found out all too well that he would not release his hold on her. Exhausted from battling him, she never noticed the tears streaming down her face.

“Saleene, what is it that has you worried for your sister? What trouble is she in?” His words a mere brush on her neck sent shivers shooting across her skin. Breathing in, she turned her head to face his, her eyes searching out the honesty she knew she would find. Reading his thoughts, she knew he was only trying to protect her and that he truly did not understand why she needed to find her sister.

“The mark you saw on me, the one you refer to from the old texts, is the same mark my sister has on her. If Viktor is aware of this, then how much time before they send someone out after others like me? My sister has no knowledge about the significance of this mark, or the possibility of what it could mean.” She needed them to understand, to know she had to find and warn her sister.

Dartian turned his head and caught the look on his friends face. He knew his friend was slowly losing the battle to remain human; knew that this quest would help keep him longer in their world.

“Zachius, I trust you with finding and keeping Saleene’s sister safe from harm. We do not know if Viktor is sending others out after her or others of their people, but we cannot chance it. Will you take this on for us? Will you help me in this endeavor?” The words, said formally, could never be turned down, even if one was so inclined to do so.

Raising his head, he bowed elegantly, his golden hair falling to slightly cover his face, his pure gold eyes shining with understanding.

“Consider your sister in my safe keeping Saleene. And know this, I will do all within my power to keep her safe from harm and will give my life for hers.” Not understanding the significance behind the words, Saleene nodded her appreciation that he would take on the venture of locating her sister. “Where was she last known to have headed?”

“The last I heard, she was sent to the lands to the north of my people, across the Baylo Sea. There was talk of an unknown illness sweeping through the towns there and undead creatures attacking villagers. Since she is also trained in the healing arts, she was sent out to see if she could determine the cause and find a cure. No one has heard from her for a full moon’s cycle. If she is anywhere, it would be in that area. Look for her, find her for me please.” The sadness in her voice caused Dartian’s heart to melt. He wanted nothing more than to take her away from all the pain and make her smile till the end of days.

“I promise to find your sister for you. Undead or not, they will find themselves at the end of my blade.”

“Zachius, when you find her, tell Kara I love her.”

Zachius stopped in his tracks, a shock resounding through his body. Kara? He had dreamt of a woman with that name. What had the dream been about? Why couldn’t he remember? Returning his golden gaze back to Saleene, his eyes questioning, he inquired.

“Saleene, so I might know what to look for. What does your sister look like? Does she look like you?”

“No, I fear she does not. We have the same mother but my father died before I was born and my mother found a new husband. Kara is a little shorter than I am. Her hair is a deep red, like a flame burning bright, and

her eyes a deep blue.” Though he heard the description it did not register. At least, not at first. Once it did the vision of his dream came back to haunt him.

Completely amazed, the description Saleene had given and the woman from his dream, they could have been twins. Raising his head, he knew this was what his path would be. To find and protect this woman. Standing slowly, Zachius reached for his pack. He turned to face his friends, to memorize their faces in case he should never return.

“I will leave at once and head to the Baylo Sea. I will find Kara; you have my word on this.” Without saying goodbye, he was gone, his scent still lingering on the wind. Looking back at Dartian, she could sense the sadness in him at losing his friend, but he said nothing, his eyes warm and comforting as they moved over her. Doing the only thing she could think of, Saleene moved closer her lips lightly touching his cheek.

“He will be fine Dartian. I think it will be as good for him as it will be for my sister. Though I fear she is a bit of a spit fire should he try to impose his will on her. You think I’m bad at listening, she is far worse.” The teasing note in her voice helped to relax the tight knot that had been forming in his stomach.

Leaning back into Dartian’s strong embrace, Saleene closed her eyes, weariness and concern moving through her soul. And then he was there, lightly caressing the nape of her neck, soothing the tight muscles with the gentleness that bordered on driving her insane. With ease, he lifted her up into his arms and walked her back into her room, placing her carefully on the bed. Looking up into his handsome face, she found sadness and an emotion she dared not think on. With all that had happened she could not hope for love. Yet, there was no denying all that he had done thus far to aide her, to calm any fears she might have and to protect her from anything that might harm her.

“Dartian...” She began, but no further words would be allowed as his mouth descended onto hers, crushing them with the demand of a man needing to be with his woman. All at once the world began to spin and fade away till it was just the two of them. She sensed urgency in his

kiss, a need to make sure she was truly there. She allowed her senses to seek out his mind and what she found humbled her as nothing else could. He loved her. When this had happened she was unsure, but he loved her unconditionally, knowing even now what she could do.

Understanding that fate could rip them apart at any moment, he wanted nothing more but to be with her. This realization made her heart turn over and melt, and a little part deep within her soul cried out to love this man as she was meant to. As if reading her mind, Dartian gently lifted her chin, staring deep into her eyes until she felt as if she would be lost forever in their depths.

