

Freedom Rising 2: What Price Freedom?

Willa Okati

**All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2006 Willa Okati**

No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file sharing, and email, without prior written permission from Changeling Press LLC.

**ISBN (10) 1-59596-181-X
ISBN (13) 978-1-59596-181-5
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1561
Shepherdstown, WV 25443-1561
www.ChangelingPress.com**

**Editor: Katriena Knights
Cover Artist: Karen Fox**



This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Dedication

For Ladycat, who is one of the Earth's biggest sweethearts.

Chapter One

Under the cool white light of a full moon, on a bed of cushions in a fragrant rooftop garden, two men writhed together making love.

“Oh, yes. Move for me.” The Nightwalker Nanashi needed no breath to survive, but all the same his chest rose and fell as he struggled to force words through his lips. Lying on his back in a bed of silks and velvets, careless of the rich fabrics as he was careful of his human lover Silken, he arched his hips and groaned for sheer pleasure.

Silken, once a courtesan, then a whore and now Consort to the Nightwalker, all but purred as Nanashi writhed beneath him. He held himself poised above Nanashi’s cock, savoring the anticipation. Practice had taught him how to relax his muscles, to stretch himself wide on his own fingers, dripping with sharply scented oils, but the man beneath him had taught him to love the act of men coming together in bed. He felt empty inside, his stomach clenching with the anticipation of slowly sliding down onto Nanashi’s cock. Feeling it pop past his tight ring and ease in, slick and sweet.

He wanted nothing more than to ride his Consort like one of the wild horses from the West. His body ached to take Nanashi deep inside and taste the power that came with being fucked by a man. What a fool he’d been not to realize how wonderful another man could be in bed! Women were marvelous, and he would not have given them up on his own, but for Nanashi... oh, he would sacrifice anything.

Closing his eyes, Silken breathed carefully and slowly, struggling for control. He would be a poor servant if he could not maintain the pace he had set. Anticipation made any sex all the sweeter, and when two were as insatiable for one another’s bodies as he and Nanashi, he was hard pressed to remember his training in pleasing another before himself.

By the Goddess! All Silken wanted was to toss his learning out the rice-paper-

covered windows of this home and spear himself like a wanton slut, moaning and pawing at Nanashi's chest for another wild gallop through the night, bodies flowing into one another as cherry trees rising from the earth.

He knew how badly it would reflect on him, but Silken didn't want to make love, didn't want to practice the Arts he'd carefully learned, didn't want to seduce Nanashi until he went mad with lust. Nanashi was already there, toes curling and hands fisting into the priceless bedding they were about to ruin. Silken wanted to *fuck*. To be possessed by the Nightwalker just as he'd been when they first shared blood.

With a silent groan of shame mixed with ravenous hunger, Silken let himself go as far as he could within the rules. Splaying his hands wide over Nanashi's chest, he began to lower himself onto the vampire's cock. Strong fingers seized his hips, guiding him even as Nanashi's head tossed, thick black hair tangling into a wild mess on his embroidered pillow.

Silken sank home, the tight curves of his ass flush with Nanashi's groin, speared by his cock, burning with agony and ecstasy -- the sort of pain that felt better than any possible pleasure.

"You," he breathed. "Do you see what you do to me? You strip my control. Turn me into a beast." He squeezed deep internal muscles around Nanashi's cock and laughed a little wildly as Nanashi yelled, bucking up. "You make me burn for you."

Nanashi pried one of his cool white hands off Silken's hip and reached up to grasp his jaw. His fingers pressed into Silken's cheek, eyes crazed with lust. "I've only just begun," he managed. "Silence, now. No more pretty words. Fuck me."

Silken let his breath out in a rush. A Courtesan almost all his life, he felt as if the order freed him to play the slut he ached to be. One sweet moment of release from who he was. He rolled his hips lustfully, wringing a groan out of Nanashi and a hiss from himself. Nanashi's cock arched deeper in, sending bolts of fire and ice to Silken's brain.

"Fuck me," Nanashi repeated, voice ragged.

Silken, unable to hold back any longer, let himself go, rising and falling. His hands roamed over Nanashi, his chosen, his vampire lover, his Consort. He forgot the

world, the bed, his Goddess, and his arts. The only thing that mattered to him was Nanashi. Driving Nanashi out of his mind while he lost his own.

Silken began to ride.

He swayed above Nanashi, power and passion thrumming through his veins like the milk of his goddess Lalasa, who watched over courtesans and whores alike. Mother of love, she lived far removed from the world these days but on occasion chose a favorite.

Silken knew She had long since selected him as one of Her special children. Perhaps She adored his beauty, as finely cut as a woman yet muscled and toned as a man who obeyed her precepts for obtaining a healthy body. She might approve of his worship through intercourse and had rewarded him with bliss few other men would ever feel. Heaven that others chased after with the finest opium and herbs.

Lalasa had long since used Silken as her vessel for conducting passion plays within the city's beds and, when he had been struck down from his position as a favored courtesan, brought a savior to restore him to his former position. He had not expected Lalasa to choose a Nightwalker -- a monster -- as the instrument of her rescue, yet the being drawn to him, Nanashi, had proved more of a gentleman than any rarified lords or ladies he had ever met. The Beast had sworn to take care of Beauty -- and oh, how he bent himself to the task.

Fucking himself on Nanashi's cock, their hands slipping and sliding together, Silken couldn't help making helpless noises of animal need. The still mostly human blood thrummed through his veins, filling him with awareness of Nanashi's amazing cock, with a sense of power, and of his own power at driving the Nightwalker over a lusty edge.

He laughed helplessly with pride and heady bliss. Had he ever regretted his fall from "grace" when his former keeper, Mama Luck, had lost him to a House of men? Goddess, no!

He would have traded anything, even the gold she'd lost for him, to have a chance at the Nightwalker. A life of service to elegant women of the courts could never

compare to fucking Nanashi. To being speared on his lover wearing only his skin, pale gold, smooth as satin and powdered with sweet-smelling honey dust streaked with beads of sweat. He cried out when Nanashi arched up to trail the pointed tip of his tongue over a drop, leaving fire and ice in his wake.

He growled low in his throat, thrashing his head. "Wildcat," Nanashi snarled in approval, hands catching Silken's thighs, pushing him up and pulling him down. "You purr, you snarl. You know your master. Me."

"Yes," Silken breathed, his own cock beginning to throb with the pulse of no return. He had long since taught himself the trick of coming without a hand on his member, and he knew he would burst at any moment.

Not too soon, though... not too soon... he owed Nanashi a glorious fuck. Needed to prove his adoration and his lust. One more time before the morning, at least one more time before he walked out of their home a free man and Keeper of his own House. Nanashi had promised him this would be the day.

Silken had also long since learned when Nanashi gave his word, his promises came true. He rolled his hips wantonly, dragging a deep, hoarse cry out of his lover and a wail from his own throat. *Thank you*, he said with his body; also, *I love you*.

Lalasa be praised! Silken ached for a mirror so he could see just how they looked together, he and Nanashi. There were none though. The Nightwalker would not allow them, as he gave no reflection. Casting a glance to the side, Silken saw that the candlelight from tapers and pillars spread around their bedchamber threw his lean, sinewy silhouette into relief against the wall. His shadow arched high and proud, undulating with power, balancing itself above the shifting, writhing figure of the man pinned between his thighs.

"Look," he managed to say through sharp, short breaths. "Watch us. Oh, goddess --!"

Nanashi shook his head. "To the Pit with shadow puppets," he said. "I only want to look at you. Your face, your eyes, your mouth falling open wide. You. No substitutes."

"But, Nanashi --"

"Stop your pretty plays! Look at us, Silken. Take your eyes off the heavens and *look!*"

Silken glanced down and gasped at the sight between his thighs. His cock jutted out hard and demanding, a pearl of seed shining at the tip. Paused with Nanashi's own member half in and half out of his hole, he stared at the thickness with lust and awe. The few men he'd had in his life could never have prepared him for his Nightwalker. Gossips told stories about Nightwalkers, but idle fantasies could never have prepared him for the reality. Nanashi looked so thick and round, swollen tight and hard for want of him -- glistening with spicy lubricant, alabaster white and perfect.

