



SHADOW OF THE WOLF

BY

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Chapter 1

One year ago

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

Shaking his feathered head, Raithe thought back on the stories handed down from one generation to another, growing in length, as each father parted his knowledge on to his son. There were only a few families who'd been selected, allowed to know the truth of the danger held hidden deep inside the cave. From the time he'd hit his twentieth summer it had been made clear he was next. His was a task that left the watcher alone for the rest of his life, a quest so important, the watcher was denied a family of his own. It was for this reason that the families shared the duty, alternating the burden of the watch. Looking across the grassland, the wind seemed to increase in velocity, the field of green swayed with the tempo it produced. There was an almost mesmerizing quality to it, so that at first, the shadowy figure might have gone unseen; until a small crack of a twig alerted Raithe to the presence of another.

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

The raven was confident that the cave was unknown to the human world; it had been deliberately removed from their history. *Could she be lost?* Questions drummed chaotically through his mind. So erratic were his thoughts, that he barely caught her slight figure move toward the entrance of the cave, her eyes darting around to see if any others were near. Could she have sensed his presence or worse could the man hidden inside have called out to her? Raithe knew he'd shrouded his body from those not of his kind but he couldn't be sure of the strength of the man inside.

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

Down below in the deep darkness a chanting began; low and melodious, filling the air until it felt thick enough to cut. Fear coursed through his veins. Raithe turned and flew away from the opening. He wanted to leave the area but a sound from behind caused him to pause. Turning his head he caught movement above the hole. His vision adjusted just in time to see hundreds of bats burst through the opening and out into the daylight sky. Something horrible must be occurring for the bats to have left their dark refuge too early and risk the pain of sunlight. Turning his gaze back to the tree, Raithe returned to his perch. He wanted to venture closer but knew it wasn't safe. For now he hoped that what was unfolding was not as he feared.

Evening crept in as the sunlight descended back behind the mountains. Shadows drew back the remaining orange hues from view, beckoning on the night. Above him the full moon began to cast

silver strands of light across the field. Raithe paced back and forth on his perch, praying to the gods that all was well. He knew if the moment came and the evil was released, he would have to fly quickly to his village and warn the elders of the situation. The sounds had not lessened over the hours, gaining instead by each breath, in tempo and tone. He wanted to ignore the sounds but found he could not. His mind felt numb with each syllable. Raithe stretched his wings ready to take flight when silence fell across the land. The thickness in the air increased with each breath; invading the surrounding area near the cave, choking the life out of anything and everyone close by.

Unsure of what to do, Raithe knew he had to get back to his people, to warn them of the coming danger. He found his body wouldn't budge. Looking down his blood froze in his veins. His feet had turned to stone, anchoring him to the tree limb. Looking up, he saw a black mist begin to form from the hole at the top of the cave, swirling and growing with every moment. Fear began to pool in the pit of his stomach, he knew if this continued, he would not be able to get to the village and warn the others of the danger coming. Staring down at his feet he willed his body to break free of the spell that had begun to weave around his body. His heart lurched in his chest full of fear the same moment as a high pitched scream emanated from within the cave. The force shook the tree limbs with its intensity. Clarity of the situation found its way into his mind. He needed to get away yet there was no way to move. A tingling feeling crept along his legs and up into his wings. He looked back down at his feet and watched in horror as the stone covering them began to move up his body inch by inch. He had no way to move the foreign substance slowly encasing the rest of his form. He knew he was lost, his soul forever sealed in this dark magic.

Moments before the stone covered the raven's onyx eyes; he caught one last glimpse of the cave and the evil being released. The swirling black mist moved quickly across the field and directly toward him, his eyes widened with shock. Nothing could be seen inside the mist, or so he thought. Moments before the darkness covered his body he saw red eyes staring back at him from within the darkness. It was loose and he'd failed. Laughter from within the mist wrapped around his mind as the last of his body was encased within the stone, silencing his screams.

Present

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

True, women of her village were born to be the healers of their people; yet there were times of great strife that allowed some of the women to be sent out to battle. It could be something as simple as scouting the origins of sickness to the diplomacy required to ease the tension between clans. In the very extreme cases it would require the skill of magick or the sword, sometimes even both. None wanted the responsibility but the call could be too great to ignore at times. This was her call, her choice and she knew her family understood. One did not choose their fate, it chose them. She, better than anyone else, knew the dangers and solitude that it could bring. For now she found herself in the very place her parents had feared would come, out in the wilderness and alone.

Alone, with only the animals she traveled with to speak to, Saleene found herself longing for home and a family of her own. She would never have turned down the request of the elders but she'd lost the dream of her childhood, to have her own family and children. Raising her sun-kissed face to the sky she whispered ancient incantations to the gods, crying out questions that she knew only time would answer. She'd wandered the woodlands for so long that Saleene no longer knew if her family was safe within the sacred mountain. Forced to flee when the evil had moved through her village, they'd sought refuge once more within the embrace of mother earth.

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

It had been a crisp, spring morning, the wind never hinted at the danger that was to come. Two days past the Spring Equinox, and the flowers in the village were beginning to blossom. Waking to the sound of the birds singing a morning melody, Saleene had slowly risen, peacefully brushing off the web of sleepiness. Refreshed from her sleep, she had raised her arms outstretched toward the sky, singing to the birds in the window sill of her bedroom. Sending a prayer of thanks to the gods for her family and friends, she had moved quietly toward the bathroom to perform her morning rituals. While she splashed cold water on her face, a black shadow began to move across the window, gradually blocking out the morning sun.

