

Darkness on the Plains

The Beginning

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC

http://www.resplendencepublishing.com

Resplendence Publishing, LLC P.O. Box 992 Edgewater, Florida, 32132

Darkness on the Plains: The Beginning Copyright © 2009, Jayme Malvagio Edited by Tiffany Mason Cover art by Chel Hickerty Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-076-7

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Electronic release: October 2009

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Introduction

Darkness. That one word stirs a myriad of feelings for every living being. To some, it embodies evil. To others, it is just another word for sadness. For us, it means life. But in the end, it is still just a word. Make your own judgment as to its connotation.

From our birth into this undeath, we have worshipped the night. We spend our days hidden away from the sun's harmful rays, thinking only of the night to come and begging for its speedy return. We play games within the night's black tendrils. It caresses our skin like a lover's touch. We are one with the night. We are but children appealing to the maternal nature of the night's airy kiss.

We feed, play, love and live an eternity that few know exist and fewer still could fathom. We exist, fearing nothing but the embrace of Ra, whose touch is one of the few things in this world that can harm us. This is not to say that we don't have our fair share of problems; the life of an immortal is still a life influenced by the world around us. As with any sentient being, life has a way of serving us as many trying times as it does the good ones.

The vast majority of us are not evil. Nor are we bottom feeders attacking anything that moves in our vicinity. We do sustain ourselves on the blood of mortals, but we are very particular about the humans we feed upon. For the most part, we only take those who wish to die, and when we do feed, their deaths are quick and merciful. Most meet their end in a state of ignorant bliss. There are those of my kind who don't take the lives of their meals at all. There are clans, even entire covens who keep stables filled with humans for the sole purpose of sustaining the brood. I find this method to be a bit too inhumane for my taste. Would it not be better to have a quick release from your suffering than to live out your years in a darkened basement, waiting for the next visit from your owners?

We do not surround ourselves with graves or the fetid remains of our victims. Nor do we wish to destroy the world in a bloody rage. In fact, we fully appreciate the beauty of the world mortals have built around us. How could we not? After all, were we not human once ourselves?

Just as our strength and speed have increased, our capacity to love and remorse have grown a hundred-fold. None who are mortal have an inkling of how love and sorrow really feel. I have wept at the splendor of the night and loved a woman with my cold heart in such a way no human mind could imagine, let alone endure its intensity. The things I see and the voices I hear would leave a mortal cowering in insanity, begging for a merciful release from the constant bombardment of his senses.

We live amongst you, imitating your lifestyles and admiring your achievements. We see better than mortals, in both the literal and philosophical sense. We spend much of our time watching over you like guardian angels. We give advice and discourage ideas that may lead to the downfall of humankind. We are not always successful, but we always try.

The following account is about the life and death of Kanati Harjo. He was born nearly two hundred years ago in South Carolina, and this is his story. Before we begin, I should set the stage so you might better understand the world as he knew it.

He was only two years old when his people were forced to move to the Indian Territory. They settled in what is now Southeastern Oklahoma. Nearly a thousand began the trek, but his Clan was barely more than one-hundred strong at the end of the march. They were part of the thirteen thousand Native Americans that were *escorted* to their new homes by the U.S. government in the fall of 1838.

The procession had over six hundred wagons that were meant to carry the sick, elderly and small children. The rest of his people had to walk. It took six months to traverse the winterencased terrain. A mixture of starvation and fatigue claimed most of his kinsmen's lives during the trip, while others succumbed to the elements. None made the journey unscathed, be it mentally or physically.

His father was one who died along the trail. He fell victim to some disease or another, the name of which is no longer important. His mother was Caucasian, though we will never know her nationality. His father met her on one of his many travels into the world of the newcomers. She died mere hours after Kanati was born from complications with his birth.

Finally, in March 1839, they arrived in the Indian Territory. The bulk of the survivors went on to establish themselves in the northeastern part of the territory between the Arkansas and the Verdigris Rivers. The elders of his tribe decided to travel farther south. Rumor had it that some of their cousins had already begun a friendly community in the area called Tahlonteeskee.

For most of the elders, a familiar face was very welcome in such a strange land.

There were many children such as Kanati who lost either their mother or father, or in some cases, both. It was the responsibility of the elders of his tribe to teach them the ways of their people. They were taught to hunt, fish, and ride. They regaled the children in the evenings with stories about the myths and legends that made them who they were as a culture.

Eventually, the then fledgling government came up with the bright idea to take one more thing from the survivors of the march...their children. They were gathered in droves and sent to boarding schools. The directors of the program broke off all contact between the children and their tribes, effectively isolating them from their roots. They could not speak in their native tongue. To do so earned severe beatings from the hands of the teachers. They learned to read and write in English. They learned all the skills deemed necessary to turn *savages* into civilized, obedient cogs in the wheels of society. The directors were sure that once the children worshipped *their* god and obeyed *their* laws, they would become the perfect little lap dogs, a lasting symbol of their dominance over the heathens.

Kanati was sent to the far southeast region of the territory when he was roughly six years old. He received his education at Chesterfield Academy for Boys. Most of the girls from his Talwa—the village of his clan—were sent to Rolling Hills Female Seminary. It was a beautiful example of government intervention at its finest.

But enough of my somewhat biased ramblings. You didn't come here to hear my thoughts. You've come for adventure, and a bloody adventure you shall have.

Chapter One

Kanati peeked from under his blanket, watching the lantern as it faded down the hall. He spared a quick glance at the other beds lining the wall. Five on his left, four on his right. He and the others were *guests* at the Chesterfield Academy for Boys, Injun School to those who worked there.

Should I wake any of them? Who else is crazy enough to try this?

He pulled a crumpled paper from beneath his pillow and ran a finger over it in the darkness. A map, stolen from the library, ripped from a book earlier in the day. It marked his Talwa, Tahlonteeskee. Home.

The harsh bite of winter was gone, but the air still carried a chill. At least that's why he told himself his entire body trembled.

Sliding from beneath the covers, he willed his breath to come. He listened for movement in the hall, cringing when the boards creaked beneath his feet. Grabbing his boots from beside the bed, he crept in stocking feet to the edge of the room and crouched to eye the shadows in the dimly lit hall. He could barely make out the shape of a door at the end of the hallway, but it was enough. By then, he knew the route by heart, having walked it every day for the last eleven years.

Forty steps to freedom. *Ocasta, please make my feet light and their dreams heavy.* He could feel sweat pool as it ran down his back. Fear threatened to consume his resolve.

If they beat me for speaking in my own tongue, what will they do to me for trying to

escape?

A board groaned beneath his feet. He held his breath. He froze halfway down the hall, certain he heard breathing behind him. He whirled, ready to spout an explanation. The hall was empty.

Keep it steady. One foot in front of the other. You're almost there— Holding his breath, he reached for the knob. *The gods are smiling on you*. "Joseph, what are you doing out of bed?" a voice rumbled behind him.

Kanati jumped, spun and glared at the man with the lantern. Over a decade of torment and regret crashed over him in waves.

"My name's not Joseph," he growled.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" The man stepped forward, face puckered, though it wasn't clear if it was from confusion or anger.

"I'm going *home*." he reached for the knob again.

"Don't push me, boy." The man jabbed a finger at the air between them. "You touch that door and I'll—"

"What?" He cast a glance at him over his shoulder. "You'll give me another beating?"

The man reached for his hip and snarled when he realized his holster wasn't there. "I don't think beating is a strong enough word for what I'm about to do to you." He began his advance, fists clenched.

"You'll have to catch me first," he said with a laughed and slung open the door.

He leapt from the porch, cursing as the rough earth dug into his feet. A full moon colored the sloping hills an eerie shade of blue. Nothing on the windswept plain provided him cover. The nearest tree line was over a mile away.

It's not far. You can make it. He stopped just long enough to stomp into his boots.

Gunfire exploded, kicking up wisps of dust and dirt from the ground around his feet.

Kanati scurried in a zigzag motion, breathing in gulps. Hickory trees raced to greet him. He ran faster, throwing himself into their arms. The branches fought him as he pushed his way through, slowing his escape. A few steps further, then a few steps more, and screams reached his ears. *What happened?* He turned and took a step back the way he came, but hesitated.

It wasn't just the voices of his friends screaming in the night; something was happening to the teachers as well. He cursed his own cowardice as he turned again and pushed deeper into the woods.

Wind whistled through the trees, their mighty limbs moaning beneath its touch. He was thankful for the relief against the warm night air. The screams followed him, filling his ears, filling his mind with visions of his friends' faces contorted in agony. Bile rose in his throat and he fought the urge to vomit. He wasn't alone. Something moved through the branches beside him. He tried to run faster, the branches snapped at his face, pulled at his shirt. Laughter bounced from the trunks; surrounded him. He turned to look for his tormentor and tripped over an exposed root. His breath left him in a rush as his body crashed into the ground.

Don't let me die...not here, not like this. He scrambled to his feet, spinning in circles, trying to find the source of the laughter. *Why are you doing this to me?*

"You are a willful one," a deep, angelic voice rode on the night air. "What will you do with your newfound freedom?"

"Who are you?" he sobbed. "What are you gonna do to me?"

"If you were a little older," the voice fell to a whisper. "I would answer that question in explicit detail."

"What did you do to my friends?"

"What makes you think I did anything?"

"The screams—" He couldn't bring himself to elaborate.

"Let's just say your journey home should be unhindered."

"You killed them, didn't you?"

The whisper of branches moving with the breeze was his only answer. Kanati was once again alone with his fears.

Chapter Two

The stranger slipped further into the shadows, eyeing the young man with interest. Everything happens for a reason. We were destined to meet, you and I.

He'd heard about the so-called school nearly a week ago and had come to investigate the deplorable conditions first hand. A couple of ranch hands in a little saloon on the outskirts of Muskogee had quite the laugh at the expense of the young men at Chesterfield as they explained to the barkeep exactly how they were taming the savages in great detail. He suppressed a shiver as he recalled the conversation. They were beat, humiliated, and in some cases, outright tortured until they were deemed civilized and given the boot. Some of the more effeminate boys were even subjected to *special* punishments. And for what? What could their future possibly hold? With the onslaught of rampant racism, it was unlikely that they'd be able to find suitable jobs to sustain them, and even if they did, they'd still be outcasts in any society they tried to call home. Just the thought of what they were doing drove him to put a stop to the abuse.

He had every intention of slipping into the school while everyone slept and dealing with the problem quietly, but when the young brave burst through that door, all bets were off. There was just something about him—strength, charisma, confidence, a...power that emanated from his very being. He didn't have to be a mind reader to know that, given the proper incentives, this man was destined for greatness.

Waiting until his newfound friend disappeared among the branches, he turned and made his way quietly back to the school. He closed the distance with remarkable speed. Twisting, turning, ducking, nary a branch brushed against his clothes or even his cloak. By the time he hit the open field, he was at a full sprint.

He stood on the porch and closed his eyes, listening for movement from within. With a bemused snort, he opened the door and stared down at the half-dozen writhing bodies on the floor, each bound by articles of their own clothing. They were all screaming, some in protest, others in fear.

"Stop this incessant sniveling," he ordered, silencing their wails as he walked through their midst. "I still have one more thing to do before I tend to you gentlemen."

Striding to the end of the hall, he grabbed the doorknob and paused. "I know you're afraid. I could hear your screams all the way out in the yard. I'm going to come in now, but there is nothing to fear from me."

He stepped into the room and was met with nine pairs of eyes, wide with apprehension.

"Why are you still here?" he asked, throwing his hands out, palms up.

Silence reigned.

"Did none of you think this might be a good opportunity to return to your families?"

The boy closest to him looked to be no more than ten years old, but after a glance at his much older friends, he took a tentative step forward. "We didn't know what was out there that could be worse than the teachers."

He felt like he'd taken a kick to the gut and exhaled accordingly. "I can assure you, little one, that after tonight, you will never have to worry about those bad men again."

Whispers floated across the small cluster of kids, gaining momentum as they were received and relayed.

"The young man who escaped," he paused as he studied their faces. "Kanati, I believe his name was. Are any of you from the same clan as he?"

They all shook their heads vigorously. Pity, that...

"Okay, I want you to gather up some supplies from the kitchen, grab some blankets and make your way back to your people."

"But I don't know how to get there," a young man cried, his voice shrill with fear.

"Do any of you know your way?"

One of the oldest in the group raised his hand.

"Then everybody stick together. Follow him." He pointed at the volunteer. "Once you get to his home, I'm sure the elders there can help you find your way to yours."

No one moved and he nearly laughed out loud.

"Go on, git!" He smacked his legs for emphasis, sending them from the room in a scramble.

After waiting patiently for all of the children to leave the house, he returned his attention to the six faculty members in the hall. He grabbed the one closest to him by the hair and pulled

him to his feet.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" the teacher shouted, spittle flying from his mouth.

"Oh, how rude of me." He let his smile wash over each of them. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Niccolo Rasetti," he continued with a slight bow. "Most of your countrymen just call me Nick."

The man squirmed in his grasp, thrashing as wildly as his tethered arms and legs would allow him. Nick licked his lips as he watched him flail. A familiar pressure rose along his gums and he closed his eyes, relishing the moment. He opened his mouth wide, exposing his fangs for all to see. The tiny hallway erupted with panicked cries as he latched onto the throat of his prey.

His mind exploded with images as he drank. Soon, they were replaced with smells, sounds, and a myriad of emotions. For Niccolo's kind, the act of feeding wasn't just the taking of blood. A connection was formed with his victims, one that allowed him to see their lives through their eyes, to feel their pain and joy, to *know* the life they lived and carry those experiences with him for all eternity. The life he relived now was more than he could bear. With a howl of rage, he pulled free of the embrace and tore into the foul creature before him in a blur of fangs and fury.

He turned to face the others as he dropped the shredded corpse to the floor. Their pleas and tears might have been enough to turn him away if not for the acts he'd seen them commit first hand. It was in his power to calm them before he took their lives, to ease their transition, but he wanted their last night on this earth to be filled with more pain and fear than they could've ever imagined possible.

Drinking just enough from his victim to ignite his blood lust, he visited each man at a leisurely pace, tasting, tearing, shredding with his claws. It was going to be a long night, and he was sure to them, it would feel like an eternity.

Chapter Three

That thing in the woods had promised he wouldn't be hunted, but Kanati still felt pursued. His journey took nearly six days. He ate what little he could scavenge without venturing too far from the route he'd marked on the map and drank from streams and ponds. Sleeping just enough to keep him going, his fear of what creature haunted him prevented more than a few hours a day.

He crested a hill, and at last, his Talwa came into view. Smoke from the hearths curled high into the air. As he drew closer, he saw people moving in and out of the dwellings in the little town. So few children darted among the homes, he wondered if he imagined them.

A dozen buildings formed the heart of the small community. Several of them lined either side of the main road that led into town. The sweat lodge, general store, and a blacksmith shop were the largest buildings on the strip. Several homes dotted the hillsides, surrounding the Talwa like a well-worn blanket. They had obviously spent so much time with the white settlers that their town was barely more than another reflection of the others.

He'd been dreaming of that moment for eleven years. He had finally returned to his people, he was home at last. *I'm truly free. If only my parents were alive to greet me.* He drew himself a little straighter and stepped onto the hard packed dirt of the road.

As Kanati entered the village, he caught many strange stares from his kinsmen. Clearly, no one recognized him. An understandable reaction since he was just a pup, only six years old, when the government took him and the other boys from his tribe.

Kanati stopped an elder who was walking down the road, eyeing the dirt in front of his feet.

"Grandfather, could you help me?" Kanati used the term for respected elders as he stepped in front of him with his palms up.

The old man grunted, gestured for Kanati to make his request. Kanati sensed the old man's hesitation. Who could really blame him? He looked down at his tattered clothes. It was

clear he had been running from something, but it wasn't clear if that something still pursued him.

"I am Kanati Harjo, son of Acoma. I lived with Enola in that house. She is my aunt." Kanati pointed to a rundown building at the edge of the village. "It's empty now. The Talwa has changed a lot while I was away, but surely there is someone here to welcome me."

The light of recognition flared in the old-timer's eyes. He spun on his heel, dragging Kanati after him by the arm.

"Kanati has returned! He lives! He is...home!" The others took up his shouts, the news swept through the village like a wild fire.

People poured out of their homes, pressed in around him, touched him, called his name. The attention overwhelmed Kanati. Was he the only one who'd ever returned? He prayed such a tragedy wasn't the case. He made sure to return everyone's greetings, though they came at him so quickly, it was a struggle. Faces faded in and out of view as they were pushed aside so others might see him. He was truly touched by such an outpouring of tears, laughter, joy, awe—both theirs and his own. Not only was he remembered, but he was loved.

"Tonight, we will feast to honor your return." The old man gripped Kanati's shoulder so tightly he winced. "Welcome home."

He finally managed to swallow the boulder in his throat. "Thank you, Grandfather. You've made this moment greater even than it was in my dreams."

"You may call me Dustu," he said, still smiling. "And your return is our dreams realized as well."

* * * *

Kanati sat on a stone near the bonfire. The dancing flames seemed to sway to the music that filled the night air. He pulled his gaze from their hypnotic movement and studied the musicians. The motley band was comprised of elders of all shapes and sizes, much like the instruments they played. There was a water drum pounding out a steady beat, a six-foot long river cane flute wailing like an angry wind in the mouth of a cave, the deeper timbre of a buffalo horn bellowing in long bursts, turtle-shell rattles urging the others to pick up the pace, and a cluster of men added the cadence of their voice to the mix. Each seemed to play their own song, but together they created a sonata that brought tears to his eyes.

Several women walked among the revelers. They carried trays of meat and fruit, offering their bounty to one and all. The aroma was heavenly. His mouth watered as a he plucked a laden

deer rib from the pile. The flesh was still warm from the fire that had seared its juices inside. He bit into the meatiest part and it was so tender it slipped from the bone nearly intact. He devoured the morsel, each bite tasting better then the last until it was gone. Wiping his mouth with the back of a sleeve, he rose to his feet in search of another tray.

The music suddenly changed tempo and he found himself encircled by smiling faces, dragging him along as they began a stomp dance. He felt a little awkward at first, unsure of his steps, but he quickly slipped into an easy rhythm as he made the first pass of a circle. Some of the men sprang and twirled, demonstrating their agility with impressive demonstrations of the fancy dance. His chest filled with pride. It was the biggest celebration he could ever remember and it was all in his honor.

A silver-haired woman stepped close and wiped his cheek. "What's wrong, Kanati?" His fingers instantly went to his face. He drew back wet fingers. He'd been crying.

"I'm just really happy to be here, to be home at last, Grandmother," he assured her.

The party raged into the wee hours of the morning. Over the course of the night, he tried to put names to faces that were once only a distant memory. He was sure it would take him a long time to remember them all, but he knew they'd come back to him eventually.

He made his way up the side of the hill, passing between the scattered homes, eyes heavy from food and wine. Studying the house that loomed before him, flashes from his childhood pushed their way to the forefront of his thoughts. His aunt's smiling face, children playing in the front yard with him, laughter. He also remembered the tears as he was pulled from her arms.

Shaking his head to dislodge the memories, he took in the small home with admiration. It was a sturdy rectangular structure with windows on either side of the door and lining both walls. The wooden shingles were mostly intact and should still hold out the majority of the rain.

The front porch creaked as he climbed the steps. The outside walls, though in desperate need of paint, appeared to have a few years left in them. Opening the front door, he disturbed the dust that had gathered on the floor into a tiny swirl that settled further into the room. Everything was coated with a thick layer, making him wonder exactly how long she had been gone. The front room was sparsely furnished, containing only a small wood stove, roughly hewn table, two chairs and a tattered sofa. Everything else of significance had been redistributed among the tribe after his aunt's passing.

He padded into the bedroom and found, to his surprise, that his kinsmen had shaken

down the bedding at some point during the evening. The clean bed stood in stark contrast to the dirty room. His attention moved to a pile of clothing folded with care and placed on a trunk at the foot of the bed. He grabbed a pair of buckskin trousers from the top and held them against himself. They appeared to be right size. He made a mental note to ask who had bestowed such kindnesses upon him so he could thank them properly.

Overcome with exhaustion, he pulled back the fur blanket and dropped unceremoniously onto the straw mattress. He closed his eyes and drifted to sleep, still marveling that he had made it back to Enola's home...*his* home.

Chapter Four

Niccolo perched on the edge of a roof near the festivities, immersed in shadows. He was quickly becoming infatuated with Kanati. He'd followed him as he made his way home from the boarding school. Having every intention of protecting him on the journey, he quickly found there was no need. He seemed to possess an uncanny ability to avoid trouble.

On his second night of travel, he came within a couple of hundred yards of a band of men, drinking themselves into a stupor around a dying campfire. From Niccolo's vantage point, he could see that Kanati was going to crest a hill and land smack dab in the middle of them before he had a clue they were there. He sent out his probing mental fingers to search their thoughts. They weren't pretty. Bracing himself to engage the ruffians, he pulled up short when Kanati suddenly veered in a new direction. There was no possible way he could've known they were there. Even with his enhanced auditory perception, Niccolo could barely hear them. No, it would appear something other than the mighty vampire was looking out for him.

He cast a final glance over the celebrating tribe. Satisfied his charge was safely received, he pulled his feet under him and sprang into the air, taking flight. He rode along with the warm summer currents, gliding lazily, searching for signs of life below him. Spotting the lights of a small encampment to his left, he swooped in low and landed on the outskirts of the town.

The little community was comprised of three buildings and several small clusters of tents. His gaze swept across the crude structures. A cross nailed above the door of the first told him it was a church. The second bore no sign, but if he had to guess, he would think it to be a general store. It was the last structure that put a smile on his face.

"What town would be complete without a rowdy saloon?"

Whistling a playful tune, he strolled up the rough road, kicking rocks from his path. He pushed open the small swinging doors and surveyed the dirty faces that peered back at him from the dimly lit room. He strode casually to the bar as the other patrons returned to their drinks and conversations.

He slipped a gold coin from the leather purse in his vest pocket, slapped it on the counter and nodded at the barkeep. "Whiskey."

The elderly man eyed him, eyes squinted. Nick plucked his thoughts from the air and looked down at his attire. *He thinks I'm a dandy*. He wore black britches tucked into riding boots, a white cotton shirt open at the collar and claret vest so dark it was nearly as black as his pants. *I can't imagine why*.

"A little late for traveling, init?" he asked while pouring a shot. "Specially by your lonesome."

"Do you have a lot of trouble around these parts?" Nick asked, one eyebrow arched.

"The territory's seen safer days." He nodded. "If you're a needin' a place to sleep for the night, I can rent ya a cot in the back."

"No rooms available then?" he laughed.

The barkeep leaned over the bar and said in a low voice, "Does this look like the sorta place that'd have an inn?"

Nick looked at the wall behind the bar, scanning the rough wood planks. He could see the night sky through the spaces between them. "No, I don't suppose it does, but that's alright. I'm just passing through."

"To where?" His face puckered up in a scowl. "The next decent sized town is a good two day ride from here."

"I thought I might try my luck up in Guthrie." He shrugged.

The barkeep's gaze flicked to his left toward the corner and back so quickly, Nick nearly missed it. "Perhaps, you should just have the one drink and be on your way then. That road's a dangerous place at night."

He hazarded a glance over his shoulder and spotted four men sitting at a table in the corner. They weren't looking his direction, but they weren't talking either. He turned his gaze to the shot glass in front of him. A quick probe of their minds revealed them to be only feigning disinterest. They very much wanted to know what his plans were for the evening.

Rising from his barstool, he made a show of pulling out his coin purse and shaking it as he looked for the telltale eagle of his silver dollars. He plucked one out and flipped it to the barkeep. "Thanks for the information."

"But, you haven't drank your whiskey yet," he protested, rubbing the coin on his sleeve.

"Give it to one of your fine patrons," he said, waving his hand to encompass the whole room. "If it's a two day ride, it'll take me a week to walk it. I better get started."

"You're on foot?" The barkeep was clearly dumbfounded. "Looky, this here dollar's more 'an enough to cover the cost of that cot. Why don't ya just—?"

"No, thank you. I really should be on my way." He turned on his heel and left, the bartender still protesting to his back.

He couldn't believe his luck. He'd hoped to find a ghost to sate his thirst, someone who no longer had the will to live but still went through the motions, waiting for death to claim him or her. Times were hard and many a mortal fell into this category. But he could hardly resist an opportunity to rid the world of vile men. If it weren't for *one* drawback, they would be his sole source of sustenance, but then that one thing was more than his sanity could handle on a regular basis.

Sticking to the middle of the road, he walked at a brisk pace, listening for the sounds of hoof beats behind him. He plodded on for over an hour and was far from any prying eyes, only surrounded by shrubs and rolling hills. Just when he was about to give up on them, the clip-clop of horses approaching reached his ears.

Continuing his pace, he moved to the shoulder. A familiar tune crept into his thoughts and he began to whistle *Green Sleeves*. The thunder of hooves grew around him. The ground vibrated beneath his feet. Still, he whistled. Two of them raced passed him, blocking the road ahead. He could hear the other two dismount behind him. Their horses shied and brayed, refusing to come any closer to him.

"Howdy, stranger," a gruff voice called out. "Bit late for stroll, ain't it?"

The two men in front leapt from their steeds and edged closer.

Nick glanced over his shoulder. "I beg to differ. With the heat of summer on us, the night is a wonderful time to travel."

They closed in on his position, forming a rough circle. Each held a pistol. The barrels pointed at his person.

"Well, I can assure you, this night will be extra wonderful," he replied with a snicker that elicited guffaws from his crew.

"You'll be wanting my purse then?" He stiffened as cold steel pressed against his back.

"Oh, we'll be having that too, pretty boy." The man's foul breath was hot upon his ear.

Nick started to laugh, enjoying the effect it had on his would-be assailants. They cast nervous glances at each other and back at him. He plucked their names from their thoughts.

"This is going to be fun, Doyle," he said when his humor died away.

"What?" the leader asked, his voice nearly a whisper. "How do you know my name?"

"Oh, we go way back. I know your whole crew. That's Bobby, John, and Lucas," he said, pointing at each as he spoke their name.

"Well, at least you'll know whose name to call out while we're taking turns with you," he said with a mirthless snicker.

In a blur of speed, Nick spun, leapt into the air and latched himself onto Doyle's throat. His fangs exploded from his gums and into the soft flesh between them. As he drank, he was forced to relive the man's vile existence through his mind's eye. When the images of the fiend's first rape appeared, it was more than he could bear. He yanked his head away, severing the connection and pulling a chunk of flesh with it. The burn of bullets entering his back accompanied the sounds of gunfire.

He dropped Doyle and sprang at Bobby, who was already sprinting for his horse. Wrapping his knees around his waist, he rode the flailing man to the ground, pulled his head back by the hair and drank from him hungrily. He could feel his body pushing the led slugs from his back as the wounds began to heal. Then he was plunged into the nightmare world of Bobby Moss. Ripping himself free, he howled in disgust, grabbed the man's head with both hands and broke his neck with a quick twist of his wrists.

Rising to his feet, he turned to face the two remaining hooligans and smiled. They scrambled for their horses, but he was on them before they made it more than a couple of paces. He grabbed each man by the back of the neck and leapt into the air. They flailed in his grasp, arms and legs thrashing wildly as he soared ever higher. He pushed into a cloud, the moisture coating his face. Only when he burst through the top of the cumulonimbus did his ascent slow. He took a deep breath and savored the atmosphere. He always loved the view from so far up.

John stopped struggling and turned his head to face him. "What are you?"

Nick was impressed with the calmness of the man's voice. "I am justice."

"Please, you don't have to do this," Lucas cried out.

"Yeah, we'll be right as rain from now on." John nodded as vigorously as the grip on his neck would allow. "Just turn us loose and we won't tell a soul."

"We have an accord." Nick laughed as he released them both.

They stared up at him, eyes wide as they plummeted into the cloud below, sending up wisps of vapors on entry. Their screams faded to the point Nick could barely hear them before the sounds of breaking limbs signaled the abrupt end of their downward spiral.

Chapter Five

On the second day back with his people, Kanati met the most beautiful creature who had ever existed, real or imagined. He nearly stumbled when he saw her emerge from the general store. Her jet-black hair hung nearly to her waist. Her brown eyes could melt the heart of a dozen men with a single glance. Her lips were full and inviting, the kind of lips that begged to be tasted.

He took a step toward her, hesitated, cleared his throat, then set his jaw and strolled purposefully in her direction. *What will I say to her?* She smiled as he approached. He attempted a smile, tripped over his own feet and nearly fell. When he regained his balance, he rushed by her, up the steps, and into the relative safety of the store.

"Acabo, who is she?" Kanati jerked his thumb toward the door.

He looked passed him. "Selu? Ah yes, she is quite pretty, isn't she?" He flashed a knowing smile.

"Yes, she is." He nodded emphatically. "I didn't see here at the gathering last night."

"Come to think of it, I don't think she was there." He shrugged. "Maybe you should go ask her where she was."

"Perhaps when she's not so busy." He watched her walk up the road at a leisurely pace. "Where does she live?"

"Up on the hill to the south with her aunt Taima."

"Is she—?" Kanati struggled for the words; his native tongue had grown rusty from lack of use.

"Spoken for?" Acabo supplied with a bemused snort. "Most of the men left around here are far too long in the teeth for the likes of her. Well, before you came home that is."

"I wonder why she isn't at Rolling Hills," he said absently, still watching her walk away. The sway of her hips had become hypnotic.

"She *was* there, but she arrived on her Aunt's doorstep last summer. When we asked her how she escaped, she would only say that it was enough that she did." "I wonder what happened."

"Whatever it was, she doesn't want to talk about it, that's for sure," Acabo said with grunt.

* * * *

"Selu." The word rolled from his tongue as he practiced how he would approach her. He spent the majority of the next day milling around the base of the south hill, waiting for her to come out of her aunt's house. By the time she emerged, the sun was all but gone from the sky and he'd nearly convinced himself to try again another day.

He approached her on wobbly legs.

"The trees for a warm day, like, uh— I mean—" Kanati's cheeks burned. He couldn't put together a complete sentence let alone a coherent one. "Osiyo, I'm Kanati."

"Huh—" He could tell at once that she was less than impressed. "My name is Selu. Pleased to meet you. Sorry I didn't get to come to your celebration last night, but my aunt was ill and I needed to stay with her."

Kanati opened and shut his mouth several times, struggling to find the right words. *Come on! Say something...anything.*

"Okay then," Selu shook her head as she pushed passed him. "It was nice almost talking to you, Kanati."

* * * *

Niccolo perched in a tree, watching the young couple as they strolled through the outskirts of the Talwa. He barely stifled his laugh as he listened to Kanati fumble with his words. *How can a man with such obvious strengths become such a bumbling idiot just because he's in the presence of a woman?* He snarled when the realization hit him. His formative years were spent among men and other boys. He'd never interacted with the fairer sex, and as a result, he was at the mercy of his hormones without the benefit of having the slightest clue of how to behave with her.

Just one more thing those bastards robbed from him. The thought made his teeth clench. His gums ached as he felt his canines stir. A hunger swelled within and refused to be ignored. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly while he watched Kanati and Selu walk directly below him. They were too close. The aroma from their warm bodies only added to his urge.

As a vampire ages, the all-consuming urge to feed diminishes, and Nick was old enough

to no longer need to hunt every night, but certain things could trigger the bloodlust regardless of his body's needs, and anger was one of them.

He could stave it off no longer.

Springing from the branch as quietly as an owl, he took to the air, soaring high above the treetops. He sped over the rolling countryside. His anger abated, but his thirst raged on.

* * * *

What an odd boy, Selu thought, casting a glance over her shoulder to where Kanati still stood, mouth agape. *Still, he's quite handsome. Maybe with enough time, he might even become charming.*

She picked up her pace, anxious to get home to her aunt. Taima had been quite ill for several days and she was worried about her. Climbing the hill with long strides, she quickly entered the house and gasped, when she saw someone sitting at the table by the hearth.

"Auntie, why are you out of bed?" she asked, laughing at her own reaction.

"I'm feeling better and I needed to move around a bit," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"You need your rest. You fever only broke this morning. If you aren't careful, it'll come back."

"I am resting," she snorted. "I'm just sitting up rather than lying down."

"I met our new arrival today," she said, taking a seat opposite her aunt.

"Really?" She visibly perked up. "How was the encounter?"

"Awkward. I think he may be a bit slow-witted."

"That's a shame. The first young man to return in ages and he's touched in the head."

"It truly is a shame. You should see the way he looks."

"Handsome man, is he?"

"Quite striking," she said with a nod. "He has big brown eyes, high cheekbones, a strong nose and a stronger jaw. His hair is as black as the night sky, but it's a bit short for my taste."

"I'm sure they made him keep it trimmed above his shoulders while he lived at the school."

"Not that it matters," she sighed. "He may be easy to look at, but I can't imagine spending much time with a blithering dolt."

"Then I'll pray to the Gods to send us another of our wayward sons home soon."

Chapter Six

Niccolo soared over a small grove of trees, their limbs bending under the force of his passing. He barely noticed. To him, they were an insignificant blur of greens and browns as the foliage struggled to renew itself under the harsh summer heat. He had no time to slow down and appreciate the beauty of the transition. The thirst urged him on, pushing him harder and faster.

A melody of odors penetrated his senses, pulling him from his thoughts. Fire, food, and ale where barely discernable within an overwhelming bouquet of coal. He slowed to a near stop as he approached the edge of a small mining town. It was nestled between the base of two large hills, one to the east, the other to the west.