Unable to resist, Silken slipped off Nanashi's cock and seized it in his hand. He wrapped a hand around the length and marveled at the feel of the organ -- like silk wrapping steel, as wide around as his wrist, longer than any human had a right to dream of, only lacking the thumping of a pulse-beat in time with Silken's heart.

"What are you doing? Go back!"

"Hush. Hush. Wait." Slowly, slowly, Silken stroked Nanashi's cock, delaying the penultimate moment with delicious satisfaction. He burned to feel that rod pushing deep inside him again, thrusting hard. Wanted to feel Nanashi's hands gripping his flanks, to feel Nanashi's mouth on his skin, the sharp sting of his fangs that was addictive as any street herb. Bites at his nipples and the lashing of a tongue over small cuts, not painful, but like champagne poured over his smooth chest.

But did not all good things come to those who waited? Feeling Nanashi writhe beneath him, insane with impatience, unable to find words to order Silken back onto his cock, Silken relished the feeling of power at postponing his pleasure. Nothing had ever felt as good. "Not just yet..."

"You think you can order me around?" Nanashi snarled. To Silken's surprise, he seemed truly angry. Not just driven out of mind with the need to be buried deep inside, but furious at Silken's teasing. Silken didn't understand. Weren't the skills he'd learned enough to please?

Confused, he tried another tack, slipping back into directness even though his lust was dampened by confusion. One of his slim hands slipped down to pinch the base of Nanashi's erection. Rough, the way he seemed to like best. "I want you in me," he said, making his voice brazen. "Come inside. I invite you."

Nanashi made another dangerous animal noise. Gripping Silken's legs hard enough to leave bruises, he thrust up and inside, so fierce that Silken arched and let out a low scream -- part pleasure, part bewilderment at the harsh treatment, and a tiny bit of pain.

Silken groaned, pain easing into pleasure, balling his hands into tight fists. He didn't know what would happen if he touched Nanashi and didn't think he dared risk finding out. What was he doing wrong?

Nanashi held him still as a statue, the moment stretching on for ages. "Please," Silken gave in and begged at last. "Please, let me move!"

The Nightwalker's smile was hungry, an animal with prey in its sights. "No more teasing," he warned. "Move," he breathed against Silken's lips. "Do what you do best. Worship me."

His hands -- strong, solid hands, powerful enough to break an iron bar in half, began to pump Silken's cock. Unable to help himself, Silken keened at the feel of being worked like a whore. He felt almost ashamed, but by Lalasa, the friction! A man couldn't think, couldn't talk, but could only *be* when faced with such power and lust.

"Do you like that?" Nanashi asked hoarsely. "Does it feel good, being speared on my cock? Tell me how much you want it. Want me."

"More than life." Silken fought to keep his eyes open, to see the waves of passion and fierce wanting on Nanashi's face. "So good," he gasped. Then, recklessly, "Come on, Nightwalker. Fuck me!"

Nanashi growled, and began to work them in earnest. Silken lost his grip on the world then, everything spiraling down to the cock plunging in and out of him, the smell of the lubricating oils, the taste of Nanashi's scent in the air, the sweat sheeting down his body, the blazing fire in his own member. He moaned and thrashed like a shameless

slut, begging for more, more, more -- until, with the power of a lightning strike, he felt himself begin to let go.

Nanashi snarled, lunging up to bury fangs around Silken's nipple and swallow heavy mouthfuls of blood. His cock spasmed inside Silken and then let go, painting him from within with heavy spurts of slick seed.

When Silken collapsed against Nanashi's chest, breathing in deep, ragged gulps, Nanashi chuckled low in his throat. He pulled out of Silken's ass with a sigh, then bent to lap up the droplets of blood running down his chest. "Good boy," he murmured. "My Consort."

Silken felt boneless as Nanashi eased them onto their sides, facing one another. Habit seized his tongue and he murmured sleepily, "This my sacrifice to you, Lalasa, goddess of the heart. As it has been done, so mote it be."

Nanashi's eyes narrowed. He remained silent for a long moment, then reached out to haul Silken to his chest. The stickiness of blood and come pooled between them on their bellies. "You have much to learn," he said at last. "Things will be different now, with you as a free man but as my Consort, Silken. You spent one lifetime in study and learning the rules. Now you begin another."

He seized Silken's jaw and shook his head. "Do you enjoy this?" he demanded. "Do you love having me inside you, or is it all for show?"

Silken's eyes widened in bewilderment. "It -- it is you," he stammered, dropping his careful speech in shock. "I would not -- there is no pretense --"

"Good." Nanashi's arms banded around him, holding him so tight he had no hope of getting free if he had wanted to. "Then never, ever call this a 'sacrifice' again. Are we clear?"

Stunned, Silken nodded. "But the Goddess?"

"Worship her as you will, and as you should, but save your adoration for *me*. The sun will rise on your new life while I sleep tomorrow, Silken," Nanashi growled. "Remember who you're bound to and what I expect of you. Do what you must, but know who paid the price for your freedom and respect me. I will know if you do not."

Silken couldn't help a small shiver. Nanashi had never been anything but kind and loving before, pampering to Silken's every whim. He could still taste the iced cherries his Nightwalker pressed on him as a treat and feel the rich clothes Nanashi draped him in.

"You look troubled."

Silken struggled internally. Perhaps this was part of being involved with a Nightwalker. Something implied in the bond of Consorthood he didn't understand. Yes, that had to be the explanation. He was lacking. Well, he would simply have to learn then. He would begin his new life with the determination to make Nanashi proud of him.

"I am fine," he said, nestling his head into Nanashi's smooth chest. "Will you hold me?"

Nanashi's arms tightened. Gentle as was his usual wont, one hand swept up and down Silken's back. "Always," he rumbled, his voice back to its usual smooth burn. "All I ask is that you remember what you've asked of me, what I've done for you, and understand: your new life holds more than you ever dreamed."

Silken had thought those words to himself many times before. They had always filled him with joy -- the thoughts of being a Keeper over his own House and coming home to Nanashi, courteous and loving and attentive.

Now, as he curled against his Nightwalker's body, seeking comfort, the phrases sent a chill down the spine Nanashi's fingers played against...

Chapter Two

Silken might have dozed; he wasn't certain. It was not in his nature to sleep while the moon still rose toward her zenith. Nanashi, naturally, never slept away the night hours either. As the afterglow warmth of his orgasm ebbed slowly out of his muscles and bones, Silken began to grow stiff and want to stretch. Behind him, he felt Nanashi quaking every so often, obviously just as eager to change position, but politely honoring the request to hold and be held.

Silken wished the moment could go on for hours -- Nanashi's skin was so cool in the warm, humid night -- yet he found himself on the verge of wriggling, and such an action simply would not do. Even former Courtesans, and especially those who hoped to retain their recently re-won high caste status, did not act the selfish lover. Flopping about like a fish would not only be undignified, it would insult Nanashi by implying his embrace was not welcome.

Silken did not want to think about what might happen if he displeased Nanashi. He had spent the most of his life pleasing human women who knew the rules of polite society even when they lay between finely woven linen sheets. Manners were of utmost importance and in no way could they be deviated from without a direct order. Some did enjoy acting the wild mare, but they always controlled their riders, and afterwards, when he arranged their hair and painted their faces, they were genteel. He had known what to expect from women such as Aliana, his fairest of the fair.

Silken spared a moment to wonder -- what had become of her? She had favored him above all others. Of course she would not have visited the House he had fallen to, the Lotus Garden, as it was for men only. Still, he knew Nanashi's claim and Silken's purchase of his freedom with the Nightwalker's gold would have been whispered behind every fan in the women's gardens, passed from small crimson lips to lips.

Aliana would have known he'd been set free. Surely she would have sent a small gift of honor. A sachet of the fragrant tea he used to love so well. A note. Or had she, like others he knew of for certain, disdained him for consorting with a vampire?