“Caru, I need you. I love you. I don’t care of our differences or the time we may or may not have left together. Oh hell, I am not good at pretty words, but know that I will cherish and protect you as long as there is breath within my body.” His words, so honest, so true, caused her eyes to mist with emotions she never thought she would feel. In that single moment of clarity she knew, she loved her warrior; she loved him with a fierce need that caused her knees to feel weak and her heart to hammer out a rhythm that drove the breath to catch in her throat. Slowly she raised her hand to his cheek, gently caressing his skin, wanting to memorize this moment for the rest of her life.

“Dartian, I...” but the words would not come out. She never said how she felt. Instead she pulled him closer and put all her feelings, all her dreams into a kiss that made his knees buckle and his heart beat wildly.

The simple act brought the beast within him to life, roaring to be at one with his mate. He moved his lips from hers and began to trail gentle kisses down her throat and across her chest. His hands quickly pulled down her dress, leaving her open to his inspection. Returning his gaze to her beautiful green eyes, he nearly melted at the passion that burned in their depths. Oh but the woman was wanton when she wanted to be. As he stood up to remove his clothing, he felt her hands stopping him.

“No...It is my turn to inspect you. You’ve had your time, now it’s mine.” Her words, laced with stark desire, caused his manhood to grow even further, till his clothes became very bothersome. Looking down, he gasped as she

began a slow removal of his shirt, unbuttoning each one with a laziness meant to drive any man insane. As she came to the last button, she moved her delicate hands inside and rested them on his chest, the heat burning him to his very soul. Pushing up, she discarded the soft fabric to a pile on the floor. But oh, the little minx was still not done.

Her next form of torture was almost his undoing. She moved around him, her body lightly touching his, sending little sparks of lightning coursing through his blood. Then she was there, in front of him, her hands expertly removing his breeches, till he stood there in front of her in all his glory.

A small gasp escaped her throat at the sight of him. Oh but he was a glorious sight, something she would never deny herself again. She moved her hands across his stomach. She could feel him tense with passion barely bridled. Gently, she moved her hands across his stomach and down to the one thing that definitely held her attention. Raw male was the best word to describe him. She would never get enough of him, she knew this. With almost a reverence in her touch, she moved her fingers across the tip, sending small flames licking across his skin. So innocent in her actions, yet naturally sensual, he found he could take no more.

Pulling her into his embrace, he began moving his hands across her hips, down to her thigh and into the dark crevice of her womanhood. Instantly her legs buckled, as the earth shifted beneath them and everything began spinning in a whirl of emotions and pure feeling. He lifted her up into his arms and moved back to the bed, placing her on the soft mattress. And then the assault on her senses commenced with him lightly kissing her waist, while his fingers created uncontrollable heat inside her. Slowly he moved his lips down across her stomach and down to her thigh, each kiss a trail of fire across her skin.

Moving with great care, he positioned himself on top of her, his thick shaft pulsing at her entrance. Moving her hips to meet up and take him into the haven of her body, she felt him hold her still, begging her to look him in the eyes. "Dartian!" Her breath came in needy gasps.

“Caru, look at me.” As she opened her eyes, she stared into the deep blue depths of his, searching for what he wanted. Needing to give him whatever he desired. “I love you. You are mine and never will be anyone else’s. Know this as we become one.”

Before she could mutter another word he thrust inward, pushing himself up until he was touching her womb. She was lost as her world began to spin uncontrollably with the raw feeling of him moving inside her. Oh, he need not say the words, as she knew there would be no other for her. She would never be able to love another man, not after being so thoroughly loved by him. No, he had branded her the other night and she would forever be lost to his passion.

Moving her hips to meet with his, nothing else seemed to matter. His lips moved from hers, and trailed down to catch a rosy bud of her breast, sucking and lapping at the sensitized skin. The action ignited a fire in her belly at the sensation it caused. Moving at a more frantic beat, she felt a building up of tension until she felt she was being pushed up to the stars, reaching for that single moment of climax. Seconds passed as the friction increased pushing them closer to the stars, her small gasp sending both of them over the edge, his mouth covering hers, muffling their screams of desire. And then they were both floating back to earth, gasping as little aftershocks rocked through their bodies, their hearts beating in unison.

After a few moments, Saleene stirred. Though her body was sore from the heated love they had made, she reveled in the thought that this man loved her unconditionally. She raised her head and looked at him, his eyes closed as if slumbering. Breathing in slowly, she laid her head on his chest, just above his heart.

“Dartian, I am sorry for any doubt I may have had about you. If things should go wrong, and one of us does not survive the upcoming battle, know that I love you too.”

And there it was. She had said it and meant it with every ounce of her being. Whatever happened from there on out, fates be damned, she had loved wholly, unconditionally and fully. She would never regret her

decision, nor forget the man who had shown her what love really was. She could die tomorrow and she would be happy as she had been thoroughly loved by her warrior.