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

"Mother?" She'd called out into the quiet hallway; no answer followed.

Looking around, she noticed that the wind had ceased to blow; no sounds were able to be heard.

Scanning the area, she found nothing but a blank void, as if her village had been swallowed into a hole. *How could that be?* Her mind echoed in concern. Fear began to work its way into her soul, causing her heart to beat in a rapid rhythm. Running from her room, Saleene snatched up her weather-worn satchel. She'd moved from room to room, searching desperately for her family. She sighed with relief when she found that they were all still asleep in their beds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What brings you out so late at night, child?"

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

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

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

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

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

She moved her gaze around the room searching for some small refuge to retire to. Her eyes came upon a small booth toward the rear. The pale glow of a dimming lantern was the only light for the spot.

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

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

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

"Finally."

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

"What will you be having m'dear?"

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

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

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

Fatigue worked its way into her limbs; the distance she had traveled in the days past, must be catching up to her. Sighing, she knew she must find shelter soon; otherwise she would surely fall from exhaustion. Leaning her head against the wall, she quietly sent up a prayer to the gods, thanking them for leading her here.

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

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

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

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

"Good evening to you my child." The old woman's voice held a purity that humbled Saleene. It also seemed to have a calming effect as the concern she'd first felt lessened.

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

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

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

"Aye, I thank you for your song, it was very beautiful." What else could she say? *Yes, it was nice but you are scaring me and I don't know you, so go away?* As if hearing her thoughts the old woman began to laugh, a whole hearted sound, bringing the stares of the other patrons over to the tiny corner of the room.

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

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

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

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

"My mother used to sing something similar to me as a child. How is it you and she both know it?" She watched the woman, looking at her more closely to see if anything looked familiar, yet nothing

rang a bell. Her hair was a brilliant silvery-white with touches of gold here and there; her eyes the color of amethysts.

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

"You've done so much already, and it is greatly appreciated." Before she could utter another word the woman who had taken her order, brought her the stew she'd requested. The smell of the meal reminded Saleene just how hungry she was. How long had it been since she had eaten a good warm meal? *Too long*, she acknowledged. She quickly thanked the server and began to eat.

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

"What is that?" A smile crossed the old woman's face at Saleene's question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now who’s come to hunt me?” She turned to see what answers the seer could provide, only to find the seat across from her empty. *How could she have moved so quickly? Had I imagined the whole thing? Perhaps I’m more tired than I thought.*

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

Past coming to the present and what circle could she mean? Her mind searched for answers but none came. Saleene returned her thoughts back to her dinner and the night that still loomed ahead of her. She’d just begun to go back to her meal when a cry broke through the night. She dropped her fork, and closed her eyes; listening to the wind and the tales it could tell. *Someone was out there, an innocent being tortured. Okay, dinner’s over.*

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

“Wait, no one leaves my inn without finishing their meal.”

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

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

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

She wanted to laugh at his statement. If he only knew just how right he was he would lock the door behind her. She patted his hand in thanks and left the comfort of the inn and faded back into the dead of night.

Chapter 2

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

The cry of a raven circling above alerted her to the direction she must take. As she moved toward the path she must travel, she took one last look at the tiny inn. She sent a soft chant of protection in the direction of the warm light and hoped it would be enough to keep those within the inn safe. Sure there wasn't anything more she could do, Saleene headed into the dead of night where an unknown evil waited in the shadows for her.

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

"What has spooked you my friends?" She knew that most forest animals sent warnings to their brethren yet the air was silent. She worried that whatever was ahead of her was not of this world. The feel of the forest had taken on a foreign sensation. Sending a prayer to the gods, she continued to move through the thick underbrush of plants and trees. Stopping for a moment to listen to the whispers of the wind, there was nothing but silence. Her body turned towards the darkest of the forest. Saleene began to head forward when a cold breeze suddenly slammed into her side, knocking her to the ground.

"Who's out there?" Her voice carried on the night air as she regained her balance. Saleene closed her eyes to determine the cause of the cold spot. Nothing but a blank emptiness answered back then she felt a withered hand wrap around her arm.

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

"Hello." Its voice pierced right through her skull, like hammers going off in her brain. Black and gray, with oozing flesh barely covering portions of its body, it could only be from the shadowed underworld. Red rimmed the sunken eye sockets, their gaze held no soul; its mouth cracked in a wicked grin.

"What are you?" Its horrid teeth were protruding from its mouth, as if too large for its face. Yellowish and decayed, bright crimson colored blood dripped from its teeth, a sign someone had suffered greatly. Her confusion must have pleased it, for she swore its smile actually increased.

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

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

"Now why would I let prey such as you go? My master will be very pleased with you." *His master?* She needed to get out of there and fast. Saleene searched her memory for any spells that might give her an advantage, something, anything, to distance herself from it. An idea broke through her

thoughts and warm laughter moved through her soul. *Would it work?* What did she have to lose? She turned her attention back to the thing still holding her arm, and forced as much strength into her voice as she could muster.

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

“Fool, do you think that you can harm me? You? A mere mortal?” Its laugh was laced with mockery at her position, conveyed his annoyance with her challenge. “I will enjoy ripping the skin from your bones and devouring your soul. You have not known pain as you will know it at my hands. Your screams will echo for all eternity and you will know no peace.” The finality in its voice froze Saleene to the core, causing her confidence to waiver.