It was far from a thriving community. The majority of the homes consisted of tin and tarps, which flapped in the early-evening breeze. They were practically stacked on top of one another, pushing up against the few buildings that comprised their main street as if they huddled near the heart of the town for warmth like helpless puppies jockeying for position to be the first to suckle.

He dropped to the ground in the shadows between the tavern and the general store and froze, the hair of his nape rising. He sensed he was not the only predator in the night. It was a familiar presence, but he was in no mood for a reunion. Just as he bent his legs to launch into the air, he felt the pressure of ethereal fingers tapping on the barrier of his mind.

"So much for a hasty retreat," he mumbled, strolling to the front of the tavern.

He grunted in amusement as he stepped onto the front porch of the establishment. A gunnysack hung over the front opening to serve as a door. Sweeping it aside, he entered the dimly lit room, his gaze locking on a figure near the back, sitting with his back stiff and both hands wrapped around a mug of ale.

Making his way to the table with a carefree stride, he took in the other man's appearance. He wore a charcoal-gray cotton shirt, cuffed at the wrist and covered partially with an unbuttoned black vest. His hair was so blonde it was nearly white and hung in loose curls to his shoulders, framing a slender face dominated by bright blue eyes. His countenance was so beautiful he could almost pass for a woman.

"Pavlo, old friend, what brings you so far from home?" he asked, taking a seat across from him.

"The same could be asked of you," he returned with an arched brow. "There is not a single establishment in these God-forsaken lands befitting of a gentleman of your caliber."

"I find the quiet suits me."

"The Butcher of Sangucina seeking a quiet existence." Pavlo leaned forward, his fingers tapping out a light melody on the side of his mug. "Who could ever imagine?"

Niccolo bristled. A barrage of images flitted along the corridors of his mind. Fangs and fury, the clash of steel, the smell of blood and ash. He shook his head vigorously as he pushed the memories back into the recesses where they belonged.

"I haven't heard that name in decades. It seems that it all happened in a different life to a different person. It changed me, the..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence for fear of what it might resurrect.

"The war, yes," Pavlo said, nodding, brows furrowed as if in deep thought. "The common assumption is that you've succumbed to the eternal slumber."

"I've never been one for goodbyes and I needed to get away from it all, needed time to..."

"Forget?" he offered with a rueful smile. "Have you heard from—"

Niccolo held up a hand, silencing him. "If it's all the same, I've worked too hard to put the past behind me. I've no desire to resurrect those demons."

It was only when Pavlo sat back with a gasp did he realize the bite he carried in his tone.

"Forgive me, old friend. The thirst is hard upon me and has sharpened my tongue." He lowered his gaze.

"Then, by all means, let's dine. I'm famished myself," he said, his gaze already scanning the sparsely populated room. "I've found a promising prospect, but alas, the bar is horribly devoid of those who wish or deserve to be released."

"Which one?"

Pavlo pointed with his chin to a petite brunette in a dingy, once-white dress, staring forlornly into a mug of ale. "Perhaps we could share?"

"And after, we can find a quieter place to talk."

"If you would do the honors, fine sir," he gestured in the girl's direction.

Niccolo nodded as he rose from the table and sidled to the empty stool next to his prey.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Is this seat taken?"

He could practically hear her breath catch in her throat as she stared up into his eyes. "It is now," she informed him in a throaty voice.

Pity, I'd rather preferred if she were a ghost. She is gripped in depression, but far from seeking death, he thought, scanning her mind as he sat.

"My name's Terri. What's yours?" she said, leaning closer.

My, but your loneliness has made you bold. "Niccolo Rasetti, but you may call me Nick," he replied, pulling her hand up to brush softly against his lips. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, the pleasure's all mine."

"No," he began, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "It isn't yet, but if all goes well, by the end of this evening, you'll know pleasure beyond your wildest dreams."

She drew back with a tiny gasp and worried her bottom lip before letting her gaze return to his. "Careful, you wouldn't wanna raise my expectations too high. I sorely don't need to be disappointed tonight."

Niccolo rubbed his chin, pretending to mull over her words. He suddenly sat straight, boasting a mischievous smile. Without breaking the bond between their eyes, he raised his left hand and signaled to Pavlo. "Good point. Perhaps we need reinforcements to ensure such a travesty doesn't happen."

Her eyes widened and she stared back and forth between them. He watched the swirl of emotions dance across her face as Pavlo stopped two paces from her stool and winked at her. Tapping into her thoughts, he barely suppressed a chuckle as he listened to her argue with herself.

How dare he suggest... My God, look at them, both of them. They're so... beautiful. I shouldn't do this. I can't do this. What would people say? Who cares what they think. I need this. I deserve this. They'll think me a whore. They don't know me. I don't know them. So gorgeous. Look at those shoulders, the chest. Those eyes... How can they be SO handsome? I want this, but I can't. I'd best just go. She started to rise when Niccolo gently laid a hand on her forearm. His eyes fixed on hers, unwavering, trapping her within their depths. "There is nothing to fear. Attraction should know no shame. You want us, it's clear, and I can assure you, the feeling is mutual. Everyone deserves a little happiness in their lives. Don't you want to be happy? Don't you want to know bliss, even if it's only for an evening?"

"But it's wrong," she said, though she nodded in answer to his question.

Pavlo leaned forward, bringing his lips near her ear, his white locks falling, brushing the side of her face. "Nonsense. There is nothing more natural than the desire to touch and be touched. In the pursuit of euphoric coital experience, there is no right or wrong. There exists only the will, the hunt, and the hope that the next encounter will bring you to the edge of orgasmic release and hurl you far beyond the possibility of return. I dare venture, having two men strive to deliver you to that precipice will better the odds of your arrival."

Sensing her desire overriding her reservations, Niccolo added, "If it would make you feel better, you and I could walk out together and Pavlo could meet up with us shortly. Then none of your peers would be the wiser. For all they know, I've offered to escort your home for your own safety."

She studied the floor as she contemplated his words. With a wry smile, she nodded and rose from her seat before sliding her arm through the one proffered by Niccolo. He quickly ushered her out of the bar and onto the street below. Casting a quick glance over her shoulder, she hesitated.

Though he already knew the answer, he asked, "What's wrong, my dear?"

"How will he know where to find us?"

"We'll walk slowly." He patted her forearm affectionately. "Which way shall we go?"

"I live down there." She pointed to the right where rows of houses lined either side of the street. "It's the second to the last house on the left."

"Do you live there all alone?" he asked as they began the trek at a leisurely pace.

"I do now," she replied with a nod and a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes. "You have an interesting accent. Where are you from?"

"I was born in Italy, but I've traveled abroad for so long, I'm quite sure my accent sounds nothing like it did when I spoke my native tongue."

She smiled up at him. "Italian is such a beautiful language."

"Lei lo parla? Do you speak it?"

"No, but I love the way it sounds. Tell me something else."

"What would you like to hear?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Anything," she breathed huskily.

"Niente," he said with a laugh.

"What does that mean?" Her head cocked to one side.

"It means 'anything', which is what you asked for."

She gave him a playful swat on the chest. "You're such a cad."

"Eri bellissima. Attraverso la sua bellezza, trovarò la vita. Attraverso la sua vita, trovarò il nutrimento. Attraverso il suo sangue saprò l'eternità."

Staring at him, eyes wide, it took her a moment to regain her composure. "That was lovely. I'm not sure what you said, but it sounded complimentary."

"Oh, it was," he assured her, pulling her hand to his lips. "And I meant every word of it."

She let out a heavy sigh as he kissed her hand and nearly stumbled. As if suddenly aware of her surroundings, she cast nervous glances all about her until her gaze finally settled on a building a little further up the road.

"That's my house there," she pointed with her nose.

Niccolo studied the squatty building with great interest. It was a step above the tin and tarp homes closer to the heart of town, but only a small one. Even at his distance, it gave him a sense of being thrown together out of necessity rather than hope. This was never meant to be a home, but merely a place of transition.

It sat a slight tilt. The unpainted wood, weathered and bleached, nearly glowed in the moonlight. The shingles, while mostly present, were of varying lengths and widths, giving it the impression of a patchwork quilt sewn together by a blind woman strictly by feel. There was no porch, the door sitting nearly at ground level.

"Did you miss me?" Pavlo's voice pulled him from his observations as he joined them.

"Of course," she said with a wink. "But your friend did a wonderful job of keeping my mind off your absence."

Pavlo leaned close and kissed her on the neck.

"As nice as that feels, I'd still rather we didn't do it in my front yard," she said in a shaky whisper.

"Perhaps we should go inside," Niccolo gestured for her to lead the way.

"Allow me to get the door then," Pavlo said, traversing the last few feet with long strides. Niccolo followed Terri into the front room and could barely mask his surprise. Where the outside of the house was cold and lifeless, the inside was full of color and warmth. The wooden floor was spotless. Paintings and framed photographs adorned the white walls, and small potted plants were dispersed around the perimeter of the room. Two burgundy sofas, a wooden rocker, and three beige wing chairs, all in immaculate condition furnished the room.

He turned his attention back to Terri and found her smiling at him, head held high with pride. "You like?" she asked.

"You have a most beautiful home," he replied with a nod.

"Wait 'til you see the bedroom." She batted her eyes at him before strolling to the back of the room.

They followed her through the narrow door, Niccolo then Pavlo. The bedroom was sparsely furnished with a dresser just left of the door and a vanity with three individual mirrors positioned on the far wall, both a dark cream color. A large canopy bed dominated the space, the wood frame stained a deep crimson and the mattress covered in pillows of varying size. A battered hope chest nestled against the foot of it.

His observations were interrupted as Terri removed her worn jacket, revealing milky white shoulders beneath the straps of her off-white evening dress. By the time she had stepped out of her skirt, he and Pavlo were eager to help with the rest of her disrobing. Pavlo removed her corset cover with practiced ease. Niccolo, not to be outdone, slipped the bustle from her trembling body with smooth grace. She unfastened the bindings of her corset, letting loose a sigh of relief, and dropped it to the floor. By the time the petticoat, pantaloons, stockings and chemise were discarded, her skin glistened with a fine layer of perspiration.

Terri let her gaze travel back and forth between the two as she coyly covered her breasts with one arm and her pubic area with the other. "I'm feeling a bit exposed here, do you plan to join me?"

She watched with interest as the two men quickly shed their clothes. Worrying her bottom lip, she nearly bit through it when they revealed lithe well-muscled bodies. She'd never seen such well-defined bodies in her life and yet here were *two* equally magnificent specimens standing before her. Their skin was so pale it seemed almost translucent. The taller one, Niccolo stepped forward first, boring into her soul with those marvelous eyes. She trembled beneath that stare, not daring to breath, not daring to move as his hands gently cupped either side of her face. She was surprised by how cold they were, and nearly gasped, but his lips covered hers before the breath could escape. Her eyes drifted close as she lost herself in the moment as his kisses drifted down to her chin, along her jaw, her throat, and wound a way to her breasts.

Feeling the hair brushed away from her neck, she snapped her attention to Pavlo who pressed up close behind her, his erect member nestling between her cheeks of her rump as he nibbled at her earlobe. Her body trembled from the dual attention and her skin burned beneath their roving touch.

Niccolo sucked her left nipple into his mouth and rolled it lightly between his teeth as his hand massaged her folds. She gripped his hair, her body shuddering, and her knees nearly buckled under the weight of her explosive orgasm.

"Wait," she finally managed. "I need to sit for a moment."

They guided her around to the side of her bed, letting her perch on the edge. Pavlo dropped to his knees before her, pressing his face between her thighs. She moaned her approval as his tongue pressed deeper within her than she would've thought possible. It wasn't until she felt him biting playfully at her inner thigh that she realized he'd replaced his tongue with slender fingers. She felt a flash of pain quickly replaced by euphoria as his attentions became fiercer.

A soft caress of her shoulder reminded her of the other suitor. He stood next to her, his erection mere inches from her face. Needing no further prompting, she took the entire length of it between her lips and began to work it with a fervor she barely knew she possessed.

Her thoughts scattered, and she found it hard to concentrate on either man as her mind drifted away on wave after wave of pleasure. She wasn't sure what they were doing, but she knew she'd never experienced anything like it. Her entire body seemed to be on fire and freezing all at the same time as a thousand tongues caressed her every nerve.

Barely registering that Niccolo had withdrew from her mouth, she let herself drift onto her back. "No," she attempted to scream when she felt the euphoria ebb as Pavlo's teeth left her skin, but she couldn't hear her own voice. She nearly cried with gratitude when the sensation resumed. She didn't know which of them was kissing her, biting her. She didn't care.

Her bliss took on a dream-like quality. She felt as though she were gripped by one

continuous orgasm. She was vaguely aware of voices, but the voices were unintelligible, merely whispers on the wind. Who could be talking and why? These thoughts should've troubled her more, but nothing could bring her out of her stupor. Not even when the edges of consciousness began to darken and close in on her did she try to comprehend the situation. She still convulsed with pleasure as her world faded to black.

"I said enough," Niccolo snarled, pulling Pavlo to his feet by the hair.

He hissed in response, fangs extended, still dripping crimson, the blood lust apparent in his eyes.

"Control yourself, old friend," he insisted in a low voice.

Pavlo's shoulders tensed, his fingers uncurled, exposing razor sharp nails, and his knees flexed, preparing to spring. Niccolo quickly released his hair and dropped back in a defense crouch, baring his fangs.

Clarity finally returned to his friend's eyes and Pavlo threw his head back and laughed. "My deepest apologizes. Too many years of solitude seemed to have all but obliterated my manners."

"Think nothing of it," he replied, rising fluidly.

"Why did you interrupt my feeding?" he stared over at the unconscious woman.

"You nearly killed her." Niccolo was at her side in a blur of speed.

"And your point is?"

"She's no ghost. I'll not take her life."

"I thought you were morally opposed to keeping pets," he said, one eyebrow arched.

"I am and before you ask, I'm not looking to start a stable either," he assured him with a laugh.

"What are you proposing?" His shock was evident. "We just allow her to alert everyone in the savage lands to not only our existence, but our immediate presence?"

"Hardly," Niccolo scoffed. "She has no idea what we are. We'll just be on our way before she wakes."

"How can you be so convinced?"

"I was in her mind until she succumbed to your...persuasion. Where you not?"

"No." He shrugged. "What would be the point of exerting such energy on a meal I had no

intention of releasing?"

Niccolo cocked his head to the side. "Have you no trace of your former humanity?"

"To be perfectly honest, I'm a bit astounded to learn you've rediscovered yours. You no longer kill what you eat?"

"Not an innocent."

"I assure you she was far from innocent." Pavlo snickered as he traced his fingers along the side of her leg.

"But she'd done nothing wrong and she still has a will to live and..." He paused as he sat beside her on the bed.

"And?"

"And she is a woman."

Revelation lit his face. "Ah, you always did hold a special place in that cold heart of yours for the fairer sex."

"I have had many revelations in my life, but there is one that is most germane to this conversation."

"Which is?" he prompted when no further words came.

"There are two beasts warring within in me, each fighting to control my hand. One is everything I was: evil, mean, sadistic and...vengeful. The other, well it is everything I want to be: compassionate, wise, and all that I still find good in the humanity from which we must sustain ourselves."

"And the latter is the beast with the upper hand."

"For now," he laughed. "But it really just depends on which one I feed the most."

Niccolo punctured his index finger with a fang, creating a mixture of saliva and blood before rubbing it over the holes left in her thighs from their feeding. It only took a moment for them to close and vanish from sight.

Pavlo snorted in amusement and turned to face the window. In the blink of an eye, he stood before it, moving the curtain aside. "Well, if you are quite finished reeducating me on the fundamentals of morality, perhaps we should move to a safer place to finish our conversation and await the coming sun."

"Do you have a place near here?"

"Actually, I have managed to secure acceptable accommodations in the foothills of the

Sans Bois Mountains."

"Really? I didn't realize that area was populated yet."

"It isn't." He gave him a wink. "Which makes it all the more appealing."

Niccolo checked her pulse a final time; it was faint and slow, but steady. He sprang from the bed and they both quickly redressed.

"With a good tailwind, we could be there in twenty heartbeats," Pavlo said as they stepped out onto the lawn.

"Lead the way," he gestured toward the starry night.

"Do you think you can still keep up?" he quipped, leaping into the air.

"Oh, I think I'll manage."

Chapter Seven

Kanati entered the general store, but couldn't bring himself to match Acabo's broad smile. The elder instantly sobered as he waited patiently for him to state his mind.

"What happened to my aunt?" he finally mustered the courage to ask.

"Enola?" His gaze dropped to the counter before him. "She took ill and never recovered." "Did she suffer long?"

Acabo gave a derisive snort. "What's long when it comes to suffering? She stayed among us for as much time as she could. She was a fighter, your aunt."

"She always was," Kanati said with a rueful smile. "When did she pass?"

His brow pursued in confusion before fading away with a nod. "It was far enough in the past that I imagine your new home needs more than a few repairs to make it hospitable again."

"I have no money for supplies," he admitted, gazing at his boots. "How often do the traders come?"

"It's pretty sporadic, but it could be awhile." He cast a glance at the window. "The trading is better when the summer fades."

"I have a few pelts—"

"So do I," Acabo laughed. "I could use your back more than I could your possessions."

"What do you propose?"

"You help me out here with the store—sweeping, stocking shelves, hauling sundries home for some of the elders, and in turn, you can take whatever you need to get your house back in order."

"Oh, thank you so much, Acabo," Kanati gushed. "When can I begin?"

"Right now," he laughed, grabbing a broom from the corner and offering it over the counter. "Unless, of course, you have more pressing matters."

* * * *

Kanati would divide his days between working at the store and spending time with the

elders, relearning skills he had lost during his time at the boarding school. He may have owed his days to his tribe, but his evenings...those he vowed to reserve for Selu. By his second attempt, he found he *could* be in her presence and still maintain the power of speech. He thanked the Gods that he was her only suitor, for even though they they'd gotten off to a rocky start, he could sense she had an interest in him. When she accepted his offer to carry her wares home from the store for her, he was sure of it.

"So," she began, casting him a sideways glance. "Are you getting settled back into tribal life alright?"

He let out a nervous chuckle. "It's good to be home, but I just... I don't know, I feel a bit like a stranger."

"You were gone a long time and you were so young when..." she let her voice trail off.

"Yeah, I see certain faces and they seem familiar, but I can't really remember anyone who is still here."

"Not even me?" she asked with a laugh.

"Sadly, no." He stared at the road before them. "You of all people I should remember."

"It will get better." She patted his forearm. "I didn't think I'd ever readjust to life back here, but I did."

"How long were you gone?"

"Too long," she replied, averting her gaze.

They continued to walk in silence, leaving the main road and trudging up the hill to her home. Kanati opened his mouth to speak several times, but could think of nothing to say to lighten the mood and cursed himself for broaching the very subject he was already warned she didn't want to talk about.

"Let me get the door," Kanati offered, springing onto the porch, stumbling under the weight he carried and barely righting himself before he crashed into the front of the house.

"But your hands are full," Selu observed, shaking with laughter. "Allow me."

She slipped past him and led the way into the house. "Auntie! We have a visitor."

Taima emerged from the bedroom, hunched over, looking incredibly weary until she caught sight of Kanati. She straightened slightly and smiled broadly as she made her way into the kitchen.

"You must be Kanati. It is very nice to meet you," she spoke slowly, emphasizing each

word as she smiled up at him.

He cut a quick glance at Selu, but she had turned away. Her shoulders visibly trembled and he wondered if she were still trying to control her laughter from his near spill. She could've warned him that her aunt was slow. Perhaps it was just her illness that had addled her brain.

Returning his attention to Taima, he replied in an equally methodical voice, "It is nice to meet you, too. How are you feeling?"

Selu suddenly clasped her hand over her mouth and rushed from the room. Both he and Taima stared after her, mouths agape until they heard laughter erupting from the bedroom. Kanati shifted uncomfortably, still holding sacks of flour and rice.

"Where do you want these?" he asked, still emphasizing his words, and Selu howled louder from the other room.

"What has gotten into you, child," Taima said, ignoring Kanati and going into the other room with Selu. Her voice suddenly sounded fluid and intelligent.

He could hear whispers, but couldn't quite make out the words. When they returned, the color in Taima's cheeks made him wonder if she were still quite feverish.

"Just set those down on the table. I'll put everything away later," Selu said, still struggling not to laugh.

Kanati complied and turned to face the two women. "Perhaps I should come back when you're aunt is feeling better."

Taima shot a seething stare at her niece and Kanati suddenly felt horrible about showing up at an ailing woman's house unannounced. It was clear she was in no shape to have visitors and was probably embarrassed that Selu had let others see her in her current predicament.

"I'll walk you out," she said, leading him by the elbow to the door.

Once on the porch, she surprised him by giving him a quick peck on the cheek. He stared at her, eyes wide, a smile spread across his face. He was still staring into her eyes as he attempted to descend the stairs. Missing the first step, he tumbled the rest of the way and sprawled on his back in the yard.

"I'm alright," he assured her as he scrambled to his feet. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow?" He could no longer meet her gaze.

"That would be lovely," she said through the fingers that covered her mouth.

* * * *

Selu tossed on her straw mattress, unable to sleep, but unable to remain fully awake. Being near Kanati had stirred something in her, something inexplicable. He was such an odd boy, but his clumsiness just made him that much more endearing. And that smile, she wished he would use it more often. It lit up his entire face.

Her aunt had been so upset with her, but she still chuckled, thinking about their exchange earlier. Who knew that Taima would take her literally when she told her that Kanati was touched in the head?

As she finally drifted off to sleep, she found she was already looking forward to seeing him again tomorrow.

Chapter Eight

Niccolo opened his eyes and gazed up at a jagged arched rock formation. Pushing up to his elbows, he surveyed the spacious cave. It was deep enough to provide shelter from the elements but still small enough to feel almost cozy. They were adequate accommodations indeed. He rose to his feet silently so as not to disturb the still form of Pavlo lying prone on the other side of the cave's mouth. Padding further into the depths, he found a large rock and perched on it, haunches nearly touching his heels. He clasped his hands over his knees and regarded his friend thoughtfully.

They'd never been close, but had always shared a mutual respect that given different circumstances could've easily blossomed into friendship. During the war, he had made it a point not to let anyone get to close to him. He never knew when he might have to kill someone who had gone rogue.

Pavlo stirred in the darkness and was at his side in an instant. "You always were an early riser."

"It was a gift that has slowly transformed into a curse," he said with a snort.

"How so?"

"The less time I spend in the land of dreams, the more time I have to remind myself of just how alone I am in the world."

"Ah, but you are no longer alone." He patted him on the knee. "The pendulum now swings in the other direction."

"And for that I am grateful." He paused as he studied Pavlo's face. "But how long shall I be graced with your presence?"

"As long as you'll have me." His smile reached his eyes. "I've explored these great lands, not sure what it was I sought, but perhaps it was you."

"You are too kind, old friend." Niccolo slipped down from his perch. "Shall we see what the night has in store for us then?" "Oh, I have a special treat in mind. I pray you won't be disappointed."

"Do tell?" Niccolo smiled as he followed him to the mouth of the cave.

"Why tell when it would be so much more entertaining to show you," he said with a wink. "This way if you will, kind sir."

They leapt into the night, gliding along on the warm summer air. Niccolo watched their surroundings blur by with increasing speed. Just as he began to wonder where they might be going, he recognized Guthrie looming on the horizon. Pavlo brazenly led them over the center of town before landing in a darkened alley off Main Street. Striding to the end of the row, he motioned for Niccolo to follow.

"I remembered you to be a gentleman who could always appreciate the arts," he said as they crossed the street. "I heard of a wonderful play being performed here tonight and thought you might enjoy it."

Pavlo purchased tickets at the door and led them to their seats in the theater. Niccolo studied the playbill for *The Virgin Widow* and smiled in appreciation. *A romantic comedy...how novel*, he mused.

Soon the curtains opened and the players took the stage.

"The wants that sent him to me, hoping still that as he grew to ripeness, what was soft would harden in him, what was hard would soften; for he was of a sweet and liberal nature. But lending this to lose it, robs my child, my poor Lisana, of that little store I gathered for her dowry," Gerbetto professed.

"For what end? Not for his good, be wiser than to think it. Give thou to no man, if thou wish him well, what he may not in honor's interest take. Else shalt thou but befriend his faults, allied against his better with his baser self," Mrs. Martino countered.

And so Niccolo soon found himself lost in the plights and follies of Sicilian nobility. When the curtains finally closed, he turned to ask his friend what he thought of the show, but stopped short. He could tell without even needing to tap into his thoughts, Pavlo was on the prowl.

"You can't be serious," he whispered.

"What?" Pavlo turned to him with a bewildered look.

"We just fed last night. You can't possibly need to feed again so soon."

"What is need when weighed against desire?" He shrugged.

"It's dangerous to feed so often," Niccolo admonished gently. "You've been around long enough to know that better than anyone."

"In the old world, I'd agree, but look around you. Word travels slow when the populace is so spread out and thin even in its so-called cities."

"And yet, the danger is still there. It only takes one mistake to get the rumors flowing, and you know what happens then."

"The hunters?" Pavlo laughed. "Let them come. With you and I side by side, we could defeat an army of them."

"You speak like a fledgling. Would you really tempt the wrath of The Council by exposing our existence like that?" Niccolo was flabbergasted.

"Oh, please." He smirked. "I'm just livening up a potentially dreary conversation. I'd never actually do anything so brash."

"Dreary?" His jaw clenched involuntarily. "Am I boring you?"

"Not at all, but as you so eloquently put it, I've been around long enough to know the rules and the dangers. There is no need to belabor the point."

Niccolo forced himself to calm. "Very well, do as you wish."

"Oh, don't be like that," he said through a lopsided smile. "I avow, after tonight, I'll not feed again until *you* feel the urge."

"Why after tonight?"

"Because I've already located two prime candidates for us and they're close."

"Ghosts?" he asked dubiously.

"The walking dead," he confirmed with a nod.

"And after, we'll take a lengthy break from hunting?"

Pavlo winked as he gave him a sharp nod.

"Then I say let's dine," he said, rising from his seat.

Chapter Nine

Kanati sprawled face-first among the leaves, so lost in his musings he barely had enough time to get his hands beneath him.

"What is wrong with you?" Her brow creased as she helped him to his feet. "You seem to spend as much time picking yourself from the ground as you do walking beside me."

"It's hard to watch where I'm going when all I can see is you." He kicked at the stump that tripped him.

"Oh, Kanati—" She blushed. "You're too much. Now that you've finally found your voice, you never cease to amaze me with your choice of words."

"The sun is nearly set." He peered up through the branches.

"So?"

"So, we should probably start heading back."

"Kanati, you're not afraid of the dark are you?"

Kanati tried to squash the memory of the night he left the boarding school, but failed. The panicked screams of his friends and the sons-of-bitches that had held him captive grew in the distance until they threatened to deafen him.

"Hey, where'd you go?" Selu touched his arm.

Kanati recoiled, but laughed to conceal his shame when he realized what happened.

"I was just—" He took her hand. "It doesn't matter."

"If the night really bothers you so much, we can go back."

"It's not the darkness; it's what's *in* it that worries me."

"Don't worry, Kanati... I'll protect you." She kissed his hand.

Kanati pulled her closer, caressed her face and leaned in to taste her lips. Branches groaned in the trees to his left. His head jerked, eyes squinted to penetrate the dark canopy—shapes, shadows, blurred lines, nothing he could identify.

"What was that?"

"We are in the woods, branches move all the time." Selu arched her brow, studying his face.

"There is no wind." Kanati pulled her to a crouch.

"It's probably just a squirrel then," she whispered.

"It would have to be an awfully big squirrel."

His gaze roamed over the trees, waiting. Movement to the right—then nothing. Unseen eyes bore into him. His breath came in quick gulps. Movement to the left, closer—silence.

"Kanati, you're scaring me."

"You should be afraid." The sound of his own warning made his skin crawl.

"What's out there?"

"His guardian angel." The voice sounded so close behind them, Kanati swore he could feel the breath from it on his neck.

They whirled in unison. A shadow separated itself from the trees, slid toward them.

Is that a man?

"Run!" Kanati sprang to his feet.

Niccolo watched them disappear among the trees. He listened to the snapping twigs as they raced for their Talwa. A grin broke through the shadows of his face.

"Was it something I said?"

The urge to follow him was nearly overwhelming. He wanted to be near him, hear his voice, read his thoughts, marvel at the potential he radiated.

Pavlo moved silently between the trees until he stood at his side. His gaze shifted from Niccolo's face to the sound of the fleeing couple. "Neither were ghosts and you couldn't possibly be under the grip of the thirst, especially after the speech you gave me last night."

"Your point?"

"It begs the question: Why have they garnered such an intense interest?"

"You followed me." It wasn't a question.

"When you left the cave in such haste, my curiosity bested my manners."

"And your common sense." Niccolo snorted, feeling pressure build along his gum line. "Have you never heard the adage about curiosity and the cat?" He smiled, revealing his extended canines and Pavlo paled, taking a quick step back. "Relax, old friend," he said with a wink. "You've not crossed me."

"Then the threat was in jest?" He still wore a doubtful expression.

Niccolo couldn't help but laugh. "It wasn't a threat."

"Yes, you have never been one to waste energy on words when actions would send a more tangible message." He turned once more in the direction Kanati and Selu had fled. "Would I be out of line to ask the nature of your interest in the young couple?"

"It's the boy. There's just something about him. I get the distinct impression he will grow to be a great man."

"If he is to be a great man, perhaps he would make an even greater vampire."

He cast a sideways glance at his old friend and smiled. "Perhaps someday, but he still has much to learn about himself before he can learn about us."

Pavlo's head snapped in his direction in a blur of speed, eyes narrowed.

Niccolo shifted uncomfortably under the intense scrutiny. "You haven't near the power to read *my* mind, unless I let you," he finally said, forcing a smile.

"I have no need for that ability to understand the implications of what you are planning."

"I'm not planning anything." He shrugged. "The boy just fascinates me."

"And are there others like him?" His head cocked to one side.

"What're you implying, Pavlo?"

"Simply that you plot your grand return even as we speak. If you hand pick a powerful clan and—"

"Wait, there's no need to continue that train of thought. I'm afraid you're way off base here." Niccolo shook his head.

"Am I? The timing is perfect. Many of our kind have already arrived on these shores. If you can establish your dominance early, you will be the irrefutable leader of the New World."

Niccolo threw his head back and bellowed at the sky. "It's a rich idea, but you're overlooking several key elements in your theory."

"Which is?" His brow pursed in confusion.

"First and foremost, I've no desire to hold such an office, and if I did, I wouldn't march on the vampire nation with a clan of yearlings. It would be suicide."

"Not for the Butcher of—"

"That is no longer my name," he cut in tersely. "I've had my fill of war and petty politics.

If it were power I sought, I'd return to Europe and claim it."

"Then why?" He gestured in the direction the couple had taken.

Niccolo rubbed his chin in thought. "I suppose I saw in him something even more alluring than the power he exudes. Something I hadn't even realized I yearned for until our paths crossed." He brought his gaze up to meet his that of his friend. "Loyal companionship."

Pavlo nodded, the light of realization washing over his features. "Alas, now you have me to fill your void."

"That I do." He gripped him by the shoulder, delivering a reassuring squeeze. "That I do indeed."

* * * *

Kanati cleared the edge of the woods, still clutching Selu's hand. He pushed ahead, running as fast as his legs would carry him, and she matched him stride for stride. At last, he could make out the shapes of buildings as they neared the edge of the Talwa and he nearly cried out in relief. Once they'd put several homes between them and the tree line, he dropped to his knees, gasping for air. Selu tumbled down beside him, lying on her back.

When she finally caught her breath, she turned wide eyes to face him. "Who *was* that?" Staring at the ground before him, he didn't answer immediately. He wasn't sure where to begin.

"We have to tell the elders. They can gather a party and—"

"No." He shook head emphatically. "We mustn't tell anyone what we saw tonight"

"What?" She pushed herself to her elbows. "Do you really want a stranger staying in the woods, waiting for one of us to stray too far from home?"

"I think I might know who he is."

"Then why did we have to run?"

"Because he scares me to death," he replied.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." She frowned at him. "If he scares you, then we should tell the elders."

"I have to tell you something, something I haven't told anyone since I came home." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The night I left the school, that...*thing* in the woods helped me escape."

"Again, why did we run from him?"

"Because he killed everyone at the school."

"Oh no!" she covered her mouth. "Did he try to kill you too?"

"No, he told me I'd be safe, that he wouldn't harm me."

He watched her eyes dart back and forth as she tried to process the information. She was clearly at a loss for words.

"I'm just not sure for how long that vow holds true."

"Then we have to hunt him down and make sure he doesn't harm anyone else."

She tried to rise to her feet, but he pulled her back down and into his embrace.

"Don't you understand?" he asked in a rushed whisper. "He killed all of those people by himself. He's not human...he can't be, and if we send people we care about after him, we'll never see them again."

"Okay, we will keep this to ourselves." Crumpling against him, she trembled beneath his touch. "How do you know he won't come for you here?"

"If he meant us harm, we wouldn't have made it out of those woods alive." He wasn't sure if he was trying harder to convince her or himself. "No, I think he was just checking up on me."

"Do you think he'll return?" She lifted her face and met his gaze.

"No, he could see that I clearly made it home and I'm doing quite well here." He kissed her tenderly. "He shouldn't bother us again."

Chapter Ten

Taima toppled a bowl on the counter and Selu leapt from her chair with a gasp.

"What's gotten into you, child? You've been jumpy all day," she said, her face scrunched up in concern.