Moving his hand to cup her face, he gently turned her to look into his eyes. Emotions bursting from the deep blue pools within, he wanted nothing more but to drown in the emerald green eyes staring back.

“Ah Caru, I have waited what seems like years to hear you say that. You will never regret your decision to give me your heart, as you’ve had mine since we first met.” Then his lips were upon hers once more, branding her very soul as his. His hands began to move once more across her body, making sure she was still ready for him as he pushed into her moist entrance.

“We cannot again. I will not be able to walk if we do.” Yet she knew she would give into him whenever and wherever he wanted. And she did, again and again for the rest of the night. They explored every crevice, every thought, every desire they had until they both fell asleep, fully sated in each others arms.

Chapter 26

Saleene. Where are you? Saleene, I need your help. Waking up drowsy from their lovemaking, Saleene shook her head to clear the cobwebs, her mind still reeling from the passion they'd shared. *Saleene, I'm in trouble and need your help!* Kara? It couldn't be. She had been trying for days to reach her sister, but never got a response. Closing her eyes, she listened intently, trying desperately to pin-point the voice.

Why won't you come help me? It was Kara! Moving slowly out of Dartian's embrace, she put her dress back on. She raced through the door into the common room and out into the early morning light. Saleene scanned the area, frantic to locate her sister. Following the sound of the voice, she made her way into the woods, her feet lightly touching the ground.

"Kara? Where are you?" Her inner warning system seemed to beat out an erratic rhythm, advising her something was amiss. As she turned the corner, she saw her sister, tied to a log, her eyes pleading for help. A scream caught in her throat, as she rushed to her sister's side, only to find nothing there. Confused she turned slowly only to find herself face to face with Viktor, his smile cruel and vicious.

"I told you I would get you alone my dear. Mortals are so easy to manipulate when their loved ones are in peril." Attempting to move out of his range, Saleene backed up and tried to dart around him back toward Nadrin's home. Suddenly she was yanked back as his hand gripped her hair, the pain piercing into her skull. Pulled into his embrace, she heard him speak words in a language she did not understand. Suddenly her legs felt rubbery, as if a veil was being placed over her mind, clouding her vision.

Dartian! I'm sorry my love, I fell into his trap. Forgive

me. Darkness engulfing her, her last conscious thoughts was of her sister and the only man she had ever loved.

Stirred from his deep sleep, Dartian turned to find Saleene gone. As he began to rise, he heard her scream echo in his head, and then a void of black intruded into his heart. Jumping from the bed, he dressed like a man possessed, anger boiling through his veins. He could not sense her, could not feel her presence, yet he knew she was not near. He knew she was not dead, but something had definitely severed their connection. Moving toward the door, he heard Nadrin moving frantically around the common room, as if searching for something.

“She’s been taken. I felt a disturbance in the air, but could not find her in time.” Dartian could tell the old man was berating himself for not acting sooner. He gently placed a hand on the old man’s shoulder, letting him know he could not be held accountable for Saleene’s abduction. They both had been sound asleep, and when Saleene put her mind to go do something, nothing and no one could stop her. No, whatever had pulled her out of the confines of the healer’s home had to have been important; otherwise she would not have gone alone.

“It is not your fault old one. If either of us is to blame it would be me. I slept so soundly that I did not hear her leave. We will find her and put an end to this once and for all.” The resolve in his voice commanded belief, allowed nothing less than what he wanted to be done. Gathering his sword, he once more geared himself up for battle, though he knew this battle might take him straight into the gates of hell.

None of that mattered, the only thing that did was finding Saleene and removing any threat to her and finally vanquishing the evil that threatened their very existence.

As they moved toward the door, a foul odor permeated the room beckoning death and destruction with it. Looking back toward the hearth of the fireplace, two blood red eyes appeared out of the soot and smoke, forming into a ghoulish figure. Shadows embraced the creature giving the illusion of something not quite there. Its eyes searched the room and came to rest on Dartian, hate shining in the deep red depths.

“You will not rescue her. She is no longer yours. Go back to your lands, or die a slow and painful death.” As suddenly as it had appeared it was gone, the noxious smoke filling the room, creating a feeling of despair in its wake as vile laughter resounded in the room.

Shaking his head to clear out the web of despair that threatened to engulf him, he grabbed Nadrin and pushed him outside the house and into the cool morning air.

“Do not allow that monstrosity to deter you old one. It is not of our world and but tries to confuse us, to keep us from finding and rescuing Saleene.” They continued farther into the village. Something seemed off, as if a blanket of darkness had descended upon the village. No sound could be heard, no animals moving about. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the concern etched across the old healer’s face. Something had definitely transpired, but for some reason they had not been afflicted by it.