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

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

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

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

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

With hidden eyes, the ghoul stared as a luminescent ball of blue white flames began to form in her

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

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

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

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

Assured that she had thoroughly cleansed the area, she replaced her sword back into its sheath and made her way deeper into the forest. Fatigue began to set in once more; using her gifts had a cost and this was hers. Scouting around for a safe place to rest for the night, she wished that she could return to the inn. Shaking her head at the thought, she knew that if she returned it would bring whatever was hunting her to their front door. She couldn't do that to the innkeeper who'd shown such kindness nor those who were innocent within.

"You've really gotten yourself into a mess this time Saleene," she muttered to herself. As she moved through the brush and foliage, her mind turned to the old woman she had met earlier. She definitely possessed powers unlike anything Saleene had seen in the past. She wished she had been able to inquire more before the woman had vanished. She had some form of connection with the old woman evidenced by the telepathic communication that they were linked in some way. What that was she hoped to find out one day. For now she had to continue on.

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

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

As she approached the figure, the pungent odor increased dramatically, sending her stomach into convulsions. Black and charred, it was difficult to determine exactly what it was. As she approached it she noticed a necklace grasped within a burnt hand, dangling like a symbol in the night.

As her fingers wrapped around the necklace visions flooded her vision as they'd done in the past.

Emotions and scenes from the owner spun through her mind but this time more chaotic than in the past. Like a kaleidoscope of thoughts were meshed together. There were other men and a beast, a lot of pain, enormous wings, an arrow; a tall powerful man with deep blue eyes, red blood everywhere and wolves. The series of images made no sense, but she knew they must have some profound meaning. Her gaze drifted back to the man's body and she could only pray that his death had been a quick one. Inspecting the necklace further she noticed it appeared to be quite large, which led her to believe that the victim must be a man. It was mostly made of gold, but was also littered with gems. It was apparent that he must have been from an affluent family, unless of course, he was a thief, but Saleene did not get that sense.

The design was very unusual, not one she remembered seeing before in her travels. Squiggly lines criss-crossing in an intricate pattern reminiscent of the old ways, seemed to form some type of knot symbol. Turning it over to look at the back of the amulet, she could see an etching in the gold. She spoke the inscription reverently, "Diogel Taith, my son Julian, Buan Atgor. Safe Journey, my son Julian, Swift Return."

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Raising her eyes upward, she could see a large creature flying in the night sky above. At once, knowledge seeped in as to what had killed the man. Gargoyle! She had only heard tales of the monstrous creatures; never once had she thought to see one. She watched its movements. Although rumored to have excellent night vision, it appeared thankfully unaware of her presence. Saleene assumed it was sated from its recent kill and scanned the area for a hiding place. Spotting a long forgotten vine and shrub covered tree on the ground, she made her way to it and hid.

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

In the distance, she could hear the footfalls of men approaching the open field. She needed to move. Nothing more could be done for the fallen man, and those who were approaching were well enough armed to deal with the monstrosity flying above. Turning quietly, she made her way back out from under the log and kept low to the ground. She knew the men who were approaching would engage the beast in combat; she just prayed they would be victorious.

The moment her feet hit the interior of the forest she picked up her pace to increase her distance from the edge of the grove. Lifting her face to the wind, she breathed in the purity of the night, allowing the forest to guide her to shelter. Yet again it provided her with the information she needed.

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

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

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

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

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

She moved swiftly through the forest, her feet never making a sound, as she rounded a corner to find the shelter the wind had told her of. Lighting lit up the sky above her, the storm closer with each passing moment. "Wonderful. Such a well kept place to spend the night." Her laughter carried on the wind, the sound light and airy. At least she would be able to keep dry as light drops of water fell onto her face.

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

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

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

As thunder rumbled in the background, a flash of lightning arched through the sky, in an array of patterns that foretold of battle. They would be at the door when the storm arrived. She had no doubt. Saleene unsheathed her blade and faded into the darkness. Her ears perked at muffled footsteps moving outside, rustling the leaves as they inched closer. Listening intently, she discerned at least two of them moving in the darkness, but her instincts warned that the third was also present. She watched as the strangers approached the entrance, looking around for any hidden traps. Even though they attempted to be quiet, her acute hearing and the aide of the creatures in the trees provided her with continual information.

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

Who were these men?

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

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

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

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

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

Saleene approached the trio of men and secured her weapon before sitting at the fire to regain her warmth. *Where did they come from and why did she feel safe with them?* She looked in the direction of the lone warrior, his frame still and strong. Each time her eyes moved in his direction, the blue eyed stranger would glance her way. Steel blue meeting deep green locked in a battle of wits with neither one truly backing down. The action caused her blood to rush through her veins like molten lava. It was odd, but she felt as if she'd seen those eyes before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saleene turned his name over in her mind, searching for recognition. She'd heard of Raku's clan, they were a proud bunch, held in high esteem with the elders. But Dartian, she wasn't sure of. His name felt familiar, as did his presence, but not in the sense of physically meeting the man. Perhaps she had previously heard his name in passing, and in doing so, recalled the descriptions associated with this powerful man. She lifted her chin in defiance, as she stared deep into his eyes, conveying her refusal to back down.

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

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

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

"I was lucky to come upon this place. I won't be here long. I just needed a place to keep dry. I plan to be gone by sunrise as the storm should have blown over by then." She couldn't move her gaze from his, curiosity about him pounded through her brain. Something deep inside her cried out that there

was so much more to the man in front of her, and to her feelings for him, but she pushed it aside, fearful of what it could mean.