What choice had he been given though? Nanashi had been Silken's ticket out of a whorehouse run by a greedy Keeper. He had been gentle and loving, and generous with his gold, but ah! Even then, while robing Silken with embroidery and pearls, he had held his mastery overhead. The last gold coin needed to purchase his freedom would not be handed over until Silken had agreed to bond with Nanashi. At the time, he had been glad to do it. The Nightwalker had been kinder to him than any human in far too long and certainly gentler than any man he had bent over for at the Lotus Garden. Nanashi made pain into pleasure and changed pleasure into rapture.

All for a price though...

Unable to help himself, Silken shivered. Nanashi's cool hand was on him at once, sliding down over his shoulder to rest on his ribs. "What ails you?" Nanashi murmured in his ear, voice like roughened velvet. A lazy jungle cat, purring, prey securely caught within its grasp.

Silken forced down another tremor. To voice a complaint was ill-mannered. "Nothing, my lord," he lied. He put his hand over Nanashi's lightly as a feather, letting him know the touch was appreciated yet allowing him to lead.

"Silken, are you lying to me?"

"What? No, my lord."

Nanashi was silent. Then, he said, "No. You were, and are, and will continue to tell me lies unless I order you to stop, won't you? Something does bother you, and you refuse to let me know."

Lalasa, help me! Silken's mind raced. He had mis-stepped somehow, and must race to right his wrong. Lovers were not permitted to complain when their protector held them. Polite half-lies were acceptable to all humans. Why would Nanashi be different?

"So silent, now?" Nanashi asked, tweaking one of Silken's nipples. The rough

touch sent a thrum of pleasure through him as plucking the string of a lute produced a sweet note. Silken closed his eyes and arched briefly backwards, his cheeks coloring when Nanashi chuckled. "Have you no words?"

Silken gave up. "I do not know how to answer you," he said honestly, his voice a shameful whisper. Such a poor showing reflected badly on him. It threatened his standing not to understand and anticipate his Consort's needs. If anyone should ever find out, he would be made a mockery.

"Speak only the truth then."

Silken hesitated, biting quickly at his lip. The truth? *I fear you as much as I love you, Nanashi. Half the time I do not understand you. How can I lead my half of our life together without comprehension of the role I am to play?* No, honesty would never do.

"I am cold," he blurted. Softening his voice, he pushed himself backwards against Nanashi's torso with a low laugh. "You are a block of ice when we are not riding the horse." There! Truth enough, and lover's teasing was certainly permitted.

He managed not to sag in relief when Nanashi laughed again, his low rumble an incredibly welcome sound. "I have nowhere near the quarts of blood in me which keep you warm as an ember. Cold, yes, you do feel chilly. Sticky too." Nanashi trailed a finger over Silken's stomach. The hot blood his Nightwalker had referenced flushed Silken's cheeks in shame as he realized he had forgotten himself so far as to wash off the evidence of their fucking.

Bed sport, he corrected himself. The rougher word was fine to use in the heat of a moment, but otherwise crude in the extreme. Though Nanashi did seem to love to coax it out of him... But for all the thoughts crowding his mind, one stood up and demanded top recognition: he was filthy, as was Nanashi, which made him a terrible lover indeed for ignoring such a basic need. Forgetting soap and water. Gods and Goddesses, he might as well have been back at the Lotus Garden!

Silken made a graceful move to raise himself up. "Let me go for soap and water," he suggested, trailing his fingers along Nanashi's arm. "I will clean us."

Nanashi mock-groaned but let Silken go. As Silken stood, he heard the rustling

sounds of Nanashi rolling over onto his back. "Use the warm water," he was advised. "From the tap on the wall. You do remember how?"

Shame colored Silken's face again. Did Nanashi think him so simple as to forget such a thing? He had been so amazed by the device, a pump on the wall that dispensed steaming water from a reservoir heated by coals. He had bathed himself in the fragrant softness of the liquid, washed from head to toe, all but mewling with delight. Nanashi must have considered him simple to think he would not remember.

Hurt, Silken nodded and said, "Yes, of course." He slid out of bed. Habit made him want to reach for a robe, which should have been hanging nearby, to cover himself, but Nanashi disdained modesty in the bed chamber. He said prudery was for the young and the old, and they were neither. He wanted to enjoy the sight of Silken's body when he had the chance.

Silken could feel Nanashi's eyes on him as he padded toward the spigot. Long years of training imbued Silken's gait with a gentle swish, so that his hips swayed enticingly. He knew his ass was tight and firm, the skin flawless save for a small ring of bite marks where Nanashi had once gotten carried away. He could all but feel his lover's eyes fixed on the marks. Hungry.

"You were delicious," Nanashi said idly, confirming Silken's thoughts. "I remember how free you were when I had you splayed across my body. All your Arts forgotten in the heat, yes, heat of the moment we shared. You are a wild thing when you lose control, and it delights my heart so very much to see you letting go of all your rules."

Silken paused with his hand on the spigot. "Nanashi..." spilled from his lips before he could stop the sound. He would have slapped his hand to his mouth, but so ill-mannered it would seem, just like a child! "Forgive me," he murmured instead, bowing his head. He touched the cool marble of the wall, resisting the urge to roll his over-warm skin against it.

"Silken," Nanashi warned, "have we not just discussed honesty between us? Talk to me. Tell me what you are thinking."

Silken stood still, trembling. Words on his tongue fought with the demands of silence from his mind.

"Must I beat you?" Silken caught his flinch halfway but could not resist a trembling. Nanashi sounded exhausted as an old man and bitter as willow bark. "Is the lash of willow across your back what it takes to break down the walls of all your Arts and Skills? I sought you out as a Courtesan, yes, but I bought your freedom out of *love*, Silken, *love*, and I took you to my bed as a Consort. I want no paid whore sharing my blood, wearing my mate's earring. I want the you I have seen glimpses of. Yet you cannot open yourself up enough to even tell me if you are hot or cold, dirty or clean, afraid or confident, unless I give the order. Can you?"

Silken pressed his hands against the wall, palms flat, shivering from head to toe. If Nanashi were to beat him, it would leave marks. Anyone who ever saw him again would be aware he had failed. "I am trying," he whispered.

"Say that again, Silken."

"I said, I am trying!" Silken turned sharply from the wall, his hands clenching into fists. "You do not try at all! You, with your 'openness' and 'honesty,' do you have any notion of what a Courtesan's life is truly like? We worship Lalasa not only because she is the Goddess of Love, but so she will protect us. Keep us safe, and the way we stay safe is to abide by the rules of our caste. You've plucked me out of the layers of men and women and made me something -- something -- I know not what! How can I know what to do when I do not know what I am?"

Nanashi sat with his hands folded under his chin, gaze level, eyes revealing nothing. "Go on."

Silken dragged his hands through his hair, further disarranging the tangles. "The bond we have formed has not been known in decades. Perhaps centuries! Men of mortal blood and those who walk the night are not supposed to mix. Your nerve in approaching my first keeper, Mama Luck, was enough to terrify the servants. No doubt they thought you would tear their throats out when I sent back my first denial.

"Keeper Illia was greedy enough to take your gold, even though she probably

suspected you wanted me for a meal, not a -- a *fuck*. You have taken me from one life but not carried me over into another, and I don't know where I stand. Whose rules should I follow? Who am I? So many questions, and I have no answers at all!"

He flung his hands out in utter frustration. "Tell me, Nanashi. How can I be what you want when I don't know the rules of this game?"

"The rule, Silken," Nanashi said quietly, "is that there are no rules. Do you not know this by now?"

"You never told me!"

"I see." Nanashi sat still and quiet for a moment longer. "I would never beat you, Silken. For one, I place too much value on your beauty to ever mar it with stripes. You are worth a king's ransom in gold, and I made certain by paying the full price before the courts that all would know you had not fallen in rank. Do you know they whisper about you in tones of envy, not malice? There are a few dissidents, of course; there will always be sour grapes in every bunch on the vine. But so few do not envy you. Many men and women who hold much wealth and power in their hands are watching us, to see if our union prospers or fails. If we triumph, it may mean the beginning of a new era."