“It was Saleene’s protection spell. It kept whatever has silenced the village from affecting us. Your woman is a strong one; do not give up hope of finding her.”

“Do you know where Viktor might have taken her? Did she ever say anything about her dream?” Hoping that something could be used to pin-point a direction, he was surprised when a smile crossed Dartian’s face.

“Now that you mention it, she did talk of a cave from when her cousin pulled her while she slept. She said the cave seemed to be close to a body of water and felt as if it actually went under the water at some point. She said it seemed very old, with many paths that lead deeper into the caverns.” Dartian continued to describe some of the formations of the cave and Nadrin thought back to their lands and what he knew of them. There were many different caves scattered all over, but none that were near water. But as he was about to mention this to Dartian a memory from long ago broke through his thoughts. A cave he had happened upon as a child, overgrown with vines and roots that he dared not enter. But it was near water. Could it be the same? It was a long shot but was definitely worth trying.

“Aye I know of such a cave, but I have never been inside it to know for sure. It is half a day’s travel from here but if we leave now we should arrive before night

fall." Not waiting for another word, Dartian allowed the old man to lead and they headed in the direction of the cave and hopefully Saleene. Time seemed nothing compared to the agony of not knowing. As they made their way into the forest, they could sense an evil presence trying to deter them from their path. One faltered step could mean their undoing. Stopping for a moment, Dartian motioned to Nadrin to clear any thoughts out of his head but one single thing. It seemed so simple, but he knew it would have to work.

"Old man, think of the water that flows from the stream into the sea. The purity of it and the simplicity it represents." He hoped this would confuse whatever was attempting to stop them, so that it would not see their intentions as it passed across their minds.

Sure enough the heaviness of the shadows crossing the forest seemed to let up, fooled for the moment by their cloaked thoughts. Allowing his breath to resume normally, they once more moved quietly through the forest, continuing in the direction of the cave Nadrin had mentioned.

As they drew closer the air, began to thicken with a heaviness that foretold of death to any who ventured too close. Dartian motioned to Nadrin, conveying the need to remain as quiet as possible. He knew that even though they had made it this far, there would be traps littered across the area, waiting to kill any wanderer into the area.

"Is there a way to show what traps may lay in wait old one?" He kept his voice low so that only Nadrin could hear his inquiry. Nodding his head, he reached into his bag and withdrew some Damiana. Chanting something Dartian could not understand, the herb began to billow into a yellowish smoke. The smoke moved across the entrance area to the cave and back into the darkened caverns, showing the hidden pitfalls and traps set to kill any who would venture too close.

"Old one, you never cease to amaze me. Now I need to ask you a favor, one that you will not agree with. I must ask that you stay here, where I know you will be safe. Also, in case I do not return, you must destroy this cave so that whatever evil is inside cannot escape. Afterward, I

need you to get word to my father of what has transpired so that he can meet with the council members to decide what needs to be done next.”

His words said formally, were full of sadness of the burden he was placing on the old man, but he knew that the chances of him returning were slim and he needed assurance that if he did not find Saleene and he lost the battle that the evil inside would not spread further across the land.

“I will not fail you Dartian, you have my word on that. But you must believe that you will survive this trial, otherwise you’ve lost half the battle. If you believe in nothing else, believe in the love you and Saleene share to get you through this.” His words struck a cord in his mind at something Saleene had said, something she had muttered when she thought he was asleep. She knew a battle was coming, and that she might not survive. She was trying to save him and sacrifice herself. Oh, that was not going to happen. Not now, when he’d finally gotten her to admit she loved him.

Resolved once more, Dartian turned his back on Nadrin and stalked proudly into the cave. All warrior and one hundred percent pissed off male in love, he was not going to let anything deter him from finding Saleene. No, they definitely picked the wrong man to test and they would soon find out just how deadly he could be.

Rousing from the blackness of unconsciousness, Saleene slowly opened her eyes; her vision cloudy from the spell that had been woven around her. As she tried to raise her hand, she found her limbs felt like dead weights, their agility and strength gone. *What had happened?* Trying to force her mind to remember, all she could recall was a black haze followed by a sudden sense of dread. Her head reeling from intense pain, she began to breathe in slowly, centering herself. She had been caught; they had used the memory of her sister she loved to entice her out of the safety of Nadrin’s home. How stupid could she have been? Sighing, she opened her eyes once more only to find Dena staring back, hate shining in her eyes.

“My dear cousin, it’s so good you’ve awoken. I feared I would have to kill your friend without you seeing his body go limp as his life force was stripped from him.” Her

laugh, laced with a vileness she could not comprehend, chilled her to the bone. How sad it was that her cousin had chosen this path, a path where she would lose her soul to evil, only to be discarded once she fulfilled any need it had for her.

“Dena, can you not see that you are being used? Do you really think that whatever it is that you’ve unleashed will not devour your soul?” She knew her words would fall on deaf ears, but continued in hopes of buying time.