Then, within the darkness of the shack, soft laughter echoed in her mind, as the old woman from the inn invaded her thoughts with her enjoyment of the situation. She shook her head and attempted to clear the foggy memory that had invaded her mind from the intrusion of the old woman's laughter and the vision she had foretold. "Is something wrong?" Dartian's deep voice penetrated her thoughts, bringing her back to the present.

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

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

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

"Saleene?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't do that again." Her voice reverberated through the small shack.

"What? You were caught by something; I was there to help you." *Of course, he would give a plausible explanation.*

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

any woman, and she would prefer to keep as much of a distance as possible.

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

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

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

"I have never seen a bow fashioned such as yours. What type of wood is it crafted from?"

Chapter 4

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

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

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

He returned his gaze back to Saleene; she was different than any woman he'd met. Her presence commanded a room. Listening, he smiled as he heard his friend tell her of his homeland, and his prized bow handed down throughout the years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

acknowledgement of her new companions, snuggled into the covers, finally allowing sleep to engulf her.

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

"Ok, turn in for the night men. Tomorrow will be here soon enough." They nodded their agreement. Raku and Jeremiah went about preparing makeshift beds for themselves and settled in for the night.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why are you here alone? Why do you hunt this evil by yourself?” His words hit her hard.

“Don’t you think a woman is capable of taking care of herself?” Anger replaced her annoyance.

His arms held tight. “Not at all. I just find it difficult to accept that your people would send you out on your own against this unknown enemy.”

Her chest tightened at his comments. “It was not easy and many men had gone out before me. I pushed the elders and they have many reasons to send me. Our women are not kept and hidden in the darkness. We have the same rights and responsibilities as all others. We heal, hunt and fight for our way of life.”

“I meant no disrespect, Saleene. I want to understand. It’s just hard to grasp that your people would send you out alone. Even I was sent out with aide.” His words held validity and she couldn’t dispute it.

“Not all follow the same beliefs. They sent out others but felt we could cover more lands alone. That if one was captured and alone that it would allow the others to continue their journeys without fear of being found out.”

His arms tightened around her. “I find that a difficult task to swallow. But you are no longer alone and I will ask no more questions of your leader’s decisions.”

Her body tensed at his acceptance. She changed the subject, no longer wanting to discuss her past. “What do you want and why are you following me?” With a slight push against his rock hard chest, Saleene removed her body from his grasp and retreated farther away from him. She prayed he would leave her be.

“I’m following you to make sure you remain safe. It is my job now.”

His job? Such arrogance was her only thought. “Shouldn’t you be checking on your friends instead of following me? I am very capable of taking care of myself.” Her words left her lips before she could stop them. She was amazed at her lack of control around him.

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

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

Chapter 5

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

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

“I know. Give me a second to grab my belongings and we can go. If you wish to go on ahead I’ll be fine on my own.” Why did he keep calling her Caru? What did it mean? “Dartian, what does Caru mean?”

“It’s just a nice term of endearment.” He was hiding more but for now she would accept his explanation.

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

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

“After you, Caru.”

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

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

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

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

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

within.

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

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

It was late evening and she had been maybe thirteen summers old when she was alerted to the call of an injured animal. She'd picked up her leather satchel and had run into the forest to find the creature to ease its pain. As she rounded a group of trees, she saw in her mind, the vision of a small wolf. His fur was black as midnight, his eyes deep pools of blue topaz. Her heart had broken when she realized that he had his foot stuck in a trap made by poachers in the area.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me about yourself Jeremiaah. Who are your people?" She hoped to keep her mind away from

the tall, dark warrior who accompanied her. Instead, she focused on learning more about his friends, who seemed to follow him without question. Jeremiih looked back at Dartian and sent him a silent inquiry, seeming to ask whether answering her question would be prudent.

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

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

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

And there were many tales, he mused, whether true or not. But he had always loved sitting by the fire to hear all that his father had told.

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

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

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

“I don’t think I’ve heard this one, go on.” Jeremiih implored.

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

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

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

“They tried to run from lions? How daft is that?” Raku muttered. “Are your people not taught the basics of survival?” His words were meant to inquire, but they hit her like a whip. She dismissed his inquiry and turned back to face Jeremiih and resume the story.

“Now, even though they did run, only three of the lions actually gave chase. Unfortunately they did catch up to those who had fled on foot and they paid for their mistake with their lives. Now, the two women who’d stayed looked to the other for an idea on how to deal with the remaining lion. One of the women, her name was Natasha, had picked up a floating branch from the stream. The other woman had picked up a series of stones.” As she told the story, the words seemed to flow like the stream she envisioned in her story.

“Did they live? Where do my people come into the story?” His lack of patience brought a fresh round of giggles to her lips. The man was as bad as her best friend, Aleixia. Neither of them had the

patience to wait for the end of a story. "Well, it is said that the one who had picked up the stones began throwing them at the lion in hopes it would cause it to flee in fear. Now in her defense, the lion did move away a few feet but only because it was interested in seeing what had been thrown." She loved how in tune the men were as she spoke, their eyes never leaving her face. At the same time, she felt Dartian's stare, the weight of his gaze leaving a heated trail across her skin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What happened?" Raku however, couldn't hold it in.

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

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

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

allowed her to breathe easier as she continued. Returning her gaze to Jeremiihah, she could sense he was trying to recall the story and its ending.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yet the wolf stayed.” Saleene turned her head toward Dartian, his words full of understanding. What he’d said felt more like a statement than a question, as if he could relate to the reason the creature hadn’t left.

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

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

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

“But...?” Raku’s voice challenged a question, though he thought better of it.