"Nothing, Auntie," she giggled nervously. "I was just lost in my thoughts and the noise startled me."

"Seems to me, you need different thoughts if the ones you're keeping now have you on such a narrow edge."

"I know. I'll try."

Selu wasn't sure how she could possibly think about anything else. Kanati said the stranger wouldn't return, but what on earth made him so sure?

"So, how are things going with the mental giant?" Taima asked.

"Oh, Auntie. You know as well as I do...he's not slow-witted." She laughed despite herself. "I wish I hadn't told you that."

"You've really taken a liking to him, haven't you?" she asked with a knowing smile that reached her eyes.

"Yes. Once he found his voice, he proved to be quite a remarkable young man."

"I'm glad to hear it." She moved to sit across from her at the table.

"I'm really not sure why he acted so queerly when we met, but I'm sure glad he overcame it."

"Perhaps this evening, instead of you two running off, he might be interested in sitting down for dinner."

"I'm sure he would be delighted. I'll ask him when he finishes with the elders."

* * * *

Kanati entered the house, hoping the butterflies in his stomach wouldn't fight for space with the food he was about to consume, the aroma of which was intoxicating and filled the entire room. Looking at Taima as she stood over the stove and stirred a large pot, he took a deep breath, savoring the scent of the stew.

Selu smiled at him. "It smells wonderful, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does," he agreed with a vigorous nod.

"Her stew is one of my favorite dishes."

"If it tastes half as good as it smells, I'm sure it will be one of mine as well."

Taima looked at him over her shoulder, face scrunched up in a look of disapproval. "What do you mean *if*?"

"I...uhm... I," Kanati stammered.

Relief flooded over him as her face broke into a wide grin. "Go ahead and have a seat. It's almost ready."

"Thank you, Grandmother," he replied, moving to the table. "I'm glad to see you are feeling much better than the last time we met."

She stiffened and Selu shot a nervous glance between them. "Auntie, did I mention that Kanati is helping Acabo down at the store now?"

"No, but I'm glad to hear it," she said, then paused as she was overcome by a coughing fit. She turned away from the food, covering her mouth until she regained control of her lungs.

She moved back to the stove with determination and ladled generous helpings of her concoction into three wooden bowls. "He's not exactly a spring chicken anymore and has no business doing all that lifting by himself."

Selu rose quickly and helped her carry the stew and a plate of fry bread to the table. Kanati waited patiently as the women took their seats. His mouth watered as he looked at the large chunks of deer meat, sliced corncobs, and various other vegetables floating in a thick brown sauce.

"Well, go ahead and help yourself," Taima gestured toward the bread.

They ate in relative silence, only interrupted by Taima's coughing.

"That was even better than it smelled," he said, sliding his empty bowl away from him with his thumbs.

"Did you get enough to eat?" Taima asked, one eyebrow arched.

"Yes, Grandmother," he said, rubbing his belly. "If I ate another bite, I'd burst." Selu rose to fetch a bucket of water to clean the dishes. "You remind me a lot of your father," Taima said as she cleared the table.

His jaw dropped and the air left his lungs, refusing to return.

She stared at him, head cocked to one side. "Surely, I'm not the first person to tell you that."

He nodded slowly.

"You were so young when Acoma passed," she paused, watching Selu as she set the bucket beside the counter. "I'm surprised he could've had such an impact on you."

"How so?"

"I mention him and you suddenly looked like you were kicked in the gut by a mule."

Kanati let out a nervous chuckle. "It was just unexpected. I've heard many people comment about my auntie, but..."

"Yes, Enola...she was a good soul and I miss her dearly."

"You were close?"

Selu handed her a freshly rinsed bowl and she dried it, nodding absently. Another fit of coughing overcame her and she put a hand on the counter to steady herself. Kanati jumped to his feet, grabbed a chair and helped guide her into it. He felt utterly helpless as he watched her gulp for air between bouts.

"Auntie, why don't you go lie down," Selu suggested when her aunt finally seemed to calm.

"After the dishes," she said in a hoarse voice.

"I can finish these," she insisted.

"I'll help her," Kanati offered, earning him a queer glance from both of them. "Besides, she doesn't have that much left to do."

Taima's gaze shifted between the two and she smiled. "Trying to run me off so you can have a little *alone* time, are you?"

Kanati and Selu instantly protested, their voice combining into an unintelligible blur.

Taima raised her hand, signaling for silence. "I'm just teasing you. Perhaps, I should rest for a bit. Selu, would you be a dear and give me a hand?"

As she guided her aunt to her bedroom, Kanati grabbed the pot, sloshed some water into it and began scrubbing. He had it cleaned, dried and sat on the counter by the time she returned. She smiled at him as she grabbed one of the last remaining dishes and began washing it. "Is she going to be alright?" he asked drying a proffered bowl.

She let out a heavy sigh before saying, "I honestly don't know. She doesn't seem to be getting any worse, but then...she hasn't improved much either."

"How long as she been ill?"

"It's been a little over a month since the cough first started."

They finished cleaning the rest of the dishes in silence. Kanati carried the bucket of water outside and dumped its contents in the grass at the side of the house. When he returned to the porch, Selu was there waiting for him.

"You can just set it there," she said, pointing to a spot near the door.

"Are we not going back in?"

She shook her head. "I thought it would be a nice evening for a walk."

Kanati looked to the sky, mentally gauging how much time they had before sunset.

* * * *

Selu held his hand as she led him into the woods. They picked their way over fallen branches and intertwining bushes grown thick with the onset of summer. The cloying undergrowth suddenly gave way to a small clearing, lit brightly through the break in the trees.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Selu asked, striding to the middle and twirling in a circle, her arms spread wide.

"Even more so now that you're in it," he replied, joining her.

She smiled up at him, reached for his hand and pulled him near. He caressed the side of her face, causing her to close her eyes before leaning in and pressing his lips to hers. Her eyes sprang open in surprise, but she didn't pull away. Rather, she returned his kiss, softly at first, but her burgeoning desire quickly escalated the intensity. Her tongue sought out his. Her hands gripped his hair, urging him on.

He didn't seem to need much more prompting than that. She felt his hands leave her face and fumble with the two leather straps tied at her neck that held her top up. With a pure act of will, she broke their kiss and stepped back to finish removing her clothes, eyeing him as he followed suit.

She felt warmth spring to life from her nether regions and spread throughout her body. Rubbing her dark brown nipples between her fingers, she watched intently as he slid out of his shirt, revealing a smooth, well-toned chest. Her left hand dropped slowly from her breast, glided down her stomach, the fingers touching lightly along her pubic hair as he shed his britches, his member already engorged.

She let out a moan of delight as he pulled her back into his embrace. His kiss was now fevered, intense, contagious. Her hands on his shoulders, she pushed lightly down until his lips trailed their way to her breasts. He pulled her left nipple into his mouth while looking up at her, nibbling at it lightly, almost hesitantly.

"Harder," she breathed, running her fingers through his hair.

His hands roamed down her back as he complied, reaching her bottom and gripping it firmly. She dropped one of her own between them and steadily massaged the area around the button nestled between her nether lips, occasionally squeezing it between her fingers. Her body tensed from the pleasure coursing through her. His skin touching hers, hair brushing over her, hands kneading her soft flesh, his scent mingling with hers to fill her nostrils with aromas hinting at the bliss to come. The sensations were almost overwhelming.

Her body shuddered as she hurtled toward climax. A whimper crossed her lips that quickly grew to a moan. She worked her hand faster, urging her orgasm ever closer. The other gripped Kanati's hair tightly and suddenly she was jarred from the edge as he pulled away.

"What..." was all she managed before he dropped to his knees.

Burying his face between her legs, his tongue lapped over her now stilled fingers, her vagina, her clitoris. The warmth returned, spreading faster, urging her hand back in motion. The first wave of her orgasm crashed over her and her knees buckled. Kanati caught her and lowered her to the ground before resuming his attentions. She jerked and twitched as he once again explored her now overly sensitive clitoris. Biting her lip, she placed a foot on either shoulder and grabbed his hair with both hands. His tongue searched deeper within her. His breath, hot and moist, washed over her thighs.

Her body felt afire as he pushed her toward another orgasm and let out an almost guttural moan. She was about to climax for a second time and he hadn't even entered her yet. No, as good as it felt, she needed something more.

"I want to feel you inside me," she whispered.

He showed no signs of pausing.

"Kanati," she said, louder this time.

His head rose. He stared at her expectantly, his face glistening in the fading sunlight.

"I want you. I need you," she began, grasping for words that flitted among her jumbled thoughts. "Be one with me."

She removed her feet from his shoulders and he crawled forward until his face was over hers. Reaching between them, she gripped his manhood with both hands and pressed it against her labia, swollen with arousal. His entire body shuddered as he pushed forward, burying himself deep within her. Suddenly feeling faint, his sheer size astounded her, filled her, threatened to send her into a permanent state of euphoria just by its presence.

His movements were slow, gentle, as he eased himself in and out of her. She locked her legs behind his back and matched his rhythm. She could barely feel the warm grass beneath her back. The clearing slowly faded from around them as she lost herself in all-consuming pleasure. Her mind swam, her body tensed, she felt her climax building with such intensity it almost frightened her. She neared the edge and fought to stay there, not wanting to lose the feeling of pure ecstasy that held her in its grip.

Kanati extended his arms, pulling his chest from hers, pushing himself deeper. The air felt cool as it rushed between them. His body convulsed as he exploded inside her, sending her past the point of no return. Her orgasm was so intense that her vision narrowed and her breath refused to come.

After he collapsed in a heap beside her, they stared at the cloudless sky, gulping for air. He snaked an arm beneath her neck and pulled her close, her head resting against his chest. She closed her eyes, savoring the moment, reliving the event one precious moment at a time.

"Selu," he said tentatively.

She rose to her elbows so she could see his face.

"I love you," he continued, caressing her cheek.

Leaning forward, she kissed him lightly on the lips. "I love you, too."

Chapter Eleven

"But it has been weeks since we last fed," Pavlo said, pacing near the mouth of their cave. "Quite frankly, I'm ravenous."

"Ravenous or bored?" Niccolo asked with a snort. "As I recall, our accord was to not feed again, until *I* felt the thirst, and it has been less than two weeks."

"I had no idea you intended to use the agreement as a means of torturing me when it was formed. Otherwise, I would have insisted on provisions to ensure—"

"Is it my fault you're a poor negotiator?" Niccolo laughed.

"In point of fact, I am an outstanding negotiator. I've just proven to be far too trusting when dealing with...*friends*."

"Then you wish to renege on the pact?"

"No," he said, shooting a look of disdain his way. "The mere fact that I'm soliciting your attendance for the event should be proof enough of my intent to honor my word. The good Lord knows, you have bestowed upon me ample opportunity to sneak a treat now and then while you are off mooning over your pet."

"Kanati is not my pet."

"And yet, you consistently put his needs above our own."

"I do no such thing," he barked, fighting the urge to drop fang. "I've only observed them from afar."

"Which is why they fled from you the night I followed."

"They've not laid eyes upon me since," Niccolo insisted. "Besides, what business is it of yours?"

"Whatever..." he said, waving his hand in the air dismissively. "All we ever achieve is the mass attendance of plays and subsequent return to this God forsaken hole in the rock like some sort of exiles. I'm bored with it all."

"The plays were your idea," Niccolo pointed out.

"Yes, but only because I know well how much you enjoy them," he said, gliding to the back of the cave to perch on a large boulder, brooding. "Besides, I was positive that if you spent enough time immersed in the scent of humans, it would hasten the onset of your thirst."

"Ah, and the ulterior motive is revealed," he said before offering a half bow. "Well played, sir, but I hate to inform you, I've been known to go months between feedings."

Pavlo's brow knitted as he contemplated those words. "Just how old are you?"

He threw back his head and roared laughter at the ceiling. When he recovered, he said, "Old enough to recognize when a friend is truly in need. Come; let's see if we can sate your appetite."

"Verily?" He instantly perked up.

"Yes, but only on one condition," he paused as Pavlo reached his side in a blur of speed. "Tonight, we dine on ghosts."

"Yummy," he cooed, leaping into the air.

Niccolo followed suit and soon they were soaring across the countryside, trees and rolling hills passing beneath them so quickly their colors and shapes seemed to blend into a single seething entity.

They set down on the outskirts of a small community with which Niccolo was unfamiliar. A rough wooden sign posted near the road declared the town to be Hope, but he doubted there was much to be found in the tiny shantytown. As they walked down the main street, he was surprised to see that very few residents were out and about. The warm summer nights normally brought the masses out in full force. There were a handful of stores lit up and open for business, but there were no tell tale scents in the air to signal the presence of either a sizeable restaurant or even a saloon.

A large church was situated in the center of town, its wooden cross looming high above all else. Where most of the homes and buildings of the town appeared to be hastily thrown together and in poor repair, the house of worship was a beacon of prosperity. The walls were constructed with rocks of various sizes, punctuated by broad wooden beams stained a brown so dark that it appeared nearly black. Stained glass windows were situated on either side of the arched double door. Each displayed an angel. The one to the right rose amidst a sea of trumpets. The other plummeted to the accompaniment of garish streaks of lightning.

He could hear the passionate voice of a preacher extolling the word of God to his flock.

With a quick probe of his mind, he found the reason for the deserted streets: The vast majority of the residents were held in rapt attention by the lively sermon.

Niccolo grunted to himself as he considered his first assessment of the small town. He was wrong. If anything, the denizens were imbued with hope and blinded by the promise of greener pastures.

"Perfect," he said with a snort.

Pavlo cast him a puzzled look.

"We're in search of ghosts and you lead us to a town filled with the devout."

Cocking his head to one side, Pavlo said, "Did you not feel them?"

"I haven't performed the scan yet," he admitted, suddenly feeling sheepish.

"And yet, I detected enough misery emanating from this place to virtually pluck me from the air of its own accord."

"Interesting," he said, nodding in approval. "Then, by all means, let's see what's on the menu for tonight."

"I've already made my selection," Pavlo said, facing the north. "It was his voice above all others that drew me here."

"Off with you then," he responded with a flick of his hand. "Come find me when you are finished."

Pavlo nodded once before moving up the road at a brisk pace. Niccolo watched him depart, a smile creeping unbidden to his face. For all his age, he still reminded him of a fledging lost in the excitement and thrill of the hunt.

Closing his eyes, he dispatched his mind's ethereal fingers and searched for a suitable candidate to sate his stirring thirst. He flitted from thought to thought among the sparse population not in attendance at the church. His focus locked on a point near the center of the small residential area and he couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Now that's what I call timing," he said, moving as quickly as possible without drawing attention to himself.

He ducked between two buildings and used to his preternatural abilities to gap the rest of the distance in the blink of an eye. Pausing on a front porch, he cast a glance in both directions before easing the door open. The front room was in immaculate condition and furnished tastefully, if not sparsely, with a couch, several wing back armchairs, and a carved mahogany side chair that stood in stark contrast in the center of the room. The fragrance of the evening meal still hung heavily in the air, smelling of roasted pork and beans.

Taking in the image of the man in the living room, he closed the door behind him gently. He sported soiled clothing that appeared to have been of a fine cut once, and unruly hair snaking out in all directions. He had the look of a man on the edge—and he was. His feet dangled dangerously close to the edge of a chair he stood on. His eyes rose to meet Niccolo's above sallow cheeks. They didn't register surprise or even concern, just mild curiosity. One of his hands gripped a rope, the ends of which were secured to a rafter and his neck.

Using his mind's eye, he quickly plucked the man's name from his thoughts.

"Come now, Allen," Niccolo whispered as he oozed further into the room. "Is this really how you want to meet your end?"

The man just stared at him.

He continued to speak to him in a soothing voice. "Have you ever seen a man strung up? It isn't a very pleasant sight. The lucky ones die quickly, their necks snapped when they reach the end of the rope. For no more distance than you have between you and the floor, I'm willing to wager you will not have that luxury. No, you'll feel every excruciating moment as your eyes bulge, your lungs scream for air, your skin burns from the tautness of the rope. You will flail. You will claw at your rope, desperately hoping to undo your folly. Your bowels will empty and be slung throughout your room as your limbs thrash."

He walked slowly toward the man as he spoke, until he stood at the base of the chair.

"There is no dignity in a death such as this. I understand your need to end the pain, believe me, but there are better ways for a man of your stature to deliver himself to the eternal slumber."

The man stared at him with vacant eyes, obviously consumed by the sound of his voice.

"Remove the rope," he commanded and steadied him by the legs as he complied. "Very good, now give me your hand," he continued, extending his own.

Niccolo helped him down from the chair and led him to the couch against the back wall. Easing him onto the cushions, he leaned in close, bringing his lips close to Allen's ear.

"I think you'll find this a much more enjoyable journey into the afterlife."

He opened his mouth, allowing his fangs to shoot forth before sinking them slowly into the man's throat. As he began to drink, he shared the man's every memory, not only as a visitor, but as if it were his own. Every touch, smell, emotion and thought was relived and drawn from. Thirty years of life was experience over the course of minutes.

Niccolo broke the connection when he saw himself enter the front door. Staring down at Allen as he took his final breaths, he couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for the man. He had led a charmed life, been given every opportunity. Born into a moderately wealthy family, he'd never done without, never experienced hardship. He was a deacon in his church... the Church, had a loving wife, a prosperous future as the owner of the town's only bank, and high hopes of having children. Then *she* came into his life. Carmella had been so pretty, so soft, and she smelled incredible. She sat across from his desk, batting her eyes and showing a brazen interest in him. Succumbing to a moment of lust, he took her right there in his office and was caught mid-thrust by one of his employees. His wife left him, the church disowned him, and the vast majority of the good citizens of Hope refused to do business with him. Even Carmella had fled the town, unable to cope with the shame heaped upon her.

"You have no one to blame, but yourself," he said, picking up the now lifeless body. "She loved you, would've done anything in the world for you and she bedded you every chance she had. Yet, you had to stray. The temptation of flesh fells more men than even the mightiest sword."

Puncturing his thumb, he used his blood to close the wounds on Allen's neck. Then he returned him to the noose and let him dangle, kicking over the chair to complete the scene. Satisfied the death would rouse no suspicions, he turned to leave just as the door swung open.

"Oh, what an exceptionally ingenious way to dispose of the remains," Pavlo said, smiling broadly.

He snorted in amusement before answering, "Alas, I can't take credit for the idea. Poor Allen here already had the props in place for this little charade." Closing the gap between them in a blur, he added, "How was your meal?"

"Delightfully decadent," he said with a vigorous nod. "He was an underprivileged young man, confused by his sexuality and shunned by the church. It was only a matter of time before his profound burden pushed him over the edge. At least, he died having finally known the embrace he so long desired."

"You indulged him?" Niccolo asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Of course," he laughed. "A touch is a touch and one long denied is even more eager to

please. Don't tell me you've never experienced a bout of male intimacy."

Niccolo shook his head. "I never had the desire to know the embrace of another man."

"When I was young, my mother once told me that fornication with a woman should only be endured for the sake of procreation. True pleasure could only be derived when shared with someone who knew your body's needs as well as their own."

"I've come across many Greeks who shared that point of view during my travels."

"And yet, you never heeded their advice?"

"No." He shook his head. "And you are the only one I've ever claimed as friend."

"You really should," he whispered, stepping closer, hand extended. "You might find you even enjoy it."

Niccolo stepped passed him, ducking the intended caress and walked through the door. "I'll take your word for it."

"Perhaps another time," he said, following on his heels.

Chapter Twelve

"How are you feeling today, Auntie?" Selu asked, taking a seat across from Taima at the table.

"I'm still here," she replied with a grunt. "I'm beginning to think I won't ever be completely well again."

"Aw, don't say that." She reached across the table to pat her hand. "At least you're no longer bedridden. You'll be back to full strength before you know it."

She removed her hand from beneath Selu's and waved it dismissively. "I'm tired of worrying about it."

"Are you hungry?" Selu offered.

Taima merely shook her head.

"Well, I'm famished," she said, rising from her seat.

She went to the cupboard and rummaged for something to eat.

"So," Taima began, turning so she might better see her niece. "How's Kanati?"

Selu smiled back over her shoulder. "He's fine, Auntie."

"I couldn't help but notice you two have been spending an awful lot of time together these past few weeks."

"Yes, now that he's...grown more comfortable in my presence, he is a pleasure to be around."

"So, should I be expecting gifts soon?" Taima asked in an innocent voice.

Selu whirled, her hunger forgotten, and returned to the table. "The marriage ritual?"

"Of course," she replied, her brow furrowed in confusion. "You're both of age and clearly in love."

"He can't take me as his wife right now," she said, staring at the table. "Who would look after you?"

"Oh, rubbish," she said with a laugh. "If nothing else, you could both live here."

They both fell quiet as Selu contemplated the weight of her Aunt's words.

"I'm surprising him with dinner at his house this evening," Selu said, breaking the silence. "Perhaps it would be a good opportunity to broach the subject."

"That's a marvelous idea. As long as it took him to find his voice, we could be waiting forever if you don't bring it up first."

"Auntie!" Selu exclaimed. "You're incorrigible."

"What ever do you mean?" she asked, smiling broadly. "You know I speak the truth."

* * * *

Selu stood over the stove, absently flipping the deer steaks in the skillet. Her mind was on her discussion with Taima. Why hadn't Kanati brought it up? Was she just a novelty? The first woman his age he ever met? No, she could see the love in his eyes. There had to be more to it. Yet there was something...something that stilled his tongue when she was certain she'd made it abundantly clear that all he had to do was ask. Then again, he'd been gone for so long. Maybe, he just didn't remember the custom.

She removed the steaks, placing them on a plate before grabbing two disks of flat dough and dropping them in the sizzling oil. The fry bread grew instantly, filling the room with its yeasty aroma. She waited until the edges browned then flipped them. Kanati entered just as she pulled them from the skillet.

"Wow, I could smell dinner before I even made it to the porch," he said, rubbing his stomach. "And it is a wondrous smell indeed."

"I hope you don't mind," she said as she strained a pot of vegetables. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Not at all," he said, crossing the room and giving her a peck on the cheek. "I'll grab us a couple of plates."

He set the plates on the table before helping her bring over the rest of the food. Holding out a chair, he motioned for her to sit.

"Why, thank you, she said as she slid down and allowed him to push the chair forward.

Kanati took a seat opposite her, eyeing her with a sheepish grin on his face.

"Why are you staring at me like that," she asked, scooping a ladleful of vegetables onto his plate.

"I..." he began as she watched a whirl of emotions sweep across his face. "Nothing, let's

just enjoy our dinner."

Spearing a steak with his fork, he placed it on her plate before claiming the other for himself. They ate in silence, Selu staring at Kanati and him staring at his plate. When he swallowed the last of his food, he turned his gaze upon her and he wore such a doleful expression on his face, her breath caught in her throat.

"What's wrong?" she managed, her voice barely a whisper.

"I..." He paused, his expression softening. "I love you so much, it hurts sometimes."

Her heart beat faster, thudding against her chest. "I love you too."

"Which still astounds me," he said with a laugh. "I didn't...we've never... It's just that when I'm around you, all other thoughts are pushed from my mind. To be honest, it's even worse when we're apart. I can't stop thinking about you."

Selu's brow furrowed as she tried to guess where he was going with the line of thought. "And this makes you sad?" she finally ventured.

With a quick motion, he swept the plates aside and held his hand before her, palm exposed. She placed her own within it and he gripped it tenderly.

"Of course not." He gazed into her eyes. The power of that stare bored through her and her limbs suddenly felt like jelly.

"But?"

"I had an interesting conversation with Acabo today," he began softly. "He told me that I'm not doing right by you, that if you had other suitors, I would most likely have already lost you to one of them."

"Why would he say such a thing?" she asked, but she already knew the answer.

"With as much time as we've been spending together, I should take you as my wife. I should perform the marriage ritual and offer a gift to your Auntie. If you had other's who were interested, they would've already done so."

"But I don't want any other suitors," she said, placing her other hand over the one he held. "All I want is you."

A smile beamed below his nose and spread to his eyes. "I'm sorry, if I've wronged you. As I said, I can think of nothing else but being with you."

"Perhaps, you could visit my Auntie soon."

"Oh, Selu! That would mean so much to me," he said, pausing as a look of doubt

replaced his smile. "What should I bring her?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, laughing. "You could show up with a handful of fresh picked flowers and she would say yes. I have it on good authority, she's quite fond of you and waiting with baited breath for your visit."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Let's just say you're not the only one who had an interesting conversation today."

"Then it's settled," he said as he rose from his chair. "But I'll have you know, I won't show up on her doorstep with mere flowers in hand."

He circled the table and she rose just in time to be pulled firmly into his embrace.

"No, I'll rise at first light. Tomorrow your Auntie will receive the mightiest, most majestic buck I can find."

Selu pulled back and stared up at him, one eyebrow arched.

"Dressed and quartered, of course. I'll even tan the hide for her."

She buried her face in his chest and breathed deeply of his scent. Pulling herself from his arms, she led him to his bedroom. She knew exactly how she wanted to celebrate the occasion.

Chapter Thirteen

Niccolo stood hidden in the shadows of the east side of the house, watching Kanati and Selu as they prepared for their evening meal. He'd followed the boy from the store all the way to his home. Kanati's mind was troubled and Niccolo wondered how he would handle his newfound burden.

"If you insist on being in his presence during every waking moment, perhaps you should turn him and be done with it," Pavlo whispered in a voice so soft, it could only be heard by a vampiric ear. "At least then, we would not be compelled to spend most of our time watching him as he goes about with is diurnal drudgeries."

"No one said you had to come with me." He cast him a sideways glance.

"Hrmpf," he grunted, making a sour face. "The only thing worse than spending my evenings observing this whelp is the prospect of spending them alone when I know you are so near."

"It's not like we spending every night here or even the entire night for that matter," Niccolo turned to face him. "Do I not indulge nearly your every whim?"

Pavlo caressed the side of his face. "Not every one."

"I said nearly." He pulled away from the touch.

"You've never answered my question. Why not just turn him?"

"He's not ready." He returned his attention to the window.

"He is old enough, learned, and has had an opportunity to know the touch of a woman. What more do you want?"

"More time. He is just beginning his life. I'll not rob him of his happiness just because I'm intrigued by him."

"How altruistic of you," he smirked. "You would rather wait until life has dealt him a few weighty blows. Have him learn the true meaning of misery and only then offer him an opportunity for the release of his pain. Me thinks it would be more philanthropic to spare him such knowledge."

"It's not your decision," he said with a warning glare. "*I* will decide when and if the time is right."

"So be it," Pavlo said, visibly trembling. "Until such a time, we will simply wait...and observe."

Niccolo wondered, not for the first time, if the peculiarities of his friend outweighed the benefits of having the company of one of his own.

Chapter Fourteen

Taima settled back in her favorite chair as she watched the young couple embrace each other in the middle of her living room. Kanati still clutched the ear of corn she had given him to accept his proposal. She dabbed at the moisture that flowed freely down her cheeks and hoped they didn't notice her tears of joy. He had really surprised her with his generous gift. She'd thought he would only bring a ham or venison at most, and yet he'd given her enough meat to last from full moon to full moon. She made a mental note to use some of the tanned hide to make him something nice to wear.

"Auntie, are you alright?" Selu was suddenly hovering over her with a concerned look on her face.

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm just so happy for you both. It warms my heart to know that when I'm gone you'll still have someone in your life that loves you as much as I do."

Selu hugged her neck and kissed her still damp cheek. "But you are not going to leave us any time soon."

"Tomorrow, I will make my way down the hill to announce your betrothal to the other elders."

A concerned look washed over her niece's face. "You are still pretty weak from your illness, I'm not sure you have the strength for such a journey."

"Bah!" she grunted in response. "I'll make it. It's tradition. They will have our Uku begin blessing the area for the ceremony immediately."

"Dustu will be so happy," Selu said, calling the Uku or priest by name. "It has been ages since he's had the opportunity to perform a marriage."

"How long will it take him to prepare?" Kanati wondered aloud.

"Seven days." She smiled as she watched his shoulders sag. "Do not fret. The time will pass quickly."

He strolled closer to them and placed his hand on Selu's shoulder. "What's a few more

days when compared to a lifetime in the arms of the woman I love."

Selu rose silently and kissed him.

"Well, I had better get some rest if I hope to get everything done I want to tomorrow," Taima said, pushing herself up from her chair. "Help an old woman to her bed?"

Kanati watched Selu escort her aunt into the back bedroom, his mind reeling with thoughts of what his wedding day would be like. Who knew he could ever know such happiness after having so much of his life filled with such sorrow.

"What are you smiling at?" Selu asked, emerging from the bedroom.

"I can't help but smile when I think of you."

She wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. He kissed the top of her head. The smell of her hair was intoxicating. Everything about her was intoxicating.

Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, he froze, forcing his smile to stay in

place. "Don't move," he whispered.

"What's wrong?"

"A shadow just crossed the window. There's someone outside."

"Is it—?"

"I don't know," he replied, pulling from her embrace. "But there's only one way to find out."

He entered the kitchen on long strides, scanning the counters as he moved. He grabbed a large cast iron skillet with his left hand and carving knife with his right.

"Kanati, don't go out there!" she urged in a rushed whisper.

"I have to," he said, moving toward the door. "I'll not start my new life with you and your auntie living in fear."

"Then I'm going with you," she said, turning back to the kitchen.

"No, just wait for me here," he begged, the thought of something happening to her nearly crushing the breath from his chest.

He cracked open the door and slid out onto the porch as quietly as he could. Aware of every creak of the wood beneath his feet, he brandished his makeshift weapons and edged closer to the corner of the house, his back against the wall. Holding his breath, he leapt around the corner, ready to fight for his life. There was no one there.

He exhaled heavily before dropping into crouch. Keeping close to the house, he scurried down to the next corner. He sprang into the clearing behind the house without hesitation. Nothing. By now his heart was beating with such force, it rocked his chest, but still he pressed on. He could hear grass crunching beneath someone's feet as he approached the next corner. Retightening his grip on the knife, he rounded the corner just as a shadow rushed at him. Sparks flew as a blade bounced off the skillet he held before him. With a mighty roar, he drew his arm back, ready to plunge his knife into the intruder. His arm froze mid swing.

"Selu!" he hissed. "You were supposed to wait for me inside."

"I couldn't," she said, lowering her knife. "What if there were more than one of them out here?

"I could've killed you." The revelation rocked him.

"I... I..." she stammered. "I'm sorry. I didn't hurt you did I?"

"No, you just hit the pan," he said, laughing as he realized she had delivered the first blow.

"You saw no one else?" she asked, looking beyond him.

His gaze followed hers across the moon-drenched hillside with its long shadows. "No, but if they are still watching, I'm sure they will think twice before returning. I can't imagine they

would want to face either of us when our ire is up."

Maybe even you more so than me. The thought made him smile with pride.

"Selu, you are truly a remarkable woman."

"Why do you say that?"

"You never cease to amaze me," he replied, draping his arm over her shoulder. "Come on, let's go back inside."

Chapter Fifteen

"What were you thinking?" Niccolo asked tersely as they pushed deeper into the woods. "You've ruined a perfectly good evening for them."

"I just wanted to share in their bliss," Pavlo answered, pushing branches out of his way. "And there wasn't a very good angle from the window you were using."

"I chose it because it put the moon at our faces so we wouldn't cast shadows into the room—as you well know, so don't play innocent with me. There isn't a chance in hell you've been able to live this long without taking account of such factors."

"I beg to differ." He came to a stop, hands on his hips. "It's true I've been a hunter for centuries, but this is the first time I've been reduced to observing humans for hours on end. To that end, you simply must forgive me if I have yet to develop the proper skill set for it, and forgive me even more if I have no real desire to do so."

Niccolo stared at him for a long moment, shook his head and let out a hearty laugh. "No, forgive me, old friend. Perhaps I was a bit harsh in my rebuttal. How can I make it up to you?"

"I presume a good hunt is out of the question," he suggested, wearing a disarming smile. He simply stared at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Then perhaps a play," he continued, sidling closer. "I heard there is a new rendition of *O Locura o Santidad* playing in Guthrie."

"The play by Echegaray?" Niccolo asked with surprise. "I wouldn't think a Spanish play would be popular in the plains."

"Oh, rest assured, it has been translated for the masses here. It is formally billed as Madman or Saint, but I'm sure they've tried to stay true to the original text."

"I thought the plays were more for my benefit," he eyed him with unmasked skepticism.

"Well, I must admit, they have grown on me," he replied, shrugging. "And this one in particular has most certainly captured my interest."

"Then by all means..." Niccolo extended his hand, bowing slightly. "Lead the way."

* * * *

Niccolo contemplated the play as the curtain slowly drew closed. It was really a story of a moral conundrum. The question posed was whether an imposture, begun in ignorance, and harmful to no one, must be made public once uncovered, even at the loss of all one's worldly possessions and ultimately, their happiness. He could relate on a larger scale for by his very existence he was an imposter posing as a man and if discovered he would surely lose all.

Pavlo patted him on the arm, shaking him from his musings. "Well? What did you think?"

"It was a wonderful—" Niccolo paused as he sensed something amiss backstage. "Did you feel that?"

His friend was stiff in his chair, head cocked slightly to one side, his nostrils flared.

"I'll take that as a yes," he snorted. "We should go before they notice us."

"They are hunting in our territory," he said in hushed voice, strained with emotion.

"I'm sure they are just passing through or we would've crossed paths with them before now."

"Either way, it is imperative we send them on their way sooner rather than later," Pavlo insisted, his eyes burning with the prospect of confrontation.