Time for Dartian to hopefully find her and time to keep Raku from dying at Dena’s hands and the horrid death she would give him.

“What exactly do you think you are going to accomplish doing any of this?” She moved her hands to indicate the musty cave and darkness that surrounded them. Had she fallen so far and become so warped by the depravity of the monster she had unleashed that she could not see what was to become of her?

“Oh, your friend shall die slowly, with excruciating pain all the way up until he utters his last breath. And I will enjoy every moment of pain you feel as his life blood flows from his veins. You will watch as his soul becomes part of my master’s, to help strengthen him even more.” Her eyes, warped beyond recognition, Saleene knew at that moment that she was lost, that her soul was no longer able to be saved. A single tear flowed down her cheek, signifying the loss of her cousin and the realization that what stood before her was nothing but a shell of what used to be part of her family.

“Why him? Why bother harming him at all? Just kill me instead; I know you would enjoy that more anyway.” Perhaps if she could get her cousin to at least release Raku, her falling into the trap would not have been for nothing. “He is no good to you; you don’t even know him.” She hoped her voice held more conviction than she felt, hope blossomed for a moment as she watched Dena mull over the idea a few times.

“Because he is needed to help fulfill the prophecy, and I need you for something much more entertaining.” The voice was so masculine, so haunting, that she swore she must be hallucinating. Turning her head to the direction of the voice, her mouth dropped open as Viktor

shimmered into view. Yet, something seemed a bit off with his movements, as if they flowed with no rhythm, an illusion meant to confuse and disorient. "Who are you? I know you are not Viktor, but yet you continue with this facade. Why? Why not come clean and dispense with the petty games." Though she was terrified, she would prefer to see exactly what she was dealing with, instead of this fake face he presented.

"Very well my dear, if that is what you wish, I will humbly comply." He walked closer to her and she could see little ripples move across his skin, as if water covered his form, transforming him into the face he had worn. Then someone she had never seen emerged from the vision, someone who terrified her much more. He had the facial features of a warrior, someone who seemed to resemble Dartian's people, yet there was hardness to him that told of battles fought. "Is this more to your liking my dear? I do hope it is easy on your eyes."

"Who are you?" Was all she could muster, as she felt the heaviness of the air in the room increase as he drew closer to her side. "What are you going to do and what prophecy are you speaking of?" Tried as she could, she could not keep standing, her limbs growing weaker by the moment. Then he was next to her, pulling her into his arms, his mouth inches from hers. Moving slowly he brought his mouth to her ear and whispered words that would burn forever in her soul.

"My name is Jocabe. The prophecy is as such. My god has needed a sacrifice. One from the clan Ravenclaw, of which, Raku is highly ranked within. By his death, my master shall live once more, ravaging the lands as he sees fit." She continued to struggle but she could not get him to release his hold on her. The more she moved the tighter his hold seemed to get, until she thought she would pass out from loss of air.

"And my cousin is helping you? Why? What is she getting out of this?" She couldn't believe her cousin had fallen so far as to let lose an evil which would destroy everything. It just didn't seem plausible.

"Oh, your cousin believes she will serve at my side, but she is mistaken. You see, I require something a bit more, feral so to speak. And you my dear Saleene fit that

mold perfectly. Initially, I figured you would be a nice diversion, but nothing more. Then that night in the woods, when you inadvertently shifted into your wolf form, I knew I had found my queen.” Her skin crawled at what he was saying. Oh there was no way she would do anything with him, she would kill herself first.

“Never” was all she could muster, her head spinning from all the information and perversion he had imparted to her. “I will die first, of that you can rest assured.”

“Oh, I do not see that happening. You see, if you do not commit to being my queen, I will take great pleasure in not only making your cousin suffer, but your entire clan, as well as your beloved Dartian and Nadrin. Their deaths will be told for centuries upon centuries for all the pain they will go through before death finally overcomes them.” Fear pounded in her heart, fear for those she loved.

“You wouldn’t.” But she knew he would, she could read it in his eyes. She would have no choice but to submit to whatever he asked, if only to save those she loved so much. She would find a way to sacrifice herself if necessary, but not until she could ensure their safety. Bowing her head, her heart broke at the thought of never being in Dartian’s arms, holding and loving him as she wanted. No, she would end her days with the monster before her, giving him her body, but never her love, never her soul.

“I see you’ve come to terms with your destiny my dear. That is a start, but I will require so much more from you before the night is through.” What he could mean by that Saleene couldn’t fathom, nor was she sure she even wanted to. “For now, have a seat, for the fun will begin momentarily.” He began to release her when she looked up to find him staring intently into her eyes, his black soulless ones promising untold nightmares. And then he pressed his lips to hers, a savage assault leaving her dazed and nauseous. His sudden release made her knees buckle, slamming her back onto the ground.