“Aye, she risked her life to save the wolf, but it hadn’t worked. What’s even worse, another effect of expending her power was that she herself fainted into a black abyss of unconsciousness; the knowledge that she may have condemned both herself and the wolf to a horrible death was her last

conscious thought.” Saleene could actually feel the magnitude of sadness the woman must have felt knowing she had failed.

“So what happened to her? Does anyone know?” Raku’s eyes were lit with the desire to know more.

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

“What happened to them? Did they stay?”

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

Looking over her shoulders at the rolling fields, Saleene thought back to how much the story had always made her dream of what it would be like to meet someone and have that instant connection. The sparks and heat that would arch between them, and the passion that would result, would be heaven to embrace. To have it last an eternity would be more than she could ever hope for.

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

“I’ve never heard that tale, but I’ll have to ask when I return home.” *Home*. That one single word made them all stop in their tracks for a moment; the knowledge that they might never return haunted them. She watched as Raku and his friend wandered ahead and out of sight.

“Aye, it’s a wonderful tale, Caru. You tell it so well that I can actually feel the connection between the two.” Dartian’s words penetrated straight to her heart, his voice a warm caress that set her soul ablaze. They were alone and that knowledge sent every nerve in her body on fire.

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

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

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

“What are you...?” Her words were lost in the close proximity of his body to hers. The intensity of his stare made her feel as if she was lost in some magical spell he had woven. She was unable to move out of his reach. Time stood still and the wind silenced in anticipation. She couldn’t move, even if she’d wanted to, and God help her, she didn’t want to.

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

She diverted her gaze to the forest, as she attempted to breathe in and center the fire that raged in her belly. Gently he placed the pad of his thumb on her cheek as he turned her to face him. She could

see the desire that pooled in his eyes and she wondered if hers mirrored his. Her answer came as he stifled a growl only to descend his lips upon hers.

Chapter 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You need me Caru, admit it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

His gaze moved to the path she had taken into the forest, her scent still in the air. He returned his attention to his men and the quizzical look on their faces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

battle.

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

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

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

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

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

“Generally I am not slow, but I was preoccupied and did not sense the presence of the attacker at first. Trust me...that will never happen again.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They are warriors, give them some credit.”

“I’m not worried about their abilities, but they are used to flesh and blood and this thing doesn’t follow the normal rules of combat.” Determined not to let the evil cause harm, Saleene reached for the light within and threw a message upon the wind.

All at once the forest came alive with the songs of the wilderness animals. The song sent forth a

message to warn the inhabitants of the danger which had invaded their world. Each creature joined together to place as many barriers in the way of the shadow as possible. The evil threatened to overtake their world and it was determined to leave with as many victims' souls as it could. Saleene knew that the barriers erected would never fully deter the evil; but she hoped it would at least allow them enough time to get back to their friends and warn them.

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

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

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

Saleene breathed deep. "You're right."

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

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

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

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

The air began to thicken and permeate with the stench of death. Fear began to eat at Saleene's strength which caused her to stumble. Strong hands clasped onto her arm and brought her up to look into his eyes.

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

"I'm so cold Dartian. I can feel it slither across my soul."

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

"I believe you Dartian." With a nod of her head, Saleene refocused her attention on their enemy as it approached them. She vowed to dispatch this demon from her world. A shriek erupted from the shadowed figure as it realized it no longer had the upper hand. Before their eyes it dissipated into

thousands of scorpions with the intent to harm all that it could before it returned back into the shadowed underworld.

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

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

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

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

Saleene reached within and began to chant an ancient spell. Protection and removal spells were taught early to her people. Above them a pool of red light began to form; a fire ball roared from the heavens and engulfed the insidious scorpions before any harm could be done. From far off Saleene and Dartian heard another scream of hate that echoed through the night. They’d won this fight, but at what cost?

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

Chapter 7

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

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

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

Saleene averted her gaze to meet with Dartian’s.

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

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

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

“Oh God, Raku. No.”

She felt the impact of the poison on their friend, the pain it inflicted caused her to collapse on the ground. Dartian rushed to her side pulling her to her feet. She felt him tremble as he held her close; his heart beat a drum in her ears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dartian had let out a shout of fear as he tried to rush and find a way to save their friend. But he knew that due to the rate at which Julian was falling, Dartian had no way to prevent the impact his

body made on the ground. The sound of his breath had ceased and seemed to reverberate throughout the lands as the animals in the forest carried the song of his death away from Dartian and on to his people. From the distance a cry from a flock of ravens had signaled the acknowledgment of the fallen warrior.

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

Without warning, the heavens unleashed their fury. Pouring rain fell down all around him. The cold water broke the web of sorrow that filled Dartian's heart, reminding him of the task before him. He returned his attention back to his current situation; a sigh escaping his throat at the loss of Jeremiihah.

"I'm sorry friend. I didn't protect you as I should have." As he continued the preparation for his friend's burial, he prayed it would be the last time he would be required to do such a thing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm so sorry, Jeremiiiah, please forgive me." Her words caught in her throat, the sadness for his passing a raw wound on her soul.

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

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

As she got closer to their camp, a pack of black wolves cried out in unison, a song to herald the

return of their cousin as a flock of ravens took flight. Amazed at the scene before her, Saleene began to lend her own voice to the song, each note a musical melody that drifted upon the wind and out into the night.