Silken faltered. "I do -- I do not understand your meaning." Mindless now of being naked, careless of the proper gait, he returned to Nanashi's side and sank into a crouch at his master's feet. He looked up, pleading blue eyes meeting those dark as the midnight sky, just as cool and emotionless as the moon. "Tell me where I have failed. Explain why I am so stupid. Help me know who I am."

Slowly, Nanashi shook his head. "I cannot do that," he said, "not if you have not learned already. But I can do this. I can offer you a choice."

The breath stopped in Silken's lungs. "What?" Automatically, he touched the swinging ruby drop dangling from his earlobe, his sign that he belonged to Nanashi and was no other man's to play with. "But our bond?"

"You may break it at any time, if you wish," Nanashi said. He wavered, then, as if he could not bear to be so cool any longer, brought one hand down to stroke and

caress Silken's hair. "I wish that you would not. I love you, Silken, so very much. I only wish you could see. But if you chose, you could turn away from me, and I would let you go. You would have the monies already in your accounts to build your House and do as you wished. But, I wonder... would you miss me when I was gone?"

"Nanashi." Silken shook his head. "I would die."

"Yes. Now you speak the truth as you feel it, but how peculiar that it should be a falsehood! You would not die, Silken. You might grieve and mourn, but your life would be safe enough. Pain would pass as pain often does, and you would be heart-whole again."

Silken's head swam. "You though," he managed, sliding his hand up Nanashi's calf to the knee. "What of you?"

Nanashi's smile was sorrowful. "I notice you did not say 'I will never leave you'," he said. As Silken drew in breath to protest, he held up his hand. "Peace, enough. Silken, I give you the choice. Either stay with me and learn, as most men do, through honesty and fair trial, the rules of your new life -- the price of your freedom -- or go free. But allow me to tell you a story first."

"A story?" Silken blinked, confused. "Nanashi, it is the Courtesan's job to --"

"Hush your mouth with all the rules of who is who and who does what and when!" Nanashi's lips tightened with anger. "I have a tale to spin, and you will listen to it. Consider this an order. Do you understand me? Will you accept this one last condition? When I am done, you will choose whether or not you stay or you go."

Silken stared at Nanashi, unable to speak or move. His throat felt tight and swollen, as if packed with ice. From the heights of passion to this thunderous valley in less than an hour! It was more than he could tolerate.

"Silken, answer me. Do you understand what I propose to do?"

With a tremendous effort of will, Silken nodded once.

"Very well." Nanashi reached down. Easily, as if Silken weighed no more than a kitten, he hauled the man around to sit between his thighs, back leaning against his chest. "Lie against me. Listen to my voice. Lose yourself in the story, and think to

yourself of what life would be like if you were the man whose thread I am about to spin..."

And Silken, helpless against his master, his lover, his Nanashi, and the future, cooperated because he could do no less...

Chapter Three

"Once upon a time, as all good stories must begin," Nanashi said, his fingers combing slowly through the tangles in Silken's hair, "east of the setting sun and north of the rising moon, in a land where no one has traveled for years upon years, there lived a human who had been badly wronged by the man he loved. This is the story of his revenge. Yes?"

Silken sat sharply upright, twisting around to seek Nanashi's face. Nanashi gazed down at him, steady and level as smooth water in a silver bowl. "Is there something wrong?" he asked.

Silken shook his head, searching his lover's face. "I -- I don't --"

"Speak, Silken. How many times must I tell you? You are *free*, even if you do belong to me. I know you do not understand. Perhaps, someday, you will. A bit more if you listen to my story than if you do not." Nanashi thumbed a wisp of hair off Silken's cheek where it had stuck to his heated flesh. "If you have a question, give it voice. You will not offend me."

"Very well." Silken swallowed hard. "I do *not* understand, Nanashi. I thought you would tell me a story to convince me of how Nightwalkers and humans could forge a bridge between them. But this? I could hear this sort of sordid story in a quarter-copper tale-teller's booth!"

"Sordid? You have not given me a chance to properly begin. This tale is far from low and common, Silken. Listen. Save your opinions until you have heard every word. But here," Nanashi said, sliding back onto the floor cushions that served equal purpose as a bed. He dragged Silken with him, rolling him over easily as tipping a feather, until he lay on his back in turn.

Nanashi sat upright, bracing himself with one arm. To Silken's irritation, the

Nightwalker was smiling. Smiling! "I think I know of a way to relax you," he said, stroking down the length of Silken's thigh. "There is no better time to do this, when your skin is moist from exertion and I am flushed with the blood from my lover's veins."

"Nanashi, what are you --"

"Hush. Watch." Nanashi stood, presenting Silken with an exquisite view of his narrow waist, slim hips, and marble-white legs as he walked to a cherry-wood wardrobe. His own. Silken had never investigated the object, of course, though he had often wondered what treasures Nanashi kept inside. The Nightwalker bent over, rummaged briefly, then made a small noise of triumph.

He emerged holding a small box of alabaster and garnet. "I still have them," he said, sounding pleased as a boy. "I bought this kit many years ago, long before you were even born, but knowing I would one day find a mate who was worthy of the contents. They cost me forty gold."

Silken caught his breath. Forty! Twice the price of his own freedom from a Courtesan's contract.

Nanashi brushed his fingertips over the box's lid, tracing carvings down its sides. "Oh, yes. A bargain. These are rare, for they come from a time when magic flowed like water in the street fountains. Days long since gone by. The days in which this story which I am going to tell you took place."

He opened the box and tilted it a bit for Silken to look inside. Curious though a little afraid, Silken raised up to investigate. "Brushes?" he asked, puzzled. "Inkwells full of sparkling powder? These are worth forty gold?"

Nanashi tilted back his head and laughed. Silken bristled, insulted. "You can buy such a thing from half a dozen peddlers in the city markets!" he snapped, too wounded to hold his tongue; he had to bark, lest he bite. "What makes these brushes and dried inks such rare treasures?"

"Ah." Nanashi sank down next to Silken in their elegant nest of velvet cushions. He winked. "Their virtue is not in what they *are*. They are worth far more than forty

gold for what they can *become*." He lifted one pale wrist to his mouth. "Watch."

"Nanashi, no!" Silken raised a hand to stop his lover, but too late. One of Nanashi's fangs pierced the large blue vein. Quick as a flick, he had uncapped one of the bottles of glittering powder and let the thin stream of crimson run through its narrow neck. Perhaps an ounce flowed, and Nanashi raised his wrist to his mouth again, licking the wound to seal it.

He grinned rakishly at Silken, once again humiliated. "How quickly you forget my body heals within an eye blink," he said. "My heart, though, it is a different matter. I chose to give it away, and you might destroy it with a careless word."

Silken drew himself up, affronted. "I am not the one talking more loudly than the mockingbirds!"

"And therein lies your single, or perhaps greatest, fault. Here, now, stop desecrating the beauty I love to look upon." Nanashi laid a finger over Silken's mouth to stop his scowl of indignation. "Look at the ink, love. Watch what happens."

Silken huffed -- silently as possible -- but obeyed, gazing at the small crystal bottle. Capping it with his thumb, Nanashi shook the vial one, two, three times. The red of his blood swirled through the powder, dissolving it. The glitter brightened, then *flashed*, as would a shooting star.

Silken cried out and covered his eyes, terrified the vial would explode. Moments later, he felt Nanashi's hand on his shoulder, comforting him. "No, no, I should have warned you. All is well. Look again, Silken. Do you see? Magic."

Silken peeked out cautiously from behind his arm... then sat up, his lips falling open. The crystal vial of ink glowed sparkling red, as someone had made champagne out of the ripest strawberries. It cast a warming glow. One could have seen by its light if the room had been dark.

"Magic," Nanashi repeated, smiling into Silken's face. Slowly, returning the smile, Silken reached out to touch the vial. It felt warm.

"Lie down," Nanashi instructed. He reached for one of the brushes and came up with a narrow-tipped example. Seemingly satisfied, he dipped the brush into the ink,

and poised himself over Silken once Silken had arranged himself in the cushions. "Yes, just so," he murmured. "I will paint you with patterns that please me, and I will tell you my story. The teardrop in your earlobe has marked you as mine, but this will show you as a free man to everyone who cares to look. Your skin, covered with glyphs. My forty gold well redeemed."