Niccolo closed his eyes, carefully shielding his thoughts as he searched theirs. "I count six of them and none of them yearlings."

"It could be interesting," he said with a wink.

"It could be risky."

"Or it could be risqué."

"I'm more concerned with the risk than any monkey business at this point in the evening."

"A risk I fear we must take lest we find ourselves imposed upon."

"There is nothing in their thoughts that lead me to believe they have any intention of spending more than an evening in the Indian Territory."

Pavlo leaned away, eyeing him with a strange look on his face. "Who would've thunk it? The Butcher of Sangucina is afraid of a confrontation."

"Don't call me that," Niccolo growled. "I'm not afraid, I'm just old enough to realize that sometimes using my wits is better than baring my fangs. Now let's go before they—" "Too late," he laughed. "They know we are here...well, that I'm here anyway, and they are most curious."

"Why did you drop your guard?" he asked, rising slowly to his feet.

"Because you would not and I was bored." He shrugged nonchalantly before rising as well.

"If it's excitement you want, it's excitement you'll get." Niccolo stormed up the aisle and out the front door, Pavlo hot on his heels.

"Where are you going?" he called out. "They await us backstage."

"We are going to the back of the theater and you are going to call them out," he replied, rounding the corner.

"I see," he snorted. "We are still hiding in the shadows."

"Don't be obtuse." He cast him a sideways glance. "There is a high probability that the introductions will be the only peaceful moment of this encounter. Do you really want to expose our existence to an entire troupe of actors?"

"The only ones who remained were meant to be feasted upon anyway. We could always celebrate our imminent victory with a feast of our own to do away with any witnesses."

"Enough!" he roared. "You wanted to meet our visitors and we will, but I'll not endanger the lives of innocents for the chance to stoke your ego."

"They are actors." He grinned disarmingly. "How innocent could they be?"

Niccolo couldn't help but laugh. He was still smiling as he came to stop in the shadows behind the theater. Staring out over the rolling hills, he quietly thanked God that the growing city had yet to stretch in that direction. No one was within earshot of the secluded spot. That was about to change.

"Get on with it then," he said gruffly, waving his hand in his friend's direction.

Pavlo closed his eyes, bowed his head and brought his hands together in front of his face. He looked to be in deep prayer. His eyes sprang open and his gaze rose above a smile as he locked stares with Niccolo.

"It is done," he said with a nod. "They approach as I speak."

Three figures materialized around the east corner, the other three arrived from the west. They paused at the edges of the building. Three men and three women regarded him, blood lust emanating from them in waves. They were dressed in elegant eveningwear, all dyed in varying shades of crimson. The smallest of the males, barely above five feet tall, took a step forward from his group in the east.

"You summoned us?" he asked in a thick British accent.

"Yes," Pavlo answered, stepping out of the shadows. "I am extending you a courtesy. It seems you stumbled across our feeding grounds by mistake."

"And who the hell might you be?" a woman called out from the other side.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I'm Pavlo."

"Pavlo?" she pressed.

"Pavlo of Sparta," he obliged with a slight bow.

"They don't have surnames in Sparta?" She snorted.

"They didn't when he was born, Nessa," the leader answered quickly.

"Is he an ancient?" the other lady asked, eyes wide.

"No, but I'd dare venture he is quite old," he replied. "But where are my manners?" He closed the gap between them in a blur, hand extended.

Pavlo stood his ground without so much as flinching.

"My name is Adam Chaffey," he said, shaking Pavlo's hand before pointing at each of his clan members in turn. "Nessa is that fiery lass over there, the newest of our little family. The two gentlemen accompanying her are Charlie and Tommy. Behind me are Lana and my mate, Annette."

The rest of the clan moved to stand within paces of Pavlo, seemingly moving as one.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Adam." He gave a slight bow. "Your name is familiar to me, but for the life of me, I can't place the context in which I know it."

"I've been around for a long time," he said with a smile. "Though not quite as long as you, I dare say I'm fairly close. Perhaps we moved in the same circles at some point."

"How large of a clan do you have here?" Tommy interrupted as he eyed him from head to toe, clearly sizing him up.

Pavlo threw back his head and laughed. "I haven't been a member of a formal clan in years."

"It's a wonder you can walk," Charlie laughed.

One eyebrow raised, Pavlo regarded him coolly. "Beg your pardon?"

"You must have stones the size of my head, so I can only imagine it must make it

difficult to walk."

"I'm afraid I still don't follow," he admitted, shaking his head.

"What my friend is trying to say is," Tommy began. "That it takes a lot of balls to call six of us out here all by your lonesome and then tell us we are not welcome."

"Who said he was alone?" Niccolo spoke softly from the shadows.

All head snapped in his direction as he emerged to join the group.

"Very interesting," Adam said, his head cocked to one side. "I didn't feel your presence... I still don't feel it."

"I'd hoped to stay out of the conversation, but I didn't like the direction it was headed." He walked to stand beside Pavlo, hands clasped behind his back.

"Perhaps we should finish the introductions," Pavlo patted him on the shoulder. "This is my dear friend, Niccolo Rasetti."

Tommy and Charlie simultaneously took a step back while the ladies looked at them queerly.

"The Butcher still lives," Adam said softly.

"This is the Butcher of Sangucina?" Lana asked, taking a tentative step closer.

"You can call me Nick," he said with a smile, revealing extended canines.

"I thought you'd be bigger," she said, running her fingertips down his chest, twirling a lock of her blonde curls with the other hand.

"I've never had any complaints about my size," he assured her with a wink.

"Oh my..." she sighed.

Charlie bristled, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

"Lana." Adam cleared his throat. "Perhaps you should return to your maker's side now."

"Sorry, love," she said and blew a kiss at Charlie. "It's not every day that you get to meet a living, breathing legend."

"Remember your place," he hissed.

She drew her hand back quickly with a gasp, lowered her head and skulked back to his side. Niccolo watched the exchange and let out a snort of disgust. *What a shame. She is a powerful being, yet she acts like a whipped pup.*

"The hour is late." Adam looked to the sky. "Perhaps you could grant us one concession and allow us to feed before we continue on our journey to the west coast." "Oooh, about that," Pavlo made a sour face. "You see, we are colossal fans of the arts and your choices for the evening could put a serious damper on future plays."

Adam gave them a bow. "Then we shall be on our way. It was a pleasure speaking with you both."

Nessa stared at Pavlo with unmasked hunger in her eyes. "If you ever get bored, come find us. We'll be in California."

Tommy grabbed her by the waist and guided her away while searing her with a look of disdain. "Gentlemen," he said curtly with a quick nod of his head.

They took the air, disappearing from sight.

"Well now, there is a motley little band of lovelies headed for troubled waters," Pavlo said, staring at the point of their departure.

"Yes, I hope they don't encounter more of our kind in this California. I think if the two yearlings spent more time with other male vampires, things could get... messy."

"Only if it's done properly," he laughed.

"Perhaps we should be on our way as well," Niccolo suggested.

"We still have a couple of hours before dawn. Would you not rather visit your pet?"

Niccolo glowered at him. "No, I think we've had enough excitement for one evening."

He leapt into the air before Pavlo could respond. Pavlo quickly caught up with him, flying so close, their shoulders nearly touched.

"You know," he said with a smile. "That Nessa was quite attractive."

"Yes, but then they all were."

"It's a shame their makers were so controlling."

"Why's that?" He cast him a queer look.

"It might have been fun to have a couple of female yearlings at our beck and call for a few nights."

Niccolo snorted derisively. "Sounds like more trouble than fun. When was the last time you dealt with a yearling for any extended period?"

"It has been decades," he admitted. "But as I recall, I rather enjoyed teaching them the ways of the world."

They set down near the mouth of the cave they called home. "Well I, for one, am not ready to once again endure the constant questions and worse, the insatiable hunger the yearlings

burn with."

"Somehow, I knew you would say that."

Niccolo prepared his bedroll before dropping onto it unceremoniously. "Good night, old friend."

"Yes, may you have pleasant dreams," Pavlo said, following suit. "I know I will."

Chapter Sixteen

Kanati paced in the living room, the knot in his stomach growing with each revolution. He'd spent the night in his own bed with nothing but his thoughts to keep him company. Today was the day...*the* day. He checked his attire for the hundredth time since he dressed that morning. He wore a white long-sleeved cotton shirt tucked into leather pants, dyed a deep brown. Multi-colored beads were sewn across the shoulders and chest of his shirt. His calf-high moccasins were nearly the same color as the pants and decorated with elegant beadwork courtesy of Taima. His hair was pulled back and secured by a strand of leather with seven feathers tied into it.

Even though fall had made its presence known and the air was cooler, he still felt sweat bead along his back. He was worried. Could he provide for her? Could he protect her? Could he give her the life she so richly deserved? He could hunt, fish, could bring her food, but the times...they were changing. The Talwa was transitioning to a monetary society. Sure, Acabo paid him a fair wage to help at the store now, and when the traders came, he always had furs to sell, but would it be enough?

A thunderous knock at the door pulled him from his self-torture. He glanced out the window; the sun was well on its way to meeting the horizon. It was nearly time, but he was sure he wasn't late. He had a sudden fear that it was one of the elders come to tell him Selu had changed her mind. Taking a deep breath, he strolled to the door and opened it. Acabo stood there along with several other elders from the tribe. The smiles they wore assured him they weren't the bearers of bad news.

"You didn't think we'd make you take the walk alone did you?" Acabo asked, gripping him firmly on the shoulder.

"I... I am humbled," he finally managed before lowering his gaze to his boots.

They escorted him down the hill and onto the main road leading through the Talwa. The streets were silent, void of life. As they approached the Townhouse at the end of the road, Kanati

understood why. The entire tribe had gathered there and was awaiting his arrival. The beat of drums accompanied his every step as he entered the vast space between the walls that comprised the community gathering place. He scanned the crowd, searching for Selu. Though a sea of smiles returned his gaze, none belonged to her.

Cheers and good-natured catcalls erupted near the door and flowed across the Townhouse like a wave. He spun, ready to rush to Selu and pull her into his embrace. He froze, mouth agape, her beauty robbing him of control of his limbs. She wore a knee-length deerskin skirt with a combination of fringe and beads that fell to her calves. Her midriff was bare and her generous bosom was barely contained within a matching halter. Seven feathers hung from her hair and lay in a bundle across her left shoulder. Kanati was sure she had to be the most exquisite creature to ever walk the face of the planet.

Silence reigned as she met him in the center of the hall. He extended his hand to her and she accepted before lightly kissing him on the lips. The tribe urged them on with another round of cheers.

Dustu separated himself from the throng and approached them with deliberate strides. When he was less than a pace away, he held out both hands, palms up. Selu placed hers in his right and Kanati the left. Dustu cast his gaze over the masses.

"We were truly blessed to have Kanati return to his people. Sadly, he returned alone. He has no living uncles. Who among you will stand as *edutsi*?"

Acabo stepped forth. "It would be my honor to school their children in the spiritual and religious customs of our people."

Dustu nodded his acknowledgment before continuing, "And our dear Selu has lost her mother as well. Taima, do you accept the responsibility of clan mother for the family that is sure to come?"

She stood beside Acabo. "I will do my best to guide them along the righteous path."

Dustu released his grip and took the couple each by the wrist. Pulling their hands together until their palms met. "The sacred grounds have been blessed. The members are eager and agreeable. The ceremony will continue at dusk, but first, we feast. Let the festivities commence."

Kanati's head turned in every direction, trying to make sense of the chaos that engulfed him. It only took a moment to realize it was an organized anarchy. Drums pounded out a steady beat, accompanied by reed flutes and shell rattles. The music was lovely, but when the majority of the people in attendance broke into song, it was nothing short of breathtaking. He felt a lump rise in his throat. Tears burned at the back of his eyes, threatening to burst forth at any moment.

"Are you alright?" Selu whispered.

He nodded. "I'm just so proud to be from such an amazing people."

A circle formed along the perimeter of the townhouse. A procession moved winder shins as they performed a stomp dance to the beat of the drums. Several of the men made their way to the center of the ring, leaping, twirling and tapping their feet as they displayed their skills in the fancy dance. Kanati gave Selu a quick peck on the cheek before he joined them. He couldn't help himself. He loved to dance. The music had always moved him.

The smell of roasted meat broke his attention from his latest display of athleticism. The food had finally arrived. He made his way to the table just in time to accept a proffered cup of mead and a slice of ham. Selu sidled up beside him with a cup of her own, still swaying slightly back and forth in rhythm with the drum.

The party roared with life, laughter and song. Kanati was having so much fun, the butterflies in his stomach were long forgotten. They didn't even return when Dustu called for everyone's attention.

"It is time," he said once it was quiet enough for him to be heard. "Prepare the bride and groom for the march."

Several men surrounded Kanati and draped a blue blanket over his shoulders as they moved him away from Selu. He gave her a heartfelt smile as he watched the ladies cover her with a blue blanket as well. They took her through the east door, while he was ushered to the west.

No one spoke a word as they walked to the sacred ceremonial grounds. Kanati studied the area as they drew closer. A large ring of stones marked the center. Within that ring, brush and wood had been stacked high. Seven paces to the east and west were two smaller circles also filled with small branches.

His escorts positioned him in front of the west circle and handed him a kerosene soaked torch before leaving him to stand alone. From his vantage, he couldn't see Selu, but he assumed she stood in front of the east circle in a similar fashion.

Dustu entered the clearing from the North and stopped seven paces from the edge of the center ring. With a nod, he signaled for two elders to ignite the smaller circles. The smell of

burning wood quickly permeated the entire area. The smoke barely wavered as it rose to the heavens.

"Friends, family...kinsmen. We have gathered here today to witness the union of Kanati and Selu. May our ancestors join us on this joyous occasion and bring with them blessings from the afterlife to bestow on us all.

"The Gods have seen fit to bring these two together. Let no man or creature come between this man and woman. May they live a life that's full of all the goodness the Gods have to offer. May their joys far exceed their pains. May their home be blessed with the sound of children's laughter. May their hearts beat as one."

Dustu leaned his head back and raised his arms until they were even with his shoulder. Kanati lit his torch as the old priest closed his eyes.

"Fire brings life and as such it is the symbol of life."

He lowered his arms slowly and Kanati moved to stand by his side. He tried not to smile as he stared into Selu's eyes.

"The fire burns bright in each of you as it should with those who possess so much life. Today, they will merge to form a light brighter than either could've accomplished alone."

Kanati and Selu walked shoulder to shoulder as they approached the center ring of stones. They brought the flame of their torches together and plunged them into the brush at the base of the pyre. The ring blazed to life, causing them all to take a step back.

"May your love burn as bright for eternity as it does on this day," Dustu intoned.

Acabo removed the blue blanket from his shoulders as Taima removed the one from

Selu's. They were replaced by a single white blanket that encompassed them both.

"The bond is sealed; let it never be torn asunder."

The Talwa cheered and jockeyed for position to be the first to congratulate the newlyweds. The sea of faces and hands reaching to touch him made him reminiscent of his first night back with his people after escaping the boarding home. He was happy then, now...now he was elated. The woman who had stolen his heart at first glance was officially his wife. It had to be the greatest day he had ever lived.

* * * *

Selu shut the door to her bedroom, *their* bedroom and pressed her forehead against its cool surface. The entire day had been almost overwhelming. She briefly wondered if the wait

had been as hard on him as it was on her. She turned to ask him and stopped short. Kanati lay in their bed on his side, propped up on one elbow. He wore nothing but a smile.

"Did you get Taima all tucked in?"

"Yes," she replied with a nod as she moved to the foot of the bed. "She was spent. I was surprised she managed to stay awake as late as she did."

"So, she should sleep soundly?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

"She always has, but tonight I'm sure she is dead to the world."

Selu pulled the strap securing her halter-top and eased the garment over her head. Kanati's sharp intake of breath made her smile as she covered her breasts with her hands, letting her nipples peak through between her fingers. He rolled to his hands and knees and walked to her on all fours. She felt him grip the hair at the base of her head before his mouth found lips. He pulled her close, his body warm against hers. Her fingers trailed up his arms, his shoulders and cupped his face as her tongue probed around his. His hand searched out the drawstrings on her skirt and untied them. It fell to a heap on the floor, the beads chiming as they bounced from the wooden slats.

He leaned back, urging her onto the bed as his hands gripped her buttocks. She let out a tiny gasp as cool air rushed in when he pulled her cheeks apart. She found she rather liked the sensation. Warmth surged through her body as her arousal grew. Maneuvering his hand between them, he palmed her mound, his fingers caressing her nether lips. She guided his other hand to the center of her bottom and pressed one of his fingers between its fleshy folds. He worked it in a circular motion, not quite penetrating, but putting alternating degrees of pressure against her anus. She shuddered with pleasure. As if feeding from her reaction, he repositioned himself beneath her without removing the hand she still held firmly in place, pressing his erection against her swollen lips while massaging her clitoris between his fingers. It was too much. The orgasm exploded over her. Her vision narrowed, her breath froze in her throat, by the time it released in a guttural moan, she wondered if she were going to pass out.

Kanati continued to touch her, each caress causing her entire body to twitch and jerk as her nerves were on the verge of sensory overload.

"Stop...wait," she urged in a soft voice before rolling away from him, panting for air. "By Ocasta!" she exclaimed, when her senses began to return. "I had no idea."

"I didn't... I wasn't." he looked at her brow furrowed in deep thought. "If you enjoyed

that, do you want me to-?"

"No!" she interrupted quickly. Even as good as the rubbing had felt, the thought of actual anal intercourse unnerved the hell out of her. "Somehow, I just don't think that would be as pleasurable."

He rose above her and kissed her tenderly. "I just want you to know that whatever brings you pleasure, I'm willing to do for you."

"And I for you," she murmured.

She reached for his member, still standing erect, and pulled on it with long strokes. He moaned his approval, closed his eyes and rolled the rest of the way onto his back. Wasting no time, she quickly engulfed him with her mouth while she continued to work the length of his shaft with her hands.

His hands moved to her hair, urging her to slow her pace. Raising her head, she smiled up at him, moved her mouth to the base of his erection and proceeded to lick the length of it before continuing to suck it.

"I want you...now," he all but growled. "I need to be inside you."

Pushing herself to all fours, she winked at him over her shoulder. "Then take me."

He entered her from behind with one long thrust. Her breath caught in her throat. He felt enormous inside her, filling her completely. She began to pant in rhythm to his gyrations, moving her hips back against him with each revolution. The sound of their skin smacking together turned her on as much as the feel of him pushing deeper and deeper within her. His hands sought out her breasts, her nipples, and tugged at them firmly.

Steadying herself with one hand, she placed the other between her legs, gently massaging her clitoris. She screamed out as the pleasure became almost too much to bear. His momentum quickened and she knew he must be getting close, but so was she. Praying he could hold out long enough for her to climax again, she rubbed her swollen button frantically. When he exploded inside her, it was enough to push her over the edge as well. Her arm buckled and they tumbled to the bed in a sweaty heap, both gulping for air.

Kanati rolled them to their side and he held her firmly in his embrace. The feel of his body pressed against hers added to her bliss. She let out a sigh of contentment before they both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Niccolo woke alone. The cave was empty. A quick probe with his mind confirmed that Pavlo wasn't anywhere in the vicinity.

"What are you up to now?" he said, rising to his feet.

It was just as well, he was sure his plans for the evening wouldn't appeal to his friend in the slightest. He wanted to attend a wedding and he would enjoy it more if he didn't have to listen to Pavlo whine about what a miserable time he was having.

He strode to the mouth of the cave and leapt into the air. Within heartbeats, he approached a group of people huddled around a large clearing amongst the trees that bordered the north side of the village. It appeared the entire populace had turned out for the event. Spotting a large branch near the circumference of the clearing, he touched down gently, testing his weight on the swaying limb.

His heart ached. So much love emanated from this couple, from this entire group, it dredged up nearly ancient feelings of love and love lost from his own past. He had once shared his heart with such intensity, but the world had changed since then, at least *his* world.

Studying the determination on Kanati's face, he was suddenly struck with the thought that he was no longer looking at a boy struggling to find his place in the world, but at a man who knew what he wanted out of this life and strove to achieve it.

Watching the ceremony with great interest, he nearly fell from his perch when the center bonfire sprang to life. It illuminated the sea of smiles surrounding the happy couple.

"Yes, let no...creature tear this union asunder," he whispered as the throng began to converge around Kanati and Selu.

He stayed until well after the last of the tribe left the clearing. Dropping silently from his perch he landed near the spot where the priest had stood. He replayed the ceremony in his mind, mimicking the gestures he'd seen performed. They were such an interesting people, such a proud people. He had made his decision. Kanati would never know his dark embrace. Niccolo couldn't

bear the thought of ripping him away from such a blissful place. As he took to the air, he knew in his heart he would never return, never bother the young man again.

Flying over the hills with all his might, he had the sudden urge to do something. Feed, fight or fuck, he didn't care. He just wanted a sensation that what obliterate the emptiness he felt inside. He was angry, angry at himself for even contemplating the idea of turning Kanati. How could he have been so selfish? Yes, the boy had a remarkable aura about him, but that was all the more reason to let him live a mortal life.

Eyes narrowed, fangs bared, he soared through the air, looking for signs of life. He grunted in surprise when the lights of a city sprang up on the horizon. He recognized it quickly as Oklahoma City. He'd traveled a greater distance than he expected in a very short time. Perhaps it was fate. He was sure someone down there could take his mind off his self-flagellation.

Just as he touched down in an alley near the heart of the city, he felt a familiar tug at his consciousness. Someone sensed his presence and was calling to him. Of all the directions he could've flown, what were the odds that he would wind up in the same city as Pavlo? Apparently they were better than average.

"I'm coming, old friend," he said with both his lips and his mind. "You are in luck. Tonight we live like the vampires you wanted us to be."

* * * *

Niccolo strode up the stairs of the old hotel, barely resisting the urge to use his inhuman speed. Reaching for the door of the room, he paused. Pavlo was not alone. He swung open the door. Pavlo lay sprawled naked on a sofa, arms folded behind his head, one foot propped up on a cushion, the other resting on the floor. Nessa knelt before him, her head bobbed up and down as she worked at his member furiously with her mouth. Lana sat in an armchair across from them, looking bored. The two ladies started at Niccolo's entrance.

"Careful with the teeth," Pavlo laughed, gripping Nessa by the hair.

"About time you showed up," Lana said, rising from the chair.

"Forgive me," he said with a slight bow of his head. "I didn't realize I was expected."

"Mr. Sparta over there told us you were waiting for us here."

Nessa crawled onto Pavlo's lap, her dark pink nipples standing erect. She absently stroked his penis as she smiled at Niccolo. "And now the party can really get started," she said in

a husky voice.

Niccolo closed the door behind him and leaned against it. "Do you your masters know where you are?"

Lana dropped fang and hissed, but Nessa answered. "They may be controlling bastards, but they are a far cry from our masters."

"I'll take that as a no," Niccolo laughed. "Masters or no, they are still your makers, yes?" Both ladies lowered their gazes.

"It's good to see loyalty is alive and well in these decadent times."

"Don't judge us so harshly," Nessa said in a whisper. "Pavlo said we were subjected to..." she paused, clearly searching for the words.

"Indigent circumstances," Pavlo supplied.

"Right," she nodded vigorously. "And as such, they weren't upholding their responsibilities as our makers."

"I see." Niccolo rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So, they just let you run off with my friend here?"

Lana closed the gap between then in a blur of speed. "Shh," she said, placing a finger on his lips. "Less talky-talky...more touchy-touchy."

He couldn't help but laugh and the others joined in the mirth. "That, my dear, sounds quite inviting."

He watched with fascination as Lana slowly disrobed, exposing small but pert breasts and a lithe body so pale as to be nearly translucent. When he'd set out from the Talwa, he wanted to do one of three things. He had a nagging suspicion that before the evening was done, he'd have an opportunity to do them all.

Movement over Lana's shoulder caught his attention. Nessa had straddled Pavlo while still facing away from him. She placed her hands on his knees and began gyrating slowly, keeping eye contact with Niccolo as she did. Lana, noticing his gaze, looked back at the frolicking couple before strolling over to stand in front of her.

She thrust her breasts toward Nessa who quickly clasped one of her nipples into her mouth without breaking her stride. Lana dropped her hand between her legs and began to massage herself.

Niccolo quickly undressed and moved in behind Lana. He wound his hand through her

hair as he slid his erection into her gently.

"Do it good. Do it hard," Lana all but groaned as he pushed deep within her.

With his free hand, he reached for her nether lips and was surprised to find not only her hand there, but Nessa's as well. She pulled her own hand free, letting the other two pleasure her with different rhythms.

Niccolo pulled her hair up and away from her neck. "May I?" he sighed into her ear.

"Yes," she whimpered, fear and anticipation evident in her strained voice.

"Do you want it?" he asked, his voice gruff with need.

"Yes," she said again, her voice growing stronger.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"Take me...bite me...feed from me," she panted.

As he sunk his teeth into the back of her neck, he was bombarded by images, smells, sensations. Her life seemed to be filled with happiness, if not a bit mundane. She knew little of hardship and even less of sorrow. He felt the transition into adolescence, the surge of hormones, the questions, the fear, the shame, the excitement. Still her life was a barrage of diurnal drudgeries that left no clue of why she was selected. At last, the answer came to him.

She sat at a desk, composing a letter. The flame of the lamp beside her flickered from the breeze blowing through the open window of her bedroom. A door opened from further into the house. Footsteps were quickly followed by the echo of muffled voices. Leaping to her feet, she rushed to her door, recognizing the sound of the lady's voice. She was about to bid good evening to her parents when she realized the man with her mother wasn't her father.

Niccolo instantly recognized the man he saw through Lana's eyes. It was Adam Chaffey.

Their voices were clearer now and Lana listened to them, hanging on every word.

"My dear, I assure you," her mother was saying. "This is highly unlike me. I've never strayed before in my life."

"I can see that in your eyes...and your heart," Adam said. "Your purity is what drew you to me."

"And yet, you'd entice me to sully that trait," she said, as they stood in the middle of the

living room.

"Entice, you say?" He let out a small laugh. "I've all but demanded it."

She closed her eyes and sighed heavily. "There is just something about you, I find... irresistible. I can't and won't deny you any request. I'm yours for the taking."

Adam kissed her passionately as he tugged at the laces of her bodice.

Lana had the sudden urge to turn away, but she couldn't. She was mesmerized by the scene unfolding before her. Her mother and the other undressed each other slowly. Each bit of flesh exposed urged her to scream them to stop such insanity. Her voice remained caught in her throat.

"What the hell are you doing?" a voice boomed from beyond of her line of sight.

She yelped in surprise. Her mother faced the direction of the voice. The stranger looked at her.

"Eunice!" Her father continued. "How could you? And in our own home..."

She started to rush to her husband, but Adam held her by the arm. "There's no need to go to him now. The damage is already done."

"Damage? I'll show you damage!" her father bellowed.

Her mother's voice sounded frantic as she pleaded, "Henry, put that thing away before..."

A shot rang out and blood blossomed from the front of Adam's shirt. He staggered back a step and stared down at the oozing wound.

"You really shouldn't have done that," he growled and seemed to disappear before Lana's eyes.

When he returned he had her father by the throat and dragged him and her mother to the couch. He forced Eunice to sit in front of him without taking his eyes from Henry's.

"Put it in your mouth," he commanded softly.

"You can't expect... I won't," she whimpered.

"You will," he growled, gripping her by the hair. "I want you to pleasure me while he watches. It will be his penance for being so foolish."

"Please," she sobbed.

He turned his gaze upon her and she froze, her face growing blank, her eyes vacant. She leaned forward and slid his member into his mouth. He forced Henry's head down, bringing him within inches of his wife's handiwork. When he finally climaxed he pushed Eunice back onto the couch roughly. He let go of Henry's throat and grabbed him by the hair pulling him off his feet. Adam looked at Lana over his shoulder as her father dangled in her grasp. He smiled at her exposing extended canines before sinking them into Henry's throat.

After he dropped the lifeless body to the floor, he sat beside Eunice on the couch. She still stared into space as if seeing nothing and everything. He stared at Lana as he lifted her mother's arm to his mouth and began to feed. When he released her, she slumped over, head on her knees. It was clear she was no more.

"Lana darling, are you going to stay in your room all night or are you ready to come out and join the party?"

She was locked in place by his gaze. "How do you know my name?"

"Because I know everything," he said with a laugh. "Now come out here so I might have a better look at you."

"Are you going to kill me to?" she asked, taking a hesitant step forward.

"Do you want me to?" His head tilted to one side.

She just shook her head as she moved closer.

"Are you afraid of dying?" he asked, appraising her with a slow look from her feet to her face.

"Yes," she whimpered, now no more than a stride away from him.

"What if I told you it was in my power to make you immortal?" He rose from the couch slowly.

"How?" was all she managed in a meager voice.

"With a kiss," he replied, caressing her cheek.

"You killed my parents," she whimpered, fear trembled through her shoulders.

"I'm sorry for your loss. I truly am." He let out a heavy sigh. "But I saw no other way.

Do you understand that once I was forced to expose myself, action was required... and still is?"

"Why would you spare me?"

"I see ... potential."

She cast her gaze around the lavishly furnished front room. This was home. This was her life, but it was a life forever altered. Nothing would ever be the same. Her parents were dead, but wouldn't they want her to live on and do so for eternity? She looked back up into his smiling face.

"Then kiss me," she whispered.

His smile broadened. "Excellent choice, my dear."

She moved closer, her lips seeking his. He grabbed her by the shoulders and held her at

bay.

"I will give you that kiss, but you are still a bit young as yet. Serve me for two seasons. If you prove your loyalty as a mortal, I will return that service with the greatest gift of all."

Niccolo felt a sharp tug on his consciousness as the sensation of being Lana disappeared abruptly.

"Easy, friend," Pavlo warned. "She is far too young and cannot afford to offer up much more blood if you hope to keep her in good graces for the entire evening."

"My apologies," Niccolo said, feeling sheepish. He'd become so caught up in the drama of her encounter, he'd forgotten about her safety.

He pulled her close to his chest and licked the wound on her neck clean. She shuddered, eyes closed. Easing himself back inside her, he barely suppressed a shudder of his own.

"Don't apologize, just come for me," she cajoled.

"Ladies first," he breathed into her hair.

"If you're waiting on me, you're backing up," she giggled. "I had two wonderful tastes of death as you fed from me."

Niccolo complied, concentrating on the sensation of his quickening thrust until his own orgasm exploded forth. He pulled out of her and dropped to his knees, panting heavily.

"My turn," Lana said huskily.

"But you said—"

"No, silly. I want to feed from you now," she explained with batting eyelashes.

"Careful, yearling," Pavlo said in a stern tone. "That one there has tasted the blood of the ancients. To drink from him could set your veins ablaze."

"Is he teasing me?" She stared at Niccolo with wide eyes.

"It was a long time ago," he assured her. "You should be fine as long as you don't ingest too much."

She worried her bottom lip, apparently torn between the opportunity and the risk.

"Perhaps just a little to replenish what you took from me," she finally decided.

Niccolo tilted his head, offering her his throat. She pushed him back on his haunches and straddled him before biting him timidly. A rush of euphoria swept through his body as her teeth pierced his skin. The sensation ended nearly as quickly as it began.

"Finished so soon?" he asked in a whisper.

She stared at him, shock evident in her soft features. "You really loved her."

Niccolo turned away from her, pain searing his chest.

"I've never felt a love so strong before in my life," she continued unabashed.

"That too was a long time ago."

"What happened to—"

"I do not wish to discuss it with you," he all but growled.

"I'm sorry." She looked away from him. "It's just that, now I know such a love is possible..."

"Go on," he urged when she failed to continue.

"Now that I know it's possible, I will spend the rest of eternity searching for someone who will love me like that."

"You can't search out a love like that, my dear. Such a love can't be forced," Nessa added with sudden interest. "If it is meant to be, it will find you and swallow you whole."

Pavlo rose from the couch, casting a disdainful glare at the window. "I hate to interrupt, but unless we would like to see whether or not this room can block out the mighty eye of Ra, I suggest we continue this conversation elsewhere.

"Agreed," Niccolo said, anxious to change the subject.

They escorted the ladies out of the hotel and found a secluded spot from which to take flight. Niccolo hoped they would let the conversation die within the walls of the hotel. He had no desire to rehash the joys of the love he once had, or the desire to relive the pain of losing her. No, he hoped to retire for the day and hoped even more that holding Lana as he slumbered would stave off the nightmares of the loss of his human wife.

Chapter Eighteen

Selu's eyes sprang open. She pulled the covers away from her face as a wave of nausea crashed over her. Clenching her eyes shut, she tried to make the room stop spinning. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, whipping the blanket the rest of the way from her body. Kanati stirred and looked at her through one barely open eye.

"What's wrong?"

She just held up a finger and shook her head.

Kanati was instantly awake. Rolling to his knees, he stared down at her, concern apparent in his eyes.

"You look awfully pale," he said, placing a hand on her forehead. "But you don't seem to have a fever."

Rolling away from his touch, she pulled herself from the bed as quickly as her trembling legs would allow and stumbled through the house. She barely made it off the porch before the contents of her stomach spewed forth. The nausea passed quickly after that, but her body still trembled. She felt Kanati's arms wrap around her and she leaned back into his embrace.

"Are you all right?" He kissed the top of her forehead.

"Something from last night's supper must not have agreed with me," she replied, allowing him to escort her back into the house.

Taima stood in the doorway to her bedroom one hand resting on the frame. "What's going on out here?"

"Nothing, Auntie," she quickly assured her. "I just seemed to have a bit of an upset stomach."