Shock covered Dartian's face; he was in awe at the sheer beauty of her voice, the way it could mesmerize with each passing note. He was moved in ways he could never have conceived of, her voice so haunting and pure that he knew he would hear her in his dreams. All he wanted to do in that moment was grab hold of her and keep her forever safe in his arms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 8

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm fine, just tired is all."

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

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

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

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

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

The innocent act was nearly his undoing as it set his blood boiling with fire once more. Why did this woman have such an effect on him? *What was it about her that seemed to be so familiar?* Due to the wealth of emotions and questions that swirled in his mind, Dartian almost missed the opening to an overgrown cave. He placed Saleene on the ground as he went inside to investigate the interior.

He found that it was clear of any animals and that there was no moisture within. Satisfied that the shelter would suffice for their needs this night, Dartian moved back outside to gather Saleene once more and bring her into the cave.

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

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

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

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

He took her hand and led her toward the cave and the gift of sleep. They entered together, a single movement as one. Dartian knelt in the middle of the cave, his hands quick to build a fire to help warm the interior of the cave. The beauty of their surroundings must have surprised Saleene as he heard her quick intake of breath

Walking around the inside, she marveled at the pictures carved onto the wall. The flickering of the firelight coupled with the luminescent glow of the moonlight brought the pictures etched onto the wall to life. Each seemed to tell a story, but one that she had never heard about. Behind her, she heard Dartian pick up the kindling to start a fire to help chase away the shadows from their shelter and bring warmth to the room.

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

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

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

“Dartian, look what I found.”

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

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

“Dartian, do you know what this is?” She knew he didn’t, but still, she couldn’t believe it was true.

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

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

“1065- Cave of Danu:

I was commissioned by the elders of my village to document the important events of tonight. These records are to be handed down through time, passed from father to son and always entrusted to an ancient line of warriors to guard the knowledge of the work performed this evening. The ritual of the priestesses and mages is to be done in secret; the tomb to be sealed once completed. A watcher will always be present to ensure the cave and its seal are never broken. If this prison was ever to be discovered and the man awoken, it would release an evil unlike anything the world has encountered before.

Concealed from human eyes, the cave has been used for many special purposes by the mages throughout the years, but never for a deed as important as the one I have been summoned to witness. When I arrived, they had already moved the man’s body from his village and into the deepest part of the cavern. Secrecy was needed to ensure the work done on this night would not be discovered. Silence was paramount to ensure that the spell will stand the test of time. What occurs tonight can never be disclosed to the clans of the area for fear of retribution.

The chanting, low and melodic, pounds out a rhythm in a language thought to be long gone from this world, its power vibrating through the night. Their words, meant to capture and hold, could also mesmerize and control, these feats that only few have mastered.

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

Clothed in shades of crimson and blue, their heads covered in black, there is no trace of skin to be seen on those performing the ritual. As they move about the circle, their chanting builds until the cave shudders from the sounds. Words that hold untold power reach into the air, filling the room with light, enveloping the mages as they dance within the circle. The focus of their attention is a man who has violated the most sacred of our laws and who has been condemned to an eternity of sleep.

The facts of his betrayal are still unclear to me, but they must have been horrendous, as none would attempt this spell otherwise. They know that if it is ever broken the repercussions will be

disastrous. The information I collect here tonight can never be released to our people. The elders would never chance someone seeking this cave out of curiosity, only to end up breaking the seal and waking this man from his sleep.

The voices that come from the shroud-covered altar sound eerie and ominous, yet they continue to echo in my mind. It must be painful, the effects of the spell, as I can see him thrashing around wildly as they lay him down on the altar. They bind his feet and hands to prevent him from striking out; and cover his mouth with a black cloth to forever seal his screams. His body is still now but his cries will haunt my dreams for years to come. I can't imagine his thoughts, knowing what is happening to him. They have told him of course, they want him to feel the fear. To know he will never die.

I've asked one of the mages what they told him and he muttered that they "had granted his last wish" and that he was going to be immortal as he desired, but will never know the joys of it. I look toward the man only to find him staring back, the look in his eyes forever burned into my memory. They seem to glow a deep red, hatred burning bright in their depths. I can feel his loathing for us, his desire to exact revenge on us all.

As they near the end of the ritual, I see that the man is no longer bound by the ropes; his arms now rest still. His body is limp and his breathing seems shallow, as if in a deep slumber. Even his eyes are now closed, no longer able to see those who have forced him to sleep. I do not know how much time has passed, or what more is left to be done, but I can still feel the power that has pooled in this room. Looking at the man asleep, a deep dark dread crosses my soul. The magick that has been woven this night is so powerful I fear what could happen if these events are ever undone.

In the distance I see the mages and priestesses breaking all the containers they have used throughout the night. I am sure this is done in case someone finds the cave and tries to remove the curse. I must admit they are very efficient in their methods, precise in the workings they wrought this evening.

Their motion to me once all has been cleansed that it is time to leave. As I pass the man who lays asleep, I swear I can still feel his hateful gaze bore into my soul.

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

Gods help us all if he is ever awakened.

Scryer Morvian

Cave of Danu-1065

Sixth Generation Raliah"

Dartian's eyes were watching her; she could feel it, a hot gaze that marked her skin. Her heart began to beat out an erratic rhythm pounding against her chest. Fearful to look up and find him next to her Saleene attempted to reread the scroll. A few moments passed when finally, she looked up to find Dartian standing at the entrance to the cave. He reminded her of a warrior of olden days, a guard who stood watch at the entrance to the gods, to keep out those who would do them harm or who were not worthy to pass.