Silken gasped, staring at Nanashi. Decorated skin was the right of princes and great warriors, not Courtesans, former or otherwise. "I have no -- no right," he managed.

Nanashi bent to kiss Silken's forehead, his lips cool and smooth. "You have every right," he said. "You are the monarch of a great caste soon to be created. Listen as I speak, allow me to do my work, and soon you will begin to understand me. You will know at what price has come your freedom."

Silken swallowed hard as Nanashi moved back, dipped his brush back into the vial, and lowered it to one cheek. The soft hairs tickled as would the finest curls of a woman's ringlets, caressing him with a lover's touch. Up and down they moved, creating hypnotizing rings and whorls as Nanashi spoke.

"On the day this story begins, it was snowing..."

Chapter Four

Reiji stared at the sky and thought, *It's snowing this afternoon. Snowing in the land of dust and cobblestones, where nothing falls from the sky but the sun's harsh light and the moon's cooling rays. Harm and healing, unequally measured. In the light, everything is held up to scrutiny. In the night, a man can hide.*

A person can do things he should never begin to consider. Do them, and feel no regrets. Feel nothing at all. Like me, and what I plan to accomplish before the rising of the sun.

He could not help but stand in the emptied streets below the great mansion where he planned to intrude, holding his hands palms-up toward the sky. It never snowed in his country, not unless a gathering of shamans had danced for days, singing prayers to gods and goddesses whose names they had long since forgotten. Sacrifices of blood and tears were needed just to make the rains fall.

What had moved a being beyond their comprehension to scatter the soft snowflakes down upon a normally busy city?

Could it be they saw his plan and approved of what he meant to do? Reiji firmed his lips together, closing his eyes. *Perhaps I have not been wholly abandoned then*, he thought. He knew there had been no great sacrifices and no incantations to block out any ray of light that might blaze down upon his lover's domain. Not in this land! Kaname would never allow such a thing.

No, the Lord Kaname gloried instead in long, dry days, regardless of how thirsty his subjects grew. In the harsh light of noon, no Nightwalkers would dare to roam -- and above all things, Kaname feared those who were free by moonlight to hunt and devour men like himself.

Yet perhaps there would be one reason for Kaname to seek a sheltering blanket, to hide away from prying eyes. Perhaps he made sacrifice in secret, spreading his royal

blood over cobalt blue flames.

Reiji could not help but wonder. And, thinking these things, he had to laugh. He, Reiji, had been the instrument behind this wonder! Kaname would have known nothing of snow if Reiji had not described the substance to him. Surely none had ever fallen before in this well-parched land. Rain, occasionally, but never the fluffy white flakes showering down around him at the moment.

When they first became lovers, Reiji used to speak to Kaname of things he had seen in the colder climes where he originated, from whence he had traveled to find the man who won his heart. Landed lord and foreign prince or no, both had known from the first meeting of their eyes they were meant to be.

All the same, Reiji soon realized Kaname did not like to hear tales of weather. The whims of the sky's bounty bothered him. He preferred to think of things firmly under his control, and so Reiji ceased describing showers and especially snow.

How he missed the white frostings of ice from back in his homeland -- fluffy white flakes drifting down to coat his bared head and the shoulders of his tunic. Snowballs and a delicious sort of pudding made from the fresh drifts, vanilla beans, and milk. Lying on his back in the yard, atop the white inches of fluff, and making butterflies with wide swoops of arm and leg.

He ceased any talking at all when he lay beneath Kaname's larger bulk. He never said a word again as they played before lovemaking, not teasing him by mimicking the movements of playing in the snow, but not plying him with words of affection either. Though he had savored the way wicked words spoken in lusty breaths made the lord gasp and grip him tighter, their cocks rubbing together, Reiji stopped telling any tales at all for the sake of peace outside their shared bed.

But Reiji still loved snow. Raising his face to the sky, he felt flakes settling on his cheeks and wondered: was it a blessing showered down upon him? *Goddess of Love and God of Revenge, be ye with me now*, he prayed, drawing a holy rune on his throat with the tip of one cold finger.

The snow, seeming as if it would soon turn into a driving blizzard, was both

blessing and curse. A gift, for it would allow Reiji the secrecy he needed to betray his lord, his lover, and the keeper of his heart.

A curse, because it meant that behind the snow's cloaking gales, Lord Kaname would be able to slip out of his palace to meet with the Lady Sadako. She who had won his heart from Reiji's hands with one coy glance from beneath her thick eyelashes. A woman, and a possible wife, a potential mother of heirs, a lover who Kaname would take seriously as Reiji now realized he himself never had been...

Sadako, who had returned from her travels in the furthest Southern reaches to find Kaname raised onto his father's throne. Alive and unopposed against countless others who craved his power. She saw how he ruled with an iron fist, and fancied she could learn to control the hand inside. If Kaname had other lights-of-love, well, what did they matter? She saw what she wanted, and like any sensible woman, sought to take it into her hands.

Reiji, whose curse was to be fair even when it pained him, did not believe Sadako harbored any particular hatred toward himself as Kaname's lover. He was more of the opinion that, after the struggle to establish herself as a power, she saw joining her forces with Kaname as a way to take some of the weight off her delicate shoulders. Women thrived on power, truly, but Sadako grew weary underneath the burden of manipulating her people. Not shallow, but tired, she had turned to a canny method of doubling her power and halving her responsibilities. With paint, and scented oils, with embroidered silks and musical laughter, she fought to win her ultimate prize.

A battle all too easily won.

Reiji knew from the moment he saw Sadako enter Kaname's court and caught the look between them, his rival and supplanter had arrived. All the same, for weeks as they lay in bed at night, Kaname held Reiji close and promised his faithfulness. His fidelity. Swore he would explain to the beautiful porcelain princess how things were between himself and Reiji. Tell her there were unbreakable if informal vows of fidelity and firmly let her know that they couldn't -- wouldn't -- change.

Terrified of losing his lover, Reiji had believed Kaname. More fool him. His lover

had already been long lost.

And so, watching the snow fall, Reiji knew himself to have no choice. Kaname might be a Lord, but Reiji was a prince and a mage besides. The man would have to know the error of his ways.

Pride would not allow any other ending to their love affair.

With that knowledge, a cold part of Reiji's mind accepted that he had to pack away the deliciousness of long nights rolling in the sheets, tangling limbs and devouring Kaname's mouth with kisses. Scraping his own swollen flesh against the lord's and spreading himself with the abandon of the lusty lover. All gone, and never more to be again.

It was time to make Kaname pay. The man had to know Reiji would not lie back and accept trickery or betrayal as meekly as a mouse. Reiji had gained the help of another, with as much reason to hate Kaname as himself, who waited just down the street for Reiji's signal.

A Nightwalker. One whose own lover had been slaughtered by one of the lord's edicts for a murder he did not commit. A Nightwalker, beautiful and pale as the moon, with silver-blond hair and alabaster skin marked only by his blood tattoos.

The time had come, and he was ready to act. It snowed today in the Lord Kaname's city, and Reiji was ready to exact his vengeance. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and broken trust for trust.

No one would ever forget what he would do that day.

Servants, their loyalty easily bought with the promise of half a copper, had reported to Reiji that Kaname and Sadako had been seen leaving earlier, together. Walking demurely side by side and speaking archly of the burdens of rulership, and all but hand in hand while in the public eye. Then, as soon as they thought themselves hidden, falling immediately into one another's arms. They folded into one another, she on tiptoes and he bending down. Mouths joining. Bodies molding. Embracing long and hard, with a passion given free reign.

They parted reluctantly to get into Kaname's carriage, one that could run by

magic alone, with the illusion of a coachman, who would tell no tales. They would not have gone far, and surely retreated as fast as possible from the thick flakes that were turning gray as they wafted down through smoky city air, most melting immediately on byways and roads.

Reiji considered it likely that the pair would be gone for hours. Doing what, he had plenty of ideas, but he found himself oddly numb, unable to care. This was his chance.