As she rested her head back against the cool wall of the cavern, Saleene could have sworn she could feel Dartian’s presence somewhere nearby. Afraid she was being tested, she cleared her thoughts, making her mind

go blank. She concentrated on a pure bright white light. How could things have gotten so out of hand? Opening her eyes once more, she watched as Jocabe and Dena moved about the cavern, lighting candles to illuminate the area with an eerie glow.

Watching intently, it appeared as if they were preparing the area for some sort of ritual. The thought of what they planned to do to Raku terrified her, leaving her stomach reeling at the mere thought of his impending death. Searching around, she saw his body slumped back in the far corner of the cave, bruises littering his body.

Swearing under her breath, she tried desperately to find a way to get him out of the cave and into safety. But how? She was just as immobile as he was and there was no reasoning with her cousin. As much as she tried she couldn't come up with a good enough plan to free Raku from his captors. Her only hope was that Dartian could find them in time to save his life. She wanted so much to live for their love; she refused to become a slave to Jocabe. No, her life was as they had predicted; it would end saving all their people.

Chapter 27

Closing her eyes, she knew not how much time had elapsed, only that her body began to ache at her lack of movement. After awhile she heard chanting coming from the far end of the cave, the sound reverberating in the high ceilings of the caverns. She opened her eyes, moving them to the direction the sounds were coming from. To her horror she saw Dena dancing around the stone slab with Raku bound on the top of it. Her cousin appeared to be decorated in nothing but odd designs, her hair flying wildly as she moved to an erratic beat. They must be starting the ritual; her heart sank at the thought of what would be happening to Raku.

Pooling as much strength as she could, Saleene forced herself to stand, only to find herself falling back to the ground, her strength sapped by something invisible. There had to be a way to combat the fatigue of the spell he had woven. Every spell had a reversal; the trick was just finding the right pattern to use to undo whatever had been spun.

“Think Saleene, think dammit.” She cursed under her breath, her need to get out of there foremost on her mind. An idea began pooling in her mind, fed by her need to protect those she cared about. Perhaps the spell only had the effect on humans. What harm could it do to try? Closing her eyes, she reached for that part of her she did not fully understand, a part that she intended to fully embrace. Intense pain began to course through her body as she allowed the beast to take over.

Falling flat onto her stomach, her arms stretched out in front of her. She could feel her body begin to contort into the shape of the wolf once more. A deep blue-black fur, supple and full, pushed through her skin, till nothing of her human side remained. Raising her head, she allowed all the information of the cave to flood through

her senses. Aye, she was right, the spell held no effect on the forest creatures.

Lifting her nose into the wind, she breathed in the scent of her enemy, vowing to send them back to the underworld. She ventured into the shadows, her eyes unerringly founding her cousin. The contempt she felt for all she had done crashed through her mind, filling her with anger. Though she wished otherwise, she knew the only path for her would be death. With that bit of knowledge, she leapt into the air, knocking Dena to the ground.

A low growl caught in Saleene's throat as she held Dena to the floor. Anger pulsed in her blood at the perversion her cousin had become. Her anger increased hazing her with the need to kill. She found herself ready to sink her sharp teeth into her cousin's neck, ending her life completely. A split second before she sank her teeth into Dena's neck, she heard Raku stir, his gasp of shock jarring her from her red killing fury. Shaking her head, she returned her stare back to her cousin, who remained motionless, her breath ragged. Sniffing, she concluded that the force of knocking her down had also rendered her unconscious. Good, she would deal with her later.

Returning her gaze to Raku, she noticed Jocabe standing near him, a knife placed too close to Raku's neck for her liking. Growling out her disdain for him, Jocabe did nothing more but burst out into a horrid laugh, sending shivers of dread coursing through her veins. Why was he not standing in fear of her in this form?

"Because my dear, you did exactly what I hoped you would do. You see, I need you in that form for the ritual. The idiot did not know about the ritual and neither did you." His laughter continued to cause her fur to prickle and nausea to course through her body.

"No." Denial laced her words. Attempting to make a mad dash for the corner, Saleene tried to change back into her human shape, desperate to distance herself from this madman. Instead she found herself stuck, chains wrapped securely around her paws. Try as she might, she couldn't gain her freedom from the binds that held her. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on regaining her human form, to keep Jocabe from doing what he had already promised.

But no matter how hard she tried, she could not transform back. What was the problem? Did she do something wrong? Was there something that triggered it? Confusion burned in her chest as she looked around the room, trying desperately to locate Jocabe.

And then he was there, next to her. “Ah dear Saleene, you see, knowing you would change into the wolf was easy. Making sure you did not change back until I was ready for you, was a bit more difficult. In order to keep you from shape shifting back, I needed a few minutes to chant a specific spell. The only way to keep your attention long enough was to build your hatred for your cousin deep in your mind.” His breath so close to her ear that it brushed her fur like a small caress, sent her stomach rolling at the close proximity of his evil.