He looked so alone. Saleene wanted to go up and chase away the shadows from his eyes. As she

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am fine, just in deep thought about where we should head to next." The answer was true for the most part, but he didn't want to reveal where his thoughts had traveled. Why did she have this effect on him? Looking up, he found a quizzical look on her face and questions he knew burned in her deep emerald eyes. He wanted to stare into those eyes, to dispel any sadness he could. Slowly she smiled, innocently brushing a stray tendril of hair from her perfectly round face. The act threw him over the edge. Without thought, he strode past the fire and right up to Saleene's slim figure.

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

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

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

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

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

Eyes closed, she could still feel his eyes on her. The heat from his stare penetrated deep into her soul. Feigning sleep, Saleene relaxed her breathing in hopes that he would turn his attention

elsewhere or decide to lie down and rest as well. Minutes ticked by and the cave grew silent. He must have fallen asleep. Happy with her ruse, Saleene opened her eyes only to find Dartian's intense stare looking back.

"I am not easily fooled Caru. I know you are tired and there is much we still need to discuss, but I am willing to wait until the morning." His eyes held a promise of wild nights and passion unleashed. Unbidden came the thought of their bodies entwined in the darkness of the night as the moon rained down shades of silver and grey. The path her thoughts had turned shocked and intrigued her. Deciding not to push the issue, Saleene closed her eyes as fatigue finally over came her; the energy spent earlier pushing her into the deep dark abyss of sleep.

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

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

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

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

"Well hello again friend, it has been awhile since we saw each other." she cooed. He tilted his face toward hers his eyes confused. Casually he lifted his muzzle to her hand, nudging to gain attention. Her carefree laughter filled the cave, dispensing any tension that remained. As she stroked his fur, Saleene wondered where Dartian had wandered off to, she had gotten used to his overbearing ways. Looking around she noticed that his bed roll was already packed and ready to go.

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

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

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

Seeming to understand her words, the large wolf sauntered to the exit but turned before he left. His eyes reminded her of a deep blue sea fathomless in their depths. Watching the wolf leave, Saleene

could have sworn she saw a smile cross his snout as he left the cave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Twisting herself out of his grasp, Saleene looked up, glaring with every bit of energy she could. "Nothing needs to be continued, because nothing has begun!" God she prayed she sounded more annoyed than she actually felt. His lips so close to her skin sent tiny fires racing across her body. If he didn't give her space soon she thought she would surely ignite from spontaneous combustion.

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

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

Chapter 9

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

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

Dartian's voice came from the right. "Good."

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

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

"Dartian! Help me!" She prayed he'd hear her in time.

The vines continued to wrap themselves around her calf, working their way up to her waist. Fear pooled in her veins at the thought of being pulled underground. Terrified at the thought of having the ground swallow her up she pushed and pulled at the roots. Desperate to get free she reached into her satchel and tried to locate her dagger. Just as her hand reached the hilt, another vine twisted itself around her mid-section, closing off any chance of using the weapon. She knew she had no way to get out without aide and prayed Dartian would make it to her in time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m sorry.” She hated to have made him worry like that.

Dartian cupped her chin with his finger sending warmth through her body. “Don’t ever apologize for being who you are, just trust me and accept my protection. Please.” Saleene shook her head needing to push aside the emotions she felt brewing. Desperate she turned her head away from his touch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saleene maintained a constant scan of the area as they continued their journey. She refused to fall into another trap. As they entered a grassy clearing a rush of wind nearly knocked her off her feet, but

Dartian's steady arms held onto her. How the heck had he gotten to her side so fast?

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

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

"He's right Saleene, no need to put yourself in danger." Raku's voice intruded into her thoughts.

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

"I'm doing much better now thank you." Saleene could tell Raku was still feeling the effects of his ordeal. With every step he took toward them he seemed to favor his left leg. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Now you really must be careful. There's no need to have anything befall you... either of you."

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

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

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

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

Dartian's hand reached out to her. "Saleene don't touch it." Concern etched his words.

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

"I don't know Saleene..." She placed her finger on his lips.

"Please Dartian. I must see to the woman. You can handle one small child. I doubt he will be too much trouble." Saleene returned her attention back to the corpse, her breath ragged at the visions of pain she must have endured before dying.

Saddened by the horrid death of the child's mother, Saleene reached into her satchel and pulled some hazel from her stash. With a quick puff, she sprinkled it across the body, her eyes turned skyward as she raised her hands and prayed for the safe passage for the dead woman's soul. Never in her life had she been forced to provide the passing ritual as many times as she'd had to recently. She hoped it wasn't the growing trend.

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

“Gods of old, bringers of life, birth of babe, fathers of light. Heed my call, know my plea, bless this soul, honor to thee.” Her hands danced with precision as the winds stilled. Saleene knelt near the body, a pale glow surrounding her. “As birth is begun, so death’s grasp is now. Hear my voice, know my vow. Corners of power, followers of Bast; north, south, east, and west.”

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

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

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

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

“He’s fast.”

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

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

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

Chapter 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All three of them bowed in respect to the elder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you for the offer."

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

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

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

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

Puffing the bangs from her eyes, she didn't see the look of stark possession coming from Dartian, nor the battle he fought to keep from pulling her into his arms, and making her his for all time.

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

She stepped into the shower to allow the water to cascade down her body. The warm water a nice

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

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

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

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

"Come, sit Caru, the food is almost ready." Not giving her a chance to argue, he turned back around, and continued the task of preparing the rest of the meal. Refusing to interrupt him, Saleene slowly walked to the table, her eyes taking in the beautiful carvings which lined all the furniture in the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

lungs.