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded her shrewdly. "That's odd. I feel fine. Kanati?" "Fit as a fiddle," he answered with a shrug.

"Were you ill when you went to sleep last night?" she pressed, stepping into the common room.

Selu merely shook her head.

"Did it wake you during the night?"

"It just came on a few minutes ago," she answered still shaking her head. "But it definitely woke me then."

The corner's of Taima's mouth twitched, threatened to spread into a frown, but resisted. She nodded absently as she ambled into the kitchen. Pausing near the table, she pulled out a chair and motioned for Selu to join her.

"Let's have a look," she said after her niece complied.

Her hands felt rough on Selu's cheeks as they glided gently over her face and down to her neck. She pressed against either side of her throat with two fingers. "Uhm," she said, each time she touched a different point on her body. Lifting her arm, she felt along the inside, across the pit and down to the side of her breast.

"Tell me if anything is tender," she instructed as she pressed against her abdomen.

Selu shook her head after each prod.

"Nothing's swollen, you're not feverish," Taima rubbed her chin as she thought aloud. "You're a bit waxen, but overall your color is good. There just aren't any signs that anything is physically wrong with you. Perhaps it's nerves. Have you been upset about anything lately?"

Selu laughed. "Are you kidding? I'm married to the most wonderful man in the world; the world is my oyster."

"Then I don't know what to tell you. We'll just keep a good eye on you for the next few days and hope it is nothing to worry about."

"Thank you, Auntie, but really... I feel fine now. In fact, better than fine, I feel great."

Kanati and Taima both stared at her with unmasked concern.

"Seriously," she insisted.

"Well, it's a good thing I don't have to help Acabo at the store today, I'd be worried sick about you if I had to leave now," Kanati said, taking a seat at the table.

"But you were going fishing," Selu said, leaning over and taking his hand. "I promise... I'll be ok. I don't need you to coddle me."

"It's not coddling, it's concern," he said, bringing her hand to his lips. "Besides, we have plenty of food in the cupboards, so it's not like I *have* to go fishing."

"Aww," she pouted. "I was really looking forward to Auntie's soup."

"I have some dried ones I could use," Taima offered with a shrug.

"It's just not the same." She shook her head. "I know! Why don't I just go with you?"

"Really?" He stared at her brows pursed. "I thought you didn't like to angle."

"It's not my favorite thing in the world to do, but it's not like I didn't have to do it before I met you," she said with a laugh. "Besides, you can fish and I will just keep you company."

"Sounds like a great idea." His smile stretched to his eyes. "Let's have some breakfast and then we can take off. If you're stomach is up for food that is."

"Oddly enough, I'm actually quite hungry. I'll make us something to eat."

* * * *

Kanati slung a satchel over his shoulder and grabbed his favorite sapling rod. Once they were out of the house, he turned north. Selu didn't follow.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his concern rising rapidly again. "Are you ill again?"

"No," she laughed. "But you're going the wrong way. The creek is down there." She pointed to the south.

"We're not going to the creek," he said with a wink.

She cocked her head to the side, eyeing him quizzically.

"I found a much better place about an hour walk from here," he said, extending his hand to her.

"A pond?" she asked, entwining her fingers in his as they resumed their walk.

His brow pursed as he considered his response. "I'm not sure what you would call it. It's far bigger than any other pond I've ever seen, but definitely not big enough to be a lake."

"I know what it's called," Selu said, smiling up at him.

He just stared at her expectantly, one eyebrow arched.

"Kanati's secret fishing hole."

They shared a comfortable laugh before he turned his attention to the tall swaying grass they were tromping through. A flutter of movement to his right signaled the presence of his prey. He pounced with practiced ease, and was rewarded with a squirming grasshopper for his troubles.

"Wow, first try," Selu said, eyes wide. "And you didn't even drop your fishing pole."

"Yes, the Gods have graced me with cat-like reflexes," he said with a laugh as he put the insect in a small leather pouch.

She cocked her head to the side as she stared at him before her smile spread. "Yeah, I could tell that from the moment I met you."

Kanati felt the heat rise to his cheeks as he remembered how clumsy he'd been around her not that long ago.

"Aww, don't be embarrassed," she sighed. "I only tease you because I love you."

"I love you more," he said before kissing her on the forehead.

They marched on, gathering bait along the way. By the time the pond came into view, they had a full pouch of grasshoppers and even a couple of crickets.

"I've had the best luck over here," he said, pointing to a sloping grass covered bank just visible through a break in the trees.

Kanati led her to the edge of the water and surveyed the glistening surface before dropping his satchel to the ground.

"The water looks really calm today," he said, pulling a long stretch of twisted gut from his bag.

He secured it to one end of his pole and threaded the other end through a hook he'd fashioned from a piece of deer bone. Selu handed him a grasshopper from the pouch. After baiting the line, he tossed it into the water, took a seat on the bank, and waited. She sat next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"This is relaxing," she said without looking up at him.

"Yes, very peaceful," he agreed. "I've done some of my best thinking while I'm out here."

"What sort of things do you think about?" She turned her face toward his.

"You," he replied, kissing her tenderly.

"You are such a sweet talker," she said and kissed him again. "So, what else do you think about?"

He laughed mirthlessly, shaking his head. "Life both with you and the unbearable pain of what I would do without you. I think about our future, I worry if I can bring you all the happiness you truly deserve."

She stared up at him with expectant eyes. "How can you ever doubt that? I love you... I married you. Of course, you make me happy."

"It's more than that," he said, taking a deep breath before continuing, "The Talwa is

changing. Hell, it's already changed. Everything has become so...mercenary. Sure, we still share amongst ourselves, but more and more we turn to things we can buy rather than make and to be able to purchase these things we have to have a means to make money."

"I don't understand your fear," she said. "Acabo pays you for your help, does he not?"

"Yes," he said, shaking his head. "And it is enough to buy the essentials, but..."

"What?" she pressed when he fell silent.

"What if you want more?"

"Then I'll make it," she laughed.

"I just don't want you to feel deprived of... well, anything."

"Just because the Talwa is changing doesn't mean we have to." She stroked the side of his face. "We don't *need* money. Both of us are more than capable of living off of what nature provides us."

"Thank you for-"

His reply was interrupted as the rod in his hand jerked forward. "Got one!" he yelled as he started backing up the bank, pulling the fish to shore. Selu rushed forward to catch the flopping prize. She eased the hook out of the mouth of a bass that was as long as the length of her arm from her fingertips to her elbow.

"See." She smiled as she held it up for his inspection. "You've just proven my point."

He rummaged in his bag for another length of line, threaded through the gill of the fish, tied it off and tossed him back in the water, securing the other end to a piece of wood stuck in the bank. She re-baited his line and had it ready for him when he turned around.

"Two more like that and we will have ourselves a fine feast tonight," he declared proudly.

"Actually, I think that one would be more than enough for Auntie's stew," she said, nodding toward the tethered line.

"Probably," he said, rubbing his chin. "But you saw how long it takes to get out here. We might as well stock up while we're here."

"Sure." She kissed him again. "I don't care what we do as long as I'm with you."

"You won't get bored?" He winked at her.

She worried her lower lip, dropping her gaze. "If the waiting becomes too tedious, I'm sure we can think of some way to pass the time."

Staring into her eyes, he couldn't suppress the smile that spread across his face. He took the end of his pole and pushed it through the grass and deep into the soft earth of the bank. Using his foot, he packed the dirt in tight around it before turning his attention back to his wife's.

"How poor of a husband would I be if I took the chance of letting the tedium grow to such a point?"

Giggling playfully, she leaned back on her elbows, pushing out her ample bosom. "Well, when you put it that way..."

He leaned over her, pressing his body between her thighs and untied the straps of her leather top. Pulling it away, he dropped it on the grass. Wasting no time, he slipped one of her nipples into his mouth while he gently massaged the other.

"Harder," she murmured.

He was only too eager to comply. His hand was just roving down her stomach when the clip-clop of horses caught his attention. They both froze in place.

"Someone's coming," he whispered, rolling off her.

Selu quickly refastened her top as Kanati came up in a crouch. They crept along the bank until they could use the trees for cover. He motioned for her to stay in place as he climbed up the bank. Crouching beside a tree, he caught a glimpse of the first horse; he counted six in all as they passed. Their casual banter drifted to him over the breeze.

"Horace, didya realize where'n we are?"

"Course I do, Mickey. Yer the only one o' the bunch that gets himself lost on a regler basis."

This caused the group of strangers to laugh.

"If you head due south from here, it'd take us pert near straight to that lil' injun town, whatchamacallit... Tally tee skee, Toweln' tuskee, sumtin like that."

"Tahlonteeskee," someone offered.

"Yeah, that one."

"So?" a different voice asked.

"Come on, Gordon," Mickey pressed. "That's a whole lot of red tail flitterin' about o'er there. Wudn't ya like to knock you a piece or two off?"

"Ah, hell. I wouldn't poke a squaw with your pecker," another voice chimed in.

"Fuck you, Sean."

"Now he would be more your speed," yet another voice added.

"Keep it up, Kurt, and you're gonna be next, you lil' shit."

"Ladies, please," someone else intervened. "The point is moot. We don't have time to

stop. I plan to rest my head in Durant tonight. Any of you have a problem with that?"

"No, Rich," they all replied almost in unison.

Kanati waited until he was sure they were out of sight before he returned to Selu's side.

"Ruffians," he grunted. "I'm relieved they didn't decide to pay our Talwa a visit."

"I know," she let out a long breath. "There's no way we could get back there to warn them in time."

"Hey look!" He pointed at the taught line zigzagging back and forth from the end of his pole. "We caught another one."

"Maybe we should pull that one in and call it a day," she suggested.

"Yeah, they may not be coming today, but we should let the elders know what we heard in case they decide to return."

Chapter Nineteen

Niccolo awoke with Lana nestled against his bare chest. Careful not to disturb her, he gently brushed the hair away from her face. She looked so peaceful and content, almost innocent with her features relaxed in sleep. He toyed with the idea of letting her and Nessa stay, but eventually dismissed it. It would only be a matter of time before they crossed paths with Mr. Chaffey and the rest of his brood and though the thought of a good fight might be appealing, he had no desire to kill the motley band of vampires for trying to right a wrong he knew he was guilty of committing.

Not to mention his feelings about taking on yearlings still hadn't changed. As peaceful as she looked now, eventually she would wake and then it was only a matter of time before the incessant questions began. No, it was best to send them on their way as soon as they woke.

Untangling himself from Lana's embrace smoothly, he rose without waking her. He scanned the others and grunted when he realized he was the only one undressed. Lana wore only his shirt, but Pavlo and Nessa were near fully dressed. He strode to the mouth of the cave and watched the sky turn from the purple of twilight to the deep blue of night.

"Please assure me, you do not still yearn for a sunset even after all these years," Pavlo's smooth voice spoke behind him.

"Humph," he replied without turning. "I was just enjoying the view and some quiet before the barrage of questions only a yearling would think to ask."

"We may need to handle them a bit more gently tonight."

Niccolo turned to find Pavlo staring at the still forms of Nessa and Lana.

"They must be utterly exhausted to remain in the dream world when there are not even the faintest traces of sunlight left to push them to slumber," he continued.

"I'm sure they'll be able to rest tonight. I plan to send them on their way shortly."

"What?" Pavlo spun on him with lightning speed.

"We both know they can't stay with us." Niccolo let out a slow breath. "We discussed it

when we first met these two."

"Have you gone mad?" He threw his hands up in the air. "After the trouble I went through to procure us proper...diversions, you just want to brush them off as if they were nothing more than dust on your collar?"

"Trouble?" Niccolo regarded him with one eyebrow raised. "I was under the impression they found you."

"Semantics," Pavlo flashed a wide smile. "Either way, we have been blessed by their presence and should indulge ourselves for as long as they can continue to hold our interests."

"Ah, you always were all about indulging yourself," he laughed.

"Of course," he said with a shrug. "What good is living for an eternity if you fail to enjoy as much of it as you can."

"If they stay, there will be trouble."

"Think about the possibilities," he pressed as if sensing a weakening of his resolve. "They are so young, so full of life—or at least un-life. Their wide-eyed wonder alone should be enough to entertain you for days, even weeks on end."

"Speaking of wonders," Niccolo pointed with his chin. "They rise."

"What're you two talking about?" Nessa asked as stood and stretched, her hands reaching above her head.

"The prince of surly over here," Pavlo jabbed a thumb in his direction. "Was just weighing the merits of the company of two lovely creatures such as yourself against the perils of enlightening yearlings to the ways of our world."

"Which side is winning?" Lana asked through a yawn.

"I fear the scale is leaning toward dismissal," he answered in a sad tone.

They exchanged a quick glance before moving closer to the mouth of the cave. Nessa wrapped her arms around Pavlo and Lana embraced Niccolo.

"Have we already become nuisances?" she asked with a pouty face.

He shook his head. "Not at all, I'm just relying on past experiences. Historically speaking, yearlings are usually more of a handful than an old man such as myself can keep up with."

She laughed and batted her eyes at him. "You didn't have any problems keeping up with me last night."

Grabbing his hair in both hands, she pulled his face closer to hers and kissed him feverishly. He tried to pull away, but she just pushed herself against him more frantically. She finally released him of her own accord and placed her head against his chest.

"Let's go back into the cave and get more..." she paused as she looked up and caught his eye, "comfortable."

"Don't we need to take you to feed first?" he asked before kissing her on her forehead. "Your thirst must be near unbearable by now."

Casting a glance over her shoulder, she replied, "I think we have a little time."

He followed her gaze and spied Nessa sitting atop Pavlo, their clothes strung in a loose trail leading from the mouth of the cave to their writhing bodies.

"We could go elsewhere if you want a bit of privacy," he suggested, motioning to the forest below.

"No," she shook her head quickly. "To be honest, I find it deeply arousing, not only knowing that my best friend is doing the same thing I am, but being able to see her do it as well."

He allowed her to lead him to a spot right next them, laid on his back and patted the ground beside him. Rather than oblige, she straddled him in a move so quick, it was even hard for him to follow. She slid out of his oversized shirt before placing her hands on his shoulders. Her brow crinkled almost imperceptibly as she stared down into his face, then she cut a glance from the mouth of the cave back to her friend already moaning in ecstasy.

"Change your mind about the privacy?" Niccolo asked, barely resisting the urge to probe her thoughts. Tapping into the chaos the made up a yearlings mind for any period of time was usually an experience that was almost painful.

She offered him a lopsided smile. "No, but I was wondering how much longer I will last without feeding. I'm quite famished."

"Perhaps we should rebuild your strength with a hunt before we go about taxing even more of your energy," he suggested, stroking the side of her face.

"Perhaps, I could feed from you," she paused as she kissed him softly on the lips. "Just a snack as it were, something to hold me over until we can hunt good and proper."

Niccolo chuckled, remembering her hesitation from the night before. "Feeling a little braver today, are we?"

She leaned even further over him and nibbled on his ear before whispering into it, "You

have no idea."

"Then by all means," he turned his head to the side, fully exposing his neck. Before he could elaborate, he felt Lana's teeth pierce his skin. The familiar wash of euphoria swept through his system as the venom in her bite spread.

"Wait!" he said, when his eyes locked on Pavlo's vacant stare. It was clear that Nessa was already feeding on him.

He struggled against the pull of the venom, trying to will himself out of the trance before he sunk too deep. It wasn't safe to let yearlings feed without someone there to keep them from taking too much, and Pavlo was clearly too far gone in his bliss to be roused by anything short of Nessa releasing her hold on him. Why hadn't he given them warning? Did she take him by surprise?

His mind swam. He tired to focus on the fleeting thoughts, searching for something to latch onto, something to keep him tethered to reality. He experienced a moment of clarity, for just an instant. Someone else had pierced his skin and was now feeding from him. The initial pain was nearly enough to bring him back to full consciousness, but it quickly faded as his body was bombarded by twice the venom. Who else was feeding from him? Did that mean Pavlo was awake now? Nessa? Surely, Pavlo wouldn't let the other yearling feed from him as well?

Something was amiss. He couldn't place the source, but the answer danced at the corner of his reason, taunting him, daring him to unravel its meaning. A dark fear took root as he replayed the moment before Lana began to feed. Her head twitched from Nessa to the mouth of the cave over and over in his mind. Was she really only yearning for a meal, or was she awaiting a signal? Why were they alone when Pavlo happened across them? Where were their masters?

Trap! Trap! Trap! his mind screamed at him. Redoubling his efforts, he visualized his body moving. Nothing happened. The draw of the venom was growing, becoming nearly irresistible. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but he was certain there wasn't much more before he would be too far gone to resist the lure of surrender. Pushing against the sensation, he tried again. If only he could rise, could find his footing, he would be able to shake free of the venom's powerful grip.

He was focused on rising with such determination that when a third set of teeth pierced his skin; it lifted the fog of his mind entirely for a fraction of a second.

It was enough.

With a mighty roar, he sprang to his feet. Pain stained his vision red as broke free, chunks of his flesh staying between the teeth of his assailants.

"What? How?" Adam Chaffey stammered as he took a step back, blood trickling down his chin. Charlie and Lana still crouched over the spot where he lay moments before, staring up at him with wide-eyed wonder.

Niccolo spotted the still body of his friend. Annette and Tommy had joined Nessa and were steadily draining him of his life's essence. He shot forth with all the speed he could muster; crashing into the group with such force, the walls of the cave trembled. He rolled to his feet on the other side, gripping Tommy's throat with one hand and Annette's arm in the other, but Nessa was still firmly attached to Pavlo's neck. He felt his legs tremble as his vision dimmed. They had taken too much blood. He didn't have much strength left in him. He slung Annette into the trio of advancing vampires as he bit into Tommy's shoulder. Knowing he could feed enough to regain all his strength, he hoped it would be enough to keep him alive.

He drank greedily, doing everything in his power not to lose himself in the story of Tommy's life as the blood entered his system. He failed, reliving with morbid fascination as one by one scores of powerful vampires fell victim to Adam Chaffey's coven. They were trophy hunters of a sort, collecting the memories and lives of both the most famous and infamous vampires who ever earned a place in vampiric history.

Searing pain severed the connection and Niccolo separated Tommy's head from his body before dropping the pieces to the floor. As his senses readjusted to the presence, he saw that he now had four vampires biting and clawing at him, fighting for the life of their brother. Succumbing to his building bloodlust, he unleashed on them a spinning whirlwind of fangs and fury. They flew away from him almost as one, tattered and bleeding.

Adam clutched a gushing wound on his forearm and stared at him, a smile growing across his face. "You sir, have truly lived up to your reputation."

Niccolo growled as he dropped into a crouch. "That was just a taste of what I have in store for you."

Before Adam could respond, he sprang forward like a bullet and shoved his hand beneath Annette's ribcage and yanked her heart free. It was still beating as he tossed it to her mate. Adam caught it, stared at it in disbelief and let out a wail of despair. He dropped to his knees cradling the heart with both hands. Charlie and Lana launched themselves at Niccolo, but he was already in motion again. Lana barely missed him, her claws grazing the side of his neck as he collided with Charlie. They soared through the air, gnawing and slashing, searching for a weakness. Niccolo clamped down on one of his flailing arms and began to drink as he held Charlie's teeth away from his own vulnerable skin.

He nearly bit through his forearm when they smashed into the wall of the cave.

They both crumpled to the floor in a heap. Niccolo was the first to recover. With the fresh supply of blood pumping through his veins, the strength began to return to his limbs and his mind began to clear. As he grabbed Charlie by the throat, he spied Lana closing the gap between them. To his heightened senses, she appeared to move no faster than an average mortal, though he was sure she was pushing her body forward with all of the supernatural strength she could summon. He clenched the hand with which he held Charlie, ripping his neck wide open.

Lana stumbled to a halt as Niccolo smacked the barely attached head, sending it skittering across the ground toward her.

"Think about it, yearling," he warned. "It doesn't have to end this way."

She stared at him, clenching and unclenching her fists as a bevy of emotions warred across her face. Niccolo took advantage of her hesitation and leapt into the air. He blew passed her before she even had time to register that he had moved. Grabbing Nessa by the hair, he kneed her in the side to make her release her grip on Pavlo before pulling her to her feet. She hissed at him in defiance.

Niccolo reared back to strike, but Lana latched onto his arm before he could swing. Apparently, she had made her choice. Her teeth sunk deep into the meat of his bicep. Even as her venom began to work at his system, he pulled her forward and bit the top of her head. The skull broke easily beneath his fangs, but still she held strong. Pulling a chunk of her hair and scalp free, he spit it onto the ground. Plunging his fangs into her exposed brain, he drank deeply until she released him. He let her go and she crumpled in a lifeless heap.

Nessa squirmed with renewed fervor at the end of his extended arm, but his focus landed on Adam. He had crawled over to Annette's body and cradled her head in his lap. Even in the midst of the attack brought on by this man, he couldn't help but pity him for the pain that was so apparent on the old vampire's face.

A sudden pain in his arm drug him from his moment of sympathy. Nessa had dug both

sets of claws into him and was trying to rip the muscles from his bone. His first instinct was to crush her throat, but he knew he needed her blood to completely heal his wounds. Keeping his eye on Adam, he caught her wrist and brought it to his trembling lips.

Reliving her life as her essence passed into him, he realized this was her first trophy hunt. She was frightened when they told her the plan, but assured her they had performed a similar ruse countless times and had yet to lose a member of their family. Adam had trained her to keep her true intentions buried deep within her mind and warned her that as long as she didn't think about them ever again, she would be perfectly safe.

When he saw himself lay beside her as she rode Pavlo, he broke off the connection. Her hand fell away from his mouth limply. When he released her throat, she collapsed at his feet, her eyes vacant, all but lifeless.

He moved in a blur to kneel beside his friend. Pavlo hadn't moved at all during the entire altercation. Pressing two fingers against his throat, he searched for a pulse. As long as his heart still beat, his body could pull in the blood he needed to recuperate. Nearly a second had passed and he still couldn't feel anything beneath his touch.

"I'm too late," he whispered, the pain of loss already searing his chest. "I should've pulled them from you sooner, old friend."

Then he felt it, a solitary throb, weak and feather light, but it was still a sign of life. There was hope. He leapt his feet and ghosted across the cave to stand above Adam's shuddering body. He didn't even bother to look up.

"On your feet," Niccolo growled.

"Just get on with it. I haven't the time for games."

He was taken aback. "Will you not defend yourself?"

Adam looked up at him with accusing eyes. "What's the point? You've taken away from me everything I cared about in this world."

"I've taken—" Niccolo let out a mirthless laugh. "You attacked us, you unscrupulous bastard."

He nodded absently. "Yes, but I've never witnessed anyone who has resisted the euphoric pull of our venom for so long. Your face clearly showed signs that you were lost in a state of bliss, but you managed dredge yourself up out of the depths."

Niccolo grabbed him by the hair and pulled him to his feet. He was poised, ready for a

fight, but Adam gave no resistance at all.

"How?" he asked so softly, Niccolo barely heard it.

"Your life will serve to replenish that which you almost stole from my friend."

"No, I mean how did you not succumb?"

He ignored the question as he drug him toward his destiny. Forcing him to his knees, he extended Adam's throat over Pavlo's still face. Extending the nail on his little finger, he gouged a small hole into the side of Adam's neck, letting the blood fall in a steady stream as he held his friend's mouth wide.

"Sadly, you've weakened him to the point he no longer has the strength to bite you himself," he whispered in his ear. "So, there will be no venom to ease your transition. You will feel every moment of your life as it oozes out of you."

"Just make it quick," he said, his voice detached. "The sooner it's over, the sooner I will rejoin my dear Annette in the afterlife."

Staring down at him, he shocked by his words. He was about to ask him to elaborate when Pavlo began to move.

"Easy, friend," he cautioned. "You've lost a lot of blood. You need to feed."

Pavlo leaned up and tried to bite Adam, but Niccolo pulled him out of reach. "No, just open your mouth and swallow. He doesn't deserve the mercy you offer."

He complied, lying still, letting the blood rejuvenated him. As the blood flow slowed to a trickle, Niccolo dropped Adam face down onto the cave floor. He placed his foot on the base of his neck, reached down with both hands and pulled his head free of the shoulders. Gripping it by the hair, he stood straight, holding it at eye level. Adam's eyes stared back at him, his mouth working open and closed in rapid succession. He slung the head out the mouth of the cave, watching it sail until it was lost among the trees beyond.

"I just experienced the most bizarre...," Pavlo began as he sat up. He fell silent for a moment as he surveyed the bodies strewn around him. "Dream."

Niccolo extended his hand to help him to his feet.

"But it appears reality was far more bizarre than even *my* imagination could conjure," he said, allowing himself to be pulled up. "What did I mi... No!"

He rushed to Nessa's side, rolling her to her back. "Nessa, wake up!"

"Pavlo," he said, keeping his distance.

"Nessa!" Pavlo glared at him over his shoulder. "What did you do to her?"

"What do you think?" He swept his hand in front of him. "I saved you from her and her coven."

"You killed her?" His voice was barely audible.

"She was killing you."

"Bullshit!" he bellowed. "She loved me."

"You can't be serious, old friend. Look around you. They were trophy hunters. They set a trap and we fell right into it."

"No." Pavlo shook his head. "Adam was a hunter as was most of his clan, but my Nessa despised the idea of the lifestyle they chose for her."

"You knew?" He was flabbergasted.

"Of course," he said, wearing a disgusted look. "I knew his name from somewhere; it just took me awhile to place it."

"And you didn't feel the need to warn me?" he all but growled.

"Why? There was no danger," he said, returning his attention to Nessa's face, stroking it gently. "Nessa told me everything when she found me. That was why they wanted to escape Adam and the rest of his brood."

"If she wasn't still helping him, how did they find us?"

Pavlo ignored the question as he examined Nessa. "Her only wound seems to be the one you inflicted when you drained her like she was a mere mortal."

"I saw no need to cause her any more pain than— What are you doing?" Niccolo rushed to his side as he slit his wrist and held it to Nessa's mouth.

"I can save her," he hissed.

"Why so we can kill her again when she's strong enough to realize what we did to her coven?"

"She won't fight us. She loves me."

"Be reasonable, man," Niccolo urged, dragging him to his feet. "She tried to kill you herself."

"And I love her," Pavlo continued, struggling to return to her side.

He held him tight. "You can't be serious. You just met her."

"Yet, I feel as though I've loved her since the dawn of eternity."

Niccolo gripped him by the shoulders, forcing their gazes to meet. "You've never loved anyone like that and you know it."

Pavlo didn't flinch. "I loved you."

Niccolo's hands fell away and he took a step back as if he were slapped.

"That's why you killed her. You were jealous."

"Pavlo, you're not thinking clearly," he said in a soft voice, before extending his arm. "I speak the truth. I had no choice but to take her life. See for yourself."

"No," he turned away. "I am too disgusted to feed from you right now."

"Please, be reasonable," he said, moving to grip his friend's shoulder.

"Leave me be," he growled, slipping from beneath his touch. "I want to be alone."

And with that, he bolted from the cave and launched himself into the air. Niccolo debated over whether or not to pursue him, but decided to let him have some time to sort out his emotions.

With a heavy heart, he began the laborious task of moving the bodies of his enemies out into the open so the sun could wash away any remnants of their existence come the dawn.

He patiently awaited Pavlo's return, but nothing came through the mouth of the cave save for a steady breeze. As the sun rose, pushing him toward slumber, he slipped into the land of dreams wondering if he would ever see his old friend again.

Chapter Twenty

Selu stood, bent at the waist, hands on her knees just a few steps away from the front porch. She wiped her mouth with the back of a trembling hand. Her morning started out the same way it had every day for the last week. She wasn't sure what illness had afflicted her, but she wished it would hurry up and run its course. The vomiting was the only symptom, but it no longer contained itself to just a waking routine. Now certain smells in the house would trigger the reaction. When she turned to reenter the house, Taima stood in the doorway, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"I'm fine," she assured her quickly.

"Come," she gestured with her head. "Let's talk inside."

They had just sat at the kitchen table when Kanati emerged from the bedroom and joined them. "I think we should take you over to Tonden's and let him have a look at you."

"Let's not be hasty," Taima said, patting his forearm as he took a seat beside her. "Selu darling, when was the last time you experienced moon sickness?"

Kanati's face scrunched up in a show of disgust about a topic he clearly wasn't comfortable with discussing.

Selu was quiet as she thought back to the last time she had her period. Her heart began to beat faster as she reached farther and farther back. Dawning crept along the edges of her searching mind.

"The moon has completed more than two cycles since last it affected me," she said, her voice rising in a mix of anxiety and excitement.

Wearing a confused look, Kanati was clearly at a loss as his gaze shifted between them.

"You don't think...?" Selu began to ask.

"I do," Taima confirmed with a nod.

Selu rubbed her stomach absently as she digested the idea. When she looked to Kanati, he was staring at her moving hand.

"You're pregnant?" he asked, eyes widening as they met hers.

She merely nodded, too choked up to speak.

"I'm going to be a father?" he pressed.

She nodded again.

He was on his feet in a flash, engulfing her between his arms, crushing her to his chest. "We're going to have a baby!" His voice broke as he made the exclamation.

"Easy, Kanati," Taima cautioned. "We'll need to treat her gently, especially in the early stages."

He released her with such reluctance; she could feel it in his arms. When she stared up at him, tears were streaming down his face. It wasn't until he reached down and rubbed her cheek with his thumb that she realized she was crying too.

"I didn't think it would ever be possible, but you managed to make me even happier than I already was," he gushed before kissing her tenderly.

When he finally pulled away, a look of sorrow had replaced his joyous visage.

"What's wrong?" She was suddenly afraid he wasn't ready for the responsibilities that come along with fatherhood.

"I have to go to work," he said, his face totally ravaged. "But I don't want to leave your side."

She couldn't help but laugh. "What? Did you plan to spend every waking moment with me until the baby comes?"

"If I could," he nodded solemnly. "But I promised Acabo I'd be there today. He has a wagon full of wares coming in and he needs my help to unload it."

"Go," she said, pushing gently on his shoulders. "I'll be here when you get home."

He rose slowly, his stare revolving from the door to her and back again.

"Seriously, honey. It's not like I've become fragile over night. I think I can manage for a few hours without you."

Sucking in a deep breath, he let it out slowly before nodding his ascent. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

Rising to her feet quickly, she kissed him again before sending him on his way.

"That boy is liable to be a nervous wreck by the time you actually have the child," Taima said after the door shut behind him.

Selu giggled. "It's possible, but I think once he's had time for the thought of fatherhood to fully sink in, he will be just fine."

Taima shrugged, then drug herself to her feet. "You should probably go lie down while I make us some breakfast."

"Oh please, Auntie. I'm pregnant, not paralyzed. Besides, you're still on the mend," she said, pulling her into a warm hug as their paths crossed. "You rest and *I'll* make us something to eat."

Her face puckered in mock consternation, she nodded slowly. "Fine, but don't wear yourself out. You have the baby to think about now."

"Deal," Selu said with a snort. She wondered how many more times she would have to hear that during her gestation period.

* * * *

Kanati wiped the sweat from his brow, the wagon was unloaded and the supplies were stacked along the back wall of the store. He'd told Acabo that he would help him stock the shelves then he needed to get home to his expectant wife. The old man was ecstatic about the news and had offered to let him go early, but the warm day had brought people out in droves and he was doing such a brisk business, he didn't feel right about leaving Acabo alone to tend to the store and put away the shipment.

The bell over the front door rang out and he glanced up. He nearly dropped the box of mason jars he was holding when he recognized the group of men that traipsed up to the counter. Quickly placing the box on the floor, he was about to warn Acabo that they were the same ruffians who passed by his favorite fishing hole when the leader began to speak.

"Hey, old-timer," the one Kanati remembered they called Rich began. "Do you happen to know where we might be able to find a young man named Koonatty, do you?"

Is he trying to say my name? Kanati wondered. It's too close to be a coincidence. How do they know me?

Acabo cocked his head sideways and pursed his brow. "I can't say as I do."

"You sure 'bout that?" Sean asked. "We had 'er on good infermatin' that he homed 'round these parts."

"I assure you, I've never heard that name before," he answered with a shrug. Horace stepped up with a fierce look and opened his mouth to speak, but Rich silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"No, matter," he said. "We were just in Durant not long ago and when we mentioned we might be heading here to Tahlonteeskee to do some bartering, a young man asked us to pass the other fellow a message."

"So, you've come to trade?" Acabo asked. His smile looked false even as far away as Kanati was standing. "What do you have to offer?"

"Actually, we come with needs and money," he answered with a wink.

"Well, you are in luck, we just had a fresh shipment of goods arrive this morning."

"That's all well and good, but we're looking for some items that are a bit more indigenous. Leather goods, blankets, jewelry and the like. Do you have any necklaces made out of beads or maybe some buffalo bone?"

"I have both at the moment. Everything our tribe has to offer is either on the shelves or handing on the racks in the back," he said, sweeping his hand to gesture further into the store. "Gather what you need and I'll set you a fair price for the lot."

The bell above the door rang again and all heads turned to stare at the woman who stood frozen in the doorway, mouth agape, eyes wide with shock.

"Weeell naw, what'd we got hir?" Mickey asked before licking his lips. "Hello purdy lil' thang, don't be shy, come on in."

Selu only hesitated for a moment then she turned and fled from the store. Mickey, Kurt and Horace hurried out the door after her.

"Selu!" Kanati shouted, startling the remaining men. They clearly hadn't spotted him yet.

He rushed through the store at a sprint, jostling Gordon on his way out. He leapt from the porch, clearing the steps and landed smoothly on the road still at a run. The ruffians had already converged on her and she was trapped between them. He could hear their taunts as he drew closer.