Turning her head, she hoped he was close enough for her to bite, but alas he knew her mind and was too far away to attack. “No, I don’t think so. I will however be happy to oblige in consummating our bond later. I like a bit of roughness. Raku can wait a few, as I indulge in the pleasure of watching you squirm.”

She watched in horror as Jocabe shape shifted. He began by falling to his knees, his hands contorting and snapping as his limbs took on the form of another creature. Deep black fur began to spring from his skin, covering his body in sheens of blue and black. Where Jocabe had once stood was now a monstrous black wolf, its eyes shining a deep red. Desire and something else she dare not wonder swirled in their depths. The magnitude of what he was about to do, sent her into a thunderous fury. How dare he try this!

“God no!” Her brain screamed out in terror.

Her anger so strong, she could have sworn she heard herself roar louder than anything she could have mustered before. But the roar she heard could not be her own, as it was more masculine, more something else. Her thoughts trailed off as she turned and saw a huge black wolf lunge into the air attacking Jocabe.

Dartian! He had found her after all. Relief swept through her, causing a calmness to replace the fear that had been eating away at her composure. The sudden moment of calm seemed to counter any spell Jocabe had

woven upon her, knowing that while she was in the wolf form anger would be present. Quickly she allowed her body to reform back into her human body, her hands and feet were freed once more. Steadying herself, she turned to see the two males pacing each other, their eyes searching for weakness, closely testing the resolve of the other.

“Oh God no. Dartian, be careful.” Her voice came out as a mere whisper, her words lost in the growl of the two males.

At once the battle began, teeth biting, claws digging into the others fur. The sounds made her stomach turn over in agony, knowing that Dartian would fight to the death before allowing Jocabe to retreat into the shadows. She quickly redressed, closing her mind to the ensuing battle.

She moved to Raku and his badly bruised body. As she made her way up to the stone slab she prayed he was still alive, but fearful he may not be. Looking down she wanted to weep at the abuse he must have endured at the hands of her mad cousin.

“I’m so sorry Raku.” Moving closer, she reached down to remove the rope that bound his hands together when she heard a hiss from behind her.

Turning abruptly, she darted out of the way of her cousin seconds before her knife could connect. Dena tripped over the slab and landed on the ground with a thud, her breath knocked from her lungs. Saleene watched as her cousin regained her balance and stood up, her hate-filled eyes boring into Saleene’s compassionate ones.

“Dena, you cannot win this. Do you not understand that now?” Her heart broke for her cousin, but her mind knew the abomination that stood before her could not leave the cave. Ready herself, she knew her cousin would come after her. She stepped back a foot or two, her hands at her side as if overcome by the magnitude of it all. Saleene knew her cousin would think she was giving in to her overwhelming sadness.

“Tsk tsk Saleene, you think you can best me? I shall take Jocabe for my own, you don’t deserve him. But I will enjoy watching you die by my hands. You who the elders

avored time and time again, you could do no wrong in their eyes? But I will make you beg, beg for your life before I end it.” Her voice resounded in Saleene’s ears.

“You’re so lost Dena. I feel sorry for you.”

“You took what should have been mine and thought to do so again. You will die now!” Hate, rage and loathing coursed through her blood as Dena launched into the air.

At the very last moment, Saleene moved in the fluid grace of her ancestors, spinning on the ball of her heels, kneeling in a form of reverence as she unsheathed the blade from her back. With one swift movement she struck up and into the chest of her cousin, connecting with ease into her heart.

Pushing the blade further in, she felt the give of skin as it came through the shirt on Dena’s back. Dena’s limp body fell to the ground as her blood flowed out of the wound to the ground. Sorrow moved through her as tears began to fall down Saleene’s face, her sadness at such a waste of life. No matter how evil her cousin had become, she was still family, the blood she was spilling was from her own line.

“I’m sorry Dena but you left me no choice.” Turning her head, she looked into Dena’s eyes, her sadness for what her cousin had become shining like a beacon of clarity in the darkness of the cavern.

A sudden intake of breath, Dena’s mouth gaped at how much she had underestimated her cousin and as such had now forfeited her own life.

“I hate you Saleene. You will die. I will kill you.” She watched as Dena attempted to move. Instead of allowing her to continue Saleene pulled the blade out of her cousin’s chest, allowing her cousin’s fading body to thud to the ground. She sent a prayer to the gods to forgive her cousin and welcome her into the afterlife if such a thing could be afforded as Dena’s last breath escaped her lips.