No one questioned his approaching Lord Kaname's private rooms. Their relationship was not quite mocked openly, but certainly no secret to gossips and gigglers, and those who sought to climb higher by trading on the knowledge. The cloaked and hooded man by his side drew a few curious eyes, but whole coins pressed into hands guaranteed their silence. Reiji was known for being kind to servants and canny as to their needs whereas Kaname was more often than not likely to deal out warning with the sharp edge of his tongue.

The sole burly guard outside Kaname's private chambers, bored with nothing to protect, and a friend of Reiji's, raised an eyebrow as he saw the two approach. "You know?" he asked, quietly as such a large man could, his voice like the rolling of muted thunder.

"I have heard, and I have seen," Reiji replied, his eyes downcast. "She is with him. The game goes to Lady Sadako."

"T'isn't right. Isn't fair. I've heard his high-and-mightiness promise you fidelity sufficient times to make a dozen sets of marriage vows." The guard was angry enough to let his carefully crafted mask slip. Reiji knew this man had a fellow of his own at home, a slender scribe with deft hands and an easily bruised heart. Knew he had no stomach for traitors and deceivers. Knew that whatever happened, Kaname had made an enemy of his chief protector as well as... well.

He laid his hand on the guard's bristling arm, bulging with muscles. "Peace," Reiji said quietly. "It is well. Let this Nightwalker in when I call for him, and if anyone asks what we might be doing inside, say nothing."

The guard eyed him up and down, wary of anything a mage might have planned -- but, in the end, nodding, his disdain for Kaname paramount. "I'll keep to my post," he said, firm as the mountain he resembled.

Reiji smiled at the man and reached out to grasp his hand, sliding a silver coin into his palm. "I cherish your friendship," he said as the money slipped away from him. "May you be rewarded for your faithfulness."

He wondered, as he slid past, if the guard's eyes lingered on him as he went. With sorrow, with curiosity, or with regret? Reiji had felt all three so keenly he had passed through to oblivion. He could spend the day mourning the loss of love and Kaname's greediness for heirs and soft woman flesh, but he could not forget what had been done to him, and he could not forgive what Kaname had proposed to do: keep him as a dish to be savored on the side while he sported in Sadako's marriage bed.

Reiji would not be anyone's concubine, waiting for the nights when the mistress was weary or confined. He was a prince and a mage, not a toy. He did not "share." Kaname would learn that soon enough.

Reaching for the cold ivory lock to Kaname's chambers, carved with elaborate filigree, Reiji shivered. He had made this lock with magic, knowing how it would please his lover. Kaname adored ivory -- the smooth coolness of it, the ways it could be sculpted, and how it warmed in the hands.

When Reiji had made him a special dildo, double-headed, engraved with their names entwined along the length of the shaft, he had been rewarded with heated kisses over the whole of his body. It had once been a favored memory of the mage's. No longer.

The lock, though, received more reverential treatment. Kaname wore his private key around his neck and trusted no one with the spare. Even when Reiji had been sure of his welcome, he'd had to go through the bulky guard to gain entrance to his lover's chamber if the man was not by his side.

Perhaps he had given Sadako the second key. But such a fool, Kaname! He had never questioned whether or not Reiji might have made a third, kept by in case of

emergencies and hidden it from any man's sight. Withdrawing the sliver of rococo ivory from its hiding place up his sleeve, Reiji slid it into the lock, murmuring a word to mollify wards he himself had set in place.

The doors opened smoothly as a breath of the west wind, the one which had brought them their snow.

When Reiji entered the ornately gilded, velvet-lush chambers of his lord, he felt an odd sensation of vertigo as if he were doing something wrong. Perhaps setting off one of the security spells he himself had put in place. But no -- after a moment's consideration, he decided it was not so. There was no tingle of magic to the air washing over his robes and skin. Merely emptiness, and the buzzing of his blanked-out brain filling the dead silence of the suite and his heart.

He stared around himself, momentarily uncertain. Where to start? Each and every part of Kaname's chambers held some sort of memory. The pair of them, in their whimsical moods, had taken it upon themselves to christen every surface they possibly could. Reiji could still feel the chill of sideboards beneath his back, the soft warp and woof of carpets scraping his hands and knees, and the groaning, squeaking yielding of a suede pad surrounding him. The freezing cold of a window against his bared shoulders. The iciness of glass beneath his palms. The burning heat of water jetting down upon them in the small adjoining bathing room.

Reiji remembered it all, every squeezing and tightening and burning of orgasm after orgasm. There was no place where they had not been, had not taken one other. The memories all but choked him. He staggered back, pressing the palms of his hands to his eyes.

Calm, Reiji, calm. Do what you have come here to do.

His eyes drifted, unwilling, toward the broad and luxurious bed of Lord Kaname. The nights spent rolling around on the soft goose down and embroidered silks...

He could still smell raw sex in the air from the last time he and Kaname had come together -- overlaid by the scent of a woman's perfumes and delicately fragrant

oils. His stomach twisted. Sadako must have smelled Reiji's own essence, yet had not stopped. And Kaname? He had not even had the courtesy or foresight to air his chambers out.

Had he and Sadako planned together, perhaps, planned, a future wherein Reiji would be his midnight snack or second-hand-man? Sadako was cunning enough to allow Kaname his indulgences so long as she might have a wedding vow and rings upon her fingers and in her ears. Reiji fancied if he shut his eyes and listened, he could almost hear the sounds of their whispers and her giggling, teasing Kaname for being so virile and mocking Reiji as a weak slut...

Damn both their souls to the Pit!

His jaw tightened in anger as he stared at the rumpled, stained sheets that had once been works of art. A pair of soft leather cuffs dangled open from the iron latticework of the bedstead, an opened bottle of lubricating oil on the night-stand, and dark, dried stains of release on the satin quilt. His own or Kaname's? Reiji could not remember.

He wondered if Kaname did.

Had they come together last only two nights before? So much had come to pass in between times. It took so very little to turn a man's world upside down...

Reiji shook himself. Standing still, he called back to the man waiting with Kaname's guard. "Enter." He heard the guard's apology as he began to search Reiji's fellow conspirator and prayed his Nightwalker would have the common sense not to reveal his fangs. Even the guard would only go so far to see Kaname got what he deserved.

He had little time to act then. Fortunately, he knew what he wanted and where to find it.

His hands felt like foreign objects to him as they plundered through the drawers of a wardrobe, shifting aside black silk robes and thin satin trousers jumbled together. He'd grown careless, Kaname had. Once upon a time, he'd have made certain everything lay arranged in neat rows. But then, he'd lost his concentration of late,

hadn't he? Mismanaged his grasp of what was important and what was real. What mattered.

But it made Reiji's search all the easier. Mere moments of digging and he found what he sought, held them in his hands. Sheet after sheet of finest rice paper, images sprawling across them with skill beyond any mortal artist. Enchanted drawings. Moments in time captured on paper. A trick of his which had delighted Kaname to no end, to the extent that he'd often demanded Reiji speak the incantation which would etch another vision of them together.

Careless Kaname though! He had no respect for the drawings' value. Scribbled across the back in his untidy hand, a shameful script for such a high-ranking man, were notes of time and place, and his own personal observations -- so crude they turned Reiji's stomach. Kaname wrote no simple and beautiful love haikus. He scribbled lecherous jokes, often comparing Reiji to a crane -- all legs and a delicate meat to be savored with a good wine.

Reiji flipped through the pictures, biting his lips. There, he rode Kaname, his hands splayed out on the lord's chest. There, Kaname took him from behind, Reiji's face buried in the quilt, hands fisting it into bunches. There, they lay side by side, each sucking the other's cock with a ferocious hunger, their hands reaching out to grasp and hold.

Images of Reiji playing submissive to Kaname's dominant; the two of them laughing as they tried out various oils and gels for the best taste and slickness; and one, the very last, least-handled -- he and Kaname curled against each other, Kaname asleep and Reiji almost there, just awake enough to work the magic.

Heart thudding in his throat, he turned the sketch over and read the one word Kaname had scribbled on the back: *mistake*.

Unable to help himself, Reiji crumbled the picture in his hands. One word, and it crumbled into ash. A fitting end.