"Aww, suga...ain't no need to be like that. We just wunt a talk at cha fer a minit," Mickey was drawling.

"Leave her alone," Kanati growled, skidding to a stop when he reached them.

"Who the fuck are you?" Kurt asked, squaring off on him, his hand resting lightly on the pistol strapped to his hip.

"I'm her husband," he replied, eyeing the sidearm warily.

"What's your name, boy?" Horace asked, looking at him over his shoulder.

"I'm..." He hesitated. "My name is Acoma."

Selu shot him a puzzled glance and pleaded with her using his eyes to stay silent. The exchange didn't go unnoticed by Kurt, who studied them both, his eyes daring quickly back and forth before a smile broke across his rugged face.

"That a fact?" he said. "Well, I guess it would be nothing short of uncivilized to continue to woo this woman seeing as she is already hitched."

"What?" Mickey shouted, finally tearing his attention from Selu's breasts.

"I said, we are going to leave her be, Mickey," Kurt said.

Mickey turned to look at Kanati for the first time. He spit on the road between them. A long brown line of tobacco stained saliva stuck to his chin and he wiped it with the back of his hand.

"Shit, I don't see how his bein' hir changes nuttin. This un's a real looker." He jerked his thumb at Selu. "Hell, he can come alon' to watch if'n he wunt to. Maybe he'd learn himself a few poin'ers. We can shows him how real men please a squaw."

Kanati drew his work knife from his waistband with a growl and dropped into an attack crouch. "Come on you, cur. If you want her, you'll have to deal with me first."

Mickey threw back his head and laughed before pulling his pistol out and leveling it at Kanati's chest. "Init just like an injun to bring a knife to a gun fight?"

"Easy, Mickey," Rich cautioned as he and the others joined the party.

Kanati started edging back so he could keep them all in his line of sight.

"Come on, man," Mickey whined. "It's one kid ginst six of us. You don't thank we can take 'em?"

"I'm sure you would do just fine even by yourself with him, but what do you propose to about them?" he asked, spreading his hands to gesture at both sides of the street.

A crowd had gathered. Both men and women had picked up arms to come to the young couple's aid. Rifles pointed from windows or rested on the shoulders of spectators as they gathered between the buildings. Others brandished bows, arrows notched and strings drawn tight, ready to be loosed if the situation didn't diffuse quickly.

"Awww, fuck," Mickey said in a surprised voice, lowering his pistol. He turned back to Selu with a smile. "Perhap, we can talk more some uther time." "Let's go," Horace said, grabbing Mickey by the arm and steering him toward their horses.

"Did you get yer tradin' dun?" he asked.

"No, but thanks to your little head thinking for your big one, I don't think they are willing to business with us here anymore. So, saddle up. Maybe we can make it to the next town by nightfall."

Sean stared at Kanati as he pulled himself up on his steed. "That boy has balls of steel."

Rich followed his gaze and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then urged his horse forward. "Move out!" he called to the rest of his men.

Kanati stood in the middle of the street, his body still trembling from the encounter as he watched them ride out of town. Acabo slung his rifle over his shoulder and marched out to join him just as he pulled his wife into his arms.

"Perhaps you should take Selu home," he suggested. "You can finish stocking the store tomorrow."

"Thank you," Kanati said, still hugging her tightly. "I've never seen anything like that in my life."

"And by the Gods, I hope you never will again," he said, gripping him on the shoulder.

He led Selu home with his arm wrapped around her shoulder. She held her head against the side of his chest as she sobbed gently. He could only imagine how frightening the whole ordeal must have been for her. Sure, his life was in danger, but his pain would've ended quickly. There was no telling how long her torment would've lasted had they made away with her.

"Why did you give them your father's name?" she asked suddenly.

He hesitated, not wanting to add to her fear.

"Kanati?" She pressed. They stopped walking and she turned to face him, staring up into his eyes.

"When they came into the store, they asked Acabo if he knew me," he finally admitted. She drew in a sharp breath. "They asked for you by name?"

He merely nodded.

"How do they know you?"

"I have no idea," he said, wiping a tear from her cheek. "But it doesn't matter. They are gone now."

Selu walked up the stairs and through the door with Kanati supporting her. She collapsed in a chair by the door, still sobbing. How could he be so stupid? He nearly got himself killed. What would she do if he died? The thought of it terrified her more than the thought of being abducted by those horrible men. He could've went for help, could've given the Talwa a few more moments to come to the rescue. Surely, he knew his tribesmen wouldn't let anything bad happen to her right there in the middle of the street.

"What happened?" Taima asked, emerging from her bedroom on unsteady legs.

"Bad men trying to do bad things," Kanati answered, not prying his eyes from hers as he held her hand.

"Those men we told you about the other day. They came to the store this morning," she explained.

"Are you hurt?" Taima asked Kanati, coming to join them.

"No, but only by the grace of the gods," she answered for him. "He tried to take them all on with a knife."

"I was defending your honor," he said, wearing a confused look. "Would you have me stand by idly while they pawed at you?"

"Defending..." Taima interrupted. "Why were you out there?"

"I went to surprise him at work," she answered, gesturing to her husband.

"But you're in no condition to go traipsing off by yourself," her aunt insisted.

Selu glared at her. "I may be pregnant, but I'm still quite capable of looking after myself."

"Sounds like it," she replied with a snort.

"How was I supposed to know those men would be there?" she asked, struggling to keep her anger under control. Why were they suddenly treating her like a child?

"It doesn't matter," Kanati quickly stepped in. "The important thing is that you are safe now."

"But for how long?" she asked, burying her face in her hands.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Taima asked, her gaze shifting rapidly between the young couple.

"They knew his name, Auntie," she replied in a whisper. "I think they came here looking

for him."

"How is that even...," she paused, a stricken look sweeping across her weathered features. "Were any of them from the school you escaped from?"

"No," Kanati said, shaking his head. "That day at the pond was the first time I'd ever seen them."

"Even still, it could've been the school that sent them after you."

"No, I seriously doubt that," he said, visibly shuddering. Selu wondered what he was thinking about that could cause such a reaction. "Besides, it has been months since I left there, why would they only come for me now?"

"Could I have some water?" Selu asked. Her crying jag had left her feeling parched.

"Of course, my love," he answered already moving into the kitchen.

She watched him ladle out a cup of water from the large pot on the stove, the events of the morning still replaying in her mind. She could still see the toothy smile of the one who had grabbed her. In her mind, he seemed larger than life. That smile held far too many promises of unpleasant things.

Her eyes drifted to the window as her husband walked by it to bring her the cup in his hand. That horrible smile was still there, it lay beneath excited eyes, boring a hole into her from the other side of the window. She leapt to her feet. It wasn't a memory or a figment of her imagination. He was there.

"Kanati," was all she could manage as she pointed at the window with a shaky finger.

He whirled just as the man disappeared from view, but Kanati had seen him.

"Take your aunt to the back room and hide," he said, rushing to the corner where his rifle rested.

Before he could reach it, the front door burst open and all hell broke loose. Men poured into the house, weapons drawn.

"Don't even think about it," Horace yelled at Kanati, pointing a rifle at him.

"Git o'er thare and stand nix to yar woman," Mickey said.

"Are you sure this is him?" Sean asked of the leader.

"Quite sure, he matches the description perfectly, right down to being married to a beautiful young lady," Rich answered.

"He only paid for the boy," Kurt said. "Should we leave the women be?"

"Oh, hell nah," Mickey answered quickly. "I ain't never seen no red tail that purdy, you think we's jus' gonna let 'er go?"

"That one's too old to be much good for anything," Gordon observed, pointing at Taima with the end of his pistol. "But I bet the other one will fetch us a pretty penny."

"After we'er dun wit 'er though right?" Mickey said with a snicker.

"Of course," Rich answered with a nod.

Selu turned to stare at Kanati, who still stood frozen, his hand extended toward his rifle. She mentally urged him not to do anything foolish. It was broad daylight. There was no way they could bring them out of the house without alerting the rest of the Talwa. If he could just be patient, these men would be dealt with...permanently.

"How much time we got?" Sean asked.

Rich pulled a watch from the pocket of his vest and flipped the cover open. "It's still a good three hours before sunset."

Selu's hopes fell. With cover of night, they may well be able to make off with them in tow.

"It sure would be easier if we could wait until then," Horace echoed her thoughts.

"Yes, but we had explicit instructions," Rich said, rubbing his chin. "We have to be far from here before the sun goes down."

"Do we got time fer one go round with 'er before we git?" Mickey asked.

Before anyone could answer, Kanati was in motion. He sprang forward, knocking the pistol from Sean's hand before delivering a crushing blow to his chin using his elbow. He jumped on Mickey, locking his knees around his waist as he rained down blows to his face. Selu and Taima reacted at nearly the same time, darting into the kitchen. They both grabbed knives. Selu brandished hers and dropped into a defensive crouch, but Taima held hers by the blade.

Rich stepped up and hit Kanati in the back of the head with the butt of his rifle. He went limp and fell to the floor in a sprawl. Mickey staggered back and forth as he recovered from the fierce beating he had just endured. He shook his head vigorously and drew back his foot to kick Kanati when suddenly a bone handle appeared in the front of his throat. Taima had thrown her knife with deadly accuracy. Horace sprinted at her and drove a shoulder into her chest, sending her flailing into the wall behind her. She crashed into it with a scream of pain. Before she could even fall to the floor, he had his own knife out and slit her throat from ear to ear. "Auntie!" Selu screamed in horror.

"Drop the knife," Rich commanded, pointing his rifle at her.

She swiped at Horace as he stepped in to disarm her. A red line sprang up on his forearm and he cursed loudly, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

Rich cocked the hammer back on his rifle. "I said to drop it. There'll be no further warning."

"He's dead," Sean said, kneeling beside Mickey's body.

"Leave him," Rich said with a grunt. "It's going to be hard enough to get out of here unnoticed as it is."

He stared at the ceiling for a long moment, then let out a long breath before saying, "Gordon, tie him up. Horace, go fetch a couple of blankets from their rooms.

"Tie him up?" Gordon protested. "But we only need the head. We can take that here."

"The plan has changed," he spun on him. "I want him to suffer. I want him to watch what we do to his wife as punishment for killing poor Mickey."

"You are one sadistic son of a bitch, you know that?" Sean said with a laugh. "I think that's why I like you so much."

"I can't believe that old man was willing to pay so much just to off some savage," Horace said. "What do you think he did to piss the codger off?"

"That is not my concern," Rich replied with a shrug.

"So, how do you want to do this?" Sean asked.

"We'll take them out one at a time and rally back over the hill where our horses are," he said, closing the gap between him and Selu. "And what are the chances that you won't scream the minute we get you out that door?"

He stared hard into her eyes. "That's what I thought," he said, before rendering her unconscious with another swing of his rifle.

Chapter Twenty-One

Niccolo awoke, but didn't rise. Lying on his back, he slid his hands behind his head and studied the ceiling of the cave. Pavlo still hadn't returned. Was he truly gone from his life? As irritating as he could be at times, he still missed his old friend dearly. He was shocked by the realization of just how much he had come to depend on the companionship. He had been alone for so long, he didn't think it was possible for him to become so attached to another vampire. Yet, there was no denying the gaping hole he felt for the loss. He debated whether or not to search for him, but decided that when or even if, Pavlo wanted to see him again, he knew where to come.

Pulling himself to his feet, he dusted off his clothing before walking to the mouth of the cave. He surveyed the land below, his eyes flitting over the charred rocks that were the last reminders of the group of trophy hunters who had turned his life upside down. He hadn't even had the energy to go see a play, choosing instead to spend nearly every waking hour waiting for Pavlo's return. He'd only left once and that was to feed. Though the blood of his attacker's had served to help him survive, there wasn't enough life left in it, to completely heal himself. No, only the fresh blood of a human could do that. He'd chosen his meal hastily, not wanting to be away from the cave any longer than he had to be. The first ghost he happened upon was snatched from the streets and drained in an alley.

Scanning the area with his mental fingers, he found no traces of Pavlo's presence. He let out a sigh and returned to the interior. It was time he quit waiting. It was time to move on with his life, or at least what passed for life in his world.

Grabbing his backpack from along the wall, he rummaged through it until he produced a rumpled piece of paper and a pen. He spread the paper on the floor, smoothing it as flat as he could manage and began to write.

Dearest Pavlo,

If you are reading this, then my prayers have been answered. As you can see, I've kept all of your worldly possessions safe while you were away. Fear not, I shall return shortly. Please, wait for me. We have much to discuss.

Sincerely,

Niccolo

He read over the letter again. *Short, sweet and to the point*, he thought. Placing the sheet of paper in the center of the floor, he placed a rock over one corner to make sure it didn't move should the autumn winds blow into the cave. A noise from behind him, made him whirl, ready to attack.

"Relax, my dearest Nick, 'tis only I," Pavlo said, holding his hands up in a show of surrender. "I have returned, abashed, but unafraid to make amends."

"You have nothing to make amends for, old friend," Niccolo said, moving to embrace him.

Pavlo returned the embrace, squeezing him tightly. "I beg to differ. My reaction was deplorable, and each night I stayed away only exasperated the situation."

"None of that matters to me," Niccolo said, pulling back so their eyes met. "I'm just glad you finally came home."

"Home, you say?" He laughed. "I hadn't given it much thought, but I suppose that is what this cave has become to us. You deserve a palace, but just being in your presence makes this filthy den seem like the bedchamber of the finest of nobles."

Niccolo just smiled at him and turned to retrieve the note he had left.

"What have you there?" Pavlo asked, pointing even as he crumpled up the note.

"You just caught me," he answered, flicking the wad to the back of the cave. "I was about to head out and was just leaving a note in case you came back while I was away."

"Off to visit your protégé?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"No, I have no more time for Kanati. He deserves more than the life I offered. I was planning to visit the city, but we don't have to make the journey if you'd prefer to stay and talk."

"Well, my timing appears to be even more impeccable than I would have thought

possible," he said with a mischievous grin.

"How so?" Niccolo asked, instantly wary.

"I've arranged a surprise for you. A token offered in hopes that you will overlook my deplorable behavior and hasting the healing process for the bond between us, which has surely been injured as a result of all of this...foolishness," he said, waving his hands as he spoke.

"Though the sentiment is appreciated, I can assure you, it isn't necessary. I, for one, would like—"

"But, you have yet to hear what the surprise is," Pavlo interrupted in a pouty voice. "You can't summarily dismiss the present without ever knowing what it is. Besides, I worked very hard to put it together."

"Ah, that would be quite rude of me," he admitted. "Pray tell, what entertainment have you line up for us this evening?"

"Come," he said, striding toward the mouth of the cave. "I shall show you."

"Pavlo," Niccolo started to protest, but his friend had already taken flight.

He shook his head, launched himself into the air and quickly caught up to him.

They soared through the air at a lazy pace. Niccolo tried to guess their destination, but Pavlo constantly seemed to be making minor corrections to their course. Finally frustrated enough to lose his humor, he used his mental fingers to probe for some clue as to their destination.

"Get out of my head, Niccolo Rasetti," Pavlo said, grinning maniacally at him over his shoulder. "I will not have you ruin such a wonderful surprise by sneaking a peek at my thoughts."

"Very well," he grumbled. "Can we at least speed up our journey? The anticipation is killing me."

Pavlo's laugh echoed from the clouds as he pushed himself faster. They continued the trek, now travelling at a breakneck pace. When he finally plummeted out of the clouds, it caught Niccolo by surprise. He overshot him and had to circle back. The first thing he spotted when he broke into the open was a large single-story house sprawled on top of a hill. It was the only structure for as far as he could see in any direction. His friend stood near the stairs, beckoning to him. He probed the house with his mind. Ten souls occupied the structure, but something was amiss. He landed next to Pavlo with questions on his tongue and ice gripping the base of his

neck.

"What have you done?" he asked in a whisper.

"Where to begin...," he replied, rubbing his temple absently. "First I managed to secure this house and about hundred acres in the process."

"How—"

Pavlo silenced him with a wave of a hand. "It comes equipped with a spacious basement that I've taken the liberty of having modified to ensure not even the slightest hint of sunlight can penetrate its dark depths. The elderly gentleman who owned it signed the deed over to us just moments before his demise. He referred to me as the son he never had or something along those lines."

"I'm sure," Niccolo said, unable to mask the disdain in his voice.

"Secondly, I searched long and hard for just the right cattle with which to stock it," he continued, motioning toward the house. "Rest assured, they are ghosts, each and everyone."

He shook his head. "Have you already forgotten my stance on pets, let alone owning a stable?"

"Ah, but I assumed your qualms sprang from some inane need to prevent the undue suffering of human society's downtrodden. I assure you, that is not the case among those I've collected."

"What's wrong with them?" Niccolo said, still probing. "Their minds are all but blank."

"I know," he smiled proudly. "Is it not wonderful?"

"I've never experienced anything quite like it."

"It was the strangest thing," he said, nodding thoughtfully. "I was fully prepared to glamour them, but when I locked their gaze and attempted to impose my will, they...well, you can feel the result. They are perfectly docile and receptive to any command as long as it is not too complex."

"A new skill, then," Niccolo said, pondering the implications. "Most of my *unique* talents have manifested themselves in much the same way."

"As it was with me, but to be honest, it had been so long since anything new happened in that department, I was caught wholly off-guard."

"And you are positive they are all ghosts?" he asked, the desire to feed growing steadily. "Well, they were," he replied with a shrug. "Now, they are living breathing dolls to be played with for our amusement."

Niccolo cocked his head to one side as a fragment from their reunion floated to the surface of his subconscious. "Now I understand the off the cuff comment you made about the cave being our home."

"Yes, a gentleman of your caliber should never have to sleep in the dirt," he said, nodding. "As you can see, I've remedied that situation with all the panache you have come to expect in gifts from yours truly."

"Indeed you have," he said with a chuckle. "Shall we?"

"By all means," he said, gesturing for him to go first. "I am simply famished."

Niccolo stepped through the front door and nodded in appreciation. The cavernous front room made up nearly half of the entire size of the house. Chairs, divans and even sofas were scattered in seemingly random order throughout the vast expanse.

"There is a modest kitchen through that door," Pavlo said, pointing to a door on the far left of the room. "And there are five bedrooms down the hallway in the center, two on each side and one in the very back."

"And the old man lived alone?" Niccolo asked dubiously.

"At the time of our encounter, he surely did, but then he had had the misfortune of surviving his entire family, including his sons."

"Do you have a preference for any of our gathered feast?" he asked, eying the hallway before licking his lips.

"Surely you jest," he laughed. "You are the guest of honor, the man of the hour as it were. Take your pick and I will choose my own once you are settled in for the evening."

Niccolo moved in a blur to the first bedroom on the left. Slinging open the door, he entered and kicked it shut with the heel of his foot. It rattled the frame from the force of the impact. Two young men sat on the edge of the bed, their stance identical, each with their knees together, both feet planted firmly on the floor, and hands folded neatly in their laps.

He stepped up to the one closest to him, tilted his head to the side, exposing the pulsing artery that beat just beneath the skin and sunk his fangs deep. Bracing himself for the onslaught of the man's life, he had swallowed several mouthfuls of blood before he realized there was no connection. It was as if the man had simply ceased to exist. Once he had his fill, he pulled away from the man's neck and stared into his vacant eyes.

"I might as well be drinking blood from a cup," Niccolo said with a mirthless laugh.

He searched out Pavlo with the tendrils of his mind. His friend seemed to be lost to the bloodlust feeding hungrily from a young woman in the master bedroom. Turning his attention to the other occupant in the room, he had suddenly lost all desire to feed. The whole situation just felt wrong to him.

He rose slowly, already debating plans of how to spend the rest of the evening. He wondered briefly if Pavlo would tire of the mindless beasts in time to go catch a play somewhere. The sound of his hungry slurping traveled through the walls and he doubted that to be the case. When his thoughts turned toward leaving without Pavlo, he paused. Would he be offended?

He was out the door and to the porch before he realized he truly didn't care if leaving was offensive or not. He had to get away from the twisted reality of the house. Perhaps he could hazard one final visit to the young couple. Some normalcy might do wonders to fray his tattered nerves.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pain seared Kanati into alertness. He felt the rope burning into his wrist where they were pinned to his back and held still, keeping his eyes closed. He barely contained his scream when he felt a blow strike him on the side of his face.

"Damn it, Horace. Is that really necessary?" He recognized the deep baritone of Rich's voice.

"I'm trying to wake him up so we can get this party started."

"I can assure that hitting a person in the head is not the best way to go about doing that," Rich explained, his voice heavy with exasperation. "Especially considering it was a blow to the head that sent him into unconsciousness in the first place."

"Well, what do you suggest I do?"

"Be patient. He'll come around soon enough."

"But I want a piece of her now and you said we can't touch her until he is watching," Horace whined.

"Fine, you want him awake?" Sean asked. "Get out of the way and let me show you how it's done."

Kanati concentrated on keeping his breathing even as he heard them moving around. It was all he could do not to open his eyes to see what horrible torture must surely be coming.

"Watch this," he heard Sean say.

In the next instant, his eyes flew open and scream of agony escaped his lips. He looked down at his chest where Sean had placed a glowing ember from their campfire. He twisted and jerked, but the still burning wood had fused to his flesh. He screamed again, rolling to his stomach, trying to douse the fire by smothering it.

"Well, you wanted him awake," Rich said with a snort. "Now you get to listen to him whine like a little bitch."

"Speaking of bitches," Horace sneered. "I've been dying to break me off a piece of that

one every since I laid eyes on her."

"Leave her alone!" Kanati shrieked. "Don't you touch her!"

"Oh, yeah?" Horace asked turning back on him. "And what the fuck are you going to do about it?"

He kicked him in the side viciously before pulling Selu to her feet. She lolled in his arms, limp as a rag doll, eyes closed.

"You can't tell me you slept through all that ruckus," he said, licking the side of her cheek. "Come on. Open your eyes for me, lil' darling."

Still she didn't move.

"I know how to get her attention," Gordon said.

Kanati watched in impotent horror as he closed the gap between them. He looked at him to make sure he was watching before he took his hand and shoved it hard between her legs. Kanati and Selu screamed out at the same time. She brought her knee up hard, catching Gordon in the crotch. He doubled over and dropped to the ground, gulping in air. She tried to catch Horace with the same maneuver, but he blocked it. Her hands were still bound in front of her, but she clawed at his face with what little movement the ropes afforded her.

"God damn it!" he bellowed when her nails dug into the flesh of his jaw.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and kneed her hard in the stomach. "That ought to take a little wind out of your sails."

"No!" she screamed, clutching her abdomen.

"No what?" he growled, straightening her up and delivering another blow with his knee.

Kanati brought his knees up under him and tried to push himself to his feet. His face skidded forward and he fell into the back of Kurt's leg. He spun and kicked him in the ribs repeatedly.

"Please, just leave her be!" he pleaded. "She's with child!"

This gave them all pause. A flicker of hope sparked within him as they exchanged glances.

"Not anymore," Horace said with a laugh before kneeing her yet again.

"You son of a bitch!" Kanati raged.

"Aww, is this upsetting you, little man?" Horace puckered up and blew him a kiss. "You ain't seen nothing yet. Sean, drag him over here. We're gonna give him a front row seat."

He drug Selu kicking and scratching to a large log near the edge of their campfire. He spun her to face away from him and removed the ropes from her wrist.

"Hold her for a minute," he said, standing between it and the dancing flames.

Kurt and Gordon each grabbed an arm and spread them wide as Horace ripped off her top, exposing her breasts. He pushed her over, kicking the back of her knees until her stomach rested over the log. She looked up, her gaze locked with Kanati's. Horace dropped to a crouch behind her, gripped her hips with both hands and promptly disappeared.

Kanati blinked, thinking his eyes were playing tricks on him.

The horses, secured to a tree near the camp, reared and whinnied, spooked by something unseen.

"What the—?" Kurt's question was cut off by an ear-piercing screech from beyond the reach of the firelight.

Selu was momentarily forgotten as they scrambled for weapons. She pulled herself over the log and rushed to Kanati. Dropping to her knees, she worked frantically at his bindings.

"Look out," he yelled as Sean made a beeline for them, pistol pointed.

He cocked the gun and promptly vanished as well. Kanati could have sworn he saw a blur of motion sweep the hooligan away, but he couldn't imagine anything that could move that fast.

Another scream rang out in the night.

"What the fuck is going on?" Rich bellowed.

"Retribution," a voice whispered on the wind.

Kanati froze, the voice may have only been a whisper, but he recognized the rumbling base with the melodic edge to it. This was the thing from the woods outside of the school, the thing that stalked him and Selu that day on the outskirts of the Talwa. This was a monster and yet, the fact that he still lived after two encounters with the creature instilled a sense of solace even as Sean's screams of agony died away. He knew in his heart that he would not be harmed; he was being protected.

"Quickly!" Rich gestured at Kurt and Gordon. "Just start shooting into-"

Before he could finish the sentence, a dark shape dropped from the sky between the two men. Two hands snaked from the shadows, grabbed both of them by the hair and then shot back into the darkness, rising into the air like a giant bird of prey. Kanati watched Kurt and Gordon flail and scream for a fraction of a second before they too were gone from sight. As Kanati listened to the shrieks floating down to him from the clouds, another realization dawned on him. This...thing was not only protecting him physically, but mentally as well. Surely, something so powerful could easily dispatch with the whole crew at one time, but he chose instead to take them to some point where neither he nor Selu would have to bear witness to the brutality.

"There!" Selu shouted as his hands sprang free.

He flexed his hands, restoring circulation to his fingers. The creature underestimated him. He wanted blood. He wanted brutality. He wanted vengeance for all the suffering the man standing before him had caused. He wanted—no he needed to take this man's life for the life he stole from his unborn child.

Springing forward, he didn't even slow when Rich leveled his rifle at him. The gun went off just before he crashed into him. He felt as though fire sprang from his shoulder, but he no longer cared. Knocking the devil to the ground, he pummeled him with a fury he didn't know he possessed. The man's face seemed to melt away beneath his blows.

His breath left his body in a rush as he was lifted from his feet. Catching a glimpse of motion, he started to protest, but darkness claimed him with an abruptness that was terrifying.

Was he dead? Had he misjudged the creature's intentions? *Oh, God! Selu, I've left her to deal with this beast alone*, he thought bitterly.

He swam against the darkness, trying to break the surface of his consciousness. He had to wake up, had to be at Selu's side to face their end together.

He awoke with a start, flailing, struggling to rise.

"Kanati!" Selu's voice broke through the fog of his mind like a sledgehammer. "It's over. Calm down."

"Are you hurt?" he asked, rising to inspect her.

She barely choked off a sob as she rubbed her stomach. "I'll live, but I'm sure our child won't."

"What happened to me?" He struggled to make sense of those final moments.

"That coward shot you—"

"But, I'm unmarked," he interrupted, rubbing the smooth flesh where he was sure he felt the bullet enter.

"That... thing. Was it Jumlin?" Selu asked, eyes wide.

"Jumlin is a myth, a creation story," Kanati replied in a voice that lacked conviction.

"Even still, this creature was not human, but he shared some traits with the myth."

"Blood," Kanati said with a nod. "But he was clearly not born of our people as Jumlin seemed to be."

"He had the presence of a living spirit," she insisted.

"Jumlin was a cruel creature, this... being still has some vestiges of humanity."

"He licked your wound," Selu said as she dropped her gaze. "I tried to stop him, but he held me at bay as if I were no more than a troublesome insect. When he was through, you were healed."

He pulled in a sharp breath. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, after... After your wounds were mended, he apologized for our loss and...and he apologized for depriving you of your vengeance. He said he feared your wound would be mortal if he waited much longer. Then he took the last scoundrel and fled through the trees."

"Come, let's get you home."

Selu began to cry again. "Auntie, they killed her," she managed between sobs.

"She will be honored," he assured her, pulling her to her feet. "But we will feel that loss for an eternity."

"What will we tell the elders?" she asked as he untied the reigns of one of the horses.

He continued to free all of them, but kept one to ride home.

"Kanati," she pressed when he remained silent.

"We will tell them that all of the ruffians are dead and we are not and that is all they need to concern themselves with," he said as he mounted the steed.

He extended his arm and helped her onto the spot behind him.

"What if they want details?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"No one in our tribe would be so insensitive as to demand we relive such horrific events," he replied as he spurred the horse into motion.

They rode as quickly as they dared in the moonless night. The sun was just breaking over the horizon as the Talwa came into view. Kanati took a deep breath and wiped the tears from his face. The little village looked unchanged, but he knew life there would never be the same.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Niccolo had just gutted Gordon when he heard the gunshot.

"Oh, no...no, no, no," he whispered.

He rushed back to the little campsite in a blur. Kanati bled profusely from his shoulder, but he still he pummeled on the last of them. The wound rested just to the left of his neck and blood pumped from it in spurts. Even as he closed the gap between them, he could hear his heart beat falter. *The bullet must've hit an artery. He is going to bleed out*, he thought frantically.

Swooping down, he pulled Kanati up just as he lost consciousness. Niccolo quickly probed the wound. "Left sublcavian artery," he murmured, turning the young man to examine his back. "The bullet went straight through.

Just as he laid him on the ground, Selu sprang at him.

"Get away from him you fiend!" she screamed as she clawed at him.

Grabbing both her hands in his, he held her as lightly as he could and still maintain control.

"Selu, listen to me. I don't have time to waste here. Unless you want to lose your husband too, please allow me to treat him. I can assure you, I mean neither of you any harm."

She nodded and he released her. Taking a few steps back, she dropped into a crouch, obviously prepared to spring if she thought he was hurting her dearly beloved. Once he was sure she would keep her place, he returned his attentions to the dying boy. He bit the tip of his tongue, diluting his blood with saliva. Plunging it deep within the gaping hole, he licked at the torn artery, pushing the mixture over the ragged tissue. He felt it closing almost immediately. Working his way outward, he didn't pause until all signs of injury were gone.

"I'm sorry for your loss, both of them," he said, rising from Kanati's still form.

"What?" Selu shrieked. "But you promised."

"No, you misunderstand," he said, holding both hands up in defense. "Your husband will be fine. I was referring to your aunt and...the child that has gone still in your womb." "How did you—"

"It doesn't matter;" he interrupted with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Just know that you have my deepest condolences. Your husband is a very special man, one destined for greatness someday."

"Can you see the future?" Selu regarded him with wide-eyed wonder.

"No, but there is just a certain quality about him." He smiled at her. "Surely, you've sensed it too."

She nodded, lowering her gaze.

"When he awakes, please give him my apologies for robbing him of his vengeance, but if I had waited much longer, he would not have survived the night." He turned to stare down at the young man's peaceful face.

"You could leave the cur until my husband is up to the challenge," she suggested, pointing at Rich as he struggled to pull himself to his feet.

"I'm afraid I must apologize again," he said, offering a lopsided smile. "I have other plans for this one."

Before she could protest further, he turned and grabbed Rich by the throat, dragging him through the trees with a whirlwind of speed. He couldn't help but grin as the man's arms and legs crunched against branches and trunks as they rushed by. Once he was sure he was far enough from the young couple that they couldn't hear him, He dropped the battered gang leader to the ground at his feet.

"What...are...you?" Rich asked between gasps.

"What seems to be the problem, Richard?" Niccolo knelt beside him. "Oh, I understand now, it sounds like you may have broken a few ribs."

"I...asked—"

"Save your breath." He paused long enough to smile and expose his extended canines. "You won't have it much longer."

Rich surprised him. Rather than shouting out in terror, he merely whimpered. The strong aroma of urine wafted up to his nostrils.

Niccolo threw back his head and laughed. "So much for the tough guy façade," he said, still smiling.

Grabbing him by the collar with both hands, he pulled him up and sank his fangs into the

pulsing vein on his neck. Soon, he found himself retracing steps on the curvy road of Rich's life. It was not an experience he wanted to endure, but he knew he must. He wanted answers. Having gleaned bits and pieces from the minds of the others, he knew someone had paid them to kill Kanati, but he had yet to figure out who that could be. It seemed to take an eternity to reach the point he sought, but finally he stumbled into the moment.

"Can we puleeze make us a run by Tally Oskee—?" Mickey pleaded as he slammed a mug of beer on the table.

"Tahlonteeskee," Rich answered, before taking a long draw from his.

"Whuteva, can we?" he pressed.

What is this guy's obsession with savage snatch, Rich's thought. "Well, the doves back home seem to be going crazy for authentic artsy shit from the heathens. It might be a good chance to make a little extra coin."

A short man, bent with age, shambled up to the table and offered the entire crew a wide, toothless smile. He was dressed in a freshly pressed beige cotton shirt, a silk vest, slacks tucked into riding boots and had what was left of his snow-white hair slicked back. When he spoke, his voice sounded like marble crushed under a hoof.

"Fine sirs, forgive my brashness and my poor manners for having eavesdropped, but I am certain overheard one of you mention Tahlonteeskee. Is that correct?"

Rich surveyed the bewildered expressions of his crew before he responded. "We may have some business there soon," he said hesitantly. "Why do you ask?"

"You see, I have business there as well, but I fear my feeble limbs are no longer up to the challenge," he said, bowing his head.

"What kind of business?"

"The profitable kind," he said, locking gazes with Rich.

As he stared into those eyes, Niccolo realized he'd seen enough. With a growl of rage, he ripped open the neck of his meal and dropped him convulsing to the ground. The old man's face may have been wrinkled beyond recognition and the voice was all wrong, but those eyes...they were a dead giveaway. Besides, he could think of only one other person in the whole of the Indian Territory who insisted on using such a pompous vocabulary.