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it? Do you sense more?" Dartian's voice moved through her like silken threads along her skin. She needed to focus on the dead not the sound of his voice.

"Not yet. I don't want you to disturb the body. It's wrong. Not until the spirit has been set free. Just wait over there while I prepare the soul." Saleene's gaze moved over the body, her stomach convulsing at the sight. The pain had to have been unbearable as the cuts were too numerous to count. She was so tired of finding those who'd been killed. It wasn't natural and needed to be stopped.

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

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

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

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

danger too late.

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

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

"Raku, no!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking around, she wondered where Raku had gone. "Where's Raku?" Moving her gaze to

Dartian, she sensed he was fearful of telling her something, his eyes regarded her with concern.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dartian, please understand that I know what it is that we face. Do not fear any outcome to myself. I will do all that I can to make sure you and Raku come to no harm. By doing this, you may learn things about me that you find unsettling, and for that I am truly sorry. I can sense where they've taken him but I cannot explain why."

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

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

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

"So be it."

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

Chapter 11

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No amount of rubbing her arms would alleviate the coldness she felt. *What is it about this part of the forest? There's something familiar, but off balance.* It made no sense. If one of her kind was in the area they would have sent out a message to the other. It was a courtesy they all practiced, yet Saleene

had not received any such message. Rubbing the nape of her neck in frustration, Saleene never heard the warning of the owl from above. All she would remember was a quick instance of pain, as darkness covered her vision.

Waking from the depths of unconsciousness, Saleene felt the impact of a venomous stare in front of her. Her body bound by ropes, she wanted to face her enemy but her head pounded unlike anything she'd felt in the past. Inch by inch she raised her head to seek out the cause of her headache and the person responsible for her pain. Her gaze came to rest on a slumped figure beside the fire; shortened breaths indicated the person was unconscious. The man's appearance was disheveled as if misused and left like no more than trash.

This had to be Raku. She could tell by the clothing he wore and the bow he'd held so close earlier. His body lay so still, as if death awaited the right time to take him. Her eyes began to water at the thought of the treatment her companion had received, wounds apparent across his face. Fury replaced Saleene's fear at the mistreatment he'd faced.

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

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

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

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

One spring morning, Saleene came upon Dena offering a sacrifice to the god Anutima. Saleene recalled the day, it had been unusually cold out and the winds whispered of something unnatural being called forth. She had ventured out to try and locate the disturbance, although she never imagined she would find the abomination that her cousin was striving to conjure. How could someone she trusted so much be doing something so vile? Seeing this, she did the only thing she could, she advised the elders of the travesty.

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

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

"Dena, I must differ on my lack of response. Had I not been preoccupied with the poor illusion that was constructed, I would have been more prepared to give you a respectable greeting." Saleene

smiled lavishly at her older cousin, never once allowing the contempt that brewed below the surface to register on her calm face. "You seem to be surviving quite well cousin; all has been well with you?" Saleene inquired, hoping to ensure she could gain enough time to work out a plan to extract herself from her current situation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Leave it alone Dena." Her heart cried out at the rough handling of the cub by her cousin.

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

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

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

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

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

Try as she might she couldn't get the ropes to loosen. Her mind still pounded in pain and her focus seemed to be diminished. Saleene watched in horror as Dena unsheathed her dagger and began to cut an incision on the front paw of the wolf cub.

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

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

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

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

"I told you I would find a way to take revenge out on you. Now you will be killed by the creatures you hold so dear. I on the other hand will watch as the village you so love crumbles into ash before my eyes!" Saleene gasped in horror as she watched Dena toss the dagger toward her. As the blade met its target, a scream caught in Saleene's throat. The blade cut deep into her arm sending bolts of pain throughout.

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

"As much as I'd love to stay and watch you die I have bigger things to take care of." Dena moved away and Saleene watched in surprise as two ghouls appeared from the shadows and picked up Raku from the ground. They tossed him around as if he was nothing more than a sack, his limp body motionless. As Dena and her helpers vanished into the woods with Raku, Saleene could hear the rustle of the approaching pack. She needed to get out of the ropes and fast.

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

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

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

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

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

Above the canopy of the forest an eagle shouted out a word of warning. The pack was close and she needed to get out of there quickly. Allowing her senses to branch out she located the pack’s direction. They were close... to close. Damn, she would never get out of here in time. Looking down at the pup she still held she wished she could remove his memories of what had happened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Preparing for the worse, Saleene whispered up a prayer to the gods to save both her village and her companions, from the vile plan that had been put into action. Her only regret as the wolf lunged into the air was Dartian. How she hated not being able to warn him of what was happening and the trap that may lay in wait for him. But more than that, she felt bereft at the thought of not seeing his beautiful blue eyes again, nor having the chance to try and chase the shadows that seemed to haunt him.

“I’m sorry Dartian; I’ve failed in my task. Find Raku and save those you can. You’ll find him with my cousin Dena and whomever she’s helping.” She sent her plea on the wind as sadness overcame her.

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

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

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

A movement from the right caught his attention. From within the bushes a large male wolf emerged in the chaos. His teeth bared, a snarl resonated from the alpha male.

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

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

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

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

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

He and Dartian shape-shifted back to their human forms at the same time. They eyed each other for any move that could be construed as ‘unfriendly’. Once they felt assured of the others intentions Dartian rushed to Saleene’s side and gently laid her in his lap. A cry of anguish was torn from his throat as he inspected the damage done to her.

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