And now, he would make a new beginning. Behind him, he heard the soft footsteps of slippered feet approaching. He breathed in and smelled the unusual tang of

a Nightwalker -- coppery blood, exotic spices, and the peculiar magic that kept them animatedly alive after they should have long been dead the first time. Even with all his enchantments, he could not divine what it was that let a vampire walk and talk, think and listen, kiss and fuck.

But did it matter? Gentle hands folded onto Reiji's shoulders, squeezing lightly. "We can leave," his Nightwalker, Li Man, whispered. "If this is too painful... I can put aside my own thirst for revenge. I would not cause you grief."

Reiji reached up to squeeze Li Man's hand. "No." He shook his head. "This is for both of us, not just me. If you can bring yourself to do what I ask, I gladly offer my body up to you."

Li Man's hands grew still. "It is not a question of sacrifice," he said after a long silence. "I would do it with pleasure."

Something strange unfurled inside Reiji's chest. He swallowed, not wanting to examine it, yet the feelings evoked by Li Man's tone and words were working a sort of magic of their own. "Thank you," he said at last, his voice rough. "I think perhaps we may have things to talk about, after we have finished here."

He felt the light brush of cool lips against his earlobe. "I think so," Li Man said against his cheek. "Now," he requested. "Speak the words. Let us be recorded for all the world -- and Kaname -- to see."

Reiji's eyes drifted shut, and he whispered the one word: *inscribe*.

Turning within the circle of his Nightwalker's arms, he lifted his mouth so that their lips met. Magic tingled through the air as does the sky-fire before a storm, filling them both with a fizzing power. Reiji knew sheets of paper would be unfurling, elegant lines capturing this moment so vividly it would almost seem alive on the page.

Laughing to himself, he slid his tongue forward to tangle with Li Man's, savoring his metallic-sweet taste and the chill of his fingers as they clutched at shoulders and arms. Reiji was a wonderful kisser and knew it, having left Kaname gasping many a time, but oh, he had nothing to compare to the skill of Li Man's lips.

He realized, to his surprise, the Nightwalker's cock was already stiff beneath his

robes, jutting out toward Reiji's stomach. Only half thinking of the moment to be captured, Reiji reached down to grasp and hold with his fingers, to rub with his thumb. Li Man hissed against Reiji's mouth, drawing back so that his fangs would do no harm. Reiji felt a thrill of wonder -- this Nightwalker, supposedly a monster, so careful!

But wait, he was whispering as he moved toward Reiji, hands sliding around to grasp the globes of Reiji's ass. "I have waited for so long. From the moment you stepped through my door, so unafraid, I wanted you as I have wanted no other man."

Reiji felt a tremor of shock go through him. "Li Man -- I --" He felt shame color his cheeks. "I did not know."

"No. I kept it a secret." Li Man seared a trail of kisses down Reiji's throat. "Move your hand, please, I beg you. I've dreamed of this for so long. You feel wonderful, with your thrumming pulse. I can hear the blood rush through your veins, I can smell the dampness of your skin, and I can all but taste your seed on my tongue."

"Li Man!" Reiji buckled against the Nightwalker, who held him up. "Why did you never say?"

"Forbidden, isn't it? The vampire kind and humans are never meant to mix. My first lover's death might have been avoided if he had stayed away from the living breed." Li Man growled and burrowed into the dent between Reiji's collarbones. "But you, you make me forget myself."

The Nightwalker's hands cupped and squeezed, fingers flexing. Reiji had thought he would need to resort to magic, but no, his cock had risen to the occasion and pulsed for want of friction, whether hand or -- ah, there, just there -- rubbing against Li Man's own swollen rod. *Better than ivory*, he thought with a dizzy laugh to himself. *Just as cold, but far more eager, and... oh, gods and goddesses. What have I done? If he cares for me, and I am using him...*

"No, no. I know what's going through your mind. You are not using me." Li Man gyrated against Reiji, pulling them closer together in a swaying dance. "I want this revenge as much as you. But, Reiji-love..." He dipped lower, swiping his tongue just above one nipple, "I want more. I can give you anything you crave. Only don't let this

be the end." His words buzzed and burned against Reiji's skin, spoken in short bursts as they thrust against one another, cocks jerking and legs growing weak. "Give me a chance, Reiji."

"But the laws... the land..."

"Neither of us would stay here. Not after -- after Kaname. After he sees."

"Gods, Li Man --"

"Come with me. I ride tonight, under cover of the moon. I go east, where there are Nightwalker cities. Be under my wing. My protection. Leave Kaname. All his foulness. The sun that never stops shining."

"Li Man..."

"Live with me beneath the moon, and be my lover. Humans have failed you. Give me yourself." Li Man teased with the needle points of one fang. "Give me a chance."

Reiji arched against the Nightwalker, his head a snowstorm of renegade thoughts. Did he dare? Was this the sex talking, or did Li Man truly love him with an unbeating heart? Joined together in revenge, might they have a life together, free of Kaname and his petty cruelty?

"Say yes," Li Man crooned, sinking to his knees. Pale fingers reached for Reiji's cock, stroking it through his trousers, then slipping them down to let his organ spring free. He licked at the tip, one long, lingering taste. "Say yes. Come with me. Be free."

Reiji closed his eyes. What was life, if not taking the chances presented to you? He did not know if he loved Li Man, or even if he could, but the Nightwalker had dared so much for him. Had put his survival on the line to flout Kaname for what he had done to both of them, and grown hard as iron for want of Reiji himself.

"Yes," Reiji whispered, grasping Li Man's shoulders. The Nightwalker looked up, searching Reiji's face. Reiji smiled down at him as best as he could through the haze of lust overtaking him. He thought Li Man saw what he had sought there, for with a low growl in the back of his throat, the Nightwalker dove upon Reiji and sucked the human's cock into the cool, wet tunnel of his mouth.

That was only the beginning of their lovemaking that night, in Kaname's chambers.

And all the while, the snow fell outside. Enchanted snow, the gift of a god or goddess who smiled down upon a union they found good. Perhaps even Lalasa, newborn and rich with the gifts she had to give. Beginning with a snowstorm to hide a Nightwalker and his new lover as they stole away from a kingdom of harsh sun and wind, to a life they might share together as equals and leaving behind only ink on paper to prove they had ever lived beneath cruel Kaname's thumb...

"No one knows what happened to Kaname," Nanashi finished, drawing a hair-thin brush across Silken's cheekbones. His other hand rested on Silken's bare cock, spiraled around with the sparkling red inks sinking into his flesh.

"Was he angry?" Silken whispered, arching into Nanashi's grip. He shivered from head to toe, but with washing waves of pleasure, not fear. He was lost in the story and in the feeling of magic covering the whole of his body.

Nanashi tilted his head. "Me, I think he came back after dallying with the conniving Sadako, ready to have a nightcap with Reiji, and found the pictures of Reiji and Li Man.

"There are stories upon stories about these two, never told to humans any more, but they were the first. They bridged the gap, and although it has not often been done since, it can happen. There can be love between our races, and perhaps now, in this day and age, there can be more."

Silken moved restlessly, trembling beneath Nanashi's grip and the tickling of his brush, yet ravenous for more. His head swam with thoughts and ideas, visuals of Reiji and Li Man from so very long ago, imagining what pictures the enchanted paper would have caught. "Were -- were they happy?" he gasped.

Nanashi laid his brush aside, and whispered, "*Inscribe.*"

"Nanashi!"

A sheet of rice paper fluttered toward them across the room, a paper crane taken

wings, landing by Silken's cheek. He turned his head in wonder, staring as the bird unfolded itself to show a drawing: Silken himself, on his back, decorated with markings of the highest caste, his cock straining hard upright. Nanashi by his side, protecting him yet giving him room to breathe.

"Look at us together," Nanashi whispered, "and tell me what you think."

Chapter Five

"I see..." Silken traced the lines of the drawing with one reverent fingertip, butterfly-light, fearful of smudging the inks. The quill strokes felt blood-warm to the touch and hummed with a soft energy. He had never seen magic before, but faced with this sketch he could not help but believe. "I see us together, Nanashi. You and I. I've yearned to know what we look like when we lay among the cushions or the quilts, but I never thought to actually see for myself."