Launching himself into the air, he swept over the plains, bending trees from the force of his passing. He was on the porch of the sprawling ranch house in an instant. He took a moment to compose himself, forcing an air of calm before he opened the door. Pavlo emerged from the hallway at nearly the same time. Blood dripped in twin streams from the corners of his mouth. The front of his shirt was soaked through and sticking to his chest.

"The prodigal son has returned yet again," he said with a wide grin. "You were away for what felt like an eternity. I assumed the absence was caused by some offensive over the stable I created for us, but fear not, their meager lives will no longer be a burden on your soul."

"Well, that's one less thing I'll need to address tonight," Niccolo replied lightly, moving further into the room with a casual stride.

"Pray tell, what else could be weighing on you?"

"I went to visit Kanati and he wasn't there," he said, trying to catch his old friend's gaze.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," he said, covering his mouth. "I know how much the boy means to you."

"Yes, but for the life of me, I can't figure out why anyone would want to hurt him."

"Did he suffer?" he asked, finally meeting his gaze.

"Not nearly as much as the gang you sent to slay him," Niccolo said on a whisper.

Pavlo flinched as if he had been struck, then coiled into a crouch and sprang with a snarl on his lips and murder in his eyes.

Niccolo was ready for him. They collided with the sound of granite on granite. They spun through the common room like some sort of demonic tornado, clawing, gnashing, trying to gain the upper hand. Furniture disintegrated in their path, sending debris and tufts of stuffing into the air. He was sure his old friend could match his speed, but he was surprised to discover that their strength was equal as well. He couldn't squash the excitement that bloomed, vying for space with his rage. This could be his greatest battle. No weapons, no advantages. Just fangs, determination, and a worthy opponent.

Four lines appeared on Pavlo's throat, each trickling blood. He snatched Niccolo's arm as it recoiled and delivered a blow of his own. He felt the heat rise on his cheek as the claws dug in. Enraged, he lunged for the neck, but his teeth barely grazed the surface of Pavlo's skin. They danced apart, eyeing each other as they moved in a close circle.

"This is not an ending I would prefer," Pavlo said through a forced smile. "Can we not

salvage our friendship?"

"No," Niccolo growled, darting in for another attack.

The conflict raged on, claw meeting claw, fangs meeting air. Every opening closed before the other could take advantage. It was infuriating to have his enemy so close and be powerless to do anything with the opportunity. If he could just get a solid hold on him, it would all be over.

He tried to press him to a corner of the room. They toppled the last remaining end table, hurtling an unlit lamp to the floor. It shattered on impact, splattering kerosene in a wide circle.

Pavlo stared at the pungent liquid and Niccolo took advantage of the distraction to charge. As he rushed forward, Pavlo raised his hand, but at the floor rather than him. In the next instant, he was engulfed in flames. The heat blistered his skin. The pain was unimaginable. He launched himself free of the conflagration, but his clothes were already ablaze as well. Though darkness encased him, he still felt every sensation. His sight was gone, robbed by the fire. The moisture of his eyes boiled away.

He rolled along the floor, trying desperately to extinguish the flames, all the while waiting for the deathblow from Pavlo. When had he learned pyrokinesis? How could he let this happen? He was a warrior, a legend, a man to be feared. Yet that pompous ass had bested him.

He slowly began to realize that he was alone. Pavlo had fled.

Rolling to his back, he could still feel the smoke streaming from his body. Every nerve still intact screamed at him for mercy. He needed blood to heal himself, but knew he didn't have time to hunt before the sun rose. Blinded, he would have to rely on his other senses to seek out the nourishment he needed. But first, he had even more pressing issues. The flames had turned into an inferno. The entire house would be coming down around his ears at any second. Nearly passing out from the pain, he lurched to his feet. Feeling his way as quickly as he could, the flames licked at his skin, threatening to consume him as they did everything else in their path.

He'd nearly given in when finally he felt cool air on his face. Stumbling off the porch, he put as much distance between him and the house as he could. The sun was coming. He didn't have much more time. Finally, he dropped to his knees in the soft grass and dug. As he covered himself in dirt, he vowed he would hunt the cur dog down.

A sudden fear burst to the forefront of his thoughts. Would Pavlo seek revenge against Tahlonteeskee? He led him to believe Kanati was dead, but what of Selu...the others? He needed time to heal, time to think. He prayed he would be afforded both.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kanati crested a hill with Selu gripping tightly to his sides as the horse galloped along and his heart sank. He couldn't quite make out the Talwa yet, but the glow rising into the night air was unmistakable. Fire. What happened? Did they take the time to set fire to the town before absconding with them?

Trying to quicken his pace, he prayed there would be survivors. As they topped the last hill, he realized the fires sprang from dozens of torches held by his kinsmen as they surrounded their home. Someone had already discovered Taima.

"Selu! Kanati!" Acabo exclaimed as they entered the light cast from the torches and leapt from their steed. "We thought we'd never see you again."

"What happened?" Acabo stepped up to embrace them. "We found one of the men from this morning and...and... "

"My auntie," Selu finished for him.

He gave a solemn nod.

"They came for us in the middle of the afternoon," Kanati said, reaching for Selu's hand. "We fought and lost, but we were able to get free after they made camp."

"We'll post guards..." Acabo began.

"That won't be necessary," he quickly assured him.

"But what if they return?" he was clearly flabbergasted.

"They won't...they're dead."

Murmurs fluttered through the crowd, but just as he predicted, no one asked for details.

"Have you moved her body yet?" Selu asked softly.

"That is what we were about to do," he said, pointing as a group of elders emerged with her remains wrapped in a blanket. "She is to be taken to the Townhouse where we will cleanse her, washing her with lavender oil to drive away the impurities of her death. We will inter her before sundown tomorrow." "She will return to the earth to give nourishment to the plants as they give nourishment to us," Dustu added.

Acabo gasped and Kanati followed his gaze to Selu's blood stained legs. "The child?" They shook their heads simultaneously, but neither answered.

"Do you need to see the doctor?" he asked, already scanning the crowd for Ani.

She shook her head again. "There's nothing he can do for me now. My body is already...purging itself."

He turned to Kanati. "Keep a close eye on her, especially for the next few days. If she starts to run fever, take her to Ani immediately.

"Of course," he replied, nodding vigorously.

"I'll let you know if I need him," she assured them.

"At the very least you really need to get some rest," he said, pulling her into a tight embrace.

"I can't stay here," she said when he released her.

"I know." Kanati squeezed her hand. "I'll just slip inside, grab us a few things, and we can go to my old house."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to look at that kitchen again," she continued, refusing to relinquish her hold on him as he started to pull away.

"Then I shall gather all of our possessions in the next few days and we shall move...permanently."

"Thank you," she whispered. "I love you."

He kissed her on the forehead. "I love you too. Wait here with Acabo and I will return shortly."

Entering the house quickly, he tried not to look at the blood already congealed on the floor. He wondered briefly what they did with Mickey's body, but quickly decided he didn't care. What happened to him in death could never make amends for what he did in life. Gathering a few sets of clothing and their wedding blanket, he was back at her side within moments, yet most of the crowd had already dispersed. Only Acabo remained. He watched the procession of torches that accompanied Taima on the path to the Townhouse and instantly knew the reason why.

"If you'll excuse me," he gave a slight bow before hurry to catch up with the others.

"What should we do about him?" Selu asked, pointing to the horse that stood motionless where they dismounted.

"I'll take off his tack and set him free," he said, already in motion.

Dropping the saddle and reins to the ground, he gave the steed a gentle smack on the hindquarters. "Go on now."

The horse obliged with a whinny, galloping quickly out of sight. They stared after him until they could no longer hear his hooves hit the ground. As they moved slowly towards home, it occurred to him that they were both procrastinating. Though he was exhausted, both mentally and physically, he didn't want to go to sleep. He was sure once his eyes closed, he would be bombarded by nightmares both of what happened and what they narrowly avoided.

* * * *

Kanati lead the procession of seven who carried Taima's body to the tribal cemetery. They kept step with the drumbeat that echoed from the crowd that followed. Wails of grief and anger coursed through the throng. He could barely see the path before him; tears rolled freely down his cheeks. When they arrived at the freshly dug hole, he helped lower Selu's aunt—his aunt to her final resting place.

Dustu stepped to the edge of the grave and raised his hands to shoulder level. The multitude fell silent. His hands dropped to his sides and he stared down at the wrapped form at the bottom of the hole.

"All things have their proper place in our world. Life, love and happiness are what we celebrate, but sickness, death and despair also make us who we are. How can we truly appreciate joy without having ever known sorrow?

"Our mental prowess increases and diminishes. We have strength and weakness. The sun rises and shines, yet it succumbs to darkness. The moon waxes full and fades away. The flowers bloom and then wither. The leaves bloom and are swept away by autumn's embrace. The wind blows and then there is calm.

"And so the changes are inevitable, all things sicken and die. But as surely as we pass from this life, we can take comfort in the fact that we will be reborn and our achievements in this life will reward us in the next.

"Our beloved Taima will surely be missed, but fear not, for her next life will be one of greatness. How could it not be with all that she us do for us of her own free will?"

He knelt at the edge, dislodging small bits of dirt in the process and pulled an eagle feather from his hair and dropped it. It fluttered down to Taima.

"Sleep well, my friend," he whispered.

Rising slowly, he turned and walked away as one by one the rest of the tribe filed by the grave. Each grabbed a handful of dirt, tossed it into the hole and said their final respects.

Selu stood by the grave long after it was filled and packed down. Kanati stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist. He wanted to comfort her, but didn't know how. He silently prayed his presence would be enough. The sun had long set before she finally pulled away and turned to face him.

"Let's go," she said, her voice breaking off in a sob.

As he walked her home, he opened his mouth several times to speak, but words failed him. What could anyone say that would ease the pain of everything that had transpired in such a short time? And yet, he wanted to do something for her. He loved her so much, he had to do something. His own grief was shadowed by his need to lighten her burden.

They stepped up to the door and he turned her to face him. Wrapping his arms around her lightly, he stared into her eyes.

"I know you're hurting. I know there is nothing I can say or do to make the ache go away, but I love you and I swear to spend every waking moment trying to make sure that the happiness in your life shines so bright, this pain...our pain will have no choice but be chased into the shadows of our mind."

"The thing that would make me most happiest in the world right now," she said and leaned up to kiss him. "Is to lie next to my husband and know in my heart of hearts that no matter how long I mourn, you will be there to try to comfort me."

"Consider it done," he said, guiding her into the house.

They headed straight into the bedroom, disrobed and climbed into bed. He held her as they drifted in and out of sleep. The sun shone through the window and still they lay there. When they were hungry, they ate, when they were thirsty, they drank, but always they returned to the comfortable confines of their blankets. Time no longer held any meaning for him as it passed in a blurred mixture of dreams, nightmares and quasi-lucid realities, but thankfully no fever. He wasn't sure if his tattered heart could endure another loss, especially not the loss of the woman he loved most in the world.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Niccolo dug himself free of his makeshift shelter. The dormant time had allowed his body to heal some, but not enough. His sight was still nothing more than shadows and blurs. He needed to feed and soon. Shaking the soil from the remnants of his once fine clothes, he raised his nose into the air, trying to catch a scent.

He'd hoped for human, but at that moment, anything would do. Animal blood wasn't nearly as effective, nor was it particularly palatable. It would, however, be enough to send him far enough along the road to recovery to at least let him go on a proper hunt.

"That'll do," he whispered as he caught a whiff of something trotting off in the distance. "Don't worry; I'll catch up with you shortly."

Taking off as quickly as his weakened body would let him, he chased after his prey. With his vision impaired, his other senses took over. His body seemed to dodge the branches and trees that whipped by of their own accord. The scent grew stronger with each heartbeat. He was close.

At last, he sensed his moment and sprang.

The buck squealed in protest as he landed on him and sunk his teeth into the soft flesh above the shoulder. The deer buckled, crashing them both to the brush, but still he held on. He drank greedily, trying to keep his mind from reliving the bizarre life of such a simple creature. It was a strange experience and one of the chief reasons he preferred not to feed from them unless it was absolutely necessary. When he had his fill, he rolled to his back, the blood already working through his system, healing him. He needed more.

He spent the rest of the evening seeking out large beasts to replenish his body. He fed from deer after deer until his sight was fully restored. Feeling more like himself, he took to the air and sought out the cave that had so long been his home.

As the sun pushed him into slumber, he spent his waning thoughts plotting his revenge. Pavlo would not escape him a second time.

* * * *

The next evening he woke, leapt to his feet, sprinted to the mouth of the cave and launched himself into the air, his tattered clothes fluttering in the wind. He made a beeline for the closest city, which happened to be Whitefield, a town known to be a haven for several infamous outlaws, but more than that, a town where he could replace his wardrobe with the latest fashions imported from his homeland. He'd frequented the shops there on many an occasion.

Setting down at the edge of town, he expended some of his energy to project a more respectable image of himself. He used the illusion long enough to shop for his new duds. Changing in the alley beside the store, he donned a pair of black britches tucked into riding boots, a burgundy vest over a pressed white shirt and a black riding cloak. He left the singed remains of his other clothes in the dirt and strolled casually out onto the main thoroughfare.

Where would Pavlo have fled? Would he have stayed in the Indian Territory? It didn't seem likely, but then for all he knew, Niccolo had died in the fire.

As he walked along the bustling sidewalk, he sent his mental fingers probing for any signs of his wayward friend. Images flitted to him as he grazed the minds of Whitefield's denizens, but none of them showed his face. He pushed harder, spreading the circle of his influence. The edges flickered and danced, but barely stretched farther than the city limits.

He suddenly felt weak. Stumbling, he pulled the tendrils back and quickly regained his composure. Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, one of the images he'd seen stood out above the rest.

"Perhaps if it would work better if I were freshly fed," he mused aloud.

Picking up the image again, he quickly located its source in a room above one of the overflowing saloons. *McCoy's* was a smoky bar filled with raucous laughter and an even rougher crowd. He weaved his way through the closely packed bodies until he reached a set of stairs leading to the second floor. Taking them two at a time, he found himself in a long hallway lined with doors on either side. He closed the gap to the third door on the left with preternatural speed. Rapping gently on the door, he waited patiently for a response.

The door opened a crack. "Can I help you?"

A wizened face stared at him with suspicious eyes.

"Possibly, but the more important question is, can I help you?" he asked, catching the elderly man's eyes.

"With what?" he replied, his voice coming out slowly as he succumbed to Niccolo's

stare.

"With your pain," he said, watching as his eyes dilate and, lose focus. "You prayed for the pain from your arthritis to end. Good news... I've come to answer the call."

* * * *

Niccolo looked out the window of the room to make sure the streets had emptied as the hour grew late. Satisfied, he tucked the lifeless body of the late Martin Wilson under his arm and dropped out over the sill. He soared up in the air and out to the woods surrounding the town until he found a suitable place to dispose of the remains of his meal.

Once the grave was filled, he returned to the task at hand. He pushed with all his might and his mind reached further than he'd ever attempted before. A barrage of thoughts and emotions bombarded him. He scanned them with an alacrity only an immortal could achieve. Seconds ticked by, but still there was no sign of him.

He was about to give up and find a new place to transmit from when he pay dirt. A memory of Pavlo's smiling face came into sharp focus. Drawing the rest of his energy in, he centered it on that one mind. He sorted through the young woman's mind until he found something to identify her location.

"Texarkana?" Niccolo said as he took to the air. "That's only about two hundred and fifty miles away. I should be there in a few hours."

When he arrived, the night was spent. He barely had time to secure accommodations before the sun rose. He reserved a room and left strict instructions not to be disturbed. Stripping the blanket from the bed, he carried into the closet, pulled the door shut and wrapped himself tightly in the coarse wool fabric. He continued to search even as the sun pushed him into slumber. Pavlo was no longer in the area.

He arose at sunset and emerged from the closet. Padding to the window, he leaned with both hands on the sill as he surveyed the city sprawling out below. He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind again. He couldn't pick up Pavlo's essence, but he did find another cluster of people who had seen him.

The charismatic demon was heading south. Niccolo followed. He felt like he was gaining on him, but not quick enough.

Nights turned into weeks and still he had yet to actually *feel* the man himself, only ghosts in the eyes of the people he passed.

He woke one evening in Juarez Mexico. He had sent out his probing fingers to their farthest reach so many times, it had almost become a diurnal habit. Sorting through the usual barrage of memories, he was shocked when his mind touched upon a familiar presence.

Niccolo, is that you, old friend? Pavlo's voice rang clear in his thoughts.

"It is indeed. Come let's sit as old friends and reminisce. We have much to discuss," Niccolo offered in his most enticing voice.

You are persistent. I simply must grant you that. I thought you consumed by the flames sparked by our last sit down.

"And yet, here I am. Standing here with open arms, hoping you will be inclined to fill them."

I fail to remember forgiveness being one of your stronger suits.

"People change," he said with a laugh.

Wait, don't close your thoughts off to me yet. I just caught a glimpse of the most amazing image. Was it a memory or merely an unfulfilled fantasy?

Niccolo cringed as Kanati came to the forefront of his thoughts.

Ah, then your pursuit is not really about vengeance, but rather protection. Still playing the Sheppard, are we? Protecting your flock?

"Leave them be," he growled. "This is between you and me."

Tell me something, little Nicky. Which of your beasts are you feed the most these days?

Niccolo wondered briefly what he was talking about, then remembered the conversation they shared when he saved the life of the ghost named Terri. *There are two beasts warring within in me, each fighting to control my hand. One is everything I was: evil, mean, sadistic and...vengeful. The other, well it is everything I want to be: compassionate, wise, and all that I still find good in the humanity from which we must sustain ourselves.*

"Why don't you come find out?" he growled.

Now why would I do that? I think we both learned just how equally we are matched during our last conflict. I have no desire to relive that uncertainty. No, I have something much more entertaining in mind.

Niccolo stiffened, still trying to pinpoint the exact location of his nemesis.

I propose a contest. Winner takes all, if you will. You think you can best me? Think that the path of the righteous will give you the upper hand? Then I challenge you to a race. You know

the destination. If I find him before you, he is mine. If you reach him first, you have but to wait for me to arrive to have another attempt at my throat.

"If I arrive before you, what's to keep you from turning tale and heading for the hills again?"

Pride.

And with that, his head was filled with silence. Pavlo was no longer within the reach of his mind. The race had begun.

"I know what I must do to save him," Niccolo sighed as he launched himself into the air.

He flew faster than he'd ever flown before, surprising even himself with the speed he achieved. He prayed it would be fast enough.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Kanati! Wake up, friend; it is time to go." Acabo called from the doorway, his voice dripping with excitement.

"Have you lost your mind? The sun isn't even up yet." Kanati yawned, covering his eyes with his forearm. His eyes suddenly flew open. "Go Where?"

"We're going on a hunting excursion," he said, poking his head through the bedroom door. "Heading out to the Sans Bois mountains. Rumor has it there are several caves for us to explore and the whole area is overflowing with game."

"There's game here," he said, still bewildered.

"Not like this," he said with a snort. "Besides, you've been cooped up in here long enough. It's time you two rejoin the living."

"We've been trying," Selu interjected.

"It's been months since your Aunt's funeral and we've hardly seen any trace of either of you. Quite frankly, we're worried."

"I can't leave her for that long," he insisted. "It will take days to reach the mountains."

"You won't be gone for more than five days at the most," he said with a shrug.

"That's too long," he replied, shaking his head.

"Kanati," she whispered, placing her hand on his chest. "Maybe he's right. A good hunting trip might help you...help us move on."

He stared into her eyes, not wanting to go, but not wanting to disappoint her. "If you really want me to," he finally said.

"I do," she said with a nod. "I'll spend my time with the other women. I'm sure they will keep my mind occupied while you're away."

"It's settled then," he said with a heavy sigh.

"The false dawn is upon us. Dustu is waiting for us out front." He fidgeted noisily outside the bedroom door. "Fine, just let me wake up a little first." Kanati drew himself from under the furs.

"Acabo, you can wait outside with Dustu," Selu said playfully, placing a restraining had on his forearm. "At least let me give a proper farewell before you drag him off to parts unknown."

"Close the door behind you," Kanati added, staring down at the love of his life.

He barely waited for his friend to comply before he leaned in, kissing her softly. She gripped his hair and returned the kiss with a fervor that was contagious. Letting his hands roam over her body, he was still amazed at how soft and smooth her skin felt beneath his fingertips. His lips moved to her cheek, her ear, her neck, and down to her chest. He gently pulled one of her nipples into his mouth and rolled it lightly between his teeth. Her nails dug into his shoulders and coursed down his back.

"Take me... take me, now," she whispered.

Raising his head, he stared into her eyes and couldn't help but smile. "Not yet."

"But you have to go soon," she sighed through pouty lips.

"Let...them...wait," he said, punctuating each word with a kiss to her breast.

Kissing a trail along her chest and abdomen, he slid his face into position between her thighs. He maintained eye contact as he blew gently along the length of her folds. She inhaled sharply, causing him to smile. Turning slightly, he began to administer soft bites along the inside of her thigh until his nose brushed against her swollen mound. He let his tongue explore just within the folds before sinking it in as far as he could manage. A moan of pleasure let him know she approved. Sliding a hand around her leg, he rubbed the area he'd seen her massage so many times before while he continued to pleasure her with his mouth. She shuddered beneath his touch. Her hands went to either side of his head, pulling his hair, urging him on.

"By Ocasta," she murmured. "That feels amazing."

Raising his head to meet her eye, he said, "You taste amazing."

She giggled throatily as she pressed the back of his head, begging for him to continue. He moved his free arm under his chest in response, using his fingers to probe her insides as he continued to lick along the surface. He could feel her trembling grow in intensity and sped up his rhythm. Her body convulsed and he felt three quick clinches of the muscles around his fingers The world was suddenly muted as her legs slammed shut on either side of his head, causing them both to laugh heartily.

"Now, I'll take you," he said, pushing himself to his knees.

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "Not yet."

Kanati cocked his head to one side and then smiled. "Ah, would you like me to do that again?"

Selu worried her bottom lip before responding. "As tempting as that is, I had something else in mind."

She sat up, drawing her knees beneath her before kissing him full on the mouth. Her hands reached for his manhood and gently stroked it as her tongue sought out his. He loved the feel of her slender fingers working their way along the length of his shaft. Closing his eyes, he savored the sensation of her lips on his skin as she moved to his neck and began alternating between light nibbles and firm kisses. His desire flared even more if that was possible. Reaching down between them, his fingers sought comfort amid her moist vagina.

"Don't," she said, looking into his eyes. "I want this to be about you."

"I can't help myself. I love to give you pleasure."

"And I you, so just sit back and enjoy this," she said before kissing him on the chest.

Her head continued south until she pulled him into her mouth. He let out a guttural groan of delight and grabbed a handful of her hair. Bliss flooded his body as she pleasured him. Her mouth, her tongue, even her teeth lightly grazing him, pushed him to levels of delight he knew only she could give him. It was almost more than he could stand.

He gently pulled her hair until she raised his face to his. Kissing her deeply, he silently thanked the Gods for bringing her into his life.

"I can wait no more. I must have you," he managed, gazing along her glistening body.

She smiled at him mischievously and turned away, dropping to all fours, offering herself to him. "Then take me."

Grabbing her hips, he entered her from behind. He fell into a comfortable rhythm that she quickly matched. He leaned over her, cupping a breast in each hand as he kissed her back without breaking their stride.

"Pull my hair," she sighed.

Removing one hand from her breasts, he wrapped her long jet-black locks around it and applied a steady pressure.

"Oh yeah!" she all but shouted. "Just like that."

Suddenly, he felt her hips begin to gyrate faster, urging him to a quicker pace. He eagerly complied, enjoying the sound of their skin colliding with greater and greater force.

She froze around him and screamed out, lost in the throes of her orgasm. He pulled free of her as she collapsed to her chest in a trembling heap.

Turning to look at him over her shoulder, she asked, "Why did you stop?"

"I want to look at your face as I succumb to the little death."

She rolled to her back and beckoned him to her with a single finger. Sliding his hips between her legs, he entered her in a single thrust. His movements were long and slow as he stared into her eyes, immersing himself in the love he saw reflected there. When his orgasm finally came, his vision narrowed and he wondered briefly if he might lose consciousness. Collapsing atop Selu, he pulled her into a tight embrace.

"I love you more than you will ever know," he whispered into her ear.

"I imagine I've garnered a fairly good idea of how deep your love flows," she giggled. "And I love you more than life itself."

Thus, by the time they were finally on their way, it was under the staring eye of the rising sun. Spring had come once again to the Plains, carrying with it a warm breeze that was in direct contrast to the cold morning. The rustling of the leaves in the trees around them was almost hypnotic. It was a good day for a walk.

* * * *

Dusk was gaining on them quickly on the second day of travel when they reached the first real hillside. The hickory trees were so dense running up the side Kanati doubted whether or not they would be able to see very far even if they had sunlight to aide them.

They had just decided to make camp at the base of the hill when a rumbling from the clouds changed their minds. They quickly clambered further up the hill in search of a cave to protect them from the storm. The downpour came before they could find any shelter. Finally, after they were soaked to the bone, they found a large opening surrounded by rocks. The lightning gave it a foreboding appearance. As frightening as it might have looked at night, it was still better than being without shelter during a thunderstorm in the Indian Territory.

Twigs and broken branches littered the floor of the cave. *Some animals must have used this place as shelter during the colder months of the last winter*. Kanati was grateful to them as he gathered some of the wood and piled it as close to the opening of the cave as possible without

getting it wet. Acabo brought out some flint from a leather pouch.

"Thank Shakura! It's still dry."

When the fire caught and began to grow, Kanati was startled to find they were not alone. The fire revealed a man perched on a rock at the back of the cave. As the light from the fire crawled across the floor, he took in his image from the feet up. He wore black knee-high riding boots. Tucked into those, was a pair of black pants that flared above the tops of his boots. The stranger had on a white shirt, open to the waist and cuffed at the wrist. A black traveler's cloak was thrown back over one shoulder.

His face made its way into the farthest corners of Kanati's mind. Long dark hair framed his too pale cheeks. The eyes—they almost glowed through the darkness with a deep, piercing, blue, the color changed with each second he looked into them. It was as if his eyes alone could swallow him whole. They swirled and danced. The colors shifted from blue to near purple to a near green. The intensity of his stare captivated Kanati. He could think of nothing but what color the eyes would take on next.

The stranger closed his lids and the trance was broken. All three of the warriors drew their weapons with lightning speed. The man merely laughed, throwing his hands up to show them he was unarmed.

"You have nothing to fear from me." His smile was almost as disarming as his eyes. "I, like you, only seek shelter from the storm."

They put away their knives, eyeing him warily. Kanati wasn't sure what to make of the stranger, but he decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. There was something familiar about him, but he couldn't place where the feeling came from. Was it his face, his voice or...? Every time he almost grasped the answer, it flitted away as if pushed.

"You may share our fire, if you wish to dry your clothes," he finally offered to break the silence.

"You are most kind. My clothes are dry, but I would love to share your company." The stranger moved closer to the fire, but chose to make himself comfortable several paces from its edge.

"I'm Kanati, this is Dustu and Acabo." He gestured to his comrades each in turn. "We came to hunt and explore the caves, though we had hoped to find them with the help of daylight."

"My name is Niccolo Rasetti. I also came to explore the caves, but I prefer to do my exploring at night. It adds a certain beauty to the hunt." The man grinned.

"You hunt at night as well? That doesn't sound very safe. How do you know what you're hunting?"

"Acabo, I think he refers to hunting for caves, not game," Kanati assured him.

"Actually, I do everything by the glow of our lovely moon. Surely, you have heard of people who only roam at night," Niccolo shot back with a hint of sarcasm.

"There are many creatures of the night in our legends, but most are more animal than human." Acabo's face contorted with distaste.

"Do you always travel alone?" Kanati stoked the fire, sending sparks into the air.

"Not always, but sometimes it's better than the alternative." He lowered his gaze. "All I have are my memories to travel with at the moment."

"Memories don't make for a very talkative companion, nor do they keep you safe as you sleep in a strange land," he said with a nervous laugh.

"Oh! I do beg to differ, young man. Memories are the best company a person can have."

"Surely you jest. Memories are only up here." Acabo pointed to his head. "They're only to be learned from, not to keep us company."

"You don't really understand their purpose at all, do you? Sometimes memories are the only things that keep people in the struggle. Countless are the souls who live in the days of yesteryear, reliving glories both real and imagined. These poor wretches spend their time in the past, for only one reason...the present is unbearable. There are many things that could have driven them to embrace the self-torture: loss of loved ones, loss of beauty, or any of the numerous failures that are unfortunately, a part of life."

"Sounds more like a hindrance than a help," Dustu said with a grunt.

"Whatever the reason or the view they take of their predicament, the result is the same; they become ghosts. Their spirits died when they erected the walls that keep them trapped in the past. They have lost their will to live, and in doing so, they have died. They only await the beating of their hearts to cease. Sad, you might say, and I agree. Well, to certain extent."

"Are you a ghost then, just wasting the remainder of your days waiting for death to claim you?" Kanati doubted it to be the case.

"I can't imagine going through life like that," Dustu said before Niccolo could answer.

"We have all seen hard times, but you just have to believe they will end. You must be strong enough to wait for the good ones to come back around or do something to change it."

"Well said, friend." Niccolo nodded approvingly. "No, I'm hardly a ghost. My memories make me strong, but I don't let them rule me."

A silence fell between them. Acabo had just begun to stoke the fire, when Niccolo suddenly looked at Kanati, his lips slowly rising into a smile.

"Say, would you fine gentlemen be interested in hearing a tale?" He looked at each of them for their answer.

"What kind of a tale?" Acabo spoke up first. "Do you know a scary one?"

"I think a good scare would be most appropriate on a night like tonight." Dustu gestured toward the mouth of the cave.

"Well, I will do my best to oblige you." He wiped a broad hand down the length of his face before he began. "Have any of you ever heard of the Nosferatu?"

"The Nosfer what?" Dustu asked, head cocked to the left.

"The Nosferatu...*vampires*." He spoke the last word in a long whisper that put the hairs on the back of Kanati's neck on end.

"Vampires are another one of your creatures of the night," he began in a voice so low, Kanati had to resist the urge to lean closer to him. "They were human once. Now, they are immortals who sustain themselves with the blood of others. There was a time when vampires feared their own existence. They hated themselves for what they had become. They made their homes in catacombs, mausoleums, or caves nestled deep in the countryside."

Kanati struggled with his fleeting memories. Blood, which should mean something to him, but why? Why couldn't he grasp the importance?

"You mean they made their homes among the dead?" Dustu was clearly flabbergasted.

"It's true. Most felt they were already dead and God was somehow punishing them for some sin or another. They went to sleep before dawn every morning and hoped they wouldn't wake for the night to come. Others knew they had not truly died, but feared discovery, so they made their homes in caves or underground passages."

"Hey, maybe one even made its home in this cave!" Acabo gestured at the surrounding walls.

"It is very possible. This cave would have made a fine habitat for yearlings and ancients

alike," Niccolo agreed in earnest.

"Ancients? Have these creatures been around so long they've evolved enough to distinguish between themselves?" Kanati perked up in surprise.

"Heavens, yes! There is quite a difference, my friend. The first of the vampires were uncouth and uncontrollable. They fed upon anything that moved. Anything and everything was fair game, from animals to infants, they attacked at random to quench their burning thirst." He spat on the floor in disgust.

"And the later generations where born with this control?" Dustu asked.

"Not born, but created. The newer generations of vampires take pride in their existence. They interact with humans and fear little. The distinction is plain for any to see. Most of the newer generations despise the old ones for the hardships they had wrought upon their world."

"It must be heartbreaking to despise your ancestors." Kanati wondered what a bizarre society that would yield.

"Those wretched creatures— One wonders why they never took the time to enjoy the feed or even the hunt for that matter. The most popular way to hunt in the days of old was to perch in a tree at the edge of a darkened road, waiting patiently for a lone traveler in the night. They then would swoop from the branches, diving straight for the throat. Embracing their victim, they would rise into the air sucking frantically at an artery to drain every last drop of blood from them before releasing the body to land where it may." Revulsion swept across Niccolo's face.

"Seems to me, someone would find it odd when bloodless corpses kept appearing by the roadsides every morning," Acabo said with a snort.

"They weren't always found." Niccolo shrugged indifferently. "Sometimes scavengers would dispose of evidence by feeding upon the victims. In other instances, you're right; the body lay unmolested, until a frightened villager discovered it. Said villager would, in the safety of the sun mind you, flee panic-stricken. He would run as fast as he could, constantly looking over his shoulder in terror. Upon his return to the village, he would undoubtedly tell anyone who would listen; he had witnessed, first hand, the work of the demons of the night."

He paused again, scratched his chin. "Why could they not have hunted a little more carefully? It was this carelessness that caused the rise of the vampire hunter."

"Vampire hunter!" Dustu's eyes grew wide. "Sounds like a dangerous occupation to me."

"Yes, for all concerned." Niccolo sighed heavily. "These hunters would search

relentlessly for the undead."

He rose to remove his cloak, folded it neatly on the ground, and knelt on it, resting back on his haunches.

"They grew wiser with each failure. Many died trying to find a means to destroy the immortals. It was a learning experience for everyone. In the beginning, the vampires thought themselves nearly indestructible. Sunlight was thought by all to be the only fatal weakness they possessed. Bullets, swords, drowning, not even the noose had any long-term effects on the children of the night."