Turning her gaze back to Raku, she heard the continued battle between Dartian and Jocabe. Her heart jumped into her throat at the thought of Dartian being killed. She hurried to the corner the fight was raging in her gaze finding her mate. As she came closer she could see each was becoming fatigued and that neither had obtained the upper hand. Unfortunately, she also knew

that Jocabe had infinite power at his disposal which Dartian did not. Closing her eyes, she searched out an answer to their dilemma, something she could use to help save the man she loved.

My dear child, have you forgotten yourself? The soft laughter of the old woman brushed her mind, easing her fears with the melodic sound of her voice. You have the power to save your love; you have but to allow the shining light from within you to dispel the darkness. Your love holds the key. Her love is the key? Shining light? Could it be that simple? Not so tough, yet not so easy. It takes much faith to love deeply, but once you surrender yourself to it, it will flow freely.

Opening her eyes once more, Saleene dropped to her knees, her eyes taking in Dartian in his beautiful wolf form. Her love for him encompassed all of her, surrounding her, glowing from within the depths of her soul.

“Dartian.” She called out, power etched in her voice. “Come to me love, I need you now.” Her words reached through the killing haze of the wolf form, calming the beast. Knocking Jocabe back against the wall Dartian moved quickly to Saleene’s side, allowing her to embrace him in the warmth of her arms.

“I love you Dartian. More than life, more than the afterlife, more than I need the breath within my body. You are my life, my happiness. You are and will always be my one true mate.” As her arms encircled his neck, her eyes closed as the love she felt overflowed and seeped into him.

Saleene? She could hear his thoughts his confusion as to what to do.

She reached her hand over and placed it against his beating heart. “Hear me Dartian and know this. Breathe deep and know I’m there. Close your eyes and you will see me. Sleep and dream to find our place together. Rise and find the warmth of my touch on you. I’m with you always and forever.” The words once uttered by her kind to bind the souls of the two forever. Never in her life had she thought to speak them till now.

She heard Jocabe lunge into the air, his claws ready to rip apart Dartian’s throat.

“No. I don’t think so.” When he was mere inches from them a light brighter than the sun began to emanate from around them sending heat coursing throughout the cave. Repulsed by the purity of their love Saleene watched as Jocabe attempted to flee only to be surrounded by the light. He was trapped in the goodness and truth of their love.

“You won’t win.” He hissed his hatred at them as he began chanting, conjuring a swirling black mist from below him, covering his body and shielding it from the light. A crack echoed from within the cone of light, breaking the hold Saleene had on Dartian.

“Saleene?” Dartian’s voice pushed through her thoughts, his deep voice a soft caress on her skin.

“I’m fine.”

Moving her eyes to where Jocabe had once stood, she saw nothing left but a pile of ash left on the ground. Standing carefully, she moved toward the remains, chanting a spell of binding to hold his evil soul from leaving. When she was mere feet from the pile a swarm of bugs burst from the ashes, scattering into the crevices of the cave, an eerie scream echoing in the cavern.

“Damn.” The word left her lips before she could censor them.

“Is he gone?”

“No, not totally.” She knew they had won for the moment, but Jocabe had retreated into the underworld to regain his strength and plot his next battle. She was sure of it. How long it would take only time would tell.

She cut the ropes that surrounded Raku’s ankles and wrists, her eyes taking in all the wounds that had been inflicted on his poor body. Tears formed in her eyes. She nearly jumped when she felt Dartian’s arms embrace her, pulling her into the warmth of his body. Leaning back, she let all that had happened spill down her face, her heart breaking for cousin’s death.

She cried for the pain poor Raku had endured, and the evil that had invaded a once great man. But more than anything, she gave thanks to the gods for sending her on this journey and ultimately to the man who would be the love of her life for all times.

“Saleene don’t cry. You’ve done more than you could

ever realize.” The softness of his words comforted her soul.

“We may have won this battle Dartian, but I fear there is much more still to come.”

Tears streamed down her face as she looked up into his deep blue topaz eyes and knew she was home. Her head against his chest, she finally began to breathe easier, her heart finding its match with his. “I love you Dartian. I think I always have.”

Looking down at her, his heart melted. She'd become his life, his love, his reason for everything. She may be a spitfire, and may do what she wanted heedless of any danger, but she was his for now and forever.

“I love you too, Caru. I have since the moment we met.” Gently he touched her chin and turned her up to face him once more. His lips descended upon hers sealing their fate with a kiss.

A word about the author...

Growing up in the country allowed for a lot of time to expand my imagination. For as far back as I can remember I've always let my mind travel to far off places to adventure where others couldn't. It wasn't until recently at the prodding of good friends that I've decided to finally put to paper all the adventures I'd lived out in my dreams and thus the Wolf/Raven series was born.

When not writing and reading other paranormal romance novels I love to sit and watch Sci-Fi movies with my family or play with friends on my favorite MMORPG. What is that you ask? It's an online role-playing game that helps to stretch your imagination even more. An active imagination that knows no bounds is a wonderful thing to have.

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