"Yes." Nanashi raised Silken on one arm, supporting his back. "Tell me more. What do you see here?"

"You, I see you." Silken drank in the sight of his lover, rendered in glittering black inks, as if someone had ground mica and used it instead of lamp black. "You are a handsome devil in the flesh, but if anyone saw this picture -- you, so strong and able-bodied, so lean and succulent, their mouths would water and I'd fear the need to fight for you."

Nanashi laughed.

"What?"

"Silken, beloved," the Nightwalker said, rumpling up his long fall of dark blond hair, "you look at this picture and see only me? What of yourself? Is there nothing which impresses you about the way you look?"

Silken frowned at Nanashi, but obediently turned his attention to the rendering of his own body. A moment later, his hand stole up to cover his mouth. "*Oh.*" He had changed; he was not the man he had seen in the mirror every day of his life before this moment. Perhaps the picture flattered, but he seemed almost to glow from the swirls of ink on his skin outwards. He radiated the power of climax and the ecstasy of love play. He looked not like a man, but like the kin of the deities.

"You see?" Nanashi curled closer. "This is how you appear, Silken, not only to me, but to the world. You are sex incarnate. Lalasa's favored child. I recognized you for the shining star come to rest on earth that you are when you were in Mama Luck's house, and knew I had to rescue you from the fate of the Lotus Garden."

He tipped Silken's chin up and stole a brief kiss. "Little did I know you would steal my heart away, as Li Man stole Reiji's very own. Their love is legendary among my people, and many have dreamed of one day finding someone whose soul knits so closely to their own."

"There are other stories about them then?"

"Oh, yes, many. Countless. They have filled books, many of which are best read or told on perfumed pillows, in the arms of the one you adore." Nanashi playfully nipped at Silken's ear, not to wound, but to tease. "Li Man and Reiji had amazing skills, not merely when it came to magic or the arts of love. They adventured from one side of the world together, in snow or rain by day, and at night by the cool light of the moon, and ah... ah... Silken, I cannot think when you do that!" Nanashi scolded, but he did not move Silken's playful hand away from his growing cock, and his eyes glowed warmly. "What do you mean by touching me without permission, Courtesan?" he asked, saucy as a serving boy. "Do you dare to approach me of your own free will?"

Silken arranged his face innocently as possible. "What, would I go against the laws I have abided by all my life?"

"Your hand says yes." Nanashi did not seem to object; in fact, he covered Silken's fingers with his own, lacing them over his swelling cock. "Your lips speak riddles. But your mind, Silken? What are your thoughts?"

Silken grinned. "My thoughts are butterflies!" he exclaimed, then laughed, soft and low, but long and free. "Look at me and see it all written on my flesh!"

He spread his free arm wide, arching his spine so that he bowed backwards, showing off his glorious new paintings. He could feel the inks soaking into his skin, burning with the low simmer of cinnamon and clove oil. Magic seared itself into his flesh with the tingling, rushing pain of a sleeping limb brought back to life.

He knew the marks would be with him for the rest of his life. Whether by enchantments Li Man or Reiji had devised, or Lalasa's gift, there would be no washing them off, not ever, neither with oils nor with soap. When he went out into the wide world again, he would be marked from forehead to feet for all to see that someone, even if "only" a Nightwalker, esteemed him *that* highly.

Silken would be declaring himself a God of Love, a child of the Goddess. Perhaps men and women alike would see the power shimmering through his decorations and acknowledge what he aspired to.

Perhaps they would build statues of him -- and the lover who had changed him over into more than a man, but less than an immortal -- and pray to him for blessings on their love affairs.

Perhaps he would be known as Silken, the heir to Reiji. The tales should not be forgotten, nor left in dusty books or whispered, secret to secret, on fragrant pillows. He thought he understood Nanashi's plan now, twined as it was with a burning love, and laughed again for the joy of it.

"You and I," he said, turning his face to Nanashi. "We are the future. They have only to recognize what's taking place beneath their very noses. They are blind, but we will unmask their eyes. They will see, and they will learn."

"They will also fight," Nanashi cautioned.

"Yes, but so will we." Silken leaned forward, pressing an eager kiss to Nanashi's lips. His tongue flicked out to taste the fragrant flavor of his lover's skin, a taste he would never tire of. His head buzzed with new thoughts and knowledge and -- yes -- courage. For he understood now. At last, he understood.

"If I am a free man," he said slowly, "I may choose to serve. But I may also choose to stand up and shake off my chains. I had grown so used to them throughout my years --"

"And oh, you have so many," Nanashi teased.

"Hush!" Silken made bold to tap a finger against the tip of Nanashi's nose and was delighted to see his lover grin like a boy. "I understand, now, what you were trying

to tell me -- what I was too thick-headed to see --"

"A lovely, thick head, yes," Nanashi murmured, his own hand drifting to close over Silken's cock. Practiced and at the same time devilishly skilled, he squeezed with just the right amount of pressure and ran his thumb over the plump head. "Have I caused you to lose your train of thought?"

Silken gave him a slanted look. "Would you prefer I fall silent?"

"I would rather hear you scream in pleasure."

"And you will," Silken said, carefully loosing Nanashi's hand -- not without regret. He crawled to kneel between his Nightwalker's thighs, resting both palms on his smooth white muscles. He let them lie there, admiring his blood red decorations for a moment, then ran them up and down Nanashi's chest.

"We are beautiful together, you and I," he murmured. "This is the price of my freedom: being brave enough to seize what has been offered. I can no longer hide behind the safety of being someone's property. I must be my own man, and I choose... yes, Nanashi, as Reiji chose in your story... to be your better half."

Nanashi's eyelids had drooped with lust, but his look was one of admiration. "This is one of the many reasons I adore you," he said, voice low and husky. "You are clever as you are handsome, Silken. Now come." He reached up to push at Silken's head. "Do what you choose, but I think you know what I would ask you to give me."

"Do I?" Silken grinned impishly but sobered long enough to savor another hungry, lingering kiss, letting his lips and tongue explore Nanashi's own. Drinking deep from a well which would never run dry, tasting immortality, the fluids of life, and the scorching blast of sex and need. He trailed his tongue across Nanashi's lip, and whispered, "I choose to do this, of my own free will. My first act as a truly free man."

And, dipping his head, Silken let his hair cascade down around his face in a waterfall of silk tickling Nanashi's legs and lower belly. Hidden inside the curtain that had won him his name, he breathed in the scent of Nanashi's male musk and the soaps he had cleansed himself with, mingled with the sharp spiciness of the blood inks.

"My lover," he whispered, then ran the tip of his tongue up Nanashi's cock. "My

friend.” He nibbled at the large vein on the underside. Breathing out heavily, surrounding the shaft with warmth, he added the last and most important part, “The key unlocking freedom’s door.”

In that moment, he knew he was no longer man, but god. Honored four times over by She whom he worshiped, by Reiji, by Li Man, and by Nanashi. No, not four times, but five. He held himself high at last and knew his own value -- far more than twenty gold.

He sucked Nanashi’s cock into his mouth and began to ply every art he had learned, but of his own free will. Blood surged into his own cock, making his head swim, and he thought, as he worked his lover towards the orgasm that would see them into the dawning light of day, *this is what I have sought all my life... and here it is. My freedom, found at last, Lalasa be blessed forever and ever.*

He who praised Lalasa was well favored in return, as all would shortly see. What happened the next day, when the sun crawled over the horizon and the free man Silken emerged from his lover’s home -- well, that is another story...

The End... for now.

Willa Okati

Willa Okati has far too many ideas for her own good, but is having the time of her life writing them all down. She has a very patient husband who puts up with seeing his wife pounding on the keyboard at 5 a.m., a hard-used coffee pot that she calls her best friend, and cats who think she's quite insane, but as long as she feeds them, will put up with anything. She adores anything that goes bump in the night, especially if it lands in the bed.

Willa loves to hear from readers. You can reach her at willshenillshe@gmail.com