"It sounds like they *were* indestructible. Unless someone could find a way to yield the sun as a weapon, that is," Kanati added in awe of such power.

"In the end, it was proven only three things could end the life of a vampire: First, as I mentioned before, is the sun. Second, would be decapitation, but only if the head and body remained far from each other. The third and final means to a vampire's end is the destruction of his heart." Niccolo placed a hand over his chest for emphasis.

"Thank the Gods they found a way to kill these demons." Dustu rubbed his arms as if fending off the cold.

"Oh, come now Dustu, don't you think immortality would be a truly wonderful gift?" Niccolo watched the old man intently, his lips curled into a half-grin without exposing his teeth.

"Who would want to spend eternity as a monster hiding from the sun? The thought of such a life turns my stomach."

"What do you think, Acabo? The thought of immortality disgust you as well?" Niccolo shifted his gaze to him, one eyebrow arched.

"At the cost my humanity? Yes. Monster or not, I prefer basking in the sun on a hot summer day to lying with corpses, hidden away in some stench-filled catacomb."

"And your answer, Kanati?" Niccolo's face was void of expression.

"I think an existence led by the glow of the moon would be an acceptable price for eternal life. Many people will face death at any day, knowing full well they made their lives from the blood of others, if not literally then in theory none the less," Kanati replied after much thought.

Niccolo's face lit up. "Good, then you've made your decision."

In a blur of speed, Kanati's mortal eyes could not follow, Niccolo reached out and

grabbed Dustu and Acabo before any of them knew what happened. Kanati tumbled backwards, panicked. He smacked their heads together and dropped them to the floor. With the same speed that had taken the lives of his friends, Niccolo had his throat held tight between his fingers, his feet dangling inches above the floor of the cave.

He walked Kanati to the back of the cave, well away from the fallen bodies of Dustu and Acabo. Kanati struggled in vain to free himself from Niccolo's grasp.

"Kanati, you do realize if I were going to kill you, you would already be dead, don't you?"

This can't be happening!

"This conversation would be a lot easier if you would just calm down." He lowered him gently to the floor of the cave and waited patiently for him to comply.

"Why did you kill them?" Kanati's mind reeled with disbelief.

"Kill them?" he answered with a snort. "I've only rendered them unconscious."

"But why?"

"They made it quite clear they had no desire for eternal life and I couldn't very well kill them. They are your friends after all," he replied sincerely.

"Aren't you afraid they will tell someone?"

"No," he shook his head. "It is within my power to wipe away the small amount of their memories I would occupy."

"Why me?"

"I've been watching you for years. You have a hunger I haven't seen in another human for what seems like an eternity."

"Then it was no accident that we came to be here with you tonight." Kanati glared at him.

"Surely it isn't a bad thing to have a guardian angel looking over your shoulder, someone to help you through situations you have no hoping of surviving on your own. Someone to help guide your thoughts to ensure that you can make an informed decision."

Suddenly the fog lifted and Kanati grasped every stray thought that had eluded him since the stranger's appearance.

"It was you!" Kanati's eyes went wide. "That night they took Selu and the night I left the boarding school, it was you who killed—"

"How else were you going to get away from them?"

"But, my friends—you could have let them live." Kanati seethed. The demon before him was responsible for the deaths of so many people in his life.

It took all of the control he could muster not to attack the fiend. The way he killed his friends without hesitation, made the blood burn in Kanati's veins. Every inch of his being screamed out for vengeance. His hand twitched near the handle of his knife. *Can I slit the monster's throat before he snaps my neck too?*

Niccolo trapped him with his gaze. "I didn't kill your friends, only the bastards who mistreated you all got there just deserts that night. No, I sent the other boys off to find their families."

Niccolo continued to speak in a calm, almost comforting voice. The meaning of the words was lost before it could register in his mind. It didn't really matter; it was not the words but the sound of his voice that made its way into his mind; soothed his anger. A strange sense of tranquility spread throughout his body.

"Now what am I to become?"

"A higher being," he replied with a smile.

"So, if you are to change me into one of your own, I will be forced to spend eternity feeding upon infants and animals?" The mere thought of it disgusted him.

"Hardly! I have rarely tasted the blood of an animal and most certainly never dined on an infant," he replied with a dismissive gesture.

"But I *will* have to feed on human blood; someone will have to lose their life for me to maintain my own." Kanati tried not to choke on his own words.

"Do you remember when I told you about ghosts?"

"Yes, the poor souls that—." Kanati's eyes lit up. He allowed a smile to creep onto his face.

"Ghosts are the perfect candidates to become meat for the beast; they are the delicacies of immortals. They come all too willingly into our embrace. It is with clear conscience that I ease their suffering. Some even enjoy it, not realizing their destiny is being fulfilled as all but the last of their life-blood flows through my veins." Niccolo clenched his fist and they watched the veins rise in his forearms.

"If you only feed upon those who wish to die, then why are you still hunted?" He doubted *all* vampires fed this way.

"As I have said before." He let out a slow breath. "My kind didn't always seek out ghosts for their nourishment."

"Nor do they now. I can see it in your eyes," Kanati added. "Now, if I choose to become like you, I must feed on those weaker than myself to survive."

"Don't get self-righteous on me now, Kanati!" Niccolo's tone made Kanati flinch. "You said yourself, it is the way among many mortals who will die tomorrow, remember? Besides, it is the way of nature. The weak sustain the strong. It is a fact that will never change, whether you make the transformation or not."

"And I have no choice but to feed?" Kanati wondered if he could actually go through with becoming a killer like the man who stood before him.

"Yes, you will feed, but the feeding in itself is a beautiful thing. The ghost in essence becomes my lover. For a brief moment in time, they once again know what it is like to be alive. It is my farewell gift to them. They feel pleasure they could not have possibly known under the caress of a mortal."

"I have no need of another lover. I'm in love with a beautiful young lady who is everything in the world to me. I will stay true to her *always*." Thoughts of Selu flooded his mind; the notion of betraying her made him nauseas.

"No...you won't. It isn't a matter of fidelity or love. It is merely a means to an end. You are not starting an adulterous relationship with any of these people. You are simply giving them a taste of all consuming pleasure in exchange for the blood you need to survive." He gripped Kanati's shoulder.

"They all enter the endless night with a smile then?"

"The heat of passion makes the blood flow with a richness not found when taken in the ways of the earlier vampires. They are lured to a quiet place, indoors if convenient, and then taken hard into my embrace. With a feverish kiss or a well-placed caress, I work them into a frenzy, and at the point when their mind and body can take no more, I gently sink my teeth into an artery." Niccolo ignored the question.

"I will enjoy the feeding as well?" Kanati wondered if it would seem much different to him from a bowl full of stew.

"As I take their blood into my body, I experience, in chronological order, their entire lives. This is my preferred means of feeding. In this way, I collect the trials and triumphs of each of my meals. These memories are priceless to me. No matter how insignificant the ghosts may appear, each and everyone have had at least one breathtaking moment in the story that is their life."

"Then they all come willingly." Kanati knew it could not be the case.

"Unfortunately, not all feedings can be carried off in ignorant bliss." He looked at the cave floor as if he expected to find a better answer there.

"Why not?"

"From time to time, they realize what I am before I can give them that all important first caress. Oh, how they scream. It brings me much sorrow to see them cower before me, begging for mercy. Some make absurd gestures of the cross with their fingers; others lunge against me as if they could *overpower* me. Alas, fear brings the blood to a boil almost as hot as passion."

"Then how can you continue to do it, if it brings you such sorrow?" Kanati asked the question with a little too much sarcasm.

"Okay, it's true. I could let them go, but I have to eat, right?" Niccolo gave him a wink.

Kanati laughed in reply. It seemed queer to him that they could make jokes about so somber a subject as death.

"If fear heightens the thrill of the hunt as much as pleasure, why do you not feed upon the delinquents and evil doers of the world?" Kanati was amazed it wouldn't be his first choice. "Surely if only the *bad* people of the world were turning up dead, it would cut down on the reasons for the hunters to pursue your kind."

Niccolo sat silent for a moment. "Fear is a definite rush both given and received. Sometimes the power that comes from the emotion brings me much satisfaction. There are indeed times we feed upon the would-be demons of society. The ruthless child killers, rapists, and molesters who waltz through the justice system unscathed, they are often targets, not for nourishment, but for the good that is still inherent in *most* of us."

"In such an instance, I understand the rush of fear given, but why would you desire to receive fear?" Kanati's head swam with possibilities.

"I don't *desire* fear. Fear comes to all of us, whether it is invited or not. To fear is to know you are alive, or at least, undead."

"You still haven't answered my question. Why do you not live off of the blood of the scourge of the earth?" He wondered why Niccolo was avoiding the subject.

"There is no pleasure derived from the blood of these undesirables. In fact, they leave a rather bad taste in my mouth, no pun intended.

"To relive the acts some of these people have committed can drive me into a rage that forces me to shred them to pieces before I'm able to finish the meal. I like to let these scoundrels know well the face of death, before he comes to claim them. Just as my lovers know a pleasure unknown; these rotten souls know a terror that is almost unimaginable."

"If not the evil men of the world, why not target these hunters you speak of?"

"I understand your reservations, Kanati. I too doubted whether or not I could sustain myself at the cost of someone's life, but neither of those two options would make for a decent way to sate your hunger. I empathize with your fear of the hunters, but the ancients deprived us of any chance at a life of obscurity. Even if they didn't, I would surely go mad reliving the atrocities of the damned each time I needed to feed. Not to mention, if we began to feed off of the hunters, we would slowly validate what is, as of now, considered only musings of men who have lost their grip on reality."

"Then we are doomed to be both hunter and hunted for an eternity."

"Kanati, not everything is as clearly distinguished as black and white. Doomed or blessed, it is all in the perspective taken. Don't you agree?"

"A little of both then." Kanati sighed. "Only time will tell which is more the case."

"Well said, my friend." Niccolo gripped him firmly by the shoulder. "Then you choose to accept my gift?"

Before Kanati could answer, Niccolo yanked his head back. Kanati screamed as the teeth pierced his flesh. The pain was brief; replaced by a wave of euphoria. When his blood was all but gone, Niccolo slit his own wrist with a thumbnail, placed the wound over Kanati's mouth. As his consciousness ebbed, he found himself dreaming of faraway lands. He knew, even in the state he was in, the dream could only be the life of one Niccolo Rasetti unraveling before him.

He woke to a lush green hillside. He was playing with a group of children. Wait, he *was* a child. He felt light as a feather. There was dew still fresh upon the grass that squeezed between his toes. He could smell the scent of wildflowers in the air. The sounds of laughter bombarded his senses. The children played chase with him. Out of nowhere, a little girl tackled him. Her smile engulfed him. The hillside faded away. The images rushed by in a blur of smells and sounds.

Kanati felt wind in his hair, mist on his face, he gripped the rail of a giant ship. The men around him were preparing for battle. He could hear the nervousness in their laughter as they strove to keep their cool. Everywhere he looked; men were sharpening swords or practicing maneuvers with their weapons of choice. The smell of the sea was thick in his nostrils as it spread out before him. The strong aroma of the ocean still wasn't enough to cover the smell of the men aboard the vessel. The clang of steel followed battle cries; the conflict had begun. The screams of the dying were almost deafening. Soon the deck he fought on became slippery from the blood that flowed so freely. The battle was short, but it felt like an eternity. They celebrated yet another victory, but to Kanati it was his first. The ship faded from beneath him.

A woman's arms encircled him. She had hair, the color of coal, which hung in big curls to the middle of her back. Her skin was a golden olive, which glistened with a thin layer of sweat from the heat of the kitchen. Her face held the type of beauty that artisans around the world strove to capture. Her eyes were soft and brown. The kind of eyes that stripped a man of his ability to complete a train of thought. Her body looked as if it were a chiseled statue fashioned after a goddess. Her lips were full and red, held in a perpetual pout. A man could lose himself forever, pondering the delights he could find there.

Those lips were hot upon his skin. Her perfume hung heavy on the air. She slowly kissed his neck. Kanati could feel the goose bumps rise all over his body. As she worked her way down his chest, his breath grew short with anticipation. She slipped him into her mouth and worked the length of his shaft with slow deliberate strokes. When he could stand no more, he placed a finger beneath her chin and forced her to stand to his height. They kissed each other ferociously. He moved her to the dining room table without pulling his mouth from hers.

The door behind him burst open. Men rushed into the room with weapons drawn. Kanati felt cold steel against his throat as unseen hands pulled his head back by the hair. One of the men began to punch him repeatedly, alternating between his face and his stomach.

Over his attacker's shoulder, Kanati could see the others closing in on the woman. They took the time to belt whip her before they took turns having their way with her. *Please, God no—not her—save her—please,* Niccolo's thoughts exploded in Kanati's mind. He could feel blood trickle down his neck as he struggled to come to her aide.

Everything around him washed away in a wave of the mind-numbing emotion of all consuming anguish. By the thoughts running through his mind, Kanati realized the woman was

Niccolo's wife. The room swam and went dark as Niccolo's mind struggled to carry his sanity to a safe place in its depths. A searing pain in his side ripped him back into the room.

One of his assailants had thrust his sword between Niccolo's pelvis and ribcage. They both knew it wasn't a mortal wound. Someone obviously wanted him to live so he could feel the pain they had just given to him for a long, long time. He was sure they had no idea just how long that would be.

The images blurred again, but the pain still lingered. When his vision cleared, Kanati found himself surrounded by leaves and moonlight. He could smell the fear of the horse below him. He was traveling alone through the woods at night. *Has he gone mad?* No. It finally donned on him. *He just doesn't care anymore*. The pain from his loss was still fresh upon his mind, though Kanati had no idea how much time had passed.

Laughter erupted from the mighty oaks surrounding the trail. The hair rose on the nape of his neck. Niccolo bound from his steed, his blade drawn before his feet hit the ground. Six men materialized around him. With his most fierce battle cry, he lunged at his nearest attacker. His sword sank true. The attacker's death cry was short, but somehow satisfying. Blood gurgled up into the man's throat as Niccolo pulled the blade free. The others were upon him at once. He swung his sword frantically, keeping them at bay. Their rapiers crept closer to his body as his arm slowed from exertion.

Niccolo caught sight of a seventh man approaching from the trail ahead. His gate was casual. He whistled a familiar tune as he walked. The name Green Sleeves came to mind. The five remaining attackers turned their attention to him in stunned silence. It was obvious by their reaction that he was as much a stranger to them as he was to Niccolo. What is he doing?

The stranger looked to be no more than a youth of seventeen years at best. He was very short, at least two hands shorter than anyone else he knew. The shock of red hair that danced on his head, gave him the appearance of a man on fire. His eyes were an emerald green that almost glowed in the night's dark veil. He stopped whistling and produced a grin that could charm the habit off a nun.

Still closer he came. He spoke with a voice that induced visions of angels singing as the words echoed in the in his head. His voice had a heavy Irish accent, but his words rang clear on the still night air.

"My apologies, lads, but I'm afraid your little game must come to a premature end. Do forgive my forwardness, but I have the strangest feeling I've been waiting an eternity for my new companion Niccolo over there," he said without breaking his stride.

He knows my name! How is that possible? I've never laid eyes on him in my entire life. Not that it matters, I suppose, for we will both be dead before this night is through.

"Go on about your business, boy. Unless, of course, you want to share his fate." A burly black bearded man twirled his sword in the stranger's direction.

"I'm afraid I can't oblige you, gents. My business is with this man." The stranger still sported his innocent smile as he nodded at Niccolo.

"So, you choose to meet his fate with him?" The boy's audacity shocked the leader of the band of outlaws.

"Not only will I meet his fate with him; I plan to introduce him to it."

At that point, he had stopped no more than three arms lengths from the closest man. With unnatural speed, he closed the gap and ripped the heart of one of Niccolo's would-be attackers form his chest. Everyone else on the trail stood motionless, not sure if what they had just witnessed was a reality or a trick of the mind. The stranger brought the heart close to his face, sniffed it. He slowly stuck out his tongue and licked the still twitching heart.

"Pity...this is such a waste of a good kill." With that, he dropped the heart to the trail at his feet.

Angered, two more assailants rushed to avenge their comrade-in-arms. The first to reach him screamed triumphantly as he managed to sink his blade deep into the chest of the Irish boy. His triumph was short lived, however. The red headed demon grabbed him by the back of the head before sinking his teeth into the bandit's throat.

The second attacker skidded to a halt as the stranger dropped yet another of his friends into the hands of death. He made a valiant swing at the youth. As the blade swung past his red locks, the stranger reached out, caught him by the wrist. With a vicious tug, he ripped the arm free at the shoulder. The bandit froze, from either pain or fear; no one will ever know which seized his body at that moment. The stranger gripped the arm with both hands, shook free the sword from the lifeless hand. With a ferocious swing, the stranger connected with the still frozen thief.

As his head disappeared into the trees, it must have occurred to the two remaining

members of the gang that they were in a fight they had no hope of winning. Their fallen friends would have to go unavenged. As they turned to flee, the demon threw his head back, howled.

"Not so fast, lads. I can't have you running off to spread nasty stories about monsters of the night." He took to the air in another blur of speed.

He grabbed one then the other by the hair and climbed high into the night. Shocked, Niccolo stared up at the spot where he lost sight of them. He was too frightened to run, too smart to stay. His mind urged his body forward but his legs refused to budge. He tumbled to the ground, helpless... hopeless. He started to cry, then laugh. His mind was beginning to crumble, or had it already gone and the fight was just a figment of his imagination?

His laughter stopped when it began to rain. Shock gave way to horror; it was raining blood. He found himself pelted with the sticky droplets and body parts. Niccolo tried to scramble to his feet. He slipped on a chunk of flesh; landed flat on his face. He raised his head from the muck and found himself staring at a pair of boots. The stranger had returned.

"My name is Danny." He extended his hand. Niccolo allowed him to help him to his feet. "What do you want of me, Danny?" He was amazed to be alive. For the moment at least.

"I want several things from you, my boy. First and foremost, I would like your friendship. I need a companion and you seem to fit the bill." Danny flashed him a smile Niccolo couldn't help but return.

"Why do you need friendship from a man like me?"

"You are, like I once was, a lover of life who just became obsessed with his pain. I can help to ease the pain, or at least help you achieve the ability to move on with your life," Danny answered with sincerity.

"And how do you propose to do that? You know nothing about me or my pain." Niccolo was convinced the stranger had him confused with someone else.

"I want to give you the power to avenge your dear Julia, without fear of retribution or failure." Compassion filled his voice.

"What do you know of my wife?" He surprised himself with the bite in his voice.

"I know everything about you, my boy. I can see into here." Danny gave him a quick poke in the forehead with his index finger.

"Then you know my wife's killers are heavily guarded."

"It doesn't matter." Danny giggled at the expression on Niccolo's face. "What you have

just witnessed is only a wee taste of what I have to offer."

"You offer more than the ability to fly and survive this?" Niccolo pulled free the sword still buried to the hilt in his chest. Danny didn't even flinch.

"Indeed much more." He nodded. "Niccolo, how would you like to live forever? You would never again feel the daily deterioration of growing old." Danny swirled a finger into the wound in his chest before sticking it in his mouth.

When Kanati awoke, Niccolo knelt beside him, smiling.

"You have led an interesting life; short, but most interesting none the less."

Kanati gripped his arm tightly. One question clouded his still reeling mind. "Your wife, Julia, was she avenged?"

His smile vanished, his jaw clenched, muscles rolled under the skin of his mouth. "One of my first acts after I received my dark gift was to find each of my assailants and slay them with a cruelty I never knew I possessed."

His eyes smoldered. "After I killed my attackers, I found the man who sent them. I flew him out above the ocean and slowly dismembered him, dropping the pieces into the water below to lure the sharks. His tongue was the first to go, so his screams wouldn't draw unwanted attention. I moved on to bite off each of his fingers one by one, spitting them back at his face before they fell as more chum. Then I began to bite chunks from his flesh. When I grew bored of his torture, I slit him from groin to sternum. I drifted down until his feet were dangling inches from the water's surface. Once I could see the dark shadows of his doom in the water, I dropped him."

"Why would anyone send men to do such horrible things? Nothing you could've done would warrant such savagery." The sheer disregard of humanity unnerved Kanati.

"I have angered many men in my travels. This one took the loss of one of his merchant ships personal. I was the captain of the ship that took his wares."

"Why was I privy to only some of the story of your life?" Kanati was hungry to learn more about his newfound friend.

"My dear Kanati, you were privy to my entire existence, but your mortal mind could only comprehend the strongest of those memories. Now that you have made the transformation, you will see the lives of your meals in their entirety." "What about your life? Will I be able to see all of it as well?"

"I'm afraid there is *so* much of my life to see, you will still only witness the most significant events in the limited time you would be able to maintain the connection. I can't let you drank too much of my blood at this tender stage in your development."

"What happens now?"

"The storm has let up and we still have a several hours before dawn. If you would like, I will take your friends to the edge of your village. They will most certainly be discovered by morning and they'll be back to their senses in short order." He averted his face to the mouth of the cave as he spoke.

"Thank you, for not killing them, I mean."

"Stay here and I will be back in a few moments." He carefully lifted the limp bodies under each of his arms.

Before Kanati could respond, Nick had disappeared. He walked to the front of the cave to see if he could catch a glimpse of Niccolo's departure. When Kanati reached the edge, Niccolo reappeared inches from his face. His sudden presence startled him, sending him sprawling to the floor.

"That was amazing! You have already traveled to my Talwa and returned? How long will it be until I'm able to travel at such speeds?"

"It won't take long; I can assure you of that. You have a hungry mind and a willing heart." Niccolo helped him to his feet.

"Can we begin my training tonight?" Kanati was eager to realize the full potential of his transformation.

Suddenly his stomach was wracked with pain, fire spread throughout his body. He dropped to his knees, arms gripping his middle.

"What's happening to me?" he screamed to hear himself over the roar in his ears.

"The transformation can be painful, but I assure you it will be brief," Niccolo said, his voice sounding miles away.

He fell forward onto his hands and emptied the contents of his stomach. Staring in horror, he realized more than food had been regurgitated; blood and tissue filled the growing pool beneath him. Still he wretched. Panic seized him, and he wondered if something had went wrong. Maybe his body was rejecting the gift. He was surely going to die. His vision narrowed and he collapsed to his side. Blessed darkness came and finally washed away the pain.

He opened his eyes, not sure how much time had passed, the pain was gone, but his throat burned as if he had eaten hot coals.

"There now, that wasn't so bad was it?" Niccolo asked, helping him to his feet.

"I still burn," Kanati swallowed hard. "My throat, how do I quench the fire?"

"I say, if you're up for it, we have your first hunt." He revealed his extended canines in the light from the dwindling fire.

"So, this is it," Kanati studied the floor. "Tonight I hunt my first human."

"No," he replied, causing his head to jerk up. "Your first hunt will be for a vampire."

"What?" he was stunned. "We hunt our own kind?"

"Only when the situation warrants it."

"And what situation is this?"

"Kanati," he said, gripping him by the shoulder. "Do you really think me so heartless as to pull you from your mortal life and yes, your mortal love just on a whim? I told you before I was your guardian angel."

"Selu," he whispered. "What have I done?"

"You did what you must to save her and likely save your entire tribe. There is a very powerful vampire coming for you even as we speak."

"Why me?"

"He wants to use you and your people to hurt me. I promise I will explain it all in due time, but for now I'm asking you to take my word for it."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Niccolo stiffened and spun to face the mouth of the cave.

"Where do we need to go?" Kanati pressed.

"Nowhere," he replied with a snarl. "He is close. I've already sensed him as I'm sure he's sensed me."

"I don't understand," he admitted.

"You will, but we don't have much more time. He's coming." He turned to face him. "We still have surprise on our side. I'm shielding your thoughts from him, so he doesn't know you've made the transition."

"How—never mind," he said, shaking his head. "What do I need to do?"

"Just do what comes naturally to you," he replied with a wink.

They didn't have long to wait. Pavlo arrived slipping into the cave like a breeze.

"Gentlemen," he said, nodding to them both. "I trust I have not kept you waiting long."

Kanati dropped into a defense crouch. His knife materialized in his hand.

"Easy, boy," the vampire laughed. "I will deal with you shortly. First I have some unfinished business to attend to with your friend here."

Kanati watched as Niccolo sprang into action. Even with his newborn eyes, their movements were hard to follow. They danced in a tight circle, bodies colliding, claws piercing flesh, teeth gnashing.

He felt the burn grow even more fierce in his throat as the blood began to flow. The scent was heavy in the air, stirring some unknown feeling from deep within him, driving him mad. He felt his gums begin to swell, then burst as his fangs shot forth. Running his tongue over them, he marveled at their sharpness.

The combatants whirled in their dance of death, creeping ever closer to the center of the cave. Neither seemed to tire or slow. His chest heaved with anticipation. He could wait no more.

With a guttural cry, he sprang into the air. The vampire let out a startled gasp as he pounced on him. Sinking his teeth in deep, he was overcome by the sheer volume of information that flooded his brain. He tried to channel the stream, only reliving portions of the man's life. What he felt astounded him. This creature had lived for hundreds of years.

The connection suddenly vanished and he flailed, trying to claw his way back to his victim.

"Enough, Kanati," Niccolo yelled. "It's over. He's all but bled dry. We have but to take his head to make our victory complete."

"He was a warrior," Kanati said, staring down at the dying fiend. "A Spartan. A true legend right out of the history books."

Niccolo twisted Pavlo's head free and tossed it onto the embers of the dying fire. "He may have been at one time, but I assure you, he washed away any semblance of his honorable beginnings."

"Was he an ancient?"

"No," he replied with a visible shudder. "I doubt either of us would still be here to discuss it if he were. At the rate he was changing though, I'm sure he wasn't far from becoming

one."

"What now?" Kanati asked, still trying to make sense of Niccolo's answer.

"What do you mean?" Niccolo asked, his head cocked to one side.

"I have so much to learn... I don't even know enough to ask where to start."

"We have all of eternity to work on your skills."

The weight of his words sank in, and Kanati lowered his gaze. Yes, but it will be an eternity without my beloved Selu. What have I done?

He smiled as a thought forced its way to the forefront. Perhaps he had not lost her, but merely acquired the ability keep them together forever...

"And what about Selu?"

Niccolo's shoulders slumped. "Would you really rob her of her life at such a tender age?" "She is as young as I," he insisted.

"Yes, but you can see why I had to turn you. You know I wouldn't have, if I thought there was any other way to protect you."

"So, I will live an eternity, but do so without the love of my life?" Kanati swallowed hard. "What kind of hell have you condemned me to?"

"No, I didn't say you would never be reunited with her, but now is not the time."

"Why put off until tomorrow what we could do today?" Kanati gave his most charming smile.

"Do you have any idea how hard it would be to train you both at the same time? You're love struck; the constant distraction would definitely hinder your progress."

"Then when I've learned enough, we can bring her into the fold?"

"When the time is right, I give you my word, we will revisit the subject. We will go to see her and if she hasn't moved on with her life, if she isn't happy with what has become of her, she will become one of us."

"You will turn her for me?"

"When the time is right," he began with a wink. "I won't have to."

Kanati stewed in silent contemplation. If she hadn't moved on? She wouldn't do that, would she? He loved her more than life itself. He was sure she felt the same. How long would it take for Niccolo to consider him trained? Could she really find someone else to make her happy during that time? He was torn. He loved her enough to want her to be happy no matter what the cost. He would have to live with his decisions for all eternity. Would she be able to accept what he had become, or would it be better to let her think him dead? Was immortality a blessing or a curse? He thought for the second time that night. *Only time will tell*.

Look for

Darkness on the Plains: The Awakening

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Jayme Malvagio began life in Dover, Delaware, but has since become a world traveler. Adrift, Jayme is on a constant quest to absorb as much of the world around us as possible. To that end, there is no place called home. Only staying in one place long enough to learn a bit of its history, Jayme is constantly on the move.

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Reluctant Dragon Elder Janos Aventech's vacation in New York is about to come to an abrupt end. Riding on the subway, he stumbles across a Dragon mate—one of the few human women with whom his people can unite and be truly happy. And his people's enemies are out to get her. As his attraction to this woman grows, he knows he must find her mate and see her safely into that man's arms. It's destined. But as every minute passes in her company, Janos begins to see he'll never willingly let her go, mate or not.

If only she were his mate...

On the subway, Scarlett couldn't stop staring at him—then he turned crazy. When he essentially kidnaps her off the train, she knows she should be irate and terrified. Instead, she finds her initial attraction growing. But what's all this stuff he's spouting about mates and enemies? She only wants to return to her life, not get caught in the middle of a war. But it's too late for that. She's destined for a Dragon's bed, and in Janos' arms, she can only hope it's his.

Drums of the Nunni'hi by James Goodman

Carl and Jessica fell for each other during their final year of high school. Unfortunately, they come from different worlds. The people of their small Oklahoma town were taught from an early age that they should steer clear of the kids from the Cherokee reservation, and the animosity flows both ways. Carl's mother is heartbroken to learn that her only son has strayed from his people by falling in love with a white girl, while Jessica's family sees any relationship with a 'Rez Kid' as the ultimate betrayal—and they want Carl to pay for their daughter's mistake.

What happens next will awaken an ancient power thought long gone from the world of man. The pounding of the drums may mark their coming, but it's the screams that will let you know the Nunne'hi have arrived...

Kissed by the Sun by Catrina Calloway

Carlee Davis is a free spirit, an artist of Native American drawings. She creates beautiful sketches of her secret loves—two Native American Indians she's known since childhood, Ben and Dan. When the matriarch of Carlee's family dies, she places the reigns of the family business in Carlee's reluctant hands. Carlee has other plans for her life, but so does someone else - someone who is jealous that Carlee is now in charge of the family fortune.

Someone who wants Carlee dead.

It's a double dose of desire for Ben Strong and Dan Swift, the two Montauk Indians of Carlee's dreams. Montauk means 'uncertain' in Ben and Dan's language, but they've always been certain of one thing: Carlee is the one woman for them—and they don't mind sharing.

Now Carlee's back in town, and a threat on her life stirs old feelings, new desires, and heats their blood. Sometimes, it feels like she's been... *Kissed by the Sun*.

Circle Star by Tatiana March

After thirteen years in the East, Susanna Talbot stands to inherit the Arizona ranch she grew up on, but only provided she marries Connor McGregor, the young drifter who once forged a bond with her father. Susanna will do whatever it takes to claim her right to land—even seek a union with a man who believes she ruined his life.

But first she must find him.

Connor McGregor rode into the desert without a backward glance thirteen years ago, believing Susanna had banished him from Circle Star. Now a man of twenty-eight, he has no interest in coming to her aid. Will he bury his bitterness, or leave Susanna on the mercy of the ruthless neighbor Burt Hartman, who covets the ranch and will stop at nothing—including rape and murder.

Compromising Liaison's by Melinda Barron

A racy Victorian novel paves the way for three very different women to find the loves of their lives.

- A Duchess-to-be who is curious about what will happen in her wedding bed.
- A widowed companion who is not afraid to tell her the truth, and cares nothing about what society thinks.
- A Lady who is afraid to follow her heart for fear of being branded a harlot.

All three of these ladies' lives are changed forever when they come into contact with The Duke's Mistress, and learn that some liaisons, no matter how compromising, are perfect.

Beyond Death by Jinger Jackson

Allana Simpson is cursed. Love only brings death to everyone around her. She longs for a normal life with one man that she can give her heart to without killing him.

Tom Haugan never believed in curses until he met Allana. She opens up a world for him that he never knew existed. A world he never wished to learn about.

Tom wants to protect Allana, to heal her heart and take away her pain. The closer he gets, the more "accidents" occur. He's not willing to give up on what they could have. Allana's longing for Tom and the dream of a future filled with happiness weakens her resolve to remain alone. She trusts him and decides to let him in. Now death stalks them both...

In for a Penny by Carol Lynne

What's the old saying...you can never go home again? Raven Black resigned himself to never returning after being ordered from the only real home he'd ever known. Now, seven years later, Raven is back to face the man who sent him away.

Zane Conner is not only Raven's foster brother but the only man Raven ever loved. Despite his mixed feelings about the situation, Raven can't deny Zane when the older man asks for his help in saving the Lazy C Bar Ranch. A boy found dead on the ranch clinches Raven's decision.

Why did the young boy look so much like he had at that age—the same age he'd been when his own father had beaten him and left him for dead?

The Hunt for the Elixir Series by Midnight Dupree

Blood Quest

The Assassin was sent to ensure that the Vampire Queen died, and to recover the Elixir that would restore his kind back to their glory. He endured years of training and sexual restraint in order to become the best at what he does.

He is on the hunt for the *Elixir of Life*.

Micah and Sasha are vampire servants to the Queen. When she is murdered, they believe their lives are coming to an end as well, but the Queen has left them one special gift and a mission...

Winter's Blood

When Angelina's sister is kidnapped, she is forced to steal a much sought-after formula. Fortunately, fate has paired her with a handsome vampire who has promised to help save her beloved sibling.

Dante wants to break through the frozen barriers of Angelina's heart, and will do almost anything to accomplish his goal. But first, he and Angelina must fight the evil and keep the precious formula out of evil hands.

Will Dante and Angelina be successful in their quest? Or will the blood spilled be their own?

Blood Red Rose

With the threat of danger high, Eli's world is on the verge of being destroyed. The *Elixir of Life* is needed by the Other's now more than ever. Their assassin has Eli in his sights. Eli is ready for this threat, but he finds an unexpected, yet intriguing distraction.

Rose is a beautiful female vampire on the run and doesn't realize how much she will need Eli. Yet, in the end, will she need to save him